

Unspoken “Collateral Damage”: America’s Wars and the Plight of the World’s Refugees

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Global Research, June 22, 2012

22 June 2012

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

We travel like other people, but we return to nowhere ...

We have a country of words.

Speak, speak so we may know the end of this travel.” (Mahmud Darwish, 1942-2008.)

Wednesday, 20th June was World Refugee Day.

This acknowledgement of the tragically displaced was declared an annual event on the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR.) Thus, in December 2000 the United Nations General Assembly unanimously designated June 20th as annual World Refugee Day.

The US marked the first UN World Refugee Day, in 2001, by hosting a commemoration at Ellis Island, where five new refugee families were welcomed during the ceremony.

Ironically, historically, the area’s west shore of Upper New York Bay had formerly bountiful oyster beds, the prime source of food for the Lenape Indian population, a mainly fishing and agricultural community. They were displaced by the Dutch settlers during the 18th century. Early indigenous American refugees, displaced by invaders in their own country.

At this first US event, UNHCR opened the “Respect” exhibition, which included a national poster exhibit on the theme of: “Giving Hope to Refugees.” Winners were announced as part of the day’s agenda.

Within four months of the marking of the initial World Refugee Day, Afghanistan, had been subject to a US-UK blitz and within two years, Iraq had also been largely destroyed, invaded and occupied by US-UK actions widely regarded as illegal.

Today those two countries have the largest refugee populations in the world, by orders of magnitude. (i)

Afghanistan at the time it was bombarded was classed as an “impoverished” and: “Least Developed Country”, according to the UN, with the lowest Human Development Index rating of all the world’s countries.

The Brookings Institute assessment of Iraq (ii) makes bleak look upbeat. This from 2007, but current trends show scant to nil improvement:

“Since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, millions of Iraqis have been forced to flee their homes. They ... fled from coalition military operations, widespread sectarian violence, and fear ... there are around two million Iraqis displaced inside their country and another two million displaced beyond the national borders, the bulk of them in Syria and Jordan.

“As the security situation continues to deteriorate inside Iraq, human displacement escalates to levels unparalleled in the region since the Palestinian displacement nearly sixty years ago.” (Emphasis mine.)

The figures of Afghan refugees are still rising. In 2009 there were 2,887,123. 2012 figures are: 3,054,709.

UNHCR estimates that an astonishing one in four of the world’s refugees originate from Afghanistan.(ii)

Iraqis who have fled the country number:1,683,579. Both figures are near certainly under-estimates since many families and individuals flee without documentation or with false documentation, now being in fear of approaching the relevant authorities in their countries, or indeed, being too destitute to afford either bribes to officials – since liberation both countries near lead the world’s corruption table (iii) – or the documentation. Iraq has a further estimated two million displaced internally. Iraq’s internally displaced often live in near unimaginable conditions, Refugees International, in a summary: “No Way Home, No Way to Escape ...” (iv) comprising the testimony of Ambassador L. Craig Johnstone, of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Helsinki Commission describes at least five hundred thousand people: “Dispossessed of their homes and belongings (living) amongst trash dumps, polluted waters and under plastic sheeting.”

“These squatter settlements mushroomed during the war and continue to be filled by those who have no other means to survive. Many residents were once home owners, their children attended school.” The Report is from 2010, but as valid now as ever. The grinding post-invasion misery, violence, displacement continues to consume the desperate, destitute, uncounted.

They are unassisted by the offices of Iraq’s unbothered, Orwellianly entitled “Human Rights Minister.”

Minorities, have also suffered terribly in this formerly proudly secular country. Last year Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil, speaking in London with Archbishop Vincent Nichols, Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, said time was running out for Iraq’s Christian community who would soon disappear.

In 1991 there were an estimated million Christians living in Iraq. At the time of the Bishop’s address (v) there were about two hundred thousand, with numbers diminishing every month.

Attacks on the Yazidis, `Mandeans and Shabaks, ancient communities, in their traditional areas of the great plains of Nineveh have rendered them as “facing extinction.”

Near forgotten are Iraq’s Palestinians. Thabet, a Beirut-based organization for Palestinian refugees right of return, has called for ending the oppression befalling Palestinian refugees in Iraq. Palestinians in Iraq: “ ... are the target of killing, displacement, and systematic

detention.”

Thabet appealed to Leaders at the Arab summit, held in Baghdad in March to urgently intervene in protection of the Palestinians in Iraq. Ears were seemingly deaf.

UNHCR was also appealed to, as was the Palestinian Authority. The remaining Palestinian refugees in Iraq now have dwindled to seven thousand – out of thirty eight thousand, in 2003. Thirty one thousand lives either dead or fled.(vi)

Ambassador Johnstone stated that the Palestinians: “ ... have nowhere to run. Not a single country in the region will offer them temporary asylum.”

Ironically, the most generous hosts to Afghan and Iraqi refugees, according to UNHCR are three countries now in the sights of Americas bombs, missiles, drones, destabilizing mercenaries, spooks and varying paid and murderous meddlers.

They are: Pakistan, Iran, and Syria who have the largest refugee populations at: 1.9 million, 1.07 million, and 1.005 million respectively.

Pakistan also feels the biggest economic impact with seven hundred and ten refugees for each US dollar of its per capita gross domestic product (GDP.)

Earlier this year, the UNHCR Representative in Iran, Bernard Doyle, lauded the country for its efforts and effective measures in supporting the Afghan refugees residing in Iran, underlining Tehran’s kind and humanitarian behavior towards two million Afghan refugees.

A UNHCR Report released on Monday also shows that the crises in Libya, Sudan, Somalia and elsewhere made some 800,000 people flee their countries in 2011. The figure was the highest in 11 years.

The tragedy of refugees is a global one – and even one displaced, lost, bewildered, destitute is one too many. The victims outlined here though, and those host countries currently threatened, are not victims or potential victims of “despots”, “dictators”, “butchers”, “a new Hitler.” They are victims of America and its marauding little accomplice Britain.

The heart wrenchingly broken lives above were wrought, not by designated “rogue states”, but by two Permanent Members of the United Nations Security Council. And they are planning more. When will the rest of the world yell a definitive, collective: “Halt”?

i. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/jun/20/refugee-statistics-unhcr-data#data>

ii. <http://www.unhcr.org/4fd6f87f9.html>

iii. <http://www.transparency.org/country>

iv.

<http://refugeesinternational.org/policy/testimony/no-way-home-no-way-escape-plight-iraqi-refugees-and-our-iraqi-allies>

v.

<http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2011/03/18/time-is-running-out-for-iraqs-christians-warns-archbishop/>

vi. <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2007/08/27humanrights-ferris>

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