

One For All and All For One:

Latin America Unified in Addressing Refugee Crisis

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Seven-years-old Danya Amroosh was at home with her family when a bomb fell upon her house. Many in her family were killed immediately. Danya now has multiple stitches on her belly and she is recovering from a broken leg and arm.¹ Her story is similar to those of many children touched by the Syrian refugee crisis. Many little ones have lost their parents; all of them have been trying to survive while fleeing a country at war. One can only imagine the fear, hunger, cold, heat, and poor hygienic conditions that these people have suffered on their journey to a safe haven. They leave behind a country full of lifeless bodies, rubble, and bombs.²

A Peek into the Situation

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Syrian crisis has created the greatest international humanitarian emergency since World War II. The number of registered refugees reached 4,052,011 as of October 4.³ Many have fled to countries neighboring Syria or undertaken long and dangerous journeys to Europe. Coping with the migration of Syrians has been very difficult for neighboring countries and for Europe as thousands of “unwanted migrants” arrive in their territory. Europe’s public opinion seems torn between those who want to help the refugees, those who are forced to deal with the crisis due to their geographical position, and those who do not want to deal with it. The “unwanted migrants” are not only from Syria; they come from some African and other Middle Eastern countries as well. Many are simply looking for a better life; others are running away from countries at war or infested by ISIS.

Why are People Less Apathetic Towards the Syrian Crisis?

According to the World Food Program (WFP), hunger kills more people than AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria combined, and 795 million people in the world do not have enough food to live healthy lives.⁴ In their quest for monetary support, humanitarian organizations broadcast images of malnourished children around the world on their TV spots with the hope of touching the hearts of potential donors.

How many people watch them and how many simply change the channel? When the picture of the 3-year-old Kurdish boy, Aylan, who was found on the Turkish shore, was shown in newspapers and TV throughout the world, many could not look away.⁵ Perhaps, the reason that there is such an internal division on how to cope with the influx of thousands of migrants is because this time we cannot change the channel. Stories such as Aylan’s have spurred many Europeans to open their arms to refugees.

There is a fear, however, of deeper economic crisis; meanwhile, some feel that their governments should first help their fellow citizens going through hardship.

A Call for Help.

As Europe struggles to address the migration issue, the United Nations (UN) has asked all countries to get involved. In order to assist refugees, the UNHCR partners with many organizations, which are listed on the Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal. These organizations create camps, organize refugee transportation, distribute food, and provide medical attention and protection. However, according to the UNHCR, as of September 24, they had only 41 percent of the necessary funds to adequately provide refugees with basic necessities.⁶

UNHCR and Latin America

The UNHCR cooperates with Latin American governments on different aspects of the refugee issue. The Argentina Regional Office, covering Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay, provides legal and physical protection and resolving statelessness related issues. In Chile and Uruguay, UNHCR focuses on women-at-risk engaging local authorities and governments to fund and implement programs. In Costa Rica, UNHCR provides training, helps with border patrols, monitors airports, and also encourages job placement. In Ecuador, UNHCR works with the government on resettlement and antidiscrimination programs. In Mexico, UNHCR informs refugees of their rights, protects them from human trafficking, offers protection to unaccompanied children, and addresses the legal status of stateless people in order to prevent detention. The UNHCR for Central America is in Panama. This office deals mostly with the displacement of people due to criminal activities. The UNHCR locations in São Paulo and Brasilia collaborate with multiple partners and NGOs to provide long-term solutions for refugees, to collect funds, and to encourage integration and protection.^{7 8} Brazil, despite economic recession, provides financial contribution for UNHCR operations, donating a total of \$15 million USD between 2010 and 2014.^{9 10} UNHCR is working with the Brazilian government on the approval of a bill against statelessness. UNHCR is also encouraging the government to become more involved in promoting integration and self-sufficiency, and in strengthening programs that provide legal and physical protection.¹¹ UNHCR is working throughout of Latin America to deal with internal displacement trends.¹²

Latin America and Refugees

Countries in Latin America have always dealt with refugees, migrating either from neighboring countries or from abroad. In order to address this persistent issue, Latin America unified to create three important documents: The Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, the Mexico Plan of Action, and the Brazil Declaration and Plan of Action.

1. Cartagena Declaration on Refugees

In 1981, Mexico hosted the Asylum and International Protection of Refugees in Latin America. During this meeting, Latin America analyzed the refugee issue and, in 1984, Latin America came together for the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees. The Declaration points out the necessity for countries both “producing” or accepting refugees to collaborate with the UNHCR, to train officials in dealing with



refugees, to assure their safety, and to make sure that refugees' rights are not violated. The Declaration also established the need to distinguish between refugees and other migrants and to strengthen programs that facilitate integration, protection, self-sufficiency, education, and health of refugees. By distinguishing between refugees and migrants, the Declaration expanded the meaning of "refugee" as someone who fled a country because of human rights abuses or life-threatening situations. The Declaration states that repatriation or moving to a third country must be voluntary. Finally, it says that governments need to cooperate to eliminate the causes of displacement, and internal laws need to be modified to mirror the Declaration.¹³

2. Mexico Plan of Action

In 2004, Latin America's representatives met in Mexico to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees. On this occasion, Latin America agreed on the "Mexico Plan of Action to Strengthen International Protection of Refugees in Latin America" (MPA). In 2005, António Guterres the U.N. refugee chief described the MPA as the "world's most sophisticated instrument to protect refugees."¹⁴ The MPA addressed the refugee issue concretely. After reaffirming the Cartagena Declaration, the MPA aimed to improve the asylum system, to encourage social and economic development, and create new legislation to protect refugee status in Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Panama, and Uruguay.¹⁵

3. Brazil Declaration and Plan of Action

In December 2014, on the occasion of Cartagena +30, Latin America celebrated the 30-year anniversary of the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees. On this meeting, Latin America signing the Brazil Declaration and Plan of Action. Besides restating what was already agreed upon and assessing the progress made on dealing with refugees, the plan redefined the term "refugee" by making a connection between Displaced and Stateless Persons. The plan included 11 strategic programs. Some of the most significant were: Quality Asylum, which focused on the refugee status and asylum application processes; Borders of Solidarity and Safety, which centered on safety and protection of all people (including locals) at borders; and Labor Mobility, which proposed a collaboration between countries in the region to help refugees participate in integration programs that allow transnational labor mobility. Three additional programs focus on the Northern Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) to address the victims of human rights violations related to transnational crime: Human Rights Observatory on Displacement, Prevention, and Dignified and Safe Transit. Other essential programs are Voluntary Repatriation, Local Integration, and Solidarity Resettlement.

Additionally, the Brazil Plan recognized the need to address migration due to climate change or natural disasters. In order to cope with these types of migration, Latin America is committed to engage in deep studies in order to find solutions. With the program Eradicating Statelessness, Latin America and the Caribbean will be the first region in the world to join the Global Campaign to End Statelessness.¹⁶

Brazil

Brazil was the first Latin American nation to create a refugee law and has been a safe haven for many refugees, including Palestinian refugees.¹⁷ In 1997, Brazil created the National Committee for



Refugees (CONARE),¹⁸ a body administered by the country's Ministry of Justice. CONARE forms policies for refugees in the country and addresses eligibility issues and the integration of refugees, while providing work permits and ID cards. With CONARE, Brazil became the first nation in Latin America to consider violation of human rights as a basis for refugee status. CONARE also gives specialized assistance to vulnerable refugees such as unaccompanied children, and they have adopted a case-by-case approach.¹⁹ According to CONARE, in October 2014, the total number of recognized refugees in Brazil was 7,289. These refugees come from 81 different nations, but mainly Colombia, Angola, and Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In 2014, Syrian refugees grew larger in number than Colombian asylum seekers, becoming the main group of new refugees in the country.²⁰ Brazil's government, together with 96 civil societies cooperating with the UNHCR, provides the largest refugee system in Latin America.²¹

Argentina

In 1914, a third of the population in Argentina was born abroad. Argentina has always had immigrants looking for better opportunities. In recent years with the increase of migrations to the country, regulations became stricter and the government started deporting illegal immigrants. Immigration slowed during the nation's times of economic trouble: in 2002 Argentina experienced a 300 percent devaluation of its currency, bringing 42 percent of the population below the poverty line and increasing to 27 percent those living in extreme poverty. Yet despite economic hardship, Argentina in 2003, changed its foreign policy, modifying the refugee and immigration system, focusing on human rights, and allowing new asylum seekers to enter under refugee status. This change was motivated by the desire to thank the international community for what it had done to help Argentinians who fled the country in the 1970s.²² With the Solidarity Resettlement Program, Argentina took as example the Mexican Plan of Action, addressing education, safety, and health issues.

Chile

Chile became the first country in Latin America to start a resettlement program, in 1999.²³ In 2005, Chile hosted 100 refugees from Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iran, Iraq, Colombia, and Cuba. In 2010, Chile enacted refugee Law No. 20.430, which included the broader definition of "refugee" described in the Cartagena Declaration. In Chile, the NGO Vicaria de Pastoral Social welcomes refugees at their arrival, providing orientation and connection with social services. Chile signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) under the MPA. The MOU states that Chile is committed to integrating refugees into Chilean society to help them become self-sufficient. The MOU commits Chile to provide legal and physical protection for vulnerable groups such as refugees with special needs and children. The MOU also includes the protection of women-at-risk and victims of violence.²⁴

Hosting refugees has been a challenge for Chile, and in 2012, the refugee resettlement program came under official review. Nevertheless, the system has continued to provide refugees with health screening, mental health support, public education, and protection for groups at risk. Additionally, those interested in higher education can apply for scholarships. Chile has shown how a country can provide tools for refugees to attain self-sufficiency and become integrated in society. According to *The Guardian*, Chile will take 100 Syrian families this year.²⁵



Besides Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, Venezuela announced it would take 20,000 Syrian refugees, while Uruguay will receive 80 Syrians.^{26 27}

Why is Latin America Willing to Help?

By the late 20th century, many in Latin America had to flee their country because of political and economic instability created by civil wars or dictatorships. The Uruguayan government's director of human rights, Javier Miranda, stated that welcoming Syrian refugees is a way to repay their debt to the international community.²⁸ In addition to "giving back," Latin America desires to help those in need due to political or religious ideologies, and aspires to be recognized by the international community not as developing countries, but as emerging countries that can offer valuable contributions to the international community. Latin America also recognizes that its nations have been built by many immigrants, many are of Middle Eastern descent. According to President Dilma Rousseff, over 10 million Brazilians have Syrian and Lebanese roots; one reason Brazil is accepting refugees with open arms.²⁹ In Chile, many requests for the government to help Syrians came from citizens of Syrian descent.³⁰

Final Assessment

On September 16, BBC Rio de Janeiro correspondent Wyre Davies reported the story of Ibrahim, a Syrian who escaped to Brazil. Ibrahim realized that going to Brazil would cost him half of what he would need to pay to risk his life to be smuggled across the Mediterranean Sea. Now, Ibrahim and his brother Mohammed run a small business making homemade Middle Eastern food. Although they do not make much money, they are able to support their family. According to Davies, over 7,000 Syrian refugees chose Brazil as their safe haven.³¹

Latin America continues to struggle with providing refugees a permanent solution. In Uruguay, 42 refugees who have been living in the country for about a year want to leave because they have not been able to find jobs and see no opportunity to improve their lives.³² Despite the desire to help, Uruguay, like many other countries, has difficulty in assuring employment for all refugees.

Latin America acts in unity to help refugees. However, despite comprehensive programs, many refugees feel abandoned to inefficient systems after initial period of support. The bottom line is that refugees feel "Latin warmth" that may not be enough to survive in a new country.

If Latin America wants to succeed in providing refugees with durable solutions, asylum seekers must have a real chance to integrate and contribute to their new countries' growth. One first step to take in order to make necessary changes is to establish specific milestones and efficient measures to evaluate success. Making periodic assessments can be key to improving inefficient systems. However, even if many countries in Latin America are willing to make necessary changes, they may be going through economic hardship and the UNHCR may not be able to support their refugee programs; since it only has only 41 percent of the funds needed to support refugee resettlement. Therefore, financially stable governments not willing to host Syrian refugees should give larger financial contribution to the



UNHCR, so that countries willing to host refugees can receive additional support and build more efficient programs.

António Guterres, the 10th Commissioner for UNHCR, praised Latin America for its effort in working as a real community and stated that collaboration between neighbors gives refugees the best chance.³³ Becoming involved with more refugees that originate in other regions may help Latin American countries receive more international support for building their infrastructures.

Many critiques have been made regarding the Syrian exodus. Some nations do not want to host refugees because they are facing economic hardship; some think the only way to solve the crisis is to fix the situation in Syria; and some wish to help but might not have a functioning system that would allow them to do so. Perhaps we cannot solve the situation in Syria just yet. We are too late to save Aylan on the Turkish shore, or to spare Danya from her pain, but we can save others. Perhaps, to handle the largest refugee crisis since World War II, the only way to succeed is to work together as a world community. In other words, the key may be to take the “one for all, all for one” approach. We all must work together.

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