



Refugee boys in a camp. Photo: CSW

RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION AND REFUGEES

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1. WHO IS A REFUGEE?

According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is someone who 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country'. Unlike economic migrants, refugees are forced to leave their countries in order to protect their lives as their own governments either fail to protect them, or in many cases, actively repress them and threaten their lives.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are people who have been forced to leave their homes but who have not crossed international borders. IDPs have usually fled their homes for similar reasons as refugees, but remain within the same state under the legal protection of their own government. Thus the government of their country is responsible for helping and protecting IDPs, and IDPs do not have a special status under international law.

Nearly 60 million people worldwide are currently displaced because of conflict, violence and persecution – the highest number since the Second World War. Violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief are one of the key reasons why people are forced to leave their countries of origin.

Religious persecution and its impact on forced migration
The right to freedom of religion or belief, enshrined in Article 18 of the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, is one of the most fundamental human rights, and includes the freedom to adopt and to change one's religion or belief, including the right not to believe, and the right to manifest one's religion or beliefs. Violations of freedom of religion or belief around

the world are on the rise.¹ Persecution² and violence targeting religious minorities is resulting in exceptionally high levels of population displacement, contributing to the worldwide refugee crisis. According to the UNHCR, globally one in 122 humans is now either a refugee, internally displaced, or seeking asylum.³ Religion is only one of many factors behind persecution, and issues of race, ethnicity, political opinion and gender often intersect with religious persecution. Religion-based asylum claims therefore often include other grounds as well.

Religious persecution can take many different forms, including forced conversion, violence, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, abduction, murder, torture, rape or forced marriage. Violations of freedom of religion or belief often take place in societies where wider human rights are violated, and in nations characterised by an absence of rule of law, corruption,

1 Aid to the Church in Need (2014), *Religious Freedom in the World - 2014*, p.7 http://religion-freedom-report.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/executive_summary.pdf

2 Persecution means 'the intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental rights contrary to international law by reason of the identity of the group or collectivity' (Article 7 (g), Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court).

3 UNHCR, 'Worldwide displacement hits all-time high as war and persecution increase', 18 June 2015 www.unhcr.org/558193896.html

economic disparity and authoritarian rule. It is important to acknowledge each country's historical context, and the impact of international policies and interventions, such as colonialism, in undermining the prerequisites for good governance and human rights development.

Religious persecution can be committed by state and non-state actors, and religious majority communities may experience religious persecution as well as religious minorities. Persecution can also occur between members of the same religion, for example when some members of a faith community do not conform to the doctrine propagated by the leaders or the majority of the community. Women and girls may experience religious persecution differently and disproportionately, and can be targeted both because of their gender and because of their religious beliefs.

Religious groups across the world experience various forms of discrimination; nevertheless, a claim for refugee protection can only be made when the discrimination and harassment amount to persecution.

Former Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Asma Jahangir has highlighted that persecution is not necessarily dependent on the applicant's knowledge of religion.⁴ This means that refugees can be at risk of persecution even if they do not have extensive understanding or knowledge of their religion. When assessing religion-based refugee claims, it is also important to acknowledge that individuals may also convert to another religion after leaving their country of origin, which may also render them vulnerable to persecution if returned to that country.

The UNHCR's guidelines on religion-based refugee claims acknowledge that claims to refugee status based on religion can be among the most complex. Yet it is clear that people should not be expected to hide, change or renounce their religion in order to avoid persecution.

2. RESPONSES TO CURRENT REFUGEE CRISES

The 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees states that countries should not expel or return refugees to areas where their life or freedom is threatened on account of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. This principle of non-refoulement is generally considered part of customary international law, meaning that it is widely established state practice binding all countries, even those who have not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention. However, various countries continue to violate this principle by returning refugees

to countries where their life is threatened. For instance, China continues to repatriate North Korean refugees who are desperate to flee the ongoing atrocities and crimes against humanity taking place in their country. In May 2015 the governments of Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia violated non-refoulement by refusing to accept Rohingya and Bangladeshi refugees stranded in boats on the Andaman Sea. Violations of non-refoulement also take place in western countries. For instance, some European countries have returned Eritrean refugees who were escaping persecution by one of the most repressive governments in the world.

It is crucial to share the burden of the global refugee crisis, as the increasing numbers of people fleeing persecution require concerted global and regional solutions.

The flow of refugees is not equally distributed between or within regions. Despite recent media attention on refugees entering Europe, the majority of the world's refugees (86%) are currently hosted by developing countries, and the largest refugee camps are found in countries in Africa, the Middle East – with the exception of one in south-east Asia⁵. According to a UNHCR report from 2014, Pakistan hosts the largest number of refugees at 1.6 million, mainly from Afghanistan.⁶ Relative to the size of population, Lebanon and Jordan are the largest refugee recipients in the world. Approximately 25% of the population in Lebanon is composed of Syrian refugees. In comparison, according to the British Red Cross, there are approximately 150,000 refugees in the UK, constituting less than 0.25% of the population.⁷ In the UK, there were 25,771 asylum applications made in the year ending June 2015, with the largest number of applications coming from nationals of Eritrea (3,568), Pakistan (2,302) and Syria (2,204), although 59% of applicants had their initial grant refused.⁸

Regional responses to refugee flows remain weak and there are no comprehensive political agreements on how to respond to the needs of the growing number of refugees.

3. CASE STUDIES

3.1 BURMA (MYANMAR)

3.1.1 ROHINGYAS ON THE ANDAMAN SEA: MUSLIM MINORITY FLEEING PERSECUTION

Burma's one million Rohingya Muslims are among the most persecuted people in the world. A Citizenship Law introduced in 1982 removed their citizenship, rendering them stateless. The law has undermined the realisation of

4 OHCHR Rapporteur's Digest on Freedom of Religion or Belief, p.76 www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/RapporteursDigestFreedomReligionBelief.pdf

5 Mapped: The countries that host the most refugees <http://qz.com/681538/mapped-the-countries-that-host-the-most-refugees/>

6 UNHCR (2014), Global Trends 2013: War's Human Cost, p.14 www.unhcr.org.uk/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Global_Trends_2013.pdf

7 British Red Cross, 'Refugee facts and figures' www.redcross.org.uk/en/What-we-do/Refugee-support/Refugee-facts-and-figures

8 UK Home Office, National Statistics: Asylum www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-april-to-june-2015/asylum

the human rights of the Rohingyas, who continue to live without the right to move freely, to access basic services or to vote. Rohingyas are disproportionately represented in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps, and the state has restricted humanitarian aid access to many areas, leaving them in dire hardship. As a consequence thousands of Rohingyas have fled the country by boat, risking their lives on the Andaman Sea. According to UN estimates, at least 130,000 have left by boat since 2012.

In May 2015 the international media reported that 8,000 Rohingya and Bangladeshi refugees were stranded on boats on the Andaman Sea, with no food or water. Some died and others were severely dehydrated and malnourished. Survivors were forced to drink their own urine to survive. Some were stranded at sea for months. They were reportedly subjected to ill-treatment, sexual violence and other abuses, and some Rohingyas committed suicide at sea. For days, the neighbouring countries, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia pushed Rohingya and Bangladeshi people back to the sea in severely overcrowded boats, which had in some cases already been abandoned by their crew. Eventually these countries offered to provide temporary shelter to some of the refugees, and the government of Burma rescued some but reiterated that only verified citizens would be allowed to stay – thereby excluding Rohingyas. Burma does not allow Rohingyas to return to the country from abroad, meaning that some have been forced to remain in indefinite detention in neighbouring countries.

In April 2016 the international media reported another incident of a capsized boat carrying more than 60 people. The overcrowded vessel capsized off the Rakhine state coastline as it was trying to make a trip to Sittwe. Twenty-one people were confirmed to have died, including nine children. They were travelling from an IDP camp to Sittwe to obtain much-needed supplies, including basic foodstuffs, fuel, and urgently needed medical supplies. Many of the passengers remain unaccounted for. Restrictions imposed by the previous military regime, in the wake of the 2012 clashes between Muslims and Buddhists, mean that Rohingyas are not allowed to leave their camp by land. This forces them to travel by boat, risking their lives in order to access much-needed aid.

3.1.2 REFUGEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLES IN KACHIN AND SHAN STATES

The Burma Army launched a major new military offensive against the Kachin people in June 2011, breaking a 17-year ceasefire with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) – an armed resistance organisation seeking autonomy in a federal Burma. Since then over 100,000 people have been internally displaced, living in camps with limited humanitarian assistance. Some Kachin have also fled across the border to China, where they face a precarious existence.

The Kokang people, an ethnic Chinese group in northern Burma, have also been the target of a military offensive by the Burma Army, and many have fled across the border to China.

In 2016, fighting broke out in northern Shan State between two ethnic armed groups. Approximately 3,900 people have been displaced in this region.

3.1.3 REFUGEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS IN KACHIN AND SHAN STATES

On the Thai-Burmese border, over 100,000 refugees remain in camps in Thailand. They are primarily from the Karen and Karenni ethnic peoples, despite ceasefires agreed between the government of Burma and the Karen and Karenni armed resistance organisations. According to The Border Consortium, an estimated 400,000 have been internally displaced in Karen, Karenni, Shan and Mon states during the decades of armed conflict.

3.2 SYRIAN REFUGEES

Syria is facing an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, the largest since World War II. An estimated 9 million Syrians have fled their homes since March 2011. According to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), over 3 million Syrians have fled to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq and 6.5 million are displaced internally. Around 200,000 Syrians have claimed asylum in the European Union; the vast majority in Germany.

The refugee exodus is fueled by the disproportionate use of force by government forces against certain sections of the Syrian society on one hand, and the actions of extremist groups fighting the government on the other.

Religion plays a major role in the Middle East, where an individual's status and rights are largely defined by their religion or sect. Religion increases in significance during times of conflicts and crises, with sectarian and ethnic sub-identities taking precedence over concepts of citizenship and national inclusiveness.

In the context of the Syrian conflict, which has a strong sectarian element, the Christian community is perhaps the most vulnerable religious minorities for several reasons.. The Assad family, which belongs to the Alawite minority, ruled Syria by terror, but ensured an acceptable level of religious tolerance as a veneer to conceal its sectarian core.

When the Syrian Uprising erupted in 2011, many Christians supported it and played active and effective roles in the protests, hoping this would pave the way to democratic reform in Syria. However, the government responded with extreme repression, and as the conflict became increasingly militarised and extremist groups began to occupy the public space at the expense of political and civil society organisations, many Christians avoided taking part in the war, hoping that their neutrality would ensure protection. Unfortunately, many rebel groups assumed the community was pro-Assad's regime despite the fact that two major Christian political

organisations (the Assyrian Democratic Organisation and the Syriac Union), had long been in the opposition, and that many prominent opposition figures are Christians who had spent many years in his prisons for opposing the ruling regime.

This strategy of neutrality left the majority of Christians vulnerable to pervasive lawlessness, to sectarian attacks by rebel militia, and to exploitation by the government and its allied militia. Moreover, the community does not occupy a particular geographic area, making them an easy target for the various parties to the conflict.

This situation has forced thousands of Christians to flee their homes and seek refuge in other areas within the country, or in the neighbouring countries where they again constitute the most vulnerable category. Interviews with Syrian and Iraqi Christians conducted by CSW researchers between 2011 and 2016 revealed that many felt it too dangerous for them to live inside refugee camps due to societal hostility and intimidation. There were also indications that refugee camps may have been infiltrated by extremist elements.⁹ Thus Christians tend to live outside of refugee camps, which exhausts their financial resources and automatically excludes them from services provided by local authorities, the UN, and other international aid organisations. Some Christian refugees reported suffering discrimination at the hands of UNHCR staff in Lebanon and Turkey because of their religion. CSW researchers uncovered similar situations in refugee camps in Europe where Christian refugees are allegedly attacked and intimidated routinely by elements amongst the Muslim refugees.

The continuation of the Syria crisis will inevitably have serious long-term implications on the stability of the entire region and on the flow of Syrians seeking refuge. It is therefore vital that the international community formulates, facilitates and resources a comprehensive, effective dialogue between Syrians aimed at finding a political solution that would ensure long-term peace and stability, and that includes human rights, transitional justice, and accountability components.

The international community must make strenuous efforts to alleviate the humanitarian tragedy unfolding in Syria. In particular, members of the international community must adopt a more creative and inclusive approach to the refugee crisis that takes into consideration the complexity and diversity of Syrian - and Iraqi - societies, religiously and ethnically, and that ensures protection for vulnerable minority communities, such as Christians and Yezidis, so that their suffering does not continue indefinitely.

3.3 ERITREAN REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

Eritrea's human rights record remains one of the most abysmal in the world. Tens of thousands are detained indefinitely without charge or trial in life threatening conditions in a myriad of facilities where torture is common. The Chair of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea (COIE) has described the nation as 'a country where detention is an ordinary fact of life, experienced by an inordinate number of individuals – men and women, old and young, including children,'¹⁰ of all faiths and none.

The Eritrean government violates human rights comprehensively, including the right to freedom of religion or belief. The Jehovah's Witness community was among the first to experience repression and continues to suffer, with at least 58 adherents currently detained, including several elderly people. Three male conscientious objectors have been in prison since 24 September 1994. In 2002 the government effectively outlawed all religious expressions except those occurring within the Orthodox, Evangelical Lutheran and Catholic denominations, and Sunni Islam. Hundreds of Christians are amongst tens of thousands of Eritrean citizens detained indefinitely at any given time. Although some are released after pledging to renounce their faith, none have ever been formally charged or tried and all are held pending denials of faith. Initially, most detainees were from Evangelical Protestant denominations; however, there are now increasing numbers of Orthodox clergy and lay people who remain loyal to the Orthodox patriarch, who has himself been under house arrest since being illegally deposed in 2007.

In its first report the COIE found that 'systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed in Eritrea under the authority of the Government. Some of these violations may constitute crimes against humanity',¹¹ including violations in the areas of extra-judicial killings, torture (including sexual torture), national service and forced labour. A second COIE report specifically investigating whether crimes against humanity are underway in Eritrea will be released in June 2016.

As a result of widespread human rights violations, the 'general climate of impunity' and the government's 'pervasive control systems',¹² Eritrea has become the largest refugee-producing country in the world on a per capita basis, despite an absence of war, civil unrest or any other humanitarian or natural disaster. Even when faced with the government's shoot-to-kill border policy, the risk of being held hostage for ransom by Bedouin traffickers, of enduring sexual violence, of dying in deserts, of

9 Sources kept anonymous for their protection

10 UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Oral Update by Mr. Mike Smith, Chair of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea at the 28th session of the Human Rights Council', 16 March 2015 www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15699&LangID=E

11 Report of the Commission of Inquiry on human rights in Eritrea www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/ColEritrea/Pages/ReportColEritrea.aspx

12 *ibid.*

being kidnapped from refugee camps in Sudan or of being captured and beheaded by Daesh (Islamic State or IS) militants in Libya, Eritreans flee by the thousands each month. Traffickers generally utilise unseaworthy vessels, and in the first half of 2015 around 2,000 asylum seekers and migrants drowned in the Mediterranean, including Eritreans. As of June 2015, the UNHCR was aware of the existence of 383,869 Eritrean refugees and 60,157 asylum seekers, a high proportion of which are unaccompanied minors.

CSW remains concerned that despite compelling evidence that large-scale human rights violations are underway in Eritrea, some European countries are choosing to view Eritreans as economic migrants, and to return them to their country of origin. Even more concerning are indications that some European nations openly attribute the unprecedented exodus to unemployment, insisting in the face of evidence to the contrary that there has been an improvement in the human rights climate and accepting government assurances that returnees have nothing to fear. In addition, European Union (EU) policy appears overly focused on containment at source rather than on tackling the root injustices fuelling the flow refugee. For example, the 2014 Khartoum Process, to which, amongst others, Eritrea, Sudan, EU Member States, the European Commission and the African Union are party, aims to tackle "irregular migration and criminal networks" in the Horn of Africa, but identifies underdevelopment and lack of opportunities as the primary cause of, and facilitating sustainable development as the main solution to the outflow. In addition, while advocating a victim-centered approach with regard to trafficking, parties to the process do not appear to acknowledge that the overwhelming majority of refugees were victims of state repression, and it was this that propelled them into the hands of traffickers and smugglers. Most importantly, the alleged complicity in trafficking of Eritrean and Sudanese government officials is also not addressed.¹³

The EU recently supplied development aid to the Eritrean government, ostensibly to assist in generating jobs and opportunities, in the hope of stemming the tide of refugees. However, unless the egregious violations that are the real root causes of the refugee crisis are addressed with a view to ending injustice and repression and promoting human rights, the exodus will continue indefinitely.

3.4 VIOLATIONS OF NON-REFOULEMENT FOR VIETNAMESE REFUGEES

Since 2014 it is believed that over 200 ethnic minority Montagnards have crossed over into Cambodia, while several hundred more are awaiting refugee status in Thailand. Many of them claim to be seeking asylum from religious persecution. In March 2015 the Cambodian authorities recognised¹⁴ Montagnards as refugees, and recent reports suggest several others may have been sent on to third countries. However, other asylum seekers are reported to have returned voluntarily to Vietnam; the

Cambodian government has stressed their return was their choice, but in these cases, due to tight security, it is difficult to confirm whether or not the decision to return to Vietnam was made freely and without coercion. Many of the asylum seekers are believed to be Christians. In Vietnam, ethnic minority Christians face severe restrictions on their right to freedom of religion or belief, and economic hardships exacerbated by discrimination against Christians in the distribution of government assistance. While the government provides blankets, money, food and housing for impoverished ethnic minorities, Christians are denied such assistance solely because of their religion. Furthermore, demonstrations by Montagnards for their religious freedom and land rights have been met with violent crackdowns by police.

CSW remains extremely concerned about the deportation of Vietnamese ethnic minority Christians from Cambodia and worrying reports of ill-treatment in Thailand and the hands of the Thai police and also suspected Vietnamese agents. Thailand has in recent years deported Chinese refugees registered with the UNHCR, and Vietnamese asylum seekers in Bangkok are also fearful that their UNHCR papers will not protect them from forced repatriation. In addition, returned asylum seekers have been 'disappeared', or arrested and detained incommunicado in Vietnam, suggesting that individuals currently seeking asylum in Cambodia face a high possibility of further persecution and ill-treatment by the Vietnamese authorities if they are forcibly returned to the country.

3.5 MINORITIES FLEEING RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION IN PAKISTAN

The number of asylum cases originating from Pakistan has risen enormously since 2010,¹⁴ and Pakistan ranked as the sixth highest source country of asylum seekers in the industrialised world in 2014.¹⁵ One reason for the rise in the number of asylum seekers is the fact that religious minorities in Pakistan have a well-founded fear of being persecuted for their beliefs. According to the 2015 report by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, Pakistan 'represents one of the worst situations in the world for religious freedom.'¹⁶ The situation is so dire that in 2014 the Supreme Court ruled suo moto that President Nawaz Sharif's government should set up a framework to protect religious minorities, including the formation of a national council for minority rights and a taskforce to develop a strategy of religious tolerance. The federal government has now established a National Commission on Human Rights. However, despite the

14 Dawn, 'Destination: Asylum abroad', 16 May 2015 www.dawn.com/news/1182298

15 UNHCR, *Asylum Trends 2014* www.unhcr.org/551128679.html

16 USCIRF, *Annual Report 2015*, p.109 [www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%202015%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%202015%20(2).pdf)

13 2011 UN Monitoring Group on Eritrea and Somalia Report on the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1916

Supreme Court ruling, the government has not been able to provide adequate safeguards for vulnerable minority groups such as Shi'a Muslims, Christians, Ahmadi Muslims and Hindus.

The May 2012 UNHCR Eligibility Guidelines state that 'The Christian minority in Pakistan is subject to recurrent discrimination and harassment, as well as acts of religiously motivated violence, at the hands of militant groups and fundamentalist elements...In many instances, the authorities are reportedly unable or unwilling to protect the lives and properties of Christians, or to bring the perpetrators of such violence to justice.' Equally, Ahmadis are at risk of mistreatment or harm within Pakistan due to 'anti-Ahmadi' laws that declare them to be non-Muslim and restrict their ability to practise their faith. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that they would not be able to apply to the authorities for protection. The Eligibility Guidelines report that, 'Little or no protection is reportedly afforded by the State authorities. It appears that crimes and acts of violence against Ahmadis are not consistently investigated, allegedly due to intimidation tactics and pressure from Islamic fundamentalist groups, and perpetrators of such crimes are reportedly rarely brought to justice.'¹⁷ Christians in Pakistan also face severe discrimination at governmental and societal levels.

However, the recently updated United Kingdom (UK) Home Office Country Information and Guidance asserts that 'Christians in Pakistan are a religious minority who, in general, suffer discrimination but this is not sufficient to amount to a real risk of persecution.'¹⁸

In Thailand over 11,000 Christian Pakistani asylum seekers are held in appalling conditions in overcrowded detention centres. The office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has now begun issuing verification cards to asylum seekers, a temporary arrangement informally recognised by the Thai government.

Asylum seekers who flee to Sri Lanka are turned away,¹⁹ often through court orders,²⁰ in contravention of agreed international standards on the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers.²¹ As the crackdown on asylum seekers continues²² the outlook for Pakistani asylum seekers who flee religious persecution remains worrying,²³ given the current global trend in the handling of these cases.

17 UNHCR, 'UNHCR Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Members of Religious Minorities from Pakistan', 14 May 2012 www.refworld.org/docid/4fb0ec662.html

18 United Kingdom Home Office, 'Country Information and Guidance – Pakistan: Christians and Christian converts', May 2016 www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/522139/Pakistan-Christians_and_Christian_converters.v2.pdf

19 Al Jazeera, 'Pakistan's silent partition', 27 January 2015 <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/1/27/pakistani-ahmadis-seek-asylum-in-sri-lanka.html>

20 Reuters, 'Sri Lanka court gives green light to deport Pakistani asylum seekers', 1 September 2014 <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/09/01/uk-sri-lanka-refugees-pakistan-idUKKBN0GW2LG20140901>

21 Reuters, 'U.N. says Sri Lanka illegally returning Pakistani asylum seekers', 2 August 2014 www.reuters.com/article/2014/08/02/us-sri-lanka-refugees-idUSKBN0G20J20140802

22 The Farrukh Saif Foundation, 'Crackdown against Pakistani Asylum seekers in Bangkok-Thailand', 11 March 2015 <http://farrukhsaif.com/crack-down-against-pakistani-asylum-seekers-in-bangkok-thailand/>

23 Tribune, 'Highest number of asylum applications submitted from Pakistan in 2014: report', 26 March 2015 <http://tribune.com.pk/story/859473/highest-number-of-asylum-applications-submitted-from-pakistan-in-2014-report/>

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Human rights, protection and the dignity of refugees should be the basis on which countries form their refugee policies. Treating refugees with humanity and dignity is a fundamental principle that should be applied without distinction.

To the international community:

- Strengthen regional and global responses to the refugee crisis, both as individual countries as well as within coalitions of countries, such as the African Union, the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Countries should show solidarity and commit to take all necessary measures to find humane and just solutions to the refugee crisis, and to provide adequate protection and humanitarian assistance to refugees;
- Continue to commit funds, time and efforts to addressing push factors, such as violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief. Tackling the root causes of forced migration requires strengthening human rights and rule of law in the countries of origin;
- Ensure that the principle of non-refoulement is respected, and that countries do not expel or return refugees to areas where their life or freedom is threatened on account of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. In cases involving people fleeing conflicts by boat such as those on the Mediterranean and Andaman Seas, countries must allow these vessels to land and give sanctuary to those fleeing persecution;
- Coordinate efforts with third countries to increase the effectiveness of counter-smuggling and trafficking measures, ensuring that these measures are truly victim-centred;
- Ensure that refugees are protected against racism, xenophobia and all forms of intolerance. The media also has a responsibility to refrain from spreading negative stereotypes about refugees and asylum seekers;
- Urgently formulate modalities for the UNHCR to work with churches and other NGOs in refugee-receiving nations in the Middle East and elsewhere that are assisting Christians, Yazidis and other Syrian and Iraqi refugees from minority faiths who are avoiding camps due to fear of facing violence and intimidation, and ensuring their resettlement in a timely manner;
- Work to ensure that countries take responsibility for refugees fleeing persecution. European countries in particular should take swift joint action to ensure the fair and balanced participation of all Member States in the screening and relocation of arrivals.

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CSW is a Christian organisation working for religious freedom through advocacy and human rights, in the pursuit of justice.

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