Yemen’s Exiles... Millions Live in Limbo Unable to Return Home

Earlier this month, Human Rights Watch called on the United States government to extend and redesignate Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Yemen, which expires on March 3, 2020, so that those Yemenis who found themselves stranded in the US when the war broke out in late March 2015 would not end up being forcibly deported back home - which home it needs to be said has become a thing of nightmare.

“Given the US role in the Yemen conflict, it would be particularly cruel not to extend TPS for Yemenis in the US,” said Andrea Prasow, acting Washington director at Human Rights Watch. “Washington needs to make clear that it won’t send people back to a country wracked by war and famine.”

While few people will need to be reminded that Yemen remains in the throes of a devastating and brutal war, it is seldom the press has spoken of the millions of Yemenis stuck in exile across the world, more often than not, in abominable conditions due to governments’ refusal to offer due protection and status. In Turkey where many managed to escape due to a kinder visa policy, immigration officials have so far refused to allow Yemeni refugees to obtain work visas, making it virtually impossible for families to meet their needs.

Forced into poverty, tens of thousands have had to rely on hand-outs and work on the black market - a euphemism for human exploitation.

Refugees in Turkey and Malaysia have reported back-breaking work conditions in factories which equate to slavery to the full knowledge of the local authorities.

Ali Ahmed, a former student in engineering at Sana’a University who escaped to Turkey in early 2016 claims that Turkish local officials are playing the refugee crisis to their advantage, using undocumented migrants to ‘furnish’ rich industrials’ factories for a fraction of the cost, in exchange for handsome retributions. “This is human exploitation at its most basic ... we have no choice but to accept whatever work and whatever pay they will give us. And if we refuse there is always the fear of deportation,” said Ali.

“It’s not like we can say or do anything. I tried to file a complaint at the UN refugee agency but no one is listening to us, we are invisible,” he added.

Since 2015, reports and investigations have exposed poor wages, discrimination, and child labour by refugees working in the Turkish garment industry. Apart from the widespread use of informal labor, Turkey’s garment industry heavily relies on migrant workers. Long before Syrians and Yemenis arrived in Turkey, garment workshops employed Azeris, Afghans, Uzbeks, and other (domestic and international) migrants who were willing to accept jobs that lost attractiveness among local workers.

For refugees like Ali exile has become a daily battle for survival. With little to no recourse at all - charities have long been overwhelmed by the growing need of an ever-expanding refugee situation, it is becoming increasingly clear that disinterest is driving the bus.

For all the promises of humanitarian aid the United Nations and other international agencies vowed to deploy in Yemen, few officials have looked into Yemen’s exiles’ crisis. There are an estimated 3 million Yemenis in exile, of those 3 million too few were offered asylum under the UNHCR.

Let me rephrase that ... of the 3 million refugees currently awaiting for their status to be legalised, the United States
accepted only 50 since 2015, and about zero since President Donald Trump entered the White House.

The issue is not merely bureaucratic or political, it stems from complete and utter disinterest before Yemenis’ plight. Forgotten and abandoned by a system which ought to have offered refuge and safety, Yemen’s exiled population has been relegated to the shadows … in Djibouti where the UNHCR erected make-shift camps in a baboon-infested area, families have had to fend for themselves as their tents are regularly torn apart and their food stolen by the wild animals.

To say that the international community is failing its mandate is a gross understatement - at which point should carelessness qualifies as a crime against humanity?

Because countries such as Turkey, Egypt and Malaysia systematically refuse to revisit Yemenis’ application for work and residence thousands of families have been made vulnerable to human traffickers, prostitution rings and other criminal organisations - not to mention religious radicals who would love nothing more but to coerce a few more souls to their dogmatic ways.

Several families in Malaysia said to have contemplated selling their organs to make ends meet ...

The Yemen Organisation for Combating Human Trafficking, a Sanaa-based non-governmental organisation documented 300 cases of organ sales in Egypt as of September 2017; Malaysia sources have claimed this number to run to several thousands as of September 2019.

While organ trafficking largely predates Yemen’s war, it is clear that desperation and the ever-pressing need for cash has forced many exiles to resort to such measures to survive.

Elham al-Dulaimi, a doctor at the University of Science and Technology Hospital in Sanaa, told Al Jazeera in an interview back in 2017 that he has documented cases in which Egyptian hospitals have bought organs from Yemenis for $5,000 and then sold them to affluent customers from the Gulf or Western countries for nearly $100,000.

Those stories of course have seldom pierced through the thick screen of self-censorship which seems to become the new ‘normal’. After all Yemen’s holds a mirror to the international community few officials have dared looked into...

Catherine Shakdam is a research fellow at the Al Bayan Centre for Planning & Studies and a political analyst specializing in radical movements. She is the author of A Tale of Grand Resistance: Yemen, the Wahhabi and the House of Saud. She writes exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.