



## Global South Colloquy

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### Saga of Migrant Deaths and Displacement in South America and Northern Triangle

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The plight of refugees across the world continues to be as disheartening as it has been over decades. Even as nations and international institutions continue to acknowledge and honour the courage, determination and strength of the millions of displaced people across countries and continents, agonizing stories from different locales of different regions keep unfolding. In less than a week after the commemoration of the World Refugee Day on 20 June, the world started engaging the disturbing images of an El Salvadoran migrant, Alberto Martinez Ramirez and his 23-month-old daughter, Valeria. They were washed up on the shore of the river Rio Grande in Mexico while trying to escape to the United States. The photograph shows both drowned in muddy waters with Ramirez's black shirt being raised and Valeria's head put inside. Her arm is seen draped around Ramirez's body and it appears that she kept holding on to him in her final moments.

The agonizing image has gone viral globally and it reminds the photograph of Alan Kurdi, a Syrian refugee boy lying face down on the Mediterranean seashore. Barring a few minor differences related to these images and tragic events, the latest one tells the extent of human tragedies in the twenty-first century. If the image of Alan Kurdi was taken by Nilufer Demir of the Turkish News Agency *Dogan* in 2015, the searing image of Valeria and his father was captured by Julia Le Duc of Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* in 2019. Both the deceased families were drowned while trying to escape from their mother country (Syria and El Salvador). If Alan was a three year old boy, Valeria did not even reach her second birthday. When Alan's father escaped in their dangerous journey through the sea, Valeria's destiny was to end her life together with her father on the shores of the river. If the former invited global attention towards the Euro-Mediterranean refugee crisis, the latter brought perils of population movement in and around Central American countries.

#### Causes of Forced Migration in South and North Central America

According to Filippo Grandi, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "As we observe the global picture of both protracted and newly developing displacement situations,

Latin America and the Caribbean may look like a haven of relative safety, spared from recent massive displacements caused by persecution, conflict and violence (Grandi 2017). Indeed, South America is experiencing a silent displacement crisis. There are many factors behind this human catastrophe. But violence and organised crime continue to be the most important cause that forced millions to flee their homeland every year. Latin America and the Caribbean are notorious for a high rate of homicide. That is why, the region faces the world's most massive internal displacement crisis. In countries like Colombia, 7.3 million IDPs were reported in 2017 (more than the number registered in Syria and South Sudan) due to the presence of transnational organised criminal gangs, social and political unrest, and limited access of essential services. Prolonged economic, political, and security crisis in Venezuela has also produced a large number of IDPs, asylum seekers and refugees. Though the number is less, Brazil is hardly immune from this regional crisis, where natural disasters, development projects and organised violence have led to the displacement of 7.7 million in the last two decades (Muggah et al. 2018 Grandi 2017).

The Northern Triangle(NT) countries<sup>1</sup> are not an exception in this regard. There were around 130,000 asylum seekers from this region alone in 2017. It shows an increase of 1,500 per cent since 2011. Most of them continue to prefer protection in the U.S and Mexico, while majority applications are being denied (Muggah et al. 2018). According to Aikaterini Kitidi, UNHCR spokesperson, it sees a significant increase in the displacement in the North of Central America (NCA) due to violence and persecution. He added that nearly three lakhs of refugees and asylum were registered globally from the region as of the end of 2017. It shows an increase of 58 per cent from the previous year. Majority of those fleeing Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador are seeking protection either in Costa Rica, Panama, Belize, Mexico and the USA. Large numbers of them are composed of vulnerable women or unaccompanied children or separated from their families (Kitidi 2018). Indeed, since 2010, more than one lakh migrant children from the NCA countries have been apprehended at the southern border of the US. The three states of NCA have been suffering from the collapse of public order, chronic weakness of governance, scarce social services, high rates of domestic violence, limited economic and educational opportunities, sexual abuse of girls, the glaring economic fragility, crushing poverty, endemic corruption, environmental crises. Altogether contribute to a mass exodus from the region (Casas-Zamora 2016; Buechner and Sarah 2018).

Recently, hundreds of thousands of people have been fleeing Honduras and El Salvador mainly due to organised crime, violence, and persecution. El Salvador alone has witnessed the murder of an estimated 150,000 people in the last decade. This number is three times more than the rate of Mexico and ten times more than that of the US average (Villasenor and Elba 2017). The image of the drowned Salvadoran father and daughter encapsulate the shocking reality and plight of migrants in the border region of Central America.

### **Is it the first or last tragedy?**

Involuntary migration from Central America to the U.S. is hardly a new phenomenon. However, the reasons for the population movement have changed. While Amnesty International considers that the NTCA is one of the most dangerous places on earth due to unprecedented levels of forced migration, the UNHCR calls this a humanitarian crisis (Amnesty International 2019). Hundreds of those migrants die while trying to escape or attempting to reach the U.S. every year. There is a

higher possibility to drown in the swift-running Rio Grande, where Valeria and her father washed up. They even prefer to go through the sweltering Sonoran Desert (Linthicum 2019; Leffler 2018; Aleman and Alfredo 2019; Reidy 2018). Since the migrants move through these risky routes, the death toll also increases alarmingly.

*Recent weeks have brought home the dangers along the border, though none quite as graphically as the death of Mr. Martínez and Valeria. On Sunday, two babies, a child and woman were found dead in the Rio Grande Valley, overcome by the searing heat. A toddler from India was found dead in Arizona earlier this month. And three children and an adult from Honduras perished when their raft overturned two months ago while crossing the Rio Grande (Ahmed and Kirk).*

To make things more complicated, the U.S. has ‘increased deportations of undocumented immigrants arriving from Central America and Mexico and tightened restrictions on new would-be asylum claimants. In the fiscal year 2017 alone, the U.S. deported 75,000 nationals from the Northern Triangle countries’ (Muggah et al. 2018).

As Filippo Grandi opined, “The deaths of Oscar and Valeria represent a failure to address the violence and desperation pushing people to take journeys of danger for the prospect of a life in safety and dignity.” “This is compounded by the absence of safe pathways for people to seek protection, leaving people with no other choice than to risk their lives” (UNHCR 2019b).

### **U.S. Immigration Policies: A Critical Evaluation**

The latest statistics published by the UNHCR in June 2019 reveals that 70.8 million people are globally displaced. When 41.3 million are Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), nearly 25.9 million are refugees. The rest are asylum seekers (3.5 million) and stateless people (3.9 million). Importantly, more than fifty per cent of them are under the age of 18. It also tells the reality that every two seconds, nearly one person is forcibly displaced globally as a result of persecution or conflict (UNHCR 2019a). But, these figures are not enough to change the attitude of some of the world leaders and countries in favour of migrants. Rather they try to introduce and impose new measures to restrict and regulate the number of immigrants.

Since Donald Trump became the President of the U.S, the U.S administration has attempted to criminalise those migrants entering the country (a centrepiece of his presidential election campaign). They even separated migrant parents from their children and made the process of asylum granting or denial slowly only. Moreover, the Trump administration has introduced a plan to send thousands of those displaced back to Mexico to await their court proceedings (Ahmed and Kirk). As a result, the number of refugees admitted has fallen by over 85 per cent in the U.S; from more than 200,000 in 1980<sup>2</sup> to less than 28,000 in 2017 (Muggah et al. 2018). The U.S. policy has “drastically reduced the number of migrants who are allowed to request asylum, down from dozens per day previously to sometimes just a handful at some ports of entry.” The U.S has also been “expanding its program under which asylum seekers wait in Mexico while their claims are processed in U.S. courts, a wait that could last many months or even years” (Orsi and Amy 2019). When thousands of migrants from Latin America and NCA are waiting to cross on the Mexican side, delays from the U.S side now span months in several border cities. The deceased family is also a victim of this “metering”<sup>3</sup> policy of the U.S (Linthicum 2019; Miroff 2019).

The disturbing image of the drowned father and daughter became a symbol of the large-scale humanitarian crisis on the southern border of the U.S and prompted an outpouring of sympathy globally. Domestically, in the U.S, “Democratic presidential candidates expressed outrage at the image,” with California Sen. Kamala Harris tweeting that it was “a stain on our moral conscience” and Beto O’Rourke<sup>4</sup> tweeting, “Trump is responsible for these deaths” (Linthicum 2019; Sabur 2019).

## Conclusion

An image can be so pervading in the global political mindscape. It can cut through almost any noise. As it happened in the case of Alan Kurdi in 2015, which drew attention to the refugee crisis in Syria, the photograph of Valeria, the drowned Salvadoran girl has invited global attention to the plight of migrants in the northern triangle countries. No doubt, a single state cannot address problems of the forced migration or the refugee crisis in the region. It needs a combination of national, regional and international responses and initiatives from media, statesmen, human rights activists, humanitarian agencies and international organisations. More importantly, without tackling the root causes of displacement in South and North Central America, the efforts to solve the issue will be fruitless. It also needs media scrutiny and international pressure over the refusal of countries like the U.S to accept the regional displaced persons.

## Notes and References

### Notes

1. It is sometimes referred to as Northern Triangle of Northern Central America (NTCA). The sub-region comprises Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras.
2. The U.S. Federal Refugee Resettlement Program was created.
3. The intention of the U.S government behind this practice is to limit the number of migrants allowed to approach border crossings to apply for asylum.
4. A U.S politician who represented Texas in the U.S House of Representatives from 2013 to 2019. He is seeking the Democratic nomination for the President of the country in 2020

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