

A Review of Human Rights Violations in Global Crises during 2017



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Introduction

The year 2017 was riddled with a host of important crises. High number of refugees, vulnerable children exposed to various threats, escalation of conflicts, growth of hatermongering and extremism and so forth were a few consequences of those crises. A crisis is a sudden and sometimes escalating development, which faces a person, society or group with unstable and dangerous conditions. Crises lead to conditions, which need extraordinary measures to be handled. Crises differ according to their type and intensity. Crises lead to especially huge pressures, which shatter conventional notions and lead to different kinds of reactions as well as various threats, risks, and new demands. Due to importance of crises and their relationship with increased violation of human rights in the world, this paper focuses on the main human rights crises in 2017. It has picked five main human rights crises including critical humanitarian conditions in Yemen and Myanmar, surge of terrorist groups, climate changes, and growing extremism. These crises have been chosen on the basis of their extensive impact on human rights violations.

Yemen

Yemen, one of the Arab world's poorest countries, has been devastated by a war between forces loyal to the government of President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi and those allied to the Houthi rebel movement. However, the actors are not limited to these 2 groups, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant have also carried out attacks. The conflict started in 2015 and until now, all the efforts by United Nations for peace negotiation have failed. All of these factors contributed to the fact that Yemen is in a humanitarian crisis.

There have been many human rights violations committed by various groups during the Yemeni Civil War and all sides of the conflict have been accused of human rights violations. Coalition forces led by Saudi Arabia and backed by the United States and other nations have also been accused of violating human rights and in some cases, breaking international law.

An overview of Humanitarian Situation in Yemen:

Two years of conflict have devastated Yemen, left 18 million people in need of some kind of humanitarian assistance and created the largest food security emergency in the world.¹ The situation in Yemen has been described as “one of the worst crises in the world” by the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen.²

On 24 March 2017, the Office of High Commissioner for human rights reported that “Since 26 March 2015, at least 4,773 civilians have been killed and another 8,272 injured by the violence – a total of 13,045 civilian casualties. These figures reflect only those deaths and injuries that the UN Human Rights Office has managed to corroborate and confirm to be civilians. The actual death toll is certainly considerably higher. Another 21 million Yemenis – 82 per cent of the population – are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance.”³



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Major human rights violations:

Right to health

The country’s water and sanitation infrastructure has been ravaged, posing serious health risks. Restrictions on the importation of fuel have disrupted the delivery of water to millions of people in one of the most water-scarce countries on Earth. Fuel shortages have also curtailed access to health care, as hospitals are unable to power the generators they need to function.

Based on a report by WHO on 14 August 2017, the total number of suspected cholera cases in Yemen this year hit the half a million mark on Sunday, and nearly 2000 people have died since the outbreak began to spread rapidly at the end of April⁴.

Children’s Rights

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On 2 March 2017, Stephen O’Brien stated that also 500,000 children under the age of five suffer from malnutrition and that a child dies every 10 minutes due to preventable causes in Yemen⁶.

Myanmar

On the night of August 25 2017, an attack on Myanmar security forces by a handful of Rohingya militants in Northern Rakhine State prompted a brutal government counteroffensive that has, in turn, led to the greatest refugee crisis of the 21st century.⁷

Rohingya people, who form Myanmar’s Muslim minority, have been living for many years in the country’s Rakhine state. However, the government of Myanmar considers them illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and deprives them from such citizenship rights as the right to freedom of movement.

A report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights said as a result of crackdown by Myanmar’s military, about 626,000 Rohingya Muslims (more than half of their total population) had fled to Bangladesh by

December 2, 2017.

Various international bodies have reacted to the catastrophic situation in Myanmar:

- The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child have issued statements condemning widespread violation of human rights in the country, including murder, rape and forced disappearance, as crimes against humanity.⁸
- The United Nations Security Council issued a statement on November 6, 2017, condemning widespread violence against Rohingya Muslims. The statement was adopted after a relevant Security Council resolution against the government of Myanmar was vetoed by China.
- The UN High Commission for Human Rights described measures taken by Myanmar's government in northern Rakhine state as textbook example of ethnic cleansing.⁹
- The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has asked the government of Myanmar to present a special report on the state of women and girls in Rakhine state.¹⁰

According to the UN High Commission for Human Rights, various factors that can prove a genocide is going on in Myanmar include the stateless condition of Rohingya people, which has continued for many long years, adoption of inhuman discriminatory policies against them; violence against and rape of Rohingya along with forced displacement; systemic destruction of their villages, houses, religious sites and cultural symbols; not issuing marriage permits for Rohingya, and depriving them of all health services.¹¹

The UN Human Rights Council discussed the situation in Myanmar in its 27th extraordinary meeting on December 5, 2017 and adopted a resolution with 33 positive votes. The resolution¹² condemned systemic violations of human rights in Myanmar, especially against Rohingya people, asking the country's government to guarantee the rights of the minority group.

An ongoing problem with regard to Rohingya refugees is their return to the country. Their return must take place at a suitable time, through their informed decision and consent, and in the presence of sustainable peace. They must be able to return to their own regions with no limitation and root causes of the ongoing conflict, including lack of Rohingya recognition as Myanmar's citizens, must be gradually eliminated.

The governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh signed an agreement on November 23, 2017 on the voluntary return of the Rohingya refugees. According to the agreement, a joint task force will be established between the two governments and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to enable Rohingya refugees to get back to their homes on their own free will and in a dignified manner. The government of Myanmar has been required to emphasize its commitment to recommendations given to it by the advisory commission on the Rakhine state, which include social and economic development for that state, ensuring citizenship rights of its people, and to guarantee freedom of movement and security of its citizens.¹³

Human rights after the fall of Daesh

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS or Daesh in Arabic) is a jihadist and military group, which gained power in 2014 after pushing back the Iraqi forces from the western parts of the country and occupation of the northern city of Mosul. This group committed many crimes against Christian, Izadi (Yezidi), and Shia minorities in areas under its control, including murder, rape and abduction.

The United Nations Security Council held a meeting in 2014 to adopt Resolution 2170 in which the group was designated as a terrorist group. The European Union and many countries, including the United States and Russia, also considered Daesh as a terrorist group. Since then, Daesh has turned into a global crisis, which is posing threats to global peace and security.

In July 2017, Iraq's security forces¹⁴, along with their allied forces, started an operation codenamed "Qademoun Ya Nineveh," which led to the liberation of city of Mosul, which had been under Daesh control since July 2014. "During the course of the operation to retake Mosul City thousands of civilians were subjected to shocking human rights abuses and clear violations of international humanitarian law," said the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein. "The execution-style killing of civilians, the suffering inflicted on families, and the wanton destruction of property can never be tolerated in any armed conflict, and those responsible must answer for their heinous crimes," he added.¹⁵

According to the report released by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) on November 2, 2017, Daesh "perpetrated serious and systematic violations

that amount to 'international crimes' during the nine-month military campaign to liberate Mosul City in Iraq."¹⁶ Among major crimes committed by Daesh from November 2016 to June 2017, the report has mentioned "execution-style killing of civilian, mass abductions of civilians, the use of thousands as human shields, the intentional shelling of civilian residences, and indiscriminate targeting of civilians trying to flee the city."¹⁷

According to this report, since the operation to liberate Mosul started in October 2016 up to the full liberation of the city in July 2017, 2,521 people had been killed, including 741 people by execution, and 1,673 were injured.¹⁸ On the other hand, since 2014 up to the present time, at least, 74 mass graves have been discovered in areas taken back from Daesh and all evidence points to the fact that Daesh can be charged with committing international crimes.

Following the collapse of Daesh's self-proclaimed government in Iraq and Syria, the human rights crisis has not reached its end in these regions. Now, perpetrators



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of the crime of genocide and other crimes against humanity must be held to account on the basis of transitional justice to answer for systematic violations of human rights. Punishment of those behind genocide and other crimes committed by Daesh is not only a demand of the people in Iraq and Syria, but also a requisite for the realization of the international law and human rights in these regions. In doing this, governments play an important role by meeting their commitment to administer justice.

Following liberation of territories previously conquered by Daesh, it is time to investigate crimes committed by this group. The government of Iraq may consider the possibility of accession

to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and accept the Court's competence and jurisdiction to investigate the country's conflict as per Article 12(3) of the Rome Statute. The government of Iraq must launch an impartial and comprehensive probe to identify those behind violations of human rights and the international humanitarian law and inform the public of its results. The accused must be arrested on the basis of law and adequate proof, and be put to fair trial in accordance with the Iraqi Constitution and the rules of the international law.

The international community also bears a responsibility towards Iraq such as seeing into all measures that led to death of civilians, including as a result of military operations by the international community. The Security Council and the Human Rights Council must continue to monitor the situation in Iraq and ensure the prosecution and punishment of all those who have violated human rights and the international humanitarian law. Since many leaders of Daesh have already fled Iraq and Syria, regional and trans-regional governments, in addition to the United Nations, are responsible for their prosecution in line with their international and humanitarian commitments.

Climate change

There is no doubt that a healthy environment is requisite for realization of people's right to life, food and suitable living standards. Climate change has serious effects on the livelihood of billions of people, various ecosystems, natural resources and physical infrastructure.

Climate change has already affected ambient temperature, hydrological circles, functions of various ecosystems, and agricultural production in many parts of the world. Many communities, especially in polar and low altitude regions of the world, are also expected to move to other regions as polar ice caps continue to thaw. According to the World Food Program (WFP), a 2-degree increase in temperature will expose about 189 million to food insecurity, while a 4-degree increase will

do the same to 1.8 billion people across the world.¹⁹ Endangerment of food security, which will affect the right to food as one of the most basic human rights, can lead to new crises in the near future.

As a result, the Paris Agreement on climate change was formulated through cooperation of 196 countries on December 12, 2015 and within framework of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The goal of the agreement is to prevent global temperatures from rising more than two degrees centigrade during the current century and also to launch an effort to limit temperature rise to less than 1.5 degrees centigrade compared to pre-industrialization era.

On July 1, 2017, US President Donald Trump announced his country's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. Therefore, the United States, along with Syria and Nicaragua, are the sole member states of the UNFCCC, which have not joined the Paris Agreement yet. Trump then claimed that Paris Agreement would weaken the US economy.

This action by the president of the United States, as number one economic power of the world and the second biggest producer of greenhouse gases after China, will have certain consequences. The first impact of the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement will be doubts about the universal nature of the agreement. One of the most important factors differentiating between the Paris Agreement and the Kyoto Protocol (1997) was universal membership of all developed and developing countries in the Paris Agreement and their role in making global climate policies. Washington's withdrawal from that agreement is sure to cast serious doubt on universality of the Paris Agreement.

Of equal importance is the impact of US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on funding of the agreement. The United States is the main contributor when it comes to funding climate policies of developing countries. Between 2011 and 2012, the United States allocated 9.6 billion dollars to this issue.²⁰ Withdrawal of the United States and subsequent curtailment of its financial aid to the agreement will face many developing countries with problems for funding their climate projects.

Although Washington's decision to quit the Paris Agreement was within jurisdiction of the country's government, it must be noted that climate change is a global problem and its consequences, including endangering food security across the world and probable flooding of tiny island countries, will challenge the entire humanity.

Extremism and Xenophobia

Extremism is not a recent issue and the world has seen various examples of



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extremism in the last decade. However, in the last few years and by radical right parties rising to power, this issue is highlighted again.

Of course, extremism is not limited to a specific party. However, in recent years, far-right parties in Europe have made great efforts to rise to power and have even won parliamentary seats in many European countries.

Extremism is any kind of behavior or action, which is distant from common ethical standards. Extremism shows hatred toward any person that is considered as the “other” and can be reflected in sharp and critical speeches, discrimination, or physical violence. This issue is rooted in extremist beliefs as well as extreme anger and desperation, which give rise to a wide array of violent measures from hate crimes to terrorism.

Europe is facing a rising tide of far-right parties, which have already entered governments in Finland, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland. The European Parliament has been influenced by the increase of these parties among its ranks and 23 percent of its members currently come from right-wing parties.²¹ Therefore, it seems that at a time when Europe is facing one of the worst refugee crises since the end of World War II, some European Union member states have taken positions, which are at odds with the fundamental principles of the EU, especially with regard to human rights and freedom of movement.

After more than one million people from the Islamic world flooded the European Union, populist movements started to pressure their governments to close borders to Muslim refugees, shut down Muslims’ schools and ban hijab or the Islamic dress of code for women, across Europe. Nationalism is on the rise in Europe so rapidly that the dominant political current is tilting toward far-right parties as a result of which, many EU states have been distancing themselves from basic principles of the Union, including tolerance and diversity.

Following its presidential election in 2016, the United States of America has also seen a rising wave of xenophobia. Discrimination against Muslims had already risen following terrorist attacks on the US soil on September 11, 2001, but Trump’s executive order banning entry of nationals from a number of Muslim-majority countries depicted a new face of xenophobia in the United States. Discrimination against Muslims has soared so high in the United States that it can be easily called Islamophobia. On the other hand, Trump is planning to build a wall across the US border with Mexico to prevent entry of illegal immigrants from that country. This step has been also construed as another aspect of xenophobia by the US administration.

The US president has a long record in inciting xenophobic sentiments. Through posts on his social media accounts as well as through media remarks, he has been clearly fanning the flames of Islamophobia in the United States. The Islamophobic views of trump have been followed with an increasing frequency of hate crimes against Muslims across the country. Attacks on Muslims in the United States in 2016 reached their highest after the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Addressing the issue of xenophobia by the United Nations and building a suitable discourse around it to identify its causes and consequences can be a useful step toward resolution of this global problem. A meeting can be also arranged to be attended by

high-ranking country officials in order to engage in dialogue and exchange of views in this regard. Such a meeting can boost mutual understanding and strengthen their will to pass domestic laws to support foreign nationals and criminalize measures taken against minorities. Introducing a mechanism to supervise measures taken by countries to eradicate xenophobia and Islamophobia in addition to provision of advisory services by the UN organs are other important steps that this international body can take in order to tackle this issue.

The UN secretary general, the UN high commissioner for human rights, and other high-ranking UN officials can appoint Muslim spokespersons, deputies and assistants in order to project a positive image of Muslims and gradually do away with the common image that depicts Muslims as a bigoted and inflexible group.

UNESCO, as the educational, scientific and cultural organ of the United Nations, can use its regional offices to educate journalists and reporters on how to present reports free from ethnic and religious clichés and how to offer a positive image of immigrants and foreign nationals. Those offices can also take steps to increase awareness among journalists and other media crewmembers about issues related to Muslims as well as cultural characteristics of other minority groups.

Elimination of xenophobia and its effects would not be possible in the absence of suitable cooperation from the United Nations as well as regional, national and nongovernmental organizations. The United Nations must actively cooperate with members of the civil society to overcome this problem and take advantage of ideas offered by nongovernmental organizations in this regard.



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Conclusion

As the high commissioner for human rights has told before, “Human rights is not, as some have argued, a boutique preoccupation of a privileged, lawyerly élite. Upholding human rights means ensuring equal access for the poor and downtrodden to justice, to resources, to decent schools, health-care and jobs. It is about clawing apart the steel trap of discrimination, which wounds and scars. It is about holding governments accountable to their people.”²²

There is nothing new about crises pivoting around human rights. During the past 70 years and following adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which forms the groundwork for the international human rights system, this area has seen many crises as a result of armed conflicts, civil wars, and measures taken by governments in violation of human rights. These crises have had a profound effect on human rights and can greatly weaken human rights as an international institution. It must be noted that there could not be global development, peace and security in the absence of human rights and a system to support these rights.

“The global institutions which protect us against chaos are cracking, splintering deeper by the day. If they break, the price paid by humanity could well be so profound, we could be placed beyond recovery. There can be no peace, no development, no safety, no future for any of us if we allow the human rights of the people – all the people – to be broken apart.”

Out of all available solutions, it seems that a serious resolve on the part of the international community to bolster the human rights system in cooperation with people, civil society, nongovernmental organizations, and international and regional organizations can be effective in putting an end to these crises. In addition, governments must be committed to stop using human rights as a tool and safeguard the real global ideals of human rights.

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