Do you think that Developed Countries in Europe and North America are protecting the rights of refugees?

Refugees are not a recent phenomenon, people have migrated for centuries but the forced migration which causes one to become a refugee did not take effect until the creation of states and the boundaries that differentiate two states from one another. Refugees are a distinct group of migrants that have been forced to flee their homes because of conflict, political, racial and religious persecutions, natural disasters, inhuman treatments or other issues that have made them uncomfortable or pose threats to their well-being in their societies. The people who flee their homes seek asylum (safety and protection) in another country. According to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “Everyone has the right to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.” However, not all countries wish to host refugees. Some countries fear that refugees may compete with inhabitants for scarce resources, or that their presence may worsen racial, ethnic, religious, or economic conflict.

In addition, the host country may not want to upset relations with the country of origin by accepting its refugees, especially in cases where the government of origin is the cause of the its citizens becoming refugees, we see that in the case of the Syrian conflict that has been ongoing since 2011 as a result of the brutal and authoritative nature of the Bashar Al-Assad led government. Since then Syrian citizens have become refugees all over the world and they have exceptionally high numbers in Europe and certain states in the Middle East. Refugees need assistance, such as food, shelter, and healthcare, when they seek asylum in another country. International and local organizations provide this assistance. These organizations house the refugees in refugee camps until it is safe to return to their home country. If return appears unlikely, they seek to resettle the refugees in the host country or another country. However, some refugees remain in camps for years. For many refugees, the flight to safety is not the end of the ordeal but only its beginning.

In the 1950s, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was created. Its mandate was to provide refugees with international protection, as well as to seek “permanent solutions for the problem of refugees by assisting governments and private organizations to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of such refugees, or their assimilation within new national communities. In July 1951, a diplomatic conference in Geneva adopted the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (‘1951 Convention’), which was later amended by the 1967 Protocol. These documents clearly spell out who is a refugee and the kind of legal protection, other assistance and social rights a refugee is entitled to receive. Initially, the 1951 Convention was more or less limited to protecting European refugees in the aftermath of World War II, but the 1967 Protocol expanded its scope as the problem of displacement spread around the world. The 1967 Protocol broadens the applicability of the 1951 Convention. The 1967 Protocol removes the geographical and time limits that were part of the 1951 Convention.

It is a sad fact that refugees, many of whom arrive deeply traumatized by what they have already gone through, may still face a succession of problems once they reach a place of refuge. Beyond the initial difficulty of gaining admission and access to asylum procedures, some refugees encounter insensitive and sometimes inhumane treatment by officials and members of the public. The process of deciding whether a person qualifies for asylum can, in certain countries, drag on for several years. In the meantime the refugee lives in a state of limbo, uncertain about the future and haunted by the past. Most serious of all, problems of expulsion and forced return still arise. Denial of the right to seek asylum has taken a number of forms in recent years. Refugees have been prevented from crossing a frontier when they were in mortal danger from hostile forces, severe shortages of food and exposure to the elements. Others have been forcibly returned to a country where they fear persecution. People arriving at a hoped-for place of asylum by boat have been pushed off from the shore.

There are other humane measures, which are aimed at deflecting illegal immigrants but also affect refugees, have been adopted by some governments, notably in the industrialized world. They include visa requirements for people arriving from countries afflicted by civil strife, and fines imposed on airlines that transport people without proper documentation. Wealthy nations like those of the United States, Europe and Australia, have a negative attitude toward migrants and refugees which is grounded in a mixture of racially driven xenophobia and a mistaken fear that refugees may be terrorists. Dislike of the needy stranger, especially when motivated by racial or religious stereotypes, is clearly contrary to core principles of human rights ethic. According to the 1951 convention on human rights and the principle of non-refoulement, the asylum needed by refugees should be a top priority of states.

A further priority arises from the special duty a rich country that has contributed to the economic deprivation of a poor country can have toward migrants from that country, especially if they are fleeing the dangers of war. For example, European powers that benefited from colonizing regions of Africa or Asia without contributing to their development have significant duties to be open to refugees and other migrants from these regions. Thus France and the United Kingdom have duties to migrants from their former colonies that they probably do not have to migrants in general. Economic benefit through forms of exploitation other than formal colonization can create similar duties. For example, the political and economic history of the United States in nations like Guatemala and Haiti creates special duties to admit people from those countries, especially refugees fleeing political persecution.

A country with a history of military involvement in the life of another country may also have special obligations. The United States recognized its special duty to receive refugees from Vietnam following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. And though U.S. military engagement in Iraq was not the sole cause of the displacement of many Iraqis, the U.S. intervention was the occasion of the huge forced migration of Iraqis that followed.

As the Harvard political scientist Stephen Walt commented in the aftermath of the terror attacks in Paris on Nov. 13, if the United States and its allies had not invaded Iraq in 2003, there would almost certainly be no Islamic State today. Thus the United States and its allies in Iraq have especially strong duties to admit refugees seeking asylum from Iraq and Syria, as well as others fleeing the economic deprivation caused by war in the region. They also have serious responsibilities to help rebuild the political and economic life whose destruction has been the source of the huge movement of Iraqi and Syrian people. There are no doubt additional grounds for a country to grant priority to the admission of migrants from a particular background when not all can be received. These suggestions indicate the direction we should be moving today. Indeed, the most fundamental criterion for determining our priorities should be our duty to support the basic human dignity of those whose lives and basic human rights are severely threatened.