**International Migrants Day**

**Our Right of Passage Should be Safe Migration, Not Leaky Boats**

By William Lacy Swing

“I’m a migrant, but didn't have to risk my life on a leaky boat or pay traffickers. Safe migration cannot be limited to the global elite.”   Thus spoke United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres in September 2017.

With a memorable turn of phrase, he captured what is perhaps one of the overriding challenges facing the world today. While we live at a time when a privileged elite considers global mobility virtually its birth-right, it is denied to countless others trapped in hopelessly bad economic or conflict circumstances.

But something else has changed to bring this self-evident reality into the grinding gears of global politics with often tragic consequences.

Not long ago a sort of insider/outsider code-of-conduct meant that what the elite got barely mattered to the global poor, who were only dimly aware of the opportunities to reach a better life beyond the confines of their country`s borders. That was then.

Today, the world’s greatest leveller, the smartphone—which now is in the hands of more than 2 billion across the world—continues to change all that. In less than a decade, smartphones have provided many outsiders with intimate knowledge of heretofore “elite” goings on.

What’s happening is that two coexisting, if starkly diverging realities are clashing on the same planet, turning the hitherto somnolent politics of many countries unpredictable—and,  indeed, volatile.

On the one hand, freedom of movement is virtually guaranteed for a privileged and surprisingly broad global citizenry, for whom it has become natural to move safely, freely and relatively inexpensively around the world. This includes tourists, students, visiting family members, migrant workers from the global south (over 2 million Filipinos and 1 million Sri Lankans etc.) as well as the businesspersons who keep our globalized world humming.

What we so easily forget in the discourse about migration is that millions are traveling in ever greater numbers. They move safely and in an orderly way, passing through security on the way to the gate, checking Facebook feeds and instant messages as they go. Above all, they move in a regular way, with passports (and visas) in hand.

So why, one might ask, has migration become such a toxic issue, leading the news headlines and providing fuel for political populism?

Part of the answer may well lie in our brushing over the challenges of integration and being too quick to judge popular hostility towards migration as irrational or worse. Politicians ignore the values people adhere to at their peril.

Equally, if uninterrupted, global mass movements of people are seen to be so orderly, normal and beneficial for all that they do not draw comment, we will need to figure out how to cope with the majority denied mobility because of circumstances.

Hundreds of millions who are not part of the growing, truly global labor talent market find themselves outside looking in, and looking onto a world they can only dream of. They face enormous income disparities and hardships and no chance of getting a visa or a work permit.

It comes as no surprise then that vast armies of hopeful young migrants want to climb aboard the “leaky boats” referred to by the Secretary General. Pushed by lack of economic opportunity, often exacerbated by climate change, they too are vulnerable to the siren song of social media.

That’s where smuggling networks, human traffickers and modern day enslavers ply their trade these days with complete impunity. These cruel deceptions go unchecked, as the social media giants chase new markets in the global south

This is the type of migration that we see on the news and that at its worst has led to the shocking reality—first revealed by IOM—of African migrants being sold as slaves and indentured servants. As population growth and economic failure drive migrants to throw caution to the wind and leave their homes, the inevitable result is populism at the receiving end where communities are also struggling with unemployment and identity issues.

This is why I place so much hope in a global compact for migration, expected to be adopted at the end of 2018.  It will be negotiated by Member States under the auspices of the United Nations and aims to address international migration in a comprehensive manner. The first planned inter-governmental agreement of its kind, it crucially is not expected to intrude on nation state sovereignty nor be legally binding, probably just as well given the tinderbox nature of the subject matter.

There is a great deal of existing common ground and it hinges on the understanding that migration isn’t so much a problem to be solved as a human reality to be managed. If we stop to think about the strict and mandatory rules which enable over 34.5 million flights per year that enable the equivalent of 44% of the world's population to take off and land safely, it should be possible to find some common rules in order to allow many more to travel, migrate and return home freely and safely. We need to offer hope to those facing economic despair, to provide legal pathways for more migrants or circular migration options for those who wish to work and return home.…because if we don’t come up with solutions the smugglers will do it for us, at great cost to human life and to the fabric of our societies.

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