Alyan Kurdi is Not Alive Because the United Nations is Dead

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By Shankkar Aiyar

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Alyan Kurdi did not die. He was killed. He was not alone. Humanity died a thousand deaths alongside, on that beach in Bordum in Turkey. The accused include superpowers backing tin-pot dictators, Arabs who have done too little, regimes that nurtured and funded fundamentalism, and those which have engineered the idea of non-state actors and fund them. The tragedy—eloquently articulated by Nilufer Demir’s photograph of Alyan—exposes the leadership of the world order as amoral spectators. The imperative for moral action is challenged by expediency for seemingly moral inaction.

Nobody quite knows who is fighting whom for whom in Syria. What is known is that precious little has been done to stop the fighting. Since 2011, over 11 million Syrians—roughly half the population of Australia—have fled the country. The Kurdi family, of which three are dead, was one of them. The failure of the United Nations is stark. If it is not dead, it is definitely paralysed.

The Preamble of the United Nations, “We the Peoples of the United Nations”, states the determination “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”, “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights”. On the floors of the UN Plaza, though piety yields to politics, conviction on issues is defined by convenience.

The power, and ergo the rot, is located in the Security Council. For four years, the members have ensured that the council is paralysed by process. It doesn’t seem to matter that children and women are being killed every hour—more than 250,000 people have been killed in Syria and more than half the population displaced.

The Security Council Reports on the country represent institutional impotence—use of chemical weapons on civilians has only been “condemned” and a resolution to refer allegations of war crimes to the International Criminal Court is vetoed. Unsurprisingly, former UN Human Rights Commissioner Navi Pillay quit in disgust, stating that “the killers, destroyers and torturers in Syria have been empowered and emboldened by the international paralysis”.

And nothing seems to have changed since the refugee crises of Vietnam and Bangladesh. The flow chart is the same—flee for life, cross border, take shelter at fenced shanties, sneak out to find a new future. In fact, the real out-of-the-box solution on sheltering refugees has come not from governments or UN but from Egyptian billionaire Naguib Sawiris. Sawiris has suggested to the UN that he be allowed to buy an island off Greece or Italy and develop it to shelter refugees from Syria and other conflicts.

Again Syria is just one story. There is also Iraq where three million people have fled for safety, fearing the scourge of ISIS. Over 300,000 persons —just from Africa and Middle East—have crossed into Europe since January this year. Thousands from Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Nigeria, Libya and Afghanistan are fleeing violence and repression. They are jumping fences in Morocco, hiding in trucks to travel to Turkey, riding trains, travelling by dinghies and walking across Hungary or Austria—in their quest for a future. It is estimated that the number of displaced people across the world is 60 million —up from 40 million just five years ago.

And it is bound to worsen. World population is expected to touch 9.5 billion by 2050. The bulk of the population rise is in densely populated, low-income countries, which lack governance, resources and jobs. For decades now, the developed world has evangelised the opening up of markets for investment and trade, but kept the labour markets closed. A billion persons will be added to the workforce—over 500 million just in India and Nigeria by 2050.

The scale and complexity of the challenge are unprecedented. There will be refugees from war, from violence, from persecution, from climate change and from poverty. The emerging spectre needs a modern institution. The League of Nations was wound up less than two decades after it was set up—post its failure to prevent World War II. Going by the track record of flops, the United Nations (established in 1945) has survived way past its expiry date. Yes, it has done and organised stupendous work in the domains of social and human development. But it has flailed and failed—Khmer Rouge, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Darfur, Rwanda—in upholding the primary mandate. And the primary reason is that it has been in denial about inadequacy of representation and lack of reforms.

The world does need a United Nations. An institution that can devise systems and processes that can work with multi-lateral agencies to re-configure globalisation, deal with new threats like the so-called Caliphate, non-state actors and tech terrorism. The world needs an institution that is not a house of the few. The world needs a new United Nations that represents the reality of the new world.

The 70th Session of the UN General Assembly later this month is a good occasion to bury the dead United Nations and draw the blueprint for a new one.