

Forcing migration of globalised citizens

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Today's constant flows of persons and information across frontiers mean that, when an emergency occurs, the international community feels it has to get involved not only out of solidarity but because its citizens could be in danger. Yet while the idea that states must take care of their citizens appears an obvious imperative, could their actions cause more harm than good? Crises – which do not distinguish between nationalities – tend to trigger special relief actions by foreign states for their nationals overseas; however, not only is it unclear whether foreign states are capable of delivering what they intend or are requested to do but also being a migrant is not necessarily a vulnerability factor, nor are migrants usually the most endangered population.

In March 2011 Sendai City in Japan faced a triple crisis – earthquake, tsunami and radiation threat. As it is not a major tourist centre or international commercial hub, there are few diplomatic missions in the city. At least nineteen consular teams visited from Tokyo, apparently to assess the needs of their compatriots; since the city was not as heavily affected as the coastal areas, the assessments were not the actual reason for the multiple evacuation operations which took place in the city between 13th and 20th March, totalling several thousand persons (mostly foreigners – naturalised citizens and Japanese spouses in some cases were evacuated, in others refused).

The first official evacuation was followed by a wave of displacement, both official and unofficial, of individuals and groups, movements which were covered – significantly – by local and international

media. Among the unintended consequences of official evacuations was panic flight when the consular teams offered the opportunity to leave the city. Secondly, there were reported cases in which people were coerced to leave because their government was telling them – as 'foreigners' – to do so; 'foreigner' is too broad a category to merit undifferentiated action.

Finally, evacuations by consular teams distort in many different ways the established protocols of humanitarian action. Foreign operations do not help the most endangered people, not even among their compatriots, and put pressure on scarce resources. The emphasis on foreign nationals during crises is mostly oriented towards dealing with public opinion and logistics back in their home countries, not about the actual security of persons at the area in trouble.

There are no simple solutions to this particular form of voluntarily forced migration. One important root of the problem can be found in the over-stretched idea of the state's responsibility and how little attention the idea of 'belonging' has received, that is, the possibility of considering oneself a member of the local polity, if not the national one, entitled to protection in times of crisis like anybody else. In the context of a globalised world, we should acknowledge that the scale of human mobility is making conventional responses to crises sometimes inappropriate.

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