Positive lessons from the Arab Spring

António Guterres

Forced displacement in today’s world is marked by several characteristics: multiple and unpredictable triggers; overwhelming numbers fleeing in a short period of time; and entire communities destroyed, too often for generations, in a matter of days. Whether across international borders or within their countries of origin, those displaced are often met with remarkable generosity by individuals and host communities, yet sometimes fail to elicit the international assistance required to alleviate their misery or the political will to resolve their plight.

The exodus from Libya serves as a microcosm of these features. Sparked by an individual act of resistance in Tunisia, peaceful protests in Libya were met by oppression, and by late February border points with Tunisia that had formerly received 1,000 persons a day were getting that many in an hour. Entire communities fled, leaving behind their homes and life savings, the more fortunate carrying what possessions they could such as mattresses and blankets. The scenes I witnessed during my visits to the border during the crisis were dismaying, with frightened and disoriented crowds still in shock from the violence they had escaped and the uncertainty they faced.

The response from ordinary Tunisians was remarkable in its altruism. I witnessed villagers sharing their homes and land while others drove for miles to provide sandwiches for those stuck in the crowds at the border. That Tunisia maintained an open border is also noteworthy as it was still emerging from its own ‘Arab Spring’ turmoil. The international community in this instance joined forces, sending aircraft to return workers and, in the case of refugees, offering resettlement places so that those secondarily displaced from Libya could start a new life.

Coordinated and timely assistance and protection are critical, as we witness a proliferation of new conflicts – Mali, Syria and Sudan – in addition to ‘old’ ones, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and Afghanistan. We need, unfortunately, to be able to focus on more than one story at a time as the world is creating displacement faster than it is producing solutions. These are essentially political problems and require a political response, as humanitarian agencies like mine can neither prevent nor end displacement on our own. The reaction to the exodus from Libya showed it can be done, when the international community has the will to do so.

I welcome this issue of Forced Migration Review for examining what was accomplished and highlighting what challenges remain. Our common work to seek political responses and solutions, in a systematic fashion, must be underpinned by learning such as this.

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Broadening our perspective

William Lacy Swing

Upholding the human rights and dignity of migrants and people displaced is one of the major challenges of the century. The causes of migration are complex and myriad, and result in no small measure from the phenomenon of globalisation in the economic, political and cultural spheres. Human rights violations, armed conflict, natural disasters and, increasingly, climate change and environmental degradation also contribute to this unprecedented surge in human mobility.

Complex crises triggered by man-made and/or natural causes generate disorderly and predominantly forced movements of people, either internally or across borders; these not only make some populations significantly vulnerable but also have lasting implications for societies, economies, development, environments, security and governance. There is a growing recognition that existing legal categories of crisis-affected persons – such as refugees or internally displaced persons – may not fully capture the varied conditions of people in crisis situations, the many avenues used by persons to escape such situations, and the changing nature of circumstances over time.

Approaches that focus solely on displaced persons, for example, may fail to reflect other realities – such as the high vulnerability of persons unable to migrate during crises and remaining trapped in dangerous conditions. Placing crisis-related mobility in a larger migration context can shed light on latent structural factors which determine people’s migration behaviour before, during and after a crisis, and promote effective ways to protect, assist and guarantee the human rights of affected persons. The events in North Africa, in particular the Libya crisis, demonstrate the need and added value of looking at crises from a mobility standpoint, what we at IOM term a ‘migration crisis’.

Complementary to humanitarian preparedness, response and recovery frameworks for complex crises, a migration management approach examines all phases related to crisis response from the standpoint of human mobility. One of the major challenges that remains is for states to coordinate among themselves and with the institutions that have the mandate and architecture to respond to these crises. IOM is taking a lead in reviewing operational systems and mechanisms to improve preparedness and response to migration crises.

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