**War of the (un)civilised**

Zeeshan Salahuddin

Saturday, Mar 05, 2022

 “Just to put it bluntly, these are not refugees from Syria. These are refugees from neighboring Ukraine. I mean that quite frankly is part of it. They are Christian, they are white…”

These are the exact words of Kelly Cobiella, an NBC news correspondent, talking about why Ukraine’s neighbours do not have a problem taking in refugees following Russia’s invasion of the country. She is but one of dozens of reporters, political figures, and bureaucrats in Europe and the Americas who have used very similar language to create a pronounced, painful distinction between what makes a refugee acceptable in the predominantly Christian, predominantly white world.

There is so much to unpack here, but before that, let us look at some of the other, equally despicable statements that differentiate on the basis of skin colour and religion.

Senior foreign correspondent for CBS News Charlie D’Agata stated on a live beeper: “This isn’t a place, with all due respect, like Iraq or Afghanistan, that has seen conflict raging for decades… This is a relatively civilised, relatively European – I have to choose those words carefully, too – city, where you wouldn’t expect that or hope that it’s going to happen.” Rarely do you see someone exhibit gross racism, xenophobia, historical inaccuracy, and ethnocentrism in so few words.

The classist icing on the racism cake was by the Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov himself, who said of the Ukranians: “These are not the refugees we are used to; these people are Europeans… These people are intelligent. They are educated people.... This is not the refugee wave we have been used to, people we were not sure about their identity, people with unclear pasts, who could have been even terrorists. In other words, there is not a single European country now which is afraid of the current wave of refugees.”

Let us draw some obvious, and not-so-obvious conclusions.

First, major news outlets and leaders of the Western world believe that Muslim, non-white refugees, hailing from war-torn regions such as Syrian, or Afghanistan, Iraq, or Yemen are uncivilised, unintelligent, uneducated terrorists, across the board. The irony of most of these wars having direct or indirect involvement of many of the Nato or American nations notwithstanding, the implication here is as clear as it is heinous: the West does not want, care for, or sympathise with, refugees – unless they are very specifically white, predominantly Christian, and come from a palatable, relatable background.

Second, European nations have poured considerable resources into regions to ensure that certain regions’ refugees do not reach their borders. Pakistan, for example, has been offered money to continue to host Afghan refugees, following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan on August 15, 2021. There has been moderate coverage of the deplorable conditions of Syrian, Yemeni, Afghan refugees on Europe’s borders, and gut-wrenching stories of thousands drowning in makeshift, gloried rafts trying to make their way across water bodies. None of that really seemed to matter then, nor does it now.

Third, the difference between how refugees are being treated, handled, and taken in at border points paints a very clear picture of Europe’s xenophobic roots and priorities. Even within the Ukrainian refugees, there are reports of hundreds of white refugees being let in before a handful of black or brown refugees are afforded the same dignity.

Lastly, a conclusion perhaps not as obvious as before. For decades, Pakistan has been accused of allowing Afghan terror groups to operate unimpeded on its soil. Pakistan has taken in more than seven million Afghan refugees since the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and hosted them for 43 years. There is literally no difference between how Ukraine’s bordering nations have opened their arms to welcome fleeing, beleaguered refugees, and what Pakistan has done for Afghan refugees for the last four decades. The hypocritical dichotomy here comes from both expecting Afghan’s neighbours to primarily manage their ensuing refugee crisis, and also accusing the same countries for harboring or allowing in “terrorists”.

It turns out that the media worldwide needs: a) sensitivity training; and b) an introduction to the idea that being civilised or decent is not a matter of skin colour. This will also not happen overnight. The depth and breadth of how widespread this type of thinking is shows clearly that this is almost inextricably entrenched in the mindsets of the media and politicians in the western hemisphere.

It is the year 2022. It is strange to be forced to make the following statement, because clearly it is not an obvious one: brown and black people are people too.

The writer serves as a research fellow at the Center for Research and Security Studies, Islamabad, and is a freelance journalist. He tweets @zeesalahuddin and can be reached at:

zeeshan.salahuddin@gmail.com