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“Refugee” Test Is Shaking Europe

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Europe is in the throes of a refugee crisis. While the worldwide media had continuously reported on the miserable procession of refugees, most have grown numb to their stories. That was until this September when the body of a young Syrian refugee named Aylan Kurdi was discovered faced down in the sand of the Turkish resort town of Bodrum. Images of Aylan were broadcasted around the world arousing a sense of sadness and responsibility in people from all over the world. The Greek island of Kos, which was the birthplace of the founder of Western medicine Hippocrates, is said to be oversaturated following the doubling of its population after the introduction of refugees. Having visited both of these places, this is no longer simply the story of others.

4 Million Syrians; Wandering Europe

The majority of refugees who have flocked to Europe as part of the worst refugee situation since the end of the Second World War are Syrians fleeing the civil war that continues to rage on in their home country.

The United Nations Higher Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that there are 4 million Syrian refugees but a majority of these refugees have remained in countries adjacent to Syria. There are said to be 2 million refugees in Turkey, 1.4 million in Jordan, 1.2 million in Lebanon, 250,000 in Iraq, and more scattered in other countries. In order to avoid the devastating Syrian civil war that has al-

ready claimed 250,000 lives, over 8 million Syrians have left their homes behind; and since half of that number has left the country, it can be assumed that 4 million have fled to other places within Syria.

Most of the refugees who have headed for Europe are those who were the first to migrate out of Syria and were living in adjacent countries. After four years of war and no end in sight, these refugees are migrating for a second time and heading north to stable Europe in hopes of settling down. During this year alone, around 600,000 refugees are said to have entered Europe, but sadly around 3,000 people have died while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Other refugees have chosen the land route through the Balkan Peninsula and are flocking into the outskirts of the European Union (EU) causing the people of countries like Hungary and Croatia to feel confused and panicked.

In order to protect the rights and interests of refugees, the international community established the UNHCR and concluded the 1951 Refugee Convention. Refugees are people who have a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of their membership in a particular social group or based on their race, religion, nationality, or political beliefs, and who are outside of their country of citizenship and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself to the protection of their home country. They are protected by international law which restricts forceful repatriation of refugees. Meanwhile, people who have moved in order to

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make better lives for themselves and are considered economic migrants are not protected by these international conventions.

However, as in the case of the recent Syrian refugees, when large scale migrations take place out of desperation, it is difficult to categorize people as refugees or migrants in both a physical and technical sense. The Dublin Regulation established that EU member states should carry out the asylum seeking procedure for people who first set foot in their country. But when people entering the EU are able to freely come and go and move between the borders of different EU member states as is currently happening, following the Dublin Regulation becomes unrealistic.

Slovakian Minister of the Interior Robert Kalinak argued that out of the Syrian refugees who were entering Europe, a mere 20 percent needed protection through the process of applying for asylum and the remaining majority of people were economic migrants. But the UNHCR adopted the "Refugee Protection and Mixed Migration: A 10-Point Plan of Action" which emphasizes that the principle of restricting forced repatriation of people who likely migrate for a variety of reasons should be respected, and suggested the establishment of "protection-sensitive entry systems."

The EU's Refugee Response in Disarray

Europe is at the center of this urgent situation. Measures to deal with the issue are still divided and confused. First, the EU provided an additional 1 billion Euros of support to the UNHCR and is working with the UNHCR to assign a quota of refugees to member countries that they will be obliged to accommodate according to their economic capabilities. Of the 120,000 refugees that have entered through Italy and Greece, 55,000 people will be accommodated in the first

round and the rest will be accommodated a year later. The Central European countries of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania have rejected the quota system. However, in an unprecedented move, the interior ministers of the EU member countries met and agreed to enforce the quota system. Central and Eastern European EU member states were assigned a combined total of 15,000 refugees with the majority being accommodated in France and Germany.

Nevertheless, the resistance from the Central European member countries is considerable. Slovakia is opposing the obligatory quota system and threatening to file a lawsuit in the European Union Court of Justice. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who spearheaded the movement to actively accommodate refugees, has called for all EU member countries to unite around the principles of humanitarianism and accept responsibility for solving this issue. She has also suggested that a failure to solve this crisis would signal that Europe has no future. But common policy on the refugee problem is not necessarily a test of EU unity and criticisms of the quota system as encouraging more refugees to travel to Europe are serious. After consistently expressing a passive and ambiguous attitude towards the issue, the UK, due to domestic and international pressure, recently announced, independent of any EU policy, that its government had decided to accept 4,000 refugees this year and accept an additional 20,000 refugees over the next five years.

Another controversial aspect of the obligatory quota system is the control of state borders. The Hungarian government strongly advocated for and then actually closed its borders to prevent the inflow of refugees. But following the implementation of the Schengen Convention, free travel between most of the 28 members of the EU is permitted without a passport and thus control of borders is limited.

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The reason the EU appears divided between east and west is that the eastern EU member countries are being primarily affected as they have become the advanced outpost on the channel along which the refugees are moving while the northern European member countries, which are the refugees' final destination, have been less affected thus far. Division has also risen due to the fact that the southern EU member countries are primarily responsible for speedily registering the refugees' fingerprints, classifying between those who will be accepted as asylum seekers and those who will be deported, and providing relief activities.

The EU is also negotiating with neighboring countries outside the EU including the Balkan states to rapidly reduce the number of refugees heading for Europe. At a recent meeting of the Council of the European Union, European leaders requested that Turkey strictly control their borders to prevent more Syrian refugees from moving into the EU given that it has become the main route for refugees to enter Europe. To compensate Turkey, the EU proposed providing 300 million Euros to provide relief to the refugees in Turkey, begin allowing Turkish citizens to travel to EU countries without visas beginning in 2016, and resuming the negotiations on Turkey's admittance to the EU.

The fundamental solution to the procession of refugees is to seek a cessation to the Syrian civil war, but, due to the complicated aspects of the civil war and the absence of strong leadership, this does not seem likely.

If an Asian Version of the Refugee Crisis Occurred?

It appears that the current refugee crisis will exert considerable influence on the domestic politics of European countries. The possibility of the rise of xenophobic rightist politics that seek to

exclude migrants based on the threats felt from the introduction of refugees is high. After witnessing the rise of the refugee crisis due to the Syrian civil war, the crisis of regionalism in Europe caused by the refugee crisis and the possible change in politics causes us to consider what would happen if a large scale refugee crisis happened in Asia. Naturally, there would not be a joint policy like Europe in Asia and each country would deal with the issue based on their own circumstances. Following Vietnam's fall to communism, Korea helped the refugees known as the "boat people" by relocating them to third countries rather than accommodating them. In 2012, a law on refugees was passed in Korea and its implementation began the following year. According to the records of the Ministry of Justice, through May 2015 refugee status was granted to 159 people. As a country that suffered from the Korean War and produced many refugees itself at that time, Koreans should ask themselves, based on humanitarian values, how many Asian refugees we could accept. ■

— Sook-Jong Lee is the EAI President, and a professor at Sungkyunkwan University. Currently, Dr. Lee holds advisory positions in the South Korean government, including the Presidential National Security Advisory Group, Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation and councils for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Unification, and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). She also participates as member of the Trilateral Commission, Council of Councils, and many other transnational networks on research and policy studies. Dr. Lee received her B.A. from Yonsei University, and M.A. and Ph.D. in sociology from Harvard University.