

A Tale of Two Halves

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The Covid19 epidemic has left a lasting impression and for the purpose of this presentation is seen through the lens of a doctor ministering to Refugees and who spent time in both the the Morya camp in Lesbos Greece and the camp housing the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh February/March 2019. Photographic images of the medical facilities and his colleagues were shared.

Although the speaker's experience was in both the eastern and western hemispheres he was clearly shocked by the situation 'in the West', in Europe, in Greece. He wished to highlight the disparity between the two by concentrating on the latter.

On Lesbos the host community were initially very welcoming but by the time of Dr Anwar's arrival were attacking the refugees. At the volunteer house he had entered with other medics, lawyers and volunteers there was a scramble to withdraw personnel including by Medicines Sans Frontieres (MSF) and put the staff underground and effectively under 'arrest' for a period of 6 days. How had this situation arisen ?

Some of the refugees had made treacherous journeys to find that they had come to an unsafe place originally constructed for 2-3,000 people. The camp held at the time 25,000 persons. They found violence, deprivation, destitution and despair. 40% of the camp population were unaccompanied minors or children. Human Rights Watch described it as an 'open air prison'. MSF described it as the worst Refugee Camp on earth. It was the largest in Europe, not in a conflict zone and eventually burnt down in 2020.

The Refugees had come from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen and from other African countries. All migrants had a common desire for safety. But in the camp there was no provision for health, water, sanitation, or education. There was a minimal electricity supply. it was a 'living hell'. He asked the question "Where does the problem lie ?"

Greece had received 2 Billion Euros in financial support from the European Union since 2016.

Regrettably the richer world has done little to support Greece and the International Community in its silence allowed for the degradation of services to continue. Dr. Anwar asked how many of the audience had heard of this camp's existence.

From a medical perspective the only service operating was provided by 2 GPs, an A&E Consultant, 1 junior doctor, 2 nurses and a handful of volunteers. The intention was to support the family but with the most basic of provisions it was a patching up service and could provide only immediate physical support after hours of queuing. The referral of patients out of the camp was complex. But there were stories of individuals which provided hope. The resilience, perseverance and determination shone through this existence. But the observation did beg the question as to whether the Declaration on Human Rights only applied to some of us.

What can a group of medics do if not able to influence wider geopolitics ? We are agents for change. We can connect with individuals on the ground. Conversations can be opened, walls pulled down, prejudices put aside and human dignity restored. We can help others see what we see and act as the voice of the disadvantaged. Surely today we can identify 'one other person on our doorstep in this country who requires help' - if we can change only one person's life Once one sees one will care. We can take responsibility and share in a new humanitarian vision. We can take a stand in a world where every human life matters.