

Minorities in Situations of Humanitarian Crisis

It was Spring 1992 when Sarajevo came under a siege. International community reacted swiftly and initiated delivery of humanitarian aid. The first round was distributed through humanitarian agencies affiliated with local religious communities. The result was that I, like other members of minority groups or citizens without any religious affiliation were left out of humanitarian efforts in the very beginning. It has been changed soon but this example shows how easy it is in situations of humanitarian crisis to forget about minorities and how much more vulnerable they are than citizens within numerically larger communities.

Several decades earlier, in Cyprus, members of minority groups had to make decision whether they should be accounted for as associates of one of the two major religious/ethnic groups. This is another example showing concerns of national and international organizations being with majority groups.

The situation, however, has improved. The crisis in Ukraine and a conflict between supporters of two large communities and different political agendas has brought attention to the plight of Crimean Tatars. It shows rightly that international community is concerned not only with humanitarian crisis that affects everyone in the region but by pointing out at the specific minority it sends strong message to whoever is in charge of the territory.

This comes as proof of the importance of access to rights, rather than status as carefully argued in the Fourth Thematic Commentary of the Framework Convention on the Protection of the National Minorities. Minority Rights are underlined as part of human rights and therefore universal regardless of territory and particular situation. There is no equality without a full enjoyment and access to rights.

Nation states take different actions towards minorities. The Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities recently visited Austria where significant number of refugees from outside of Europe have settled temporarily or permanently. While this dilemma is settled, local authorities, especially those in Vienna, have provided education for children refugees and putting in special efforts in this field.

Despite the lack of universal definition of minorities and Austrian insistence on autochthonous minority groups, authorities have put in practice major efforts to help minorities in situation of major humanitarian crisis.

This leads to concluding remark that minorities could need special concern and assistance in different situations and these can be grouped as:

1. Humanitarian crisis in the region that minority traditionally inhabits that is caused by conflict that minority is not part of.

2. Humanitarian crisis in the region that minority traditionally inhabits and is one of the sides in the conflict.

3. Humanitarian crisis outside of the region of conflict or other humanitarian catastrophe where minority members have taken refuge to.

In the first two cases, national authorities usually need international assistance and fast response of international organizations and insistence on application of international conventions is of utter importance. The third case shows ability of developed nations to assist newly forming minorities and provide access to human rights enjoyed as members of minority groups. However, they do often need assistance and application of international instruments for the protection of minorities. Inclusive approach is of greatest importance in application of protection of minority as humanitarian crisis creates extraordinary situation where usual definitions, conventions and agreements have to be applied in its broader interpretation.

Article 6 of the FCNM in particular applies to everyone in the territory of the state party.