

„Corona, Flucht und Menschenrechte“ (Coronavirus, forced migration and human rights)—An interim report on the online discussion series

(original discussions in German only)

Refugees and other migrants are currently facing even greater challenges than usual due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic: From the lack of masks, the impossibility of maintaining physical distance or even social isolation in camps, to the increasing violence experienced by vulnerable groups, border closures and delayed resettlement programmes. In the framework of the “Forced Migration and Refugee Studies: Networking and Knowledge Transfer” (FFVT) project, the Centre for Human Rights Erlangen-Nuremberg (CHREN) therefore launched the online discussion series “Coronavirus, Forced Displacement and Human Rights” in mid-2020. Unfortunately, scientifically sound evidence and large-scale surveys on the human rights situation of refugees in times of the coronavirus is lacking. This is why, in this series, experts are presenting ad-hoc reports on the local situation. These presentations are followed by a discussion of the challenges and possible solutions, also taking scientific assessments into account. Experts from the media, NGOs and academia are invited to participate in the series to do justice to the central mandates of the FFVT project, which are networking and knowledge transfer.

The series began on 29 June 2020 with a focus on human mobility between West Africa and Libya. The journalist Benjamin Moscovici, Kristin Pelzer from Doctors without Borders (MSF), Benjamin Schraven from the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) and Prof Dr Michael Krennerich from the Friedrich-Alexander Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU) took part. The experts presented facts, figures, trends, as well as some necessary contextual information. Their frank contributions led to a better understanding of the influence and significance of COVID-19 on migrants and refugees in this region. Besides discussing the risks and opportunities involved, the role of actors such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic in this region was highlighted. To this end, Benjamin Moscovici presented recordings of affected people who at that time had been trapped in an irregular camp for IDPs (internally displaced people) in Bamako, Mali, and in the main IOM transit centre in Agadez, Niger. Kristin Pelzer focused on the situation of ‘stranded’ refugees in Libyan camps and Benjamin Schraven on the situation of West African labour migrants, before Michael Krennerich gave a human rights assessment of the situation. They all showed overcrowded institutions and economic emergencies (due to the decline of remittances and the collapse of cross-border trade, which accounts for a relevant part of GDP in West Africa). There is a widespread public perception of migrants as spreaders of the virus—although primarily they ought to be considered as vulnerable to it themselves. The panellists called for the establishment of humanitarian corridors, the reopening of borders (at least for trade) and the observance of human rights such as that of health.

Part Two of the discussion series on 20 July 2020, shed light on the situation at the Greek external EU borders. Dr Lorenz Wiese and Prof Dr Anuscheh Farahat (CHREN) discussed the medical and legal situation of refugees with the Lesbos-based journalist Franziska Grillmeier: They focused on the conditions in the Moria camp, where around 15,000 people were caught up in the 5th extension of the curfew. In the course of the discussion, they addressed human rights violations caused by illegal pushbacks and the sea barrier on the Aegean Sea, implemented by the Greek government, as well as the legal situation of refugees with recognised protection statuses on land, many of whom are homeless in Athens. The core thesis was that the right to asylum at the EU's external borders had for years only been simulated and that the pandemic was bringing this injustice and abuse to the surface more than ever. Somewhat provocatively, the controversial question was raised as to whether we could observe the end of the Geneva Convention on Refugees at Europe's borders.

All in all, these contributions made clear that there is a risk of instrumentalising the Coronavirus pandemic, among other things, to disproportionately restrict many of the rights of refugees and migrants for the sake of the lockdown and the security of a country's citizens. The repeated violations of rights that accompany this may be seen as symptomatic of current migration policy at various political levels.

The discussion series will be continued with Part Three on 1 December 2020 at 6 pm (CET) on the housing situation of asylum seekers and refugees in Germany; especially in Bavarian AnkER centres. We cordially invite you to attend: <https://fau.zoom.us/j/98891205928> (prior registration is not necessary; see also: <https://ffvt.net/de/events>).

The first two episodes are also available online for review at: <https://www.video.uni-erlangen.de/course/id/1486>

You can also follow us on Twitter (@FFVT_Project) to stay informed about upcoming events.

Authors:

Petra Bendel, Project leader at CHREN

Lorenz Wiese, Project networker at CHREN, Contact: lorenz.wiese@fau.de

Project Partners

