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Letter from the Editors

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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Aylan Kurdi was born in 2012, two years into the Syrian civil war. Knowing a life of war and violence, Aylan, together with his five-year-old brother, mother, and father, fled his hometown of Kobane, Syria to seek refuge in Turkey. Aylan's father, Abdullah, sought to reunite his family with his sister in the safety of Vancouver, Canada. The Kurdi family, already having fled war in Syria, sought to escape economic peril in Turkey by crossing the Mediterranean in a small boat. Aylan's tragic death caught international media attention in September 2015 when the boat sank, washing Aylan's lifeless body upon the Turkish shores.

Aylan came to represent the real human tragedy of the Syrian war. Although many media outlets have reported on the crushing number of refugees and internally displaced persons created by the war, Aylan Kurdi put a face to those overwhelming numbers. For the first time since the beginning of the war, Syrian refugees were seen as people, not numbers. The millions of people seeking safe refuge in Europe were no longer simply a national security concern, but were families: children, young men and women, and grandparents.

National reactions to the Syrian refugee crisis have varied considerably. In Canada and Sweden, governments are working with private individuals in their countries who have agreed to help sponsor Syrian refugee families, including paying for their flights and inviting them to live in their homes. Germany and France moved to increase the number of Syrian refugees admitted into their countries amidst other European nations closing their doors. In the face of a great tragedy the French government did not degenerate into fear-mongering and politicking over the Syrian refugee crisis, but instead maintained its commitment to helping Syrians resettle in France. To our great disappointment, not all countries have protected the human rights of Syrians or met their international obligations in this regard. Politicians in the United States have called for various bans on Syrian refugees under the guise of national security, including discriminating based on religion. In Denmark, members of parliament passed legislation authorizing the confiscation of valuables from Syrian refugees as they enter the country. Reactions like these are sadly not uncommon.

The Syrian refugee crisis is not the first time that the global community has faced such a tragedy; leading up to and during World War II many countries turned Jewish and other refugees away, effectively sending people back to their ravaged homes to die. In 1948, born out of that great tragedy, and the shame and regret world leaders felt for their actions, the United Nations passed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), outlining the unalienable rights inherent in every person. Protecting each person's right to be treated equally under the law and protected regardless of age, sex, gender, nationality, political affiliation or religion. Significantly, the UDHR also protects the right to freedom of movement and the right to asylum and to change nationality.

Unfortunately, although the Syrian refugee crisis had global consequences, the failure of many states to protect the rights of the Syrian refugees was not the only example of states failing to protect our most basic human rights. The articles in this edition highlight a few of those issues,

including the violation of minority land rights in Brazil, the denial of the right to nationality in the Dominican Republic, domestic violence throughout the world, violence and danger for the LGBTQ community in Kenya, child labor violations, and states failing to protect the right to education.

The ongoing violation of the basic rights of Syrian refugees by an alarming number of states must be highlighted. Unfortunately, Aylan is not the only Syrian child who has died due to a basic lack of compassion among various states and governments. However, in pushing our governments to respect and protect basic human rights, we must include and look beyond the shores of the Middle East. We, as individuals, must work to push our governments to protect the rights of all vulnerable groups. Those facing harassment and persecution must be empowered and we must demand protection from human rights abuses and accountability for such violations.

By looking at both well covered and lesser known human rights abuses that are occurring across the globe, we hope that this issue of the *Human Rights Brief* will encourage individuals, organizations, and states to push for better human rights protections for all vulnerable groups. Only by acting proactively and together can we prevent further abuses. The world should not need to witness a tragedy like Aylan Kurdi to mobilize governments to act in defense of human rights. For current coverage please visit hrbrief.org where we update daily on cutting edge human rights issues.

CHRIS KEELER & WHITNEY-ANN MULHAUSER
Co-Editors in Chief

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