



Open the gates to uprooted Syrians

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Societies across the globe are becoming multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious. Like it or not, we cannot stop this trend; it is inevitable.

We do have a choice, however, in how we approach this. Do we embrace diversity as a source of strength, or do we play the populist game and make it a source of fear? I believe tolerance is the only responsible option.

Canada provides a compelling example of the benefits of multicultural life when nurtured by good governance, strong civic institutions and respectful policies. It is a model celebrated worldwide and cherished by many at home.

Yet we have seen how easy it is to throw tolerance off course. In my part of the world, Europe, anti-immigration and xenophobic parties have taken advantage of the economic crisis to rapidly gain influence, and mainstream parties have been unable, or even unwilling, to stop them.

This is deeply worrying. With an average fertility rate of 1.5 children per woman, Europe needs immigration to maintain its economy and pay the pensions of its aging population. Without immigration, many of our communities would become unsustainable.

Recently, I visited the Central African Republic, a country where just a year ago Christians and Muslims lived side by side. Today, it is one of the world's most dangerous places, with men, women and children driven from their homes and killed just because of their religion. Thousands of people are dead and nearly 700,000 have been forcibly displaced. It took unscrupulous individuals looking for short-term gains to make this happen.

When faith or ethnicity is exploited for political purposes, tensions can quickly rise, creating a dangerous dynamic. Intolerance is like a genie that becomes impossible to control once out of the bottle.

That is why we celebrate models such as Canada, where tolerance and reason remain strong. We must stand together against any kind of manipulation that leads to hatred, whether it is rooted in political populism, radical nationalism or religious fundamentalism.

It isn't easy. Globalization has been unfair, and many people have been left out. Physical and legal barriers are not enough to stand in the way of people fleeing persecution and violence, or simply looking for a better life. Border controls alone do not work, but they do play into the hands of traffickers and smugglers.

Globally, we need a system that welcomes diversity and distributes the benefits of globalization more widely. That means co-operation among countries of origin, transit and destination, and concerted efforts to identify opportunities for legal migration.

It also means doing more to prevent conflict and build peace so that when people move they do so out of choice, not necessity. And it means building strong global systems for when things go wrong.

Irrespective of cultural, religious or ethnic differences, men and women around the world share a common value: that we should protect and shelter strangers in need.

Today, more people are uprooted by violence, persecution and war than at any time since the Second World War. Nearly three million Syrians have fled their country in little more than three years. And more than one million of them are in neighbouring Lebanon, which has the highest concentration of refugees in the world.

Canada is fortunate to be far from today's main sources of conflict and displacement. Most refugees find safety and help in neighbouring countries, which are showing generosity well beyond their means. In fact, about 86 per cent of the world's refugees live in developing countries, compared with 70 per cent a decade ago.

But globalization has led to global population movements, including the displacement of refugees. It remains important, therefore, that people in need of international protection can seek and find asylum anywhere in the world.

Canada has a proud history of welcoming refugees and its resettlement program is one of the largest. It offers refugees who can no longer stay in their first country of asylum an opportunity to rebuild their lives. I encourage Canada to resettle a large number of Syrian refugees, helping to ease the disproportionate burden shouldered by neighbouring countries and setting an example to the rest of the world.

This article is an abstract of the lecture António Guterres is delivering at the Global Centre for Pluralism in Ottawa on Thursday, May 29. The lecture and a discussion moderated by Globe and Mail editor-in-chief David Walmsley can be viewed at www.tgam.ca/pluralism at 6:30 ET.