**Refuge in Rwanda?**

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The British government announced in April that it had struck a deal to send potentially tens of thousands of asylum seekers to Rwanda. The arrangement attracted significant criticism from the British opposition, charities, religious leaders and human rights activists who all said the deportations were unlawful and inhumane. Even Britain’s Crown Prince Charles allegedly described the plan as ‘appalling’.

On Tuesday, the first charter flight to take asylum seekers to the East African nation failed to take off as scheduled after the European human rights court issued last-minute injunctions to stop the deportation of the handful of people on board. Many others who were supposed to be on the flight had already delayed their deportation after making successful legal challenges against the decision in UK courts.

Home Secretary Priti Patel, however, said the government would not be deterred in its deportation plans and would prepare for the next flight. Government officials and supporters of the asylum deal once again insisted that Rwanda is a safe destination with the capacity to absorb possibly tens of thousands of UK-bound claimants in the future.

But is this true?

The Rwandan government – which is due to host a Commonwealth summit, to be attended by Prince Charles and Prime Minister Boris Johnson later this month – says the 1994 genocide made the country particularly attentive to protecting anybody from discrimination, and primed it to be a haven for all refugees.

The facts on the ground, however, point to a different reality.

Twenty-eight years after Rwanda’s civil war and the genocide against the Tutsi, Rwandans are still recovering from the trauma and losses that have affected each and every citizen. Genuine reconciliation is proving elusive, and the country is still trying to heal. And the persisting trauma of the civil war and genocide is not the only challenge facing Rwanda.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, less than 50 percent of households in Rwanda were categorised as “certainly food secure”. According to data published by the World Bank in 2020, undernourishment affected 35.6 percent of Rwanda’s population, and 36.9 percent of children were experiencing stunted growth. Since the pandemic, the number of families living in poverty increased significantly, exacerbating the country’s food security and malnourishment crisis further.

While the country experienced significant growth in the past decade, this has not translated into any considerable poverty reduction, particularly in rural areas. The government chose to invest a large segment of public funds into the meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE) industry, developing the touristic areas of the country, and building impressive infrastructure in the capital, Kigali. But these efforts did not translate into increased employment across the country and provided no benefit to the most struggling rural communities. MICE-related developments suffered a lot due to the pandemic, further limiting the gains made. Now as a result of these and other short-sighted economic strategies, Rwanda stands on debt equivalent to a whopping 73 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP).

Furthermore, continuous political tensions with neighbouring countries which led to border closures have impeded cross-border informal trading activities that many families relied upon for a significant portion of their income. The most recent tensions with the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) over Rwanda’s alleged support for the M23 rebel group that has long been fighting the DRC government close to the Rwanda border, will certainly halt the income generation activities of Rwanda’s informal traders who were supplying goods to the DRC market.

Although poverty in Rwanda is worse in the rural areas, families in urban areas also have their own problems, especially in Kigali. The government restricts informal commerce in the cities, limiting further economic opportunities for poor families. Human rights organisations have often condemned the way street vendors, particularly women, are treated by police officers in Kigali.

The government has also been working on rebuilding and transforming Kigali to provide modern and environmentally sustainable housing to the city’s residents. To achieve this, it has been relocating residents between districts and neighbourhoods. The way government officials have carried out these expropriations, however, has caused undue stress, trauma, and economic harm for many families.

For example, the authorities, citing security concerns, razed thousands of residential buildings in the Nyarutarama district in Kigali in March 2020, promising residents either rehousing opportunities or compensation for their losses. Some of these people have since been rehoused in newly built accommodation elsewhere in the city, but have been complaining about a lack of basic facilities and of not being able to find employment in their new neighbourhoods. Others never received the compensation they were promised and disputes over this problem are ongoing.

These are only some of the economic and developmental challenges Rwanda is currently facing. The country is crippled by debt and is unable to provide decent living conditions and a life free of poverty for most of its own citizens. Due to all these problems, Rwanda’s population is frequently ranked among the bottom five in the World Happiness Index in spite of the country recently registering high economic growth.

So how would asylum seekers, an overwhelming majority of whom are already traumatised by their experiences of poverty and conflict in their home countries, fare in Rwanda? Can Rwanda provide them with the opportunities and care they undoubtedly need while it tries to rebuild itself and overcome its own significant struggles?

And economic and developmental hardship is not the only factor that makes Rwanda an inappropriate destination for UK-bound asylum seekers.

Unfortunately, despite devastating memories of the civil war and genocide still being fresh in Rwandan minds, political persecution is rife in the country. In fact, anyone who dares to challenge the government’s policies and narratives is persecuted and labelled an “enemy of the state intending to destabilise Rwanda”.

Excerpted: ‘Can asylum seekers find safety and dignity in Rwanda?’

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