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We Need to be That 'Shining City on the Hill' for Syrian Refugees

By Elizabeth Santiago

UCF Forum columnist

Tuesday, September 15, 2015

In our Declaration of Independence it is written that all people have certain unalienable rights, including “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” As Americans, we strive for equality and opportunity. We are taught to treat everyone justly and with respect, for everyone is equal. We are taught to “ask not what your country can do for you...” and to extend an open arm when help is needed.

I was taught all these wonderful things about how we should act as Americans, but when I turn on the TV or read the news, all I see is breaking “news” about the latest celebrity updates, computer-product announcements, and hateful comments made by politicians.

As a student since exposing myself to the diversity within UCF, I have been submersed into the culture of others and the issues that people of different backgrounds face. I find myself talking to different people and getting perspectives on issues I didn’t even know *were* issues.

It wasn’t until I recently saw the heart-wrenching images of the tiny, lifeless body of a 3-year-old boy washed up on a Turkish beach that I found myself wondering how it was possible for America to be silent on a crisis that tries its most basic foundations? Why did it take the life of an innocent little boy, whose family was trying to escape turmoil in Syria, to get us talking about this “current” issue and whether the western world is living up to its democratic and humanitarian principles in light of the worst refugee crisis since the Rwandan genocide of the 1990s?

Though this may be breaking news for some, the source of this problem began in the spring of 2011 when millions of Syrians and others across the Arab world staged massive protests against the repressive, authoritative government. They were met with fire and lead.

The government's crackdown was so brutal that it plunged the nation into a civil war that still rages today and has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. The conflict has caused more than 4 million refugees to flee the war-torn region. The international response has been mixed, but my concern is the reaction of the European Union, which is currently overwhelmed with the flood of migrants pouring in through the Balkan nations, and the United States.

The majestic display of compassion and moral responsibility by the German government and a few others has been inspiring. The German government has already announced that it expects a total of 800,000 asylum requests this year and that it is willing to accommodate half a million refugees each year for several years, according to Vice Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel. In another positive gesture, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker has announced a comprehensive plan that would accommodate an extra 160,000 refugees throughout the European Union on a strict quota system that would allow the region to deal with the refugee crisis more quickly in the future.

Other European nations have been a little more hesitant. France has agreed to take in 24,000 migrants during the next two years. The United Kingdom has reluctantly pledged to take in 20,000 refugees during the next five years. Although the good faiths of these European governments should be recognized, these efforts are simply not enough – with the exception of Germany, of course – considering that fact Turkey is accommodating 1.9 million refugees. Lebanon has taken in approximately 1 million, a 25 percent surge to its population. The European Union, being the economic powerhouse that it is, could and should do more, much more.

This brings it back to the question: Where does the United States stand on this issue and why has its response been so muted? To date, the United States has only relocated 1,500 Syrian refugees. The State Department recently announced that the government plans to increase that figure in 2016 and pointed out that the United States has donated \$574 million to the Syrian refugee crisis, more than any other country.

Yes, the financial aid is needed and appreciated, but more than that, these people need a new home, a place where they can exercise their basic human rights and not live in fear of a government airstrike leveling their neighborhood.

The United States has been that “shining city on the hill” for more than two centuries. America has personified freedom and opportunity and, over the course of its illustrious history, has drawn millions to its shores in search of a better life. It would only be natural for the United States to take the mantle of leadership in this moment of crisis and welcome many more to our nation.

We were built on the principle of protecting basic human rights, and those rights are not contingent on whether you are born within our borders. So far, about 2,800 refugees have recently perished on their journey trying to cross into Europe to a better life.

As citizens of this great nation it is our duty to speak for those who do not have a voice and to encourage our government to take decisive action in the name of compassion and human dignity. Instead of giving in to the social media fashion hype as to “Who wore it best,” why don’t we look into the real issues of the world and vote according to “Who can lead us best.”

Let us focus more on upgrading the qualities of lives rather than the latest models of phones.

Elizabeth Santiago is a UCF junior majoring in psychology and a member of the President’s Leadership Council. She can be reached at easantiago7@knights.ucf.edu.