

MIT Faculty Newsletter

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in this issue we offer commentary on the new MicroMaster's Credential (below and p. 6); "A Response to President Reif's 'Plan for Action on Climate Change'" (p. 4); reflections on his time at MIT by retiring Medical Director Bill Kettyle (p. 13).



After the Nepal Earthquake

After the Earthquakes: MIT's Nepal Initiative

Jeffrey S. Ravel, Aaron Weinberger,
Bigyan Bista

LAST APRIL 25, AN EARTHQUAKE with a magnitude of 7.8 on the Richter scale struck the South Asian country of Nepal, killing over 9,000 people and injuring more than 23,000 others. Aftershocks continued in the following days and months, including a 7.3 magnitude quake on May 12 that killed or injured another 2,700. Hundreds of thousands of people were made homeless with entire villages flattened across many districts of the country. Centuries-old buildings were destroyed at UNESCO Heritage sites throughout the Kathmandu Valley. It was the worst natural disaster to strike Nepal since the 1934 Nepal-Bihar earthquake that registered 8.0 on the Richer scale and resulted in the deaths of over 10,000 people.

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The Tragedy of Forced Migration

Nasser Rabbat

THERE IS A NEW FACE to the tragedy of forced migration, and it is Syrian. Mouaz al-Balkhi, a 22-year-old engineering student, died while trying to swim across the English Channel. His decomposed body was found months later on the Dutch island of Texel, hundreds of miles from the French seaport of Calais where he started his ill-fated attempt to reach the relatively lenient England. He and another Syrian, Shadi Kataf, had bought two identical thin wetsuits on October 7, 2014. They disappeared shortly afterward and Kataf's remains were found even further north on the shore of Lista in the south of Norway in January 2015, but were not identified until July. The two young men, like thousands other Syrians, Afghans, Iraqis, Palestinians, and North and sub-Saharan Africans, had fled the miserable condi-

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Editorial

The Wisdom and Process of Creating a MicroMaster's Credential

PRESIDENT REIF ANNOUNCED a new pathway to MIT Master's degrees on 7 October, and referenced an *MIT News* account with a subtitle that says the new pathway "reimagines admissions," and "introduces 'MicroMaster's.'" We expect that President Reif, noting the world needs more leaders with MIT educational experience, wants to find ways to increase our output at every level. Many of us on the faculty, probably most of us, maybe nearly all of us, concur and want to help.

Issues of Input and Process

What we do not understand is why many of us first heard about the new pathway in the President's announcement. Others, who had heard about it, referencing MIT tradition, expected a full airing in a faculty meeting, with discussion and vote, before an announcement.

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The Tragedy of Forced Migration

Rabhat, from page 1

tions at home to seek better lives in the promised land of Western Europe. But many have died trying to sneak across treacherous seas and hostile borders.

This is only one front of the global web of forced migration. Similar foreboding barriers exist along the long southern borders of the United States to keep out Central and South Americans and the northern shores of Australia to prevent a panoply of hopeless Asians from entering. And similar tragic stories of people who died while trying to cross them are reported all the time. The number of dead has increased exponentially as the number of refugees around the world skyrocketed (more than 51 million registered in 2013) and as the disparity between the wealthy West and the devastated South widened. But the Western governments are still erecting more formidable physical and legal obstacles in the face of forced migration, while ignoring the historical roots of this global problem and its political, economic, and ethical ramifications.

Of course there are direct causes for this surge in desperate migration from the South: raging civil wars, brutal, corrupt, and ethnically biased regimes, ruined economies, emboldened drug and human trafficking, ruthless terrorism, and perennial natural disasters like drought, desertification, and epidemics. But these phenomena are not totally unrelated. Nor are they isolated from global trends for which the West is primarily responsible and of which it is the ultimate beneficiary.

A bit of history may be instructive. Legal and illegal immigration are essentially recent categories. They appeared in the wake of the establishment of nation-states and citizenship criteria in Europe. Since then, they have been cunningly used to regulate the flow of desirable people in, while keeping the undesirables out. This is how the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, but also Argentina, Chile, South Africa, and several other countries of the global South and the former Soviet

Union, which were occupied then settled by Europeans, acquired their present populations. For a long time, they have all restricted immigration to White European Christians, and sometime even more constrained subsets of that vast

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group, while banning other races and religions. Selective immigration was, and to a large extent still is, openly discriminatory, even though advances in human rights after WWII have softened the prejudice against some formerly excluded immigrants, such as the dark skinned and non-Christian. But that is only half the story.

The other half has to do with economic cycles reaching back to the beginning of the colonial age in the sixteenth century. European colonial empires have used selective migration to move vast numbers of colonized people around the globe according to their economic needs. Thus millions of Africans were enslaved and forcibly transported to the Americas to work the huge sugarcane and cotton plantations of the new exploitative agrarian economies. Indian merchant communities were uprooted from Gujarat to serve in the outer fringes of the trade network of the British Empire in Asia and Africa. Deviously indentured Chinese and other Southeast Asian workers were imported to build the railways of the American West. More recently, with the post-WWII economic prosperity, the U.S. and other rich European countries opened their doors to unskilled laborers

from Asia and Africa to fill the menial jobs that their own workers no longer wanted to perform. The practice changed at the end of the twentieth century, when many Western countries instituted new quotas for the import of skilled and highly edu-

cated citizens of the South to staff the rapidly expanding tech industries and services.

This is an expected aspect of globalization, vaunted as the hallmark of our time, which has manipulated the world political order to serve its supranational networks of trade. Western goods, images, and lifestyles have come to define a new, wired consumerist society that is admired, emulated, and acquired worldwide, while new, legally admitted, immigrant communities instill some diversity in the main Western cities, which, despite ingrained and sometime volatile racism, have learned to cope with multiculturalism. But the underbelly of this regulated immigration is precisely its built-in, persistent, and unabashed inequity. The seduction of the West, lauded around the world in all kinds of media, is a tool used by governments and corporations alike to attract desirable immigrants. It is also the irresistible magnet that is driving millions of hapless citizens of the South to risk everything to attain it, when their chances to do that are close to zero.

The Western historical and moral responsibility for this state of affairs is clear. What is less clear is how to legally

translate that responsibility into action without resorting to rancorous recrimination and counter recrimination or incurring allegations of idealism or relativism (which in and by themselves are not categorically wrong). This is a task that no international or regional organization has been able to achieve. Besides, the enormity and mounting gravity of the problem preclude hasty or symbolic approaches. They require practical yet impartial and long-term remedies, which could alleviate the present tensions and minimize the ensuing tragedies while paving the way for more just and less dreadful conditions in the future.

The most pressing situation is that of the refugees displaced by wars and civil wars (many of which fueled by hungry extractive multinational companies), who have nothing more to lose and are thus willing to take any risk. Supporting the international organizations that have traditionally cared for them may address the immediate, material part of the problem: provision of food, basic healthcare, shelter, rudimentary education for the youth, and the like. But living in miserable, temporary, and underfunded camps controlled by reluctant and suspicious host countries, whose populations often become hostile to the newcomers, breeds a mixture of despondency, indolence, and shame that pushes the refugees to the edge of human behavior. This usually comes in the form either of desperate attempts at breaking loose by following the illegal immigration route or by committing senseless acts of violence, especially among the youth.

Tackling these issues requires new thinking. We need to pay attention to the refugees' psychological plight as much as we do their material ones, if not more. And we need to do it in ways that both restore their sense of self-worth and dignity and benefit them directly in their ostensibly temporary abode, the camp. This will mean that we need to empower the refugees to take command of their lives in the camps and improve their con-

ditions there while learning new skills and deriving not only sustenance but also meaning from their work. A new kind of self-help program, deployed creatively, respectfully, and sensibly, will channel the latent energy and ingenuity among the

This is where MIT can play a leading role both as a model institution and as an active contributor to improving the living conditions in the refugees' camps. MIT can team-up with international organizations connected to the network of refugees' help. Once contacts are established and permissions acquired, MIT can put in place an extracurricular program akin to a focused and specialized Peace Corps, which will allow students to use their summers or IAPs to spend time at the camps leading refugees in solving problems.

refugees – which is otherwise frustratingly wasted in a conventional camp setup – towards productive and inventive solutions to real problems. A number of new tools may help: new production and communication technologies that are easy to implement, a focus on sustainability and recyclability, hands-on learning methods, and an emphasis on self-reliance and problem solving.

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Teams can be formed of students from diverse academic backgrounds led by interested faculty or research associates who will address issues such as camp planning, landscaping, innovative building techniques, passive and active solar

heating and energy production, sanitation, garbage collection and recycling, education and recreation, job training for the unemployed, the implementation of communication technologies, and other possibilities in creative and participatory ways. All along, teams would work in collaboration with recruits from among the refugees, who will learn from the team members and teach them at the same time, while improving their living environment and gaining experience and self-respect in the process. Funding should not be a big problem as there are several international organizations and foundations eager to explore ways of making their financial support more effective.

Of course there is no silver bullet here. A new international covenant about sharing responsibility for all global refugees may be required to truly get to the roots of the problem. But confronting the predicament of despair in the refugees' camps through programs aimed at raising self-esteem among their most vulnerable inhabitants is worth a trial in the meantime. ■

Nasser Rabbat is the Aga Khan Professor in the Department of Architecture (nasser@mit.edu).