

Inspiring immigrants shame Parliament's rush to judge

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Refugees from the world's conflicts came to Westminster to share their stories, writes
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Yesterday there was an excellent City of Sanctuary event in one of the committee rooms in Parliament, where groups of asylum-seekers who had come to live in different parts of Britain gathered to describe the difficulties and hopes they had in their lives.

A superb play, *Nine Lives* by the West Yorkshire Playhouse, described the humiliation of being an asylum seeker in Britain, trying to survive on food vouchers, being regularly told by all of the media that you are a burden on society, and endlessly waiting for the Home Office to either consider the case, or in the event of a refusal, to provide an opportunity for an appeal.

Asylum-seekers come from all over the world with their stories of heroism, stoicism and their wonderful expressions of hope in adversity.

I met one group, including a brilliant young man from Eritrea who described how he'd wasted years of his life trying to gain safety, and had finally done so and was now going to university to study for a medical science degree, which will ensure he makes an enormous contribution to our society.

In November, a sanctuary summit will revolve around eight key principles — of protection, legal advice, detention, destitution, right to work, healthcare, language and, above all, dignified treatment of people looking for safety.

The contrast with David Cameron's lengthy statement to the Commons on Monday, in which he opened by discussing the dangerous situation in the Ukraine, offering no political solution but merely an increase in armaments, before moving on to the dreadful situation in Gaza.

While conceding that lives are equally valuable whatever the nationality, he seemed incapable of pointing out the huge impact that Israeli attacks on Gaza have had, killing more than 2,000 people, and destroying tens of thousands of homes.

He then moved on to discuss the situation in Syria and Iraq and the growth of Isis forces.

His way of preventing people in Britain from travelling to Syria or Iraq is to give the police the powers to remove the passport of anyone suspected of travelling to fight there and to prevent British nationals who have been involved in the conflict from returning.

While no-one openly supports or condones Isis for its aims or methods, they are extremely well armed with advanced Western-made equipment that has come from wealthy backers, many of whom are suspected of having Saudi Arabian connections.

Over the past year, there have been more than 2,000 deaths in Gaza, at least 2,000 in the Ukraine, 200,000 in Syria (since 2011), and a very large number in Iraq.

In addition, there is a massive refugee flow through Libya, as thousands flee war zones and desperation in Mali, Eritrea, Syria, Iraq and other countries trying to get to Italy.

The issue ahead of the Nato summit surely must be to examine the causes of war, rather than reaching only for a military solution.

In 2001 Britain and the US went to war in Afghanistan with Nato participation and support, and 13 years later we're still there, the refugees are still leaving to try to gain a place of safety and many of those who remain are in grave danger from an increasingly intense civil conflict.

The Iraq war, supposedly to rid the country of weapons of mass destruction, has instead resulted in the destruction of life in many areas and the development of a terrible civil conflict where Isis forces are pitted against those of the Kurdish forces and the Iraqi government.

Tomorrow, the Nato summit opens at Celtic Manor, with Cameron proud that Britain spends 2 per cent of our GDP on defence while urging other countries to spend more. He also wants 33 other countries to join Nato.

How much better it would be if the Nato ministers approached the summit on the principle of not spending any more than the trillion dollars a year already committed to defence by Nato members.

Instead they could look at the causes of war, namely the escalating effect of Western interventions in north Africa and the Middle East and the increasingly dangerous military competition between Russia and Nato which is destroying the hope of a neutral and demilitarised Ukraine.

The consequences of war include massive abuses of human rights, huge refugee flows and increased intolerance in all the countries participating.

Cameron did concede that expenditure on armaments has had an effect on other areas of government spending, but defended our £33 billion defence budget and was proud of it being one of the top five in the world.

Indeed I asked Cameron yesterday why we have "continued an armed relationship with Israel despite 2,000 people dying in Gaza.

Does he not think it is time to suspend arms deals with Israel because of the appalling loss of civilian life in Gaza, the continued occupation of the West Bank, and the continued theft of Palestinian land by the Israeli occupying forces?"

The arms manufacturers have done very well since 2001 and unless there is huge pressure for a political and inclusive solution to issues in the Ukraine, Syria, and Iraq, one can imagine there will be a greater escalation of spending and with it more lives lost, more refugees and more intolerance.

Without addressing the causes of war, it's hard to see how there can be any moves towards peace.

Jeremy Corbyn is Labour MP for Islington North. For more information on the City of Sanctuary visit www.cityofsanctuary.org