

Realities behind the wall

BY BUNN NAGARA



Heavy machinery and construction workers are seen along a motorway stretch in Calais as work continues to build a wall to secure the approach to the city from migrants trying to reach Britain, Calais, France. – REUTERS

The fuss over measures to prevent illegal migration seems as out of touch with popular sentiments as it is with political platforms championing these measures.

WHEN a crime or offence is committed, the perpetrator is supposed to be punished under the law.

Enlightened authorities, however, are obliged to act to prevent or discourage the offence in the first place. But when multiple offenders are bent on breaking the law, the situation becomes more serious.

There may be tougher measures and stiffer punishments, but not a lax attitude, much less encouraging yet more people to flout the law. The exception these days seems to be mass illegal migration.

When an undocumented migrant is caught trying to enter a country illegally, he is arrested, jailed or turned around and deported.

But when thousands do the same thing at the same time, they are expected to be assisted rather than prevented from doing so.

Masses of migrants entering Europe and the US by sea and land, without bothering to apply legally for entry, are somehow expected to be admitted regardless of the merits of their case.

Many of these are economic migrants rather than genuine refugees entitled to safe refuge. Even before any refugees among them are identified as such, all are supposed to be helped in their unlawful quest.

To many people regardless of nationality, this amounts to rewarding offenders who break the law. To would-be offenders, this is encouraging more people to do the same.

Time was when up to a million migrants from Mexico tried to enter the US illegally each year. Since then the pressures and the sentiments have risen.

Now, there are increased migrant flows with the risk or threat of “sleeper” terrorists in their midst. Countries are hard-pressed to distinguish them from genuine migrants.

Immigration advocates say that migrants actually commit fewer crimes than native-born nationals. However, all illegal migrants have already chosen to break the law with unlawful entry.

The US Centre for Immigration Studies finds that more than half the 48 al-Qaeda operatives active in the US in 1993-2001 had violated immigration laws before committing their terrorist acts.

But when Donald Trump pledged last year to build a border wall to keep out illegal migrants from Mexico, his political opponents pounced.

Presidential campaign rival Hillary Clinton scored points by declaring her intention to build “bridges, not walls.” It appealed to the liberal middle class she represented who liked the idea of connecting people rather than separating them – the idea at least, if not actually the act itself.

As expected, the US mainstream media tilted towards Hillary kept hitting Trump on such “controversial” statements like the wall. Others felt that his talk about the wall was mere campaign rhetoric.

Why should Trump’s wall be controversial at all, if illegal immigration was such a serious problem? A Bloomberg Politics poll last year found that 54% of Americans want immigration numbers reduced.

There are at least five reasons why the controversy over Trump’s wall proposal had been over-inflated.

First, 41% of Americans (including former presidential hopeful Senator Ted Cruz) supported the wall idea, with 55% against. The difference may narrow as migrant numbers escalate.

Second, the Republican Party has lined itself behind Trump on the wall idea. Days before the party convention in July, senior members drafting the party platform included it in the draft.

Third, Mexico itself favours a wall – on its southern border to keep out illegal migrants from Central America. With the larger numbers trying to enter the US illegally, a wall to Mexico’s north would seem even more justified.

Fourth, such a wall may even be redundant since one – a very strong border fence – already exists. Ironically, this barrier separating people was erected by Hillary’s husband Bill Clinton when he was president.

In 2006, Hillary as Senator voted for the Secure Fence Act to construct an enhanced fence and other obstacles on the border with Mexico. She had the same views by last November, until Trump went one up by spelling out a wall he wanted.

Fifth, in the larger international setting, Trump’s wall is just another sign of the times. Europe is one such example.

Last year, more than a million migrants made it to Germany alone. So far this year, some 320,000 illegal migrants landed in Europe from parts of West Asia, South Asia and Africa.

Last June Britain voted in a referendum to leave the EU, with a major issue being opposition to EU requirements on taking in migrants.

The following month, Hungary decided on a similar referendum to be held on Oct 2. As a transit country for mass illegal migration, Hungary has been criticised by some in the West for tough border controls including a fence to stop the flow.

On Friday, the Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijarto expressed amazement at the inherent imbalance and double standards in criticisms of his country's immigration policies.

He said that as a transit country for illegal migrants and a Schengen country in the EU, Hungary would also be condemned by other EU members if it granted illegals free passage.

Once in Hungary, they would be able to travel easily to other Schengen countries. Last year, Hungary received almost 400,000 illegal migrants on their way to other EU countries.

At the same time, Szijarto noted the somewhat subdued criticism of Britain's decision last June to build a vast fence at the Channel Tunnel in Coquelles near Calais to stem the migrant flows.

Britain has in fact gone beyond building a fence to reportedly erecting a wall in Calais. Construction begins this month and is slated for completion by the end of the year.

About 10,000 migrants are huddled in camps in the Calais area. Austria is also building a huge fence along its border with Hungary as an additional barrier on the "Balkan migrant route."

Opposition parties, NGOs and UN agencies have piled on the criticisms, often without offering any solutions. Undeterred, Hungary last month resolved to build an even stronger, more electronically sophisticated fence to keep illegals out.

The migrants themselves are determined and defiant, declaring that no barrier would keep them out. Several of them have been scaling fences and stowing away on trucks plying across the borders.

But why is Britain building a wall in Calais, France? Actually it is France that is building the wall, but Britain has agreed to pay for it because the migrants are heading towards Britain.

But since Britain is the paymaster, it is considered "Britain's wall."

A similar arrangement could work in the US if the Treasury in a Trump administration agreed to pay for the wall. It may be a tactic for Trump to say initially that a wall would be built and Mexico would pay for it.

Uncertain if Mexico would agree to a wall at all, especially if it encroached on Mexican territory, the trick may lie in first saying Mexico would foot the bill. Then when the time comes for construction and the US agrees to pay for it, Mexico would be more likely to accept it.

Trump's idea can still be "Trump's Wall." A wall in itself need not impede a country's progress. A case in point: China.

Not only is the world's biggest wall considered "great", all efforts are taken to preserve it long after it has outlived its purpose.

Bunn Nagara is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.