

# Heritage Lectures

No. 951

Delivered June 20, 2006



Published by The Heritage Foundation

July 14, 2006

## The U.S. Commitment to Refugee Protection and Assistance: A Humanitarian and Strategic Imperative

*The Honorable Ellen R. Sauerbrey*

Today is World Refugee Day and I want to try to put you in the shoes of a refugee.

### Understanding the Plight of Refugees

You have escaped alive. Your life will not be what it was, but your life will continue. You can't go back to where they deny you your rights, where they take your possessions, where they hurt you and your family, where they may even try to kill you because of who you are—because of your faith, your political stance, your ethnic background, your social group.

You are among the approximately 13 million human beings in our world today who are in this situation. You are the Karen villagers driven out by the oppressive rulers of Burma; the religious minorities of Iran; the victims of violence in Darfur; the North Koreans, subject to imprisonment or torture for the crime of escaping and seeking a better life. You are among the ethnic Nepali, expelled from Bhutan in an act of ethnic cleansing.

Now, you are in a camp or a shelter. You are subject to the good graces of your hosts, waiting for the day when you can go home again—if things change at home, or if you are offered a permanent status in your country of refuge, or if you are resettled to another land. But you are hoping for a better future. What difference does your plight make to anyone in the United States? What difference does it make to the government of the United States?

We as Americans want to help.

### Talking Points

- With millions of refugees in the world, no single country can go it alone. Since 1975, the United States has resettled more than 2.6 million refugees.
- We do refugee work not only because it is the right and moral thing to do, but also because it is in our international interest and the interest of national security to do so.
- Since the horrific events of September 11, 2001, our country has had to maintain a balance between ensuring national security and continuing our humanitarian tradition of providing refuge to persecuted people.
- There is no substitute for dealing with the root causes of refugee flows and displacement, including discrimination and lack of freedom.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
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Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison  
Center for Foreign Policy Studies  
of the  
Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis  
Institute for International Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
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As individuals, we respond with empathy and concern. Those of us so blessed as to have been born and raised in the United States, and who have lived our lives in freedom, can only imagine the plight of refugees. Even so, maybe your parents or your grandparents fled to this country, seeking opportunity or escaping oppression in the lands of their birth. The stories of refugees today have echoes in many stories of the founding and growth of our nation. And the welcoming response of the United States is famously summarized in the stirring words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, words written by Emma Lazarus, a descendant of European Jews who fled religious persecution. You have all heard them: "Give me your tired ... your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free."

This history, compassion, and dedication to upholding human dignity make up our humanitarian imperative. This is why collectively as a nation we continue to concern ourselves with the plight of refugees. I'm honored that President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice have charged me with the responsibility of reflecting the best humanitarian traditions of the American people and with providing, with taxpayers' money, protection and life-sustaining relief for refugees and victims of conflict around the world.

According to the definition of the United Nations Convention on Refugees, which we have largely adopted as U.S. law, a refugee is a person who is outside of his or her home country, and who cannot return due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political origin, or membership in a particular group. So, as we talk about refugees, remember that we are not talking about people who are trying to arrive in our country seeking a better economic future. We are talking about people who are victims of tyranny, oppression, and persecution.

The Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR, also concerns itself with other vulnerable persons, including internally displaced persons, or IDPs. They have the same needs as refugees; the difference is that while IDPs have escaped from a conflict or a humanitarian crisis of some kind, they are still within their own country. In our hemisphere, Colombia, for example, has one

of the largest concentrations of IDPs who have fled from the attacks on their villages by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. Working with international partners, we have made life better for millions of refugees and internally displaced persons that live in far-flung refugee camps.

### **The U.S. Commitment**

I had the opportunity in the spring to visit one of these camps, the Kakuma Camp in Kenya. And there I was able to see the benefit of the work that we do through not only an international organization like UNHCR, but also through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like the International Rescue Committee. I saw a number of things that we fund: latrines that help with sanitation to reduce cholera, mosquito nets, a 120-bed hospital. I saw a physical therapist working on the legs of a tiny, tiny infant who had been born with cerebral palsy. I saw the therapeutic feeding of children who were in danger of dying of malnutrition. We are sustaining life as well by helping fund the World Food Program, whose food aid prevents food supply interruptions in refugee camps.

We also fund health and sanitation projects in Chad, where so many of the victims who have fled Darfur are located. One of our projects, designed by an American NGO, and again, this happens to be the International Rescue Committee, pipes water into the camp, right on the edge of the desert in Chad. By bringing the water into the camp, this project prevents further human rights abuses. Women no longer have to go out of the camp to collect water, where they may be subject to rape and other violence.

We are also preventing and addressing sexual abuse and exploitation—a terrible problem for the most vulnerable populations—by insisting on higher standards of performance from our partners. Our implementing partners have to sign a code of conduct. We fund training to develop respect for the human rights and dignity of all people, especially women, and we are empowering victims, through, for example, legal advocacy programs that enable women in West Africa to prosecute their abusers. This is so important to breaking the culture of impunity that allows the abuses in the first place.

We are also focused on the need for education, and we have funded schools all over the world. For Afghan refugees in Pakistan, for example, these schools are providing opportunities and hope for the future, particularly for girls. We fund education projects on democracy, human rights, and tolerance that reach half a million Palestinian refugee children.

Self-sufficiency is something that we Americans believe in very strongly. To help refugees become self-sufficient, we support vocational training and economic opportunities. When I was in Kakuma Camp, I had the opportunity to visit programs where I saw equal numbers of men and women learning to sew, learning auto mechanics, learning construction trades, and being prepared for the day when they can go home again, when they will have a marketable skill.

Now, these are the kinds of things that we do “in camps,” and that assistance is substantial. But our major goal is to provide durable solutions for refugees, many of whom have been in camps for decades. In too many cases, babies are born and reach maturity without ever knowing anything except life in a refugee camp.

It is true that most refugees want to go home. That’s a natural human instinct. And indeed, they are returning home in unprecedented numbers to places like Afghanistan, where 4.5 million have already returned home—one of the great success stories of our time. Many other refugees have returned to Iraq, Liberia, Burundi, and Southern Sudan. All of them are former victims of conflict, terror, and tyranny, and they are now home, rebuilding their lives and rebuilding their countries.

We have supported repatriation in safety and dignity for many of these populations. The Afghan story is already one of the most wonderful humanitarian success stories we can claim. But we also look to Liberia, where large numbers of Liberians are returning home. Sustaining these returns is an important part of this process. It does no good to send people back if they turn around because there is nothing there for them, and they return to refugee camps. Sustaining returns will continue to test and strengthen our country’s commitment to help people build new lives in freedom.

Sometimes, refugees are able to make new lives in the country in which they have found refuge, and again, our diplomacy seeks to encourage self-reliance and local integration. But many of the countries of first asylum are themselves troubled countries with few resources, and they are to be commended for their generosity and sacrifice in hosting large refugee populations. For example, Pakistan at one point in time was hosting these millions of Afghanistan refugees who are now going home. Tanzania today hosts over 500,000 refugees.

Often, host countries are not able to integrate refugee populations and the refugees do not have an option of going home. There is no option but resettlement in another country that has the means and the willingness to offer refugees a new start in life. The United States has a proud record of assisting refugees in many such nations, as well as offering many refugees a chance for a new life, a new home, a new start in America. Since World War II, more refugees have found permanent homes in the United States than in any other country. This past year we opened our doors to 53,000 refugees from 55 different countries. This is more than all of the other resettlement countries in the world combined. To put this in perspective, since 1975 the United States has resettled more than 2.6 million refugees.

### **The Humanitarian and Strategic Imperative**

I think the way a nation treats the most vulnerable indicates what its values really are. But you might ask yourself, “What makes all of this the work of the United States government? Why not leave it to the non-governmental sector?”

First, I think we have only to look at the causes and dimensions of refugee protection and assistance to see that they are a major foreign policy concern. We see by the scale of the problem that this has to be an international effort. With millions of refugees in the world, no single country can go it alone. There needs to be international agreement on how to define a refugee. There needs to be collaboration in providing assistance. So the concept of burden-sharing has been a part of the international effort since the 1950s.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was established on December 14, 1950, by the United Nations General Assembly. UNHCR has the international mandate to protect and assist refugees and to coordinate international efforts to resolve refugee problems worldwide. One of its primary purposes is to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees, to hold countries to their obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention, and to make sure that people are not forcibly returned to places where they may be subject to torture or be killed.

A vital part of the work of the U.S. refugee program is supporting UNHCR and other multilateral organizations in meeting the needs of these vulnerable people. And I have to say that this is both a matter of principle and a matter of pragmatism.

The principle is that refugee assistance should be internationalized. It is the duty of the international community. But being pragmatic, we also see that the best vehicles for this assistance are international organizations, including UNHCR, the U.N. Relief and Works Administration (UNRWA) that assists Palestinian refugees, and the International Committee of the Red Cross. We work in concert with other donors and we ensure that, by making our regular and substantial contribution, we are leveraging our capabilities and encouraging other countries to come forward and meet the rest of the load.

As a former legislator who is used to looking at budgets on a line-item basis, I can tell you that when I came into this job I was a bit uncomfortable with the idea of giving large lump sums of money to these international organizations. But I've been very reassured by not only the level of monitoring that we do of their operations, but also how their work facilitates the U.S. refugee program.

I work very closely with António Guterres, the former Prime Minister of Portugal who is now the head of UNHCR. As the representative of the major donor to his organization, I can see the value of the influence we have in improving not only the operational efficiency of his office, but also ensuring that it responds to our priorities in this work.

Through the UNHCR, we work with the Red Cross and NGOs to address the crisis in Darfur—

no doubt the highest profile humanitarian disaster of our times. Since the onset of the crisis in Darfur in 2003, my bureau has led all donors, providing \$115 million in assistance to the 200,000 Sudanese refugees who have fled from Darfur to 12 camps in Eastern Chad.

The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration is also focusing greater attention on internally displaced persons who are forced from their homes by conflict or natural disasters. We support UNHCR in its efforts to expand and improve protection of the IDPs in camps in Liberia and Uganda.

Let me say a bit more about Uganda, another country I recently had the opportunity to visit. If Sudan is the best known humanitarian crisis, Northern Uganda is the least known and one of the worst in the world. More than 1.5 million Ugandans have fled their homes in fear of an individual known as Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army. Kony is a psychopath and a tyrant, who reportedly wants to take over his country and run it according to his extremely distorted vision of a Christian nation based on the Ten Commandments. To wage this war, Kony has abducted tens of thousands of boys and girls. The boys are pressed into becoming child soldiers and porters; the girls become sex slaves and are doled out as wives to his lieutenants.

In the 20 years since this struggle began, Kony and his troops have butchered thousands of his fellow countrymen. More than 90 percent of the men, women, and children who live in the three main districts that make up the region now reside in IDP camps.

The conditions in these camps are shockingly bad. They have a soaring mortality rate, and more than 15 percent of the people are infected with HIV/AIDS—three times the national average in Uganda. We support UNHCR, which is just taking over the responsibility for the IDP camps in Uganda, because we know that they have the proven skills in protection and camp management to improve the conditions of the people who are living there.

Given that repressive regimes, like North Korea and Burma, and failed states, like Somalia, create refugees, we need to be aware that this has significant implications for our own national security. As

President Bush said in his second inaugural address, “For as long as whole regions of the world simmer in resentment and tyranny, prone to ideologies that feed hatred and excuse murder, violence will gather and multiply in destructive power and cross the most defended borders and raise a mortal threat.”

When people lose hope, they become vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups. In Nepal, for example, there is real concern about the 100,000 refugees from Bhutan sitting in Nepalese camps who are being recruited by Maoist groups. And some of the worst conditions in the world exist in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. We are working with UNRWA to improve the conditions for these refugees and make them less vulnerable to terrorists seeking recruits.

In this post-9/11 world that we live in, it is even more important that the United States lead the efforts that provide hope to victims of tyranny and oppression. Refugee protection and assistance are a vital part of this effort.

Of course, there is no substitute for dealing with the root causes of refugee flows and displacement, including discrimination and lack of freedom. And I am sure that this audience would not be surprised to know that the major countries that produce refugee flows rank near the bottom of virtually every index of freedom, including the Heritage Foundation’s *Index of Economic Freedom*.

So, resolving refugee problems by providing durable solutions is critical to preventing ongoing cycles of violence and repression. In other words, it is not just that we do refugee work because it is the right and moral thing to do, but it is also in our international interest and the interest of national security that we do so.

Since the horrific events of September 11, 2001, our country has been challenged in terms of maintaining a balance between ensuring national security and continuing our humanitarian tradition of providing refuge to people who are persecuted. You may have read about amendments to our immigration laws that vastly expanded the definition of terrorism. These changes have had an unintended effect of barring victims of conflict and oppression who we strongly believe deserve our protection.

My staff and I are frustrated by the number of people disqualified from entry to the United States even though they are victims of government oppression, or have resisted government oppression. This includes people who have been coerced into giving what is called “material support” to their oppressors when they had no choice, perhaps with a gun to their head, or people who were blackmailed to pay ransom for a child or a brother who had been captured.

This is having a negative impact on our refugee program. As a result, I think it could well have a negative impact on our country’s well-deserved reputation for fairness and generosity.

My bureau received funding this year to admit 54,000 refugees. We are now estimating that we will fall short of that goal by as many as 12,000 to 14,000 arrivals because of this material support issue. This problem can only be addressed to some degree without legislation. To really resolve the problem, it is going to take an act of Congress to change some of these definitions that have had such unintended consequences.

Now, some have said to me that maybe they are not all that troubled if we cannot admit these 10,000 or 12,000 people, because they see refugees as an economic burden on the United States. But I have to say that I see it very differently. I have seen how refugees can have a major and positive effect on our economy, as well as being a source of strength through diversity.

Take Utica, New York, for example. Utica is a community that suffered a major decline in population after the closure of a nearby military base and many manufacturing plants. Even their housing stock was decaying as the population fled. Yet today this city is an amazing story. It has been revitalized by an influx of refugees who provided a labor pool for new enterprises, started their own businesses, and renovated the housing stock of the city.

### **Public/Private Partnerships**

Our refugee program is a public–private partnership. Private sector NGOs play a key role in all phases of resettling refugees in the United States. In communities all over America, in small towns and

large ones, NGOs provide reception and placement services. They strive to assure that refugees have the best possible start in their new lives. I have to tell you the most inspiring aspect of our refugee program can be found if you go and visit some of these resettlement agencies. You will see wonderful stories that are the face of hope and opportunity.

Let me just share with you my recent visit to an office called The International Institute in Providence, Rhode Island. There I had the opportunity to meet with the dedicated staff and volunteers who help new refugees find housing and connect with health care services, English-language and skills training, and, probably most importantly, get them quickly into a job. Many refugees come back as volunteers in these resettlement agencies.

I also had the opportunity to visit a Somali refugee in her home and a Cambodian restaurant where I had lunch. The Cambodian restaurant is run by a woman who escaped from the Khmer Rouge and who came to this country as a refugee years ago. She started a small business, is very successful in her community, and has three grandchildren who are now in the Rhode Island National Guard.

These stories—and others, like the Sudanese “lost boy” who is now getting his Master’s degree at Harvard—are the faces of the American dream.

## Conclusion

I will end by saying that I’m really proud of the work that the U.S. does for refugees. Millions are fed, clothed, and housed, and millions are given hope and a chance for a new life because of efforts that everyone in this room helps pay for. And I’m proud that we are advancing interests and ideals on which this country was founded, ideals and interests that strengthen us as a country.

Protection and assistance to refugees and other vulnerable populations help fulfill the promise expressed by President Bush when he said, “All who live in tyranny and hopelessness can know the United States will not ignore your oppression or excuse your oppressors. When you stand for your liberty we will stand with you.”

Today, on World Refugee Day, we are reminded of both the suffering and the contributions of refugees,

of many inspiring stories of those who have overcome traumatic pasts and gone on to do great work—in business, science, and artistic achievements. But we also remember the millions of unsung people, many of them mothers, who are still in refugee camps struggling under very, very difficult circumstances to raise their children, to make sure they get education and skills training, and hoping for a better future against all odds. Maybe they will return to their home countries, or maybe they will perform the heroic feat of carrying on day-by-day in the hope of a better day. They deserve our respect and they all deserve our support.

I also salute today the inspiring commitment and dedication of those who work on behalf of refugees. When I visited Kakuma Camp in Northern Kenya, it seemed to me the hottest, driest place on earth. And even there you find those who work for voluntary agencies, who leave their families behind and sign up for three-year stints in a place that is very close to the edge of Hades—difficult and dangerous conditions. While I was there, in Uganda, 10 miles from where we were, the UNHCR camp was attacked and two humanitarian workers were killed. And yet people do this work because they are so committed and so dedicated to helping keep refugees and the flame of hope alive.

Finally, I want to honor the refugees themselves. They remind us, because of the road they have walked for freedom and hope and opportunity, that freedom is precious and worth all of our efforts to protect and defend it.

I just left the World Refugee Program at National Geographic. We heard from a young Vietnamese girl who came here about 12 years ago, and who didn’t speak a word of English. She is now on her way to becoming a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. I also met a young Olympic skater, a gold medal skater you will remember—Joey Cheek—who immediately gave away the \$25,000 that came with his medal to help refugees.

Each and every one of us in some way can make a contribution. There’s a new program called “nine-million.org,” run by Nike, Microsoft, and some other businesses that seeks to pull together \$9 million to provide refugee camp children with balls, sports

equipment, and education. It might sound frivolous; you might say, "Why sports when they need food?" And the answer is that anything that can provide a sense of normalcy in the lives of refugee children and offer a sense of hope is so very important.

Indeed, each and every one of us in some way can make a difference. So I thank you for the

opportunity to spend some time with you on World Refugee Day to highlight the incredible needs of refugees and the inspiring work that America is undertaking.

—*The Honorable Ellen R. Sauerbrey is the Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration at the U.S. Department of State.*