

The International Refugee Crisis

Co-sponsored by the Albert Shanker Institute and the Jewish Labor Committee

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The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was born from the ashes of genocide and displacement in Europe seventy years ago to be the predominant international agency mandated to protect and assist refugees. The Convention on the Status of Refugees codified international standards and gave UNHCR the authority to supervise its implementation by States.

The Holocaust experience is at the core of UNHCR's work to protect and assist victims of persecution because of race, religion, political opinion or membership in a particular social group; and the people forcibly displaced because of discrimination, violence, war and yes, even after the Holocaust, renewed war crimes and genocidal acts.

Over the decades, UNHCR has been on the front lines, working with States and civil society, to ensure an adequate immediate response to the needs of refugees and to find solutions to their plight.

It is a distinct honor, therefore, for UNHCR to be invited to this event convened by the Albert Shanker Institute and the Jewish Labor Committee, two organizations committed to improving access to justice and respect for human rights. And it is, moreover, a personal privilege given my own experience as a child of survivors of the Holocaust.

A number of developments over the last six months have made the global refugee crisis a matter of public interest - Aylan Kurdi, the Paris and San Bernardino attacks, electoral rhetoric and the mass flow to Europe. The unprecedented scope and magnitude of forced displacement has been coined a 'global refugee crisis'. This is a call to find political solutions - to end war - and to meet the needs of the victims of conflict, discrimination and persecution. It is also a call to engage global responsibility - states and other stakeholders; individuals, civil society and the private sector.

Millions and *global* are big ideas. But the first thing to remember is that we are talking, each one and the children, about victims.

Public opinion has been polarized, with fear underpinning a disturbing anti-refugee populist sentiment that politicians in several countries have massaged and manipulated. Reasonable concerns about national security and the changing environment have had an impact on refugee policies and procedures. But the stirring

of xenophobic fear about national identity has led some to portray the refugee as the threat, when surely they are actually victims.

Empathy and a sense of responsibility motivating communities around the world to continue to help refugees. Refugees around the world continue to benefit from generous policies of asylum coupled with access to services and opportunities for self-sufficiency. Refugee resettlement still brings out the best in local communities who work in partnership with professional agencies and government to receive refugees and help them take care of their families and contribute to the community.

The numbers of people who are forcibly displaced are larger than ever since WWII and growing. As of this time last year, there were some 20 million refugees, 40 million internally displaced persons and 10 million stateless persons. No doubt, regrettably, these numbers will increase when we take stock of the data on the occasion of World Refugee Day on 20 June.

The resources required to address humanitarian needs are also growing to unprecedented levels, and even though contributions from governments and the private sector are higher, there is still an important gap. The 2016 appeal for Syrian refugees is just about one quarter funded, and the emergency appeals for African refugee situations are getting even less money.

The key to a durable resolution of the causes of displacement is essentially political. The three largest refugee producing countries are Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia. A peace process is getting underway in Syria, however violence is still intense and widespread. Achieving durable political solutions in these and other countries also requires a sustained commitment to economic development, and also to governance and security. Unfortunately, the trend over recent years is that the numbers of refugees who repatriate voluntarily is reducing as old conflicts - such as Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq - persist or re-ignite - such as South Sudan and Burundi, and new conflicts emerge - such as Yemen and Libya - taking on the characteristics of protracted emergencies.

It is important to recognize that reactive, protectionist policies that aim to stem the tide of refugees are either failing to reduce the numbers of refugees on the move or are undermining fundamental rights-based principles. Or both. Deterrence measures may temporarily reduce the number of arrivals but this is at the expense of ensuring that asylum-seekers have access to territory and to due process in considering their claims. Smugglers are reaping the advantage as refugees are denied safe and legal avenues to safe environments.

In respect of all of the victims of persecution who came before and for the generations to come, it is essential that public policies be grounded in the respect for human rights and refugee law. To the extent that many of the main countries of asylum are developing or middle-income countries, which are coping with the economic and social impact of large numbers, the practices of the global West can be beacons of best practice in respect of international law, or otherwise set precedents for countries to sidestep their obligations.

Innovative policies and tools are bubbling in a variety of fora as the UN and governments seek new partnerships with the private sector and civil society; and as experts seek new ways to adapt technology to help refugees. This has taken on remarkable impetus in the field of remote education as well as in terms of energy use, logistics management and registration. These technological innovations can provide concrete protection benefits for refugees and for countries of asylum.

The resurgent commitment to address the longer-term needs of refugees and the host communities is very significant. If pursued, the 'development dividends' will be game-changers in terms of mobilizing new resources, multi-year strategies and protecting asylum space for refugees. The impact on host communities of humanitarian underfunding has opened a new engagement to recognize the granting of asylum for what it is: a global public good that needs to be supported.

There is also a positive focus on efficiency and accountability. This is key to making the best use of the resources available and to encouraging governments and private donors to give more - preferably multi-year and unearmarked - financial support. They need to be able to explain to stakeholders, whether they be parliamentarians and taxpayers or shareholders and board members, that the resources are being used properly and are having the intended, positive and discernible impact.

2016 has shaped up to be a year of opportunity:

The London Conference at the end of January raised an extraordinary \$12 billion in pledges to help Syrian refugees, with credible amounts dedicated to education and livelihoods. Multi-year pledges were on the rise. UNHCR appeals for these pledges to be honored soon. More money is being pledged, but the demands are still greater. Most programs are underfunded, which has a multiplicity of impacts, including on the host population, directly and indirectly.

A UNHCR conference at the end of March to solicit commitments for resettlement may have yielded modest results in numerical terms, but it was marked by a broader focus on other legal avenues that states can pursue to provide protection, for example, through family reunification, labor migration scenes, student scholarships and other forms of humanitarian admission.

At its spring meeting in April, the World Bank raised a billion dollars in grants and concessional loan financing to assist States in the Middle East and North Africa help refugees and the host communities.

Next week, the World Humanitarian Summit will convene, and we are all looking forward to renewed commitment to the respect for international humanitarian law - so that senseless bombings of hospitals and IDP camps cease once and for all, and that humanitarian access to stranded or embattled populations is guaranteed - as well as new commitments for more and better managed financing of humanitarian assistance.

The UNGA Summit on 19 September will be focused on large scale movements of refugees and migrants. I have shared with you the background paper for this meeting.

On 20 September, President Obama will convene a summit among countries that have introduced practical measures that promote education and livelihoods, increase multi-lateral funding and expand resettlement places.

All of this could, in sum, project us to a new period where conflict prevention and resolution, asylum and migration management, humanitarian assistance and development are all more deliberately and conscientiously promoted with a view to providing necessary protection and care to refugees, and to finding solutions to their plight.

The last year has revealed that no single country can provide solutions and that, in the absence of collective responsibility-sharing, the crisis will deepen. It has revealed that all countries of asylum need the support of their regional neighbors and the international community for asylum.

UNHCR has appealed to all States to keep their borders open to people in need of international protection; to provide access to safety through resettlement and other legal pathways; to protect refugees and asylum-seekers from refoulement; to offer refugees and the communities where they live economic and educational opportunities and social services; and to increase global financial support through multiple channels

The United States remains UNHCR's most generous donor – and the United States also contributes generously to ICRC, IOM, UNRWA, WFP and to NGOs.

We count on you to encourage the United States to sustain bipartisan support for humanitarian assistance for refugees and to advocate for the United States to take the lead with countries so that international financial institutions and bilateral development agencies introduce mechanisms to help States at the outset of an emergency to reinforce their national capacities to not only just cope with the arrival of refugees, but to transform the diverse capacities of the refugee population for the benefit of the host economy.

The United States also remains one of the top countries of asylum in the world, and the single largest country of refugee resettlement. Here, too, we count on your influential voices to promote more public awareness of the benefits of refugee resettlement and to cultivate the spirit of welcome and tolerance that has, for decades, characterized American national and domestic policies toward refugees.

One day there will be political solutions that will allow the refugees and displaced persons to return and rebuild their homes. America's leadership in humanitarian diplomacy remains vital. Your advocacy and influence remains equally important so that the United States remains the beacon of hope for refugees that it has always been.

Thank you.

