

Overcoming New Challenges: Finding Opportunities in Our Changing World
2008 California Refugee Summit, Manhattan Beach, California

Opening Plenary Panel Session:

Larry Yungk/UNHCR; Jane Bloom, ICMC; Barbara Day, PRM; June Tancredi, DHS
September 3, 2008

Check Against Delivery

Meeting capacity challenges

Jane E. Bloom

U.S. Liaison Officer

International Catholic Migration Commission

It is an honor to join some of my favorite D.C. people on this panel and to be back in California with your strong, committed network of refugee service professionals, many of whom are cherished friends and respected colleagues.

I would like to focus my time with you today on three aspects of resettlement capacity. You have heard it said that “if California were a nation, it would be the third largest resettlement country in the world” – a remarkable statistic. But the number of refugees who will eventually resettle in California as well as where they come from and when they will arrive here is largely a function of the **capacity** of the OPEs (Overseas Processing Entities) and DHS to process them. And in turn, for the OPEs and DHS who are processing P-1 caseloads, our numbers are almost totally dependent upon UNHCR’s **capacity** to make solid and timely referrals for U.S. resettlement.

So let us begin there, at the start of the process, with UNHCR. Larry Yungk reported that in 2007 and 2008, UNHCR referred **99,000 refugees** for resettlement in each of those years (including submissions to ALL resettlement countries, not limited to the U.S.). For the coming year, 2009, I understand that UNHCR projects that it will aim to achieve **127,000 submissions** – a record number, representing a 27% growth rate in its resettlement **capacity**.

One of the ways UNHCR will accomplish this 27% expansion and process those 127,000 refugees for resettlement, is through something called the UNHCR-ICMC Resettlement Deployment Scheme that it operates with the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC). In fact, approximately 30% of UNHCR’s resettlement workforce worldwide today are actually “deployees” and not UNHCR employees. Three out of ten. My guess is that the percentage is even higher for the workforce conducting Best Interest Determinations (BIDs) to decide on durable solutions for unaccompanied refugee children. At any given time, as many as 50% of the BIDs specialists working on the ground are likely to be deployees from our Children’s Specialist Sub-Roster. So, without the doubling of the BIDs **capacity** that those deployees provide, some unaccompanied children would be waiting longer for a durable solution; some of those who were to come with non-kin might be left behind altogether if the BID process would hold up their case and their departure for a longer time.

Who are these deployees? They come from all over the world, many from America, many with the experience you in the audience bring. They come from community based organizations, from legal aid groups, from volag affiliates or national volags – and currently one former refugee state coordinator and one former ORR employee too. So far this year, there have been approximately 100 deployments. Yet, mysteriously and significantly, not a single one of our 2008 deployees are Californians and not one person on the roster represents this state’s amazing network.

We are going to work hard in the next three days to change that. In the audience is Yasmeen Aidnejad, who is the refugee project officer in D.C. for the Bahai, and one of our newest additions to the deployment roster. She and I will be here throughout the conference if you would like more information about the application process and the deployment opportunities. We are especially interested in discussing NGO partnerships for the deployment roster, which is a “win-win” for your agency, for the deployee, for our national and state networks, and for UNHCR. It may be possible to arrange short-term deployments of three or four months, such as the recent assignment of eight deployees who are currently in Ethiopia conducting verifications of Eritrean refugees.

But the bottom line here is, if we in the U.S. want to resettle more refugees next year, we will need to step up and help the UNHCR by supplementing its workforce, enhancing its *capacity*. So please take a look at our brochure and let us set up a time to speak further.

The second aspect of *capacity* that I would like to touch on: the need to beef up, to strengthen, to better address, the protection response capacity of service providers working overseas with refugees in urban settings. My lens here is specifically on the Iraqi refugees in Syria and Jordan where ICMC operates a number of programs for extremely vulnerable individuals and where we have participated as part of four protection missions in the last year.

UNHCR’s new policy draft on urban refugees states that an urban environment (as opposed to a camp setting) “exacerbates some of the protection risks and also generates specific protection risks.” On all four missions, we found that statement to be painfully true. We found fragile families with multiple and profound protection needs. A 102 year woman living alone after her family was resettled in Canada. A father selling his teenage daughters into prostitution each night. An increasing number of people living in the dark because they can’t afford the electricity charges.

But a troubling pattern emerges: There is a general lack of understanding about protection, even in terms of recognizing protection risks, or of recognizing a case in need of protection. Of equal concern, even when a worker *recognizes* a protection case, there does not seem to be a protocol in place to know what they should *do* to about it. No system to flag the case, no system to prioritize, to expedite a response.

So protection capacity really needs to be enhanced. This needs to be made a top priority. Caseworkers need extensive and continuous training on protection, agencies need to come up with a swift protection response, UNHCR needs to expand its hot line technology so that it is responsive 24/7. We need to get these refugees out of harm’s way. And, since resettlement is one of our strongest protection tools, we need to get more of these vulnerable families and protection cases through the resettlement filter.

Once UNHCR has submitted a case to the U.S. for resettlement, it is referred to the State Department’s Overseas Processing Entity (the OPE), the third aspect of resettlement capacity I would like to highlight.

In Turkey, Lebanon, Kuwait, Yemen, India, and Pakistan, ICMC is the OPE , primarily processing Iraqi refugees. Of the total UNHCR submissions of Iraqis by country of asylum in the last eighteen months, you may be surprised to learn that Turkey represented 17% and Lebanon 10%.

In Lebanon, the growth of this operation has been dramatic. Last fiscal year, only **67** Iraqis arrived in the U.S. via our Beirut office. This year, as of last week, an astounding number of 2,428 people representing 921 Iraqi cases had been referred by UNHCR and a total of about 800 will have arrived by this September 30th, thanks to Herculean efforts by the UN, by DHS, by us all. We've had to get – shall we say- “creative” in order to be able to increase capacity from 67 to nearly 2,500. For example, ICMC is housed inside the UNHCR building in Beirut where in past years we worked out of one room. Now, necessity being the mother of invention, we created – or invented - two more offices within UNHCR. One I understand is in the balcony off the kitchen and the other is part of the kitchen itself. We have also tried to expedite the process in a number of ways; for example, we have started what we are calling “pre-medicals”. In other words, we aren't waiting for the DHS circuit rides in Beirut to get these people through their medical exam.

There are huge logistical challenges in Beirut as well, which June Tancredi will no doubt touch on, where DHS is required to interview at the US Embassy from 2 pm to 11 pm on weekdays and 9-5 on weekends, after consular working hours; ICMC provides an escort home for those refugees whose interviews end so late at night. A circuit ride is going on there right now where 400 cases are being presented to DHS.

In Turkey, the situation is quite different but with its own set of issues. The government of Turkey mandates that refugees register with them as well as UNHCR, after which they are sent to one of about 25 so-called satellite towns throughout the country and far from Istanbul. We usually see refugees for their pre-screening appointment very quickly – usually within one week of receiving the UNHCR referral.

At the prescreening, we take their photos, collect biographical info of all case members, copy passports, birth certificates, employment information, document the refugee's claim, and request SAO (security advisory opinion) in WRAPS when applicable and submit employment verification requests online. As soon as ICMC receives notice from DHS on their next circuit ride, cases are scheduled for interview – usually 4 Iraqi cases per officer per day. We also make every attempt to find suitable interpreters for all the different languages spoken and understood. For example, some of the Iraqi refugees only speak Assyrian or Aramaic or a Kurdish dialect.

Once they are adjudicated by DHS, the case is returned to ICMC where we enter the results in WRAPS and request assurances for the approved cases. We then schedule medicals and cultural orientation, sometimes at the same time as the circuit ride. Because of the long distances, we put everybody up in hotels after we bus them in .We stick to a whirlwind crazy timetable that is carefully choreographed to get everything done in usually four days and three nights before they board the bus back to their satellite town. Finally, once we receive the assurance and the case got medically cleared and we have sign off by DHS, we request travel for the case.

A DHS circuit ride is in Istanbul right now, and we are presenting about 900 Iraqis and 100 other refugees. From the start of this fiscal year on October 1, 2007 until August 31, three days ago, **2,316 Iraqi refugees** have thus far arrived in the U.S. from Turkey; an additional 322 refugees are scheduled to arrive here in September. We have a busy year ahead as well, as UNHCR-Ankara has already referred some 3,344 more Iraqis.

It is important to point out that our job doesn't always end with the plane ride. In fact, the phone calls from volags and CBOs are starting, our follow up case work is at full speed, and we are fast building *capacity* to work with you to make for a seamless and successful resettlement. For example, a caseworker from a Chaldean service agency in El Cajon, California, called a few months back. Besma is actually here in the audience. She said she had in front of her an Iraqi refugee family that was processed through ICMC Istanbul the month before and they wanted "to go back to Turkey" and how would she go about getting them returned. When I asked why, she said that their 73 year old mother with Alzheimer's was left behind with no one to care for her because she couldn't remember her persecution claim. ICMC quickly filed a motion to re-consider with DHS in Athens, who expedited the case, and I am happy to hear from Besma that this grandmother was reunited with her family in El Cajon last month. If you hear something like this or any other kind of processing glitch, please call the OPE so that it can be resolved before anyone boards a plane going in the opposite direction!

Again, it is an honor and pleasure to back with you today. I hope we can find time during the next two days to speak together individually – I will look forward to it.

Thank you.