

For immediate release

World Refugee Day 20 June 2009

World Refugee Day 2009 Celebrating shared hope and responsibility

As World Refugee Day 2009 is celebrated around the globe, the International Catholic Migration Commission takes this opportunity to highlight some of the recent and welcome efforts being made worldwide to help improve the lives of refugees and their families. In particular, ICMC notes the simple chain of shared hope and responsibility in responding to refugees—one which begins first with seeing people and ensuring protection from persecution; then looks to seeking and sharing solutions.

Seeing

Above all, refugees must first be *seen*. UNHCR reports this week that there are 15 million refugees in the world today—roughly the same number as in 2007. Startlingly invisible, more than half have been in camps for more than 10 years. Unfortunately, many refugees seem to become visible only as “boat people”, or while crossing borders that are especially life-threatening.

Seeing means saving

Under both international law and international and regional conventions, refugees have a right to not be pushed back into danger, *but they must be seen first*. For vision and leadership, ICMC not only applauds UNHCR, but also the work of church groups, national Red Cross societies and civil society.

Among others, ICMC celebrates the work of dedicated networks such as national refugee councils, the European Council for Refugees and Exiles, Human Rights Watch, Save the Children, and, and grass roots organisations present and working on borders worldwide in effort to ensure that that refugees fleeing for their lives have access to the protection to which their human dignity—and the law—entitles them. Similarly, ICMC congratulates the decision of the Council of Europe to develop specific guidance for the provision of first aid, recovery and referral services to migrant victims of violence or trauma crossing sea, land and air borders to Europe.

Saving means sharing the responsibility

Malta is right: the responsibility and, as ICMC believes—the opportunity—to respond to refugees belongs to all of us. Some responses are easy; some require more work. There is no single organisation or country that can do it all, neither within a region nor globally. With programmes serving refugees directly and with member Bishops Conferences worldwide, ICMC, like many other NGOs, shares resources, expertise and commitment with UN agencies, governments and other actors offering protection and assistance to refugees on the ground.

Particularly on the occasion of World Refugee Day, ICMC applauds:

- Countries that have recently joined states such as **Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, the UK** and the **US** in welcoming refugees to resettle within their communities, including **Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Japan** and **Luxembourg**;

- Concrete steps by the **European Union** to create a new European Asylum Support Office (with which NGOs are looking forward to collaborating) and to harmonise processes that its 27 Member States use to decide who is a refugee or not; among other things, to end baffling inconsistencies in asylum approval rates, with in 2008 for example, one EU member state approving 76.7%, while another *less than 1%!*;
- The many governments that have contributed programmes which tangibly increase the assessment, protection and resettlement of refugees, including especially the ICMC-UNHCR **deployment scheme** through which ICMC identifies and recruits resettlement experts to support refugee protection work in some 36 UNHCR field offices throughout the world.

Sharing responsibility means seeking solutions together

Refugees are people in search of solutions, solutions that last. The solution—and preference—for most refugees is to return home when there is an end to persecution. Only small numbers of refugees are permitted to stay permanently in the country to which they have fled, and fewer than 1% are formally processed to resettle in another country. Not only must these solutions be voluntary, but every effort must also be made to ensure that the solutions are real, and durable. Among others, ICMC applauds:

- **Lebanon, Jordan and Syria**, for their generosity in hosting some 2 million Iraqis
- **Ecuador**, for expanding programmes of assistance and resettlement for refugees from Colombia
- **Romania**, for hosting the new Evacuation Transit Facility, to receive refugees in urgent need of protection
- **Tanzania**, for granting citizenship to a large number of Burundians who had been refugees there for many decades
- **Church and civil society networks** that work with refugees who are resettling and restarting their lives in new lands, and all those governments, donors and other partners whose funding and other support make it possible.

Precisely as the UNHCR proclaims in its theme for the day, refugees are indeed real people with real needs: urgent, immediate, and profoundly human. To the people, countries and organisations that respond by seeing, saving, sharing and seeking solutions with refugees, today is a day to say, **thank you!**

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