Almost 150 years ago, the League of Nations’ first High Commissioner for Refugees came into being to help alleviate the problems of those people fleeing
their country or fleeing trouble within their country. Unfortunately, this human tragedy has not disappeared at all.

The latest tally by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which superseded the League of Nations’ entity, found 43.7 million “displaced” people worldwide – roughly the total population of South Korea. This includes 27.5 million people internally displaced by conflict; 15.4 million refugees; and 850,000 asylum seekers, with about one-fifth of asylum seekers in South Africa alone.

In an interview with Melissa Fleming, a UNHCR spokeswoman in Geneva, I discussed the current plight of refugees as conflicts continue. And though the agency is a caretaker for refugees, only a refugee himself can appreciate what it means to be in that situation. The same goes for an internally displaced person or an asylum seeker.

One wonders what would happen to these 43.7 million people if the UN refugee agency did not exist – particularly when you include 15,500 asylum applications by unaccompanied or separated children in this figure. Fortunately for them and for us, the UN agency does exist and works around the clock in more than 120 countries, looking after the well-being of these people.

This year, the refugee agency celebrates the 60th anniversary of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 50th anniversary of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention defines a refugee as any person who “...owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is unable or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail him [or her]self of the protection of that country, or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his [or her] former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”

Traditional drivers of displacement, such as conflict and human rights abuse, are joined by extreme poverty, climate change, population growth, urbanization and resource insecurity to generate new trends and consistently high levels of involuntary displacement – according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Global Appeal 2011 report.

This does not even take into account the unintended consequences of the so-called Arab Spring, which has turned into Arab Summer, in North Africa and the Middle East. The situation has added huge burdens on the already overburdened agency and its humanitarian partners like the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent and other major international nongovernmental organizations.
As I write this, there is a continuing stream of Syrians fleeing over the Turkish border. I salute the Turkish government for its humane response. The situation is so fluid that it is hard to keep track of the day-by-day worsening condition in the region. Nobody knows what comes next.

So what does the UN refugee agency actually do? In its own words, over the past 60 years, it has been:

- Protecting people fleeing persecution
- Providing assistance to victims of conflict
- Ensuring respect for human rights
- Listening to voices of women and children
- Defending the principle of asylum
- Speaking out against refoulement [reversal or going back]
- Securing a right to a nationality
- Creating safe havens
- Working in emergencies
- Airlifting aid to isolated communities, and
- Helping people go back to their homes

Perhaps the least known fact about the agency’s work is that 80 percent of the world’s refugees are being hosted by developing countries – this during a time of rising antirefugee sentiment in many industrialized countries. The agency’s 2010 Global Trend report reveals a deep imbalance in international support for the world’s forcibly displaced people. Several of the poorest nations are hosting huge refugee populations, both in absolute terms and in relation to the size of their economies.

Which leads me to say the obvious: Wealthy nations should do more to address this huge burden carried by the developing countries, which have limited resources and even more limited capacities. This is an issue of fairness and balance that needs to be addressed sooner rather than later.


Russy D. Sumariwalla is president of UNA-USA Southern Oregon.

CATEGORIES OF REFUGEES

By Dick Bennett

The subject of refugees seeking admission to the U.S. and Arkansas is seldom examined, seldom conceptualized in the general media. Who are refugees, as distinguished from immigrants? Let's begin with these three categories:

I. Human Rights: Political Refugees (for example, from Iraq);
II. Human Rights: Individual (e.g., spousal abuse)
III. Economic Refugees (e.g., Mexican Indigenous sharecroppers);

IV. Climate Disruption Refugees (e.g. from New Orleans to Bangladesh).

An inseparable problem is priority. Should political, economic, and climatic refugees resulting from actions by the United States be given first consideration? A related problem concerns the increase of CO2 by increasing the US population. Of course there are additional issues. Is the US, is Arkansas, is NWA preparing for a possible influx of refugees?

In building a Culture of Peace by We, the People, thinking clearly is essential, and distinguishing the parts of complex matters and recognizing the origins and ramifications of issues are major building blocks. Participate. Help OMNI be a part of the solution.

HUMAN RIGHTS: POLITICAL


POLITICAL REFUGEES

By Dick Bennett

MATTHEW 2 tells the “Christmas Story” of Jesus’ birth and the wise men from the East coming to Jerusalem in search of the “king of the Jews.” King Herod, then King of the Jews, sent the men to find Jesus, which they did but returned to their own country fearing treachery. An angel alerted Joseph and Mary of the danger from King Herod, and ordered them to “flee to Egypt,” to avoid the murder of baby Jesus. And so Joseph, Mary, and Jesus became political refugees, and found sanctuary in Egypt. The danger was real, for Herod was a mass murderer. When he heard that Jesus had escaped his grasp, Herod “sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under.” After King Herod died, an angel again appeared to Joseph and advised him it was safe to return to Israel. But Joseph feared the new king of Judea, Archelaus, son of Herod, and another angel advised Joseph to go instead to Galilee, and Joseph then settled in Nazareth.

The question has surely occurred to many Christians, in pondering the problem of illegal immigrants in the US: In the life of Jesus, what ought to guide us? The most immediate thoughts would probably be the two Great Commandments, to love God and your neighbor, and the Good Samaritan story. Charity toward all people is surely the central ethical precept one gains from the life and teaching of Jesus. And so our support for refugees seems clear from the Christmas Story. Joseph and Mary with Jesus fled from a murderous ruler, and were rescued twice by people willing to give them hospitality and protection—in Egypt and Judea.

During the 1980s in South America and in Central America—in El Salvador and Guatemala especially—, when military rulers were oppressing and killing their people, thousands fled in all directions to escape the slaughter, many of them reaching the US. Unfortunately, the fanatically anti-communist US government at the time supported dictators all over Latin America and tried to prevent refugees from entering the US. A “Sanctuary Movement” in churches along the border and a new “underground railroad” sprung up, and many sanctuary activists were prosecuted.

What did the public majority think at the time? What think today? Should the US have replayed Joseph, Mary, and Jesus in Egypt and Judea? Should they now? Certainly General Rios Montt, General Pinochet, the Argentine generals, the Contras in Nicaragua and others were Herods in varying
degrees.

We are not unable to help the refugees. US laws permit political refugees. The trouble is, the laws are extremely restrictive, allowing few to enter under that category, and in practice allowing fewer than the law allows. Expansion of these laws to allow more political refugees—including women and children escaping domestic abuse and other kinds of life-threatening Herod oppression—should be and is a goal of Christians and of the justice movement connecting all faiths.

HUMAN RIGHTS: ABUSE

*When We Leave*, dir. Feo Aladag, Rev. Ms. Magazine (Winter 2011). Germany’s Oscar entry about a German-born woman of Turkish descent who flees an abusive husband in Istanbul with her son to Berlin, where she faces additional hardships.

ECONOMIC REFUGEES

But another kind of refugee is at the center of a stormy controversy today. The war against economic refugees is roiling our country. The Statue of Liberty declared our compassionate position emphatically in 1883: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” Here is EMMA LAZARUS’ POEM, “The New Colossus,” inscribed on the pedestal of the Statue:

"Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name,  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

But since this time, as the United States population increased and attitudes hardened toward newer waves of exiles seeking the beacon of welcome, many laws limiting immigrants have been passed.

CLIMATE

*SUN COME UP FILM: REMOVAL OF THE CARTERET ISLANDERS*

Last month Science published a paper explaining that if global temperatures continue to rise, "resettlement in response to climate impacts would become virtually unavoidable." Resettlement is already under way in Mozambique, on the Alaskan coast, Inner Mongolia and the Carteret Islands, and prospects for a global climate treaty appear bleak at this year’s UN Climate Change Conference.
There has never been a more relevant time to bring dialogue of climate change and human rights into the classroom.

http://www.newday.com/films/suncomeup.html

We hope Sun Come Up can reach as many students and educators as possible.

Sincerely,
Jennifer Redfearn & Tim Metzger, Filmmakers

More about Sun Come Up

Sun Come Up follows the relocation of the Carteret Islanders, a community living on a remote island chain in the South Pacific. The film shows how the islanders live a subsistence-based life as fishermen, and highlights their unique cultural traditions. The film follows a group of young leaders as they leave their close-knit community in search of a new homeland. Filmmakers Jennifer Redfearn and Tim Metzger traveled with the Carteret Islanders during this journey. We hear the optimism of the younger generation, who are hopeful about building something new, as well as the laments of the elders, who mourn the loss of their culture. You can watch a trailer of Sun Come Up and read more reviews online at www.suncomeup.com

Documentary Investigates Plight of Millions of 'Climate Refugees' (Video)
by Brian Merchant, Brooklyn, New York on 02.18.10

Photo via CMA

The changing climate is causing upheaval and unrest on a large scale--rising sea levels, more severe storms and flooding, and worse droughts are already rendering populated parts of the world uninhabitable. In some places, this is occurring just around, oh, right now. In order to raise awareness of their plight documentarian Michael Nash has created the film Climate Refugees. It's an apolitical (interviews from both John Kerry and Newt Gingrich are included) look not at the intricacies of the science or government policy, but at what's physically happening right now due to climate change. Even the trailer goes a long way in putting a human face on climate change. Here's what the director himself has said about the project (via the Daily Camera):

The human face of climate change really is an untold story and the very reason I felt the need to investigate. When I started this journey three years ago, there was very little data on climatic migration. There seemed to be a vast amount of spin on both sides of the climate change issue. I wanted to move beyond the politics and dig into the truth of whether our climate was really changing and if it was, how was it affecting humans? What I found was mass climatic migration. Victims forced to relocate, unable to live on the land, either from short-term or long-term climatic changes. Our changing climate seems to be all about water: too much in some areas and too little in others.

Here's the movie poster:

The film was an official selection at this year's Sundance Film Festival. I look forward to the wide release--projects like this
are of greater importance now than ever before.

More on Climate Refugees
Climate Refugees Could Number 1 Billion by 2050
U.S. Leads World in Climate Refugees

ONLY 3 YEARS AGO SMALL ISLANDERS APPEAL FOR HELP

From: Ben Wikler - Avaaz.org [mailto:avaaz@avaaz.org]
Sent: Wednesday, September 03, 2008 8:12 AM
To: jbennet@uark.edu
Subject: Underwater

Dear friends,

Imagine the sea rising around you as your country literally disappears beneath your feet, where the food you grow and the water you drink is being destroyed by salt, and your last chance is to seek refuge in other lands where climate refugees have no official status. This is not a dream, it's the fearful reality for millions of people who live on islands around the world, from the Maldives to Papua New Guinea.

That is why these small islands are planning the unprecedented step next week, ahead of the UN General Assembly meeting, of calling on the Security Council itself to address climate change as a pressing threat to international peace and security.

This is a creative move born of desperation, a challenge to global powers to end their complacency and tackle this lethal crisis with the urgency of wars. This effort could help shift the tenor of the world's debate -- from a far-off storm cloud to a life-threatening crisis here and how. But the island states' campaign will meet fierce opposition from the world's biggest polluters, so they need our help. Sign the petition now to raise a worldwide chorus of support for this call -- our signatures will be presented to the UN by the islands' ambassadors as they introduce their resolution next week:

http://www.avaaz.org/en/sos_small_islands

For the first time in human history, the North Pole can be circumnavigated -- the Arctic ice is melting more quickly than almost anyone anticipated. Now, small island nations -- where homes are, at most, mere meters above
sea level -- are preparing evacuation plans to guarantee the survival of their populations. They are on the frontline, experiencing the first wave of devastating impacts from climate change which soon will threaten us all.

President Remengesau of Palau, a small island in the Pacific, recently said: Palau has lost at least one third of its coral reefs due to climate change related weather patterns. We also lost most of our agricultural production due to drought and extreme high tides. These are not theoretical, scientific losses -- they are the losses of our resources and our livelihoods.... For island states, time is not running out. It has run out. And our path may very well be the window to your own future and the future of our planet.

Beyond the islands, countries like Bangladesh -- population, 150 million -- face losing large parts of their landmass. The experience of our planet's most vulnerable communities serves as a warning sign of the future world we can all expect: extreme weather growing in intensity, conflict over water and food supplies, coasts disappearing and hundreds of millions made refugees.

The more signatures we raise to be delivered to the UN next week, the more urgently this call will ring out to protect our common future. Sign now:

http://www.avaaz.org/en/sos_small_islands

The small islands' brave campaign for survival is our campaign as well. Just as sea levels rise or fall everywhere at the same time, the choices of every person everywhere affect the future of our common home. By standing with the people at the front line of the climate crisis, we show them, and ourselves, that we recognize our fundamental shared humanity -- and the responsibilities that come with it.

With hope, Ben, Iain, Alice, Paul, Graziela, Pascal, Ricken, Brett, Milena -- the Avaaz team

PS: For a report on Avaaz's campaigning so far, see:

PPS: These are the States who are sponsoring the resolution: Fiji, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Samoa, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, joined by Canada and Turkey.

For a draft of the Small Islands States Resolution, please see:
http://islandsfirst.org/draftres.pdf

For more information about those presenting the petition please visit:
http://islandsfirst.org
For information on Tuvalu's evacuation plan and climate refugees, see:

For information about how rising sea levels will affect us all:
http://www.earth-policy.org/Updates/Update2.htm

For more information on the rapidly-melting Arctic ice:

For more information about all of the island states:
http://www.sidsnet.org/aosis/

ABOUT AVAAZ
Avaaz.org is an independent, not-for-profit global campaigning organization that works to ensure that the views and values of the world's people inform global decision-making. (Avaaz means "voice" in many languages.) Avaaz receives no money from governments or corporations, and is staffed by a global team based in London, Rio de Janeiro, New York, Paris, Washington DC, and Geneva.

AS BUSINESS AS USUAL AND WARMING CONTINUE. THINK ABOUT THE VICTIMS  by Dick Bennett  2008

"Evacuees Arrive at Chaffee" (TMN 8-31-08).  " Beebe OKs $300,000 for Gustav Response" (TMN 9-3-08), "Monsoon Swamps India“ (9-1-08): "about 1.2 million people have been left homeless....Some 700,00 people are still trapped with little or no food "; "India's Military Mounts Flood Rescue" (TMN 9-3-08).

Given climate change, Arkansas will be asked to do more and more for US refugees.  Two of many questions are: how much are we prepared and willing to give?  But the larger and much more difficult questions are: how well are we prepared and willing to help international refugees caused by global warming, wars, and hunger (a third of Bangladesh could be under water)?  And how might we prevent, world wide, the increase of militarization that these crises will inevitably bring?

All of us must read and think about these questions.  How OMNI might lead the way?  Our role in national and global issues, not possessing millions of dollars, has been to model to the peace, justice, and ecology movement.  How might we be in the vanguard for the victims of warming?  Here are three refugee actions we might begin in Arkansas:

EDUCATION:
1) Publicize support for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), an office which deals with all kinds of refugees.  Bring a representative here.
2) Annually recognize International Refugee Day June 20
Coalition possible in 1 and 2 with Central Ark. UN/USA chapter and ACPJ.
3) RESCUE: Bring one family from a submerging nation or area to Fayetteville.  The animal
rescue movement is strong in NWA and can serve as a foundation for the human rescue movement. Let us remember our successes and not be daunted. We marched and marched against the Bush wars and the wars happened and escalated. Those marches were necessary and must be continued, for they are an important part of our resisting public voice against lying and injustice and to hearten the public for the future. But always we continued to build the individual commitments and social and political structures for peace, justice, and ecology, true to our mission statement. While the US corporate warfare warming state grew, so did the peace and justice movement, which is now positioned to influence national policy and performance than formerly.

LETTER TO JOHN LUTHER
John Luther
Director, Washington County Emergency Management
105 Mill Ave., Fayetteville 72701
December 7, 2009

Dear Mr. Luther,
We have spoken by phone twice, and I appreciate your friendly reception.

NWA Red Cross sponsored Lt. Gen. Russell Honore to lecture on “Lessons Learned from Hurricane Katrina” at Springdale Holiday Inn. He told audience: “We need to create a culture of preparedness,` to better deal with disasters.” Ark. has taken refugees from Katrina and Ike, and supposedly will again from other disasters in the U.S.

But what about the many more refugees from other countries resulting from global warming—melting ice and rising seas? Are we locally preparing for refugees not only from inundated US coastal areas but from nations around the world threatened by rising seas (Tuvalu, Maldives, Bangladesh)? Many new books are warning of such an eventuality. Have people in your office read A World without Ice by Henry Pollack, for example? And let me again invite you to speak to OMNI’s Climate Change Task Force at some time in the future of your choosing.

Yours sincerely,
Dick Bennett

END REFUGEES NEWSLETTER #2