

IBVM Justice Alert

Canadian Province, June 27, 2006

Refugee rights and the consequences of not protecting their rights

From June 17 to 19, five of us IBVMs had the privilege of attending the recent International Conference on Refugee Rights, held at York University campus, sponsored by the Canadian Council of Refugees. Our group included Rosemary Albon, Judy Kidd, Maria Lanthier, Mary Joan McDonnell and Maria Paz Herrera Jimenez (ibvm-Spain).

The IBVM reaction: For us the conference was a deeply moving experience - a global gathering of 450, mostly young people, with whom we mingled and traded ideas throughout three days. Participants represented every country where political oppression and violence have caused people to flee their homes and become refugees. The conference participants had a wealth of background and knowledge of the conference theme since they were members of non-government organizations working with refugees or active members of human rights committees at the universities within their country.

Secondly, a large section of the participants represented the “host countries” (or countries of asylum) to which refugees in the thousands had fled - and still remain - where they must be housed until, or if, they can find a country to sponsor them.

The third group of participants arrived from the various countries whose governments have agreed to accept refugees for the purpose of permanent resettlement along with the offer of citizenship (including Canada.)

Since the lack of protection of refugee rights was the chief theme of the conference, most of the presentations in plenary or in breakout sessions were delivered with a passion and depth of honesty. Speakers – many appearing to be in their early twenties or thirties – told us what happens in their own

countries, and how the manner in which their governments deal with refugee management has to be changed.

The speakers were clear and shared many insights which came from the risks they have taken in their daily work on behalf of refugee populations. They also fielded hundreds of questions from their international counterparts as the challenging sessions continued. We IBVM's were so impressed with the level of responsibility, caring and genuine sharing shown by the mostly young people present that we had to conclude that our hope for the future of a more just global society had received a huge boost!

A Reminder: From Lavinia Limon (United States Committee for Immigrants and Refugees) we were reminded of the contents of the 1951 United Nations Convention/Protocol on Refugee Rights. Refugees have:

- The right to work for wages
- The right to be in business and practice their profession
- The right to own property
- The right to freedom of movement and to have travel documents
- The right to elementary education and to social services equivalent to the level that was provided in their own country

Lavinia had 29 years of experience in carrying out the U.S. Annual World Survey of Refugees. She strongly emphasized that the United Nations' custom of "warehousing" refugees in today's giant camps was never required by the 1951 Convention/Protocol. Her committee's 2005 survey found that 8 million (of the world's 12 million) refugees are housed in these camps, "a limbo with no hope for the future" [i.e. that there is no hope of getting out, known as "no durable solution"]

Many of these 8 million have now endured 9 to 15 years of camp living, but Lavinia notes that "no durable solution" did not appear in the 1951 U.N. Convention either! "It is time now, she said, (and all in the assembly seemed to heartily agree) "to revisit that Convention/Protocol and dig up the real meaning behind the words 'provision and protection of rights'."

ACTION TO BE TAKEN: We can at the very least forward to our political leaders the suggestion that Lavinia's committee has come up with for getting refugees out of the "warehouses" where they are presently trying to survive the dangers of violence and of disease. The committee has been

studying and researching, for some time, how the host countries (countries of asylum) could begin to move the refugees out of the camps and integrate them into the local populations of the host country. Their suggestion for how this plan could be executed is incorporated in the letter attached to this justice alert. (See below)

Please mail (or write your own letter) to the following:

The Honourable Monty Solberg
Minister of Citizenship & Immigration
House of Commons
Parliament Bldgs.
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

FAX 1 613 -957-2688

The Honourable Mr. John McNee
Canadian Ambassador to United Nations
885 Second Avenue, 4th Floor
New York 10017
U.S.A.

FAX 1-212-848-1192

The Right Honourable Stephen Harper
Prime Minister of Canada
House of Commons
Parliament Bldgs.
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A6

FAX 1-613-941-6900

N.B The only postage stamp needed is on the New York address

Scroll down to see letter

The Honourable Monty Solberg
Minister of Citizenship and Immigration
House of Commons
Parliament Bldgs.
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A6

Dear Minister

I am deeply concerned about the protection of the rights of refugees, especially the 8 million housed in the huge international camps where there is little, if any, protection from violence, sexual abuse of women and girls, and disease. Camp residents have endured limbo for 9 to 15 years now!

At the recent International Refugee Rights Conference held at York University campus (more than 450 participants from around the world) where you yourself also addressed the assembly, the United States Committee for Refugees & Immigrants outlined their suggested plan to improve the lot of those refugees “warehoused” in the giant camps. Their suggestions come out of a history of 29 years of working on annual surveys of the world’s refugee population. Their suggested plan seemed to me to be founded in practical common sense while holding to the human rights outlined in the 1951 U.N. Convention and Protocol relating to the status of refugees. Refugees are supposed to be able to enjoy these rights even when they are in exile in host countries (countries of asylum). I am restating for your consideration some of these suggestions for getting refugees out of the huge camps:

- Let refugees integrate with local populations of the asylum country
- Once there, provide them with work as a means of feeding and lodging themselves
- Local populations should realize it makes sense to capitalize on the skills and creative ideas the refugees will bring to the community.

- Setting up such a plan and educating local populations to accept it will require serious spending on the part of the asylum countries' governments.
- Hence the Committee recommends to the United Nations member countries that they see themselves as DONOR COUNTRIES to a massive plan of REIMBURSEMENT to the host countries who would finance the integration plan.
- For further details of the most recent research of the committee, one can contact Lavinia Limon, U.S. Committee for Refugees & Immigrants which has completed its 43rd annual World Refugee Survey.

Blessings on your efforts to obtain workable solutions for refugees and immigrants as you carry this heavy portfolio. Many of us will be supporting you in whatever way we can.

Sincerely,

.....

**cc: The Right Honourable Stephen Harper, Prime Minister of Canada
The Honourable John McNee, Canada's Ambassador to United Nations**