

WORLD & NATION

Refugees face greater struggle to find safe haven

By Nancy Frazier O'Brien
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Unlike the baby Jesus, whose parents had a safe place to which they could return after their travels to Bethlehem, more and more of the world's refugees today have no place to find a safe haven.

Life has never been tougher for the 22 million refugees and displaced people under the protection of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, according to a report released Dec. 8 by the international agency.

"It is becoming increasingly difficult for refugees to find a place of safety beyond the borders of their homeland," said the report titled "The State of the World's Refugees 1997-98: A Humanitarian Agenda."

"In many parts of the world, people who have taken refuge in another country have been harassed, attacked and even forced to go home against their will," the report added.

Pope John Paul II also called attention to the problem in his message for the 1998 World Day of Migrants and Refugees. In the United States, the observance is called National Migration Week and is scheduled for Jan. 5-11.

"The situation of migrants and refugees in the world seems to become ever more precarious," the pope said. "For the Christian, welcoming and solidarity for strangers constitute not only a human obligation of hospitality, but also a precise requirement which comes from their fidelity to the teaching of Christ."

U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata, who is Catholic, notes in an introduction to the report that most people picture the world's refugees living in sprawling camps and settlements, waiting to return to their own country when conditions make it safe.

But, she said, "the problem of forced displacement has become a much broader and more complex phenomenon than is suggested by the conventional image of a refugee camp." And many of the displaced people will never be able to return home without some form of significant international assistance.

The figure of 22 million under UNHCR protection does not include the "very large number of uprooted people who do not receive any form of international protection or assistance, the majority of whom remain within the borders of their own country," the report noted. When those are included, it said, the total of refugees and displaced people could reach more than 50 million.

Only a little more than half of those under the agency's protection are technically refugees. The others fall into various new and sometimes mysterious categories — the stateless and those whose nationalities are disputed; returnees who are formally no longer refugees but still need lots of help to get back their former lives; asylum-seekers; and those internally displaced by war or natural disaster in their homelands.



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A child arrives at a U.N.-sponsored reception center in Ho Chi Minh City for refugees returning to Vietnam. The U.N. high commissioner for refugees in a recent report said many displaced people will never be able to return home without significant international assistance.

Even though 10 million refugees have been returned to their countries since 1990, millions more have had to leave their homes for the first time.

A major problem confronting refugees and asylum-seekers has been the reluctance of both rich and poor countries to take people into their borders, even for short-term stays.

The 5 million people who requested asylum in Western Europe, North America and Australia during the past 10 years have faced "an array of different measures intended to prevent or deter people from seeking refuge," the UNHCR report said.

Twenty-nine countries host more than 100,000 refugees, but Germany — with 1.26 million — is the only wealthy nation to do so. The United States took in 75,682 refugees in 1996 and rejected 24,700 of the estimated 195,600 asylum applications it received in 1996, according to the United Nations.

Three countries host more than 1 million refugees — Iran, with 2 million; Pakistan, with 1.2 million; and Germany.

Asylum claims in Western Europe dropped 60 percent in five years, from 690,000 in 1992 to 250,000 in 1996, the report said. Germany receives about half of all asylum claims in Western Europe.

But many poorer nations are adopting the anti-refugee sentiments of their better-off neighbors, the report said.

"When the very countries responsible for establishing the international refugee regime begin to challenge its legal and ethical foundations, then it is hardly surprising that other states, especially those with far more pressing economic problems and much larger refugee populations, have decided to follow suit," it said.

Too often, Ogata warned in her introduction to the report, nations are expecting international aid agencies like hers to provide solutions to the complex humanitarian problems raised by refugees and displaced people. But she said the tools available to such aid agencies are limited.

"However proficiently such agencies are managed and coordinated, they cannot bring civil wars to an end, oblige states to respect the human rights of their citizens or bring a halt to the deliberate displacement of civilian populations," she said.

"The challenge of the 21st century will be to ensure the security of people," Ogata added. "Unless people feel secure in their own homes, the security of states will continue to be threatened."



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