

UNITED NATIONS



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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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MESSAGE ON WORLD REFUGEE DAY

20 June 2007

As humankind enjoys unprecedented mobility, with more people than ever before changing countries and even continents in pursuit of better opportunities, let us remember that not everyone who leaves home does so by choice.

Refugees do not leave their homes and villages willingly. They are forced to do so by conflict or persecution. In many cases, they are fleeing for their very lives, trying to find safety, protection and a way to meet their most basic needs. For tens of millions of people, exile has brought untold hardship. Rather than an opportunity to pursue education or employment, leaving home has meant traumatic experiences of uncertainty, deprivation and intolerance.

Compared to the past few decades, official global refugee figures are at low levels. But they do not take account of other groups displaced by insecurity or political strife. Entire communities may also seek refuge within their own countries. Living in refugee-like conditions within their borders, internally displaced people have the same need for protection and assistance, education and a safe environment. And this population is growing. In the past year, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other UN agencies have expanded their assistance to 23 countries with a total population of nearly 20 million internally displaced people.

And then there are the stateless, those who because of their ethnicity or history are simply denied the right to a nationality. For them, "going home" may not depend on a peace accord and repatriation, but rather, on overcoming bureaucratic obstacles and securing an official identity. Though the estimate of stateless people worldwide has risen to nearly six million in some 60 countries, the figure signals growing international willingness to recognize and address the problem.

International solidarity is crucial to meeting the urgent humanitarian needs of refugees and others forcibly displaced. Millions depend on the UN for material aid. But people chased from their homes also need refuge and legal protection, which begins with an understanding by Governments and individuals alike that refugees are not exiles by choice.

As we mark World Refugee Day, let us recall what sets these families, children and elderly apart from others on the move around the globe. The difference is that they cannot go home. To ensure that they are cared for and protected until they can, let us offer them our support and understanding.