

**SECRETARY OF STATE HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
REMARKS AT UNHCR COMMEMORATIONS
MINISTERIAL
GENEVA, SWITZERLAND
WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2011**

Thank you, Mr. High Commissioner.

I am honored to join you for the 60th anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 50th anniversary of the Statelessness Convention.

It is a pleasure to stand with all the ministers and other senior government officials to reaffirm our commitment to the principles of the two conventions, and to deliver our pledges to provide protection and assistance for refugees and stateless persons.

Before I continue, I would like to congratulate UNHCR on its own anniversary last year, celebrating more than 60 years of service. UNHCR, its staff and its humanitarian partners help more than 34 million refugees and persons of concern around the world. I know how often their work can be dangerous, as we saw this past October with the tragic shooting deaths of three UNHCR local staff members in Kandahar. We share your sorrow and we honor their sacrifices.

The United States is a nation of immigrants. We are proud to have welcomed to our shores more refugees than any other nation in the world. This year alone, we welcomed more than 56,000 refugees from more than 60 countries. We are equally proud to be UNHCR's largest financial donor. And we look forward to continuing our work together.

The conventions we celebrate today laid a marker for human compassion on a global scale. They enshrined and guaranteed the rights of refugees and stateless persons, and created a system for protecting refugees and other vulnerable persons and responding to crises. That system endures today. Its value can be measured in the generations of people around the world who have found new lives and futures thanks to resettlement, local integration, and voluntary repatriation.

As we look back at our accomplishments, we must also recognize the work we have left to do. Since the refugee convention was adopted in 1951, the scale of the challenge has expanded in ways no one could have foreseen.

During those 60 years, tens of millions of desperate people have fled conflicts and crises in a steady flow, from Indochina in the 1970s to the Balkans in the 1990s to the Horn of Africa right now. As their numbers have grown, and populations have become increasingly mobile, refugees have become a fluid but permanent presence.

Millions of people continue to be uprooted by wars or victims of persecution because of race, tribe, religion, political opinion or sexual identity. Many are internally displaced persons, disempowered within their countries, in places such as Burma, Syria, and Nepal.

We—the governments, multilateral institutions and other global partners gathered here—have come to realize that this challenge demands us to respond. We must create effective, forward-looking policies, rather than purely reactive responses.

That means, in some cases, training immigration judges or border guards on how to treat asylum seekers with efficiency and compassion, or making counseling services available to refugees who are also victims of gender-based violence. It means providing civic education to young people so they might learn democratic practices, and helping to better protect girls, women, and children, who are particularly vulnerable to violence, sexual exploitation and other abuse during times of crisis and upheaval.

The needs of refugees don't respect our bureaucratic divisions, so all these efforts have to be coordinated across the entire government: justice and health, foreign affairs and national security. Each can bring unique perspectives and capabilities. And the nature of the problem also demands breaking down barriers among governments—sharing best practices and creating partnerships to deal with shared regional challenges.

Though the challenges are significant, the benefits of solving them are clear, and extend beyond resolving the crisis of the moment. We won't only help people return home in safety and with dignity and begin new lives in resettlement countries. With the right support, refugees can strengthen the communities and societies they join. That improves stability and security—which benefits all of us.

That's why protecting and assisting refugees, internally displaced and stateless persons, and other vulnerable populations, is among my government's highest humanitarian priorities.

Today, 12 million people on this planet wake up every morning stateless, belonging to no country at all. Most of them are in developing countries without sufficient resources. And more than 40 million people are displaced around the world. The pledges we are all making today will be an important step in helping them build a better future.

Later, Acting Assistant Secretary Robinson from the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration will speak in some detail about the 28 pledges the United States is delivering. I would like to briefly mention one that is a particular priority for the United States, and for me personally. It concerns one of the major causes of statelessness, which is discrimination against women.

At least 30 countries around the world prevent women from acquiring, retaining, or transmitting citizenship to their children or their foreign spouses. And in some cases, nationality laws strip women of their citizenship if they marry someone from another country.

Because of these discriminatory laws, women often can't register their marriages, the births of their children, or deaths in their family. These laws perpetuate generations of stateless people who are often unable to work legally or travel freely. They cannot vote, open a bank account, or own property. They often lack access to health care and other public services. And without birth registration or citizenship documents, stateless children often cannot attend school.

In this compromised state, women and children are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, including gender-based violence, trafficking in persons, and arbitrary arrest and detention. And that hurts whole societies—because when women are given the opportunity to participate equally, they contribute to their countries' democratic governance, peace and stability, and economic development.

The United States has launched an initiative to build global awareness about these issues, and to support efforts to end or amend those discriminatory laws. We will work to persuade government officials and members of parliaments to change nationality laws that discriminate against women, to ensure universal birth registration, and to establish procedures and systems to facilitate the acquisition of citizenship for stateless persons.

I encourage other member states to join this effort. I am pleased that High Commissioner Guterres [goo-TEH-ress] has signaled his support. And I encourage UNHCR to work with UN Women, UNICEF, UNDP, and other UN partners to achieve equal nationality rights for women.

There is so much more that governments can do, and ideas we haven't yet thought of that can help these and other vulnerable groups. That is where we call upon your creative solutions, your engagement, your imagination. What new strategies can we adopt to better serve the refugees who come to our borders, or empower the stateless people within them? What has never been tried before? How can we expand our efforts and broaden our scope?

With us here today is Fatuma Elmi [El-mee], whose life during the past 20 years is clear evidence of the wisdom of investing in women. When civil war broke out in her native Somalia, she applied for asylum successfully in the United States.

She settled in Minneapolis with her daughter, and worked as a volunteer helping other refugee mothers and daughters adapt to life in the USA. A few years later, she joined the Lutheran Social Services agency where, for the past 15 years, she has helped new refugees find employment and build their own futures.

Her story is just one of millions I could share, stories of refugees who have found a new home and forged a better life, and given back to the communities they have joined. You can help write many more stories like that. And you can do it by making pledges that make a real difference—to the Somali family stuck in a refugee camp in Kenya, or the Afghan girl who wonders when her family will be able to return home after three decades of war.

We welcome your commitments. And we urge you to turn your pledges into action. So do millions of men, women and children.

We look forward to many more years of partnership on behalf of refugees around the world.

Thank you.

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