

YOUNG REFUGEES HAVE SPECIAL NEEDS

Adolescence is a formative period that shapes adulthood. Inadequate nutritional and health standards can permanently affect the mental, emotional and physical development of children and teenagers. If they are not properly protected, and denied opportunities to learn the skills required to live productive, independent lives, they are likely to contribute to the next round of conflict.

Young people are more vulnerable to abuse than adult refugees, and the problems from which they need special protection include recruitment from armed groups, sexual exploitation and abuse, forced labour and family separation. Girls especially have to face crippling cultural inequalities and cruelty; men and boys must be taught to understand and accept their right to equality and community participation.

Nevertheless, while they suffer greatly, young people also show great resilience in coping with these problems. They are also more adaptable, creative and energetic than adults, and if permitted can be agents for constructive change and exert a positive influence in their communities.



Decommissioned ex-combatants displaced by war and living in an internment camp in Mapee, Sierra Leone, play a game of soccer. UNHCR/N.Behring-Chisholm

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN

Is any form of human depravity more cowardly than the sexual exploitation of children? Shocking though it is, it is still common, and not just in war situations. For while forcible recruitment and sexual slavery may be a young girl's worst nightmare, it's not the only one.

Sadly, the threat of sexual violence is always present in any refugee climate where social and family structures have collapsed. Girls are seen as easy targets in refugee camps, suffering outright rape or coercion. Some are forced into prostitution, or are required to bestow 'favours' on powerful men such as camp leaders or teachers, merely to survive.

One answer that we are pursuing is to enable girls to acquire a skill or a trade, for the more economically self-sufficient young women become, the less vulnerable they are to exploitation. Other improvements include reducing the opportunity for rape by improving basic camp security, housing and lighting, and providing more accessible amenities.

EDUCATION: THE KEY TO SELF SUFFICIENCY

If there is one key element in helping young people escape from exile and poverty it is education, for with it come economic self-sufficiency, social integration and health. It is a basic human right. Yet it is the single most difficult one to successfully and universally provide to this group of refugees. For example, when refugees arrive in a particular location, how long will they stay? Since it is hoped that they will return home quickly, when should efforts begin to educate their children?

And while some refugees succeed in getting a primary education, there is little access to secondary and university education for the millions of young people in our care.

But we are making headway. The Refugee Education Trust, founded in 2000 to mark UNHCR's 50<sup>th</sup> year, will provide secondary education for 1.5 million teenage refugees in developing countries.

On a different level, but addressing a need that is just as important, our partner Right to Play aims to combat the crushing boredom of camp life by establishing sport programmes supervised by qualified coaches.

Perhaps UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has said it best: "Young people should be at the forefront of global change and innovation. They can be key agents for development and peace." But he also has a warning: "If they are left on society's margins, all of us will be impoverished."

It is the aim of UNHCR, especially in this year dedicated to Refugee Youth, to heed that warning, and do all we can to give them the opportunities they deserve.



An 11 year-old returnee girl studies at a private English lesson in Kabul, Afghanistan. UNHCR/N.Behring-Chisholm



Internally displaced youth in the Mutata area of Uraba, Colombia. UNHCR/P. Smith

INVEST IN THEIR FUTURE

The refugee children, teenagers and young adults under our care really need our help. And we need yours. After all, could there be a more rewarding investment than being able to provide a constructive future for these active, hopeful and enthusiastic youngsters who have had the misfortune of being caught up in other people's conflicts?

Please visit us at [www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org) or get in touch with your country's UNHCR office. Thank you.

World Refugee Day

20 June 2003

Refugee Youth:  
Building the Future

A large, artistic photograph of a young girl with dark hair, looking down. The background is blurred, showing other people in a crowd.

The UN Refugee Agency

World Refugee Day  
20 June 2003

Oil painting "Fraternité" 2002 by Kosal, Cambodian refugee



Liberian refugee students at school in Jimmi Bagbo camp, Sierra Leone.  
UNHCR/N.Behring-Chisholm



A returnee youth in Mutara Prefecture, Rwanda. UNHCR/J.Stejskal

“The days of our youth are the days of our glory”.

So wrote the poet Byron. But tragically, for 20 million young people around the world, the days of their youth, far from being days of glory, are often filled with hopeless misery, unspeakable cruelty and heartless exploitation.

Among them are the world's refugee youth – youngsters whose only crime was to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and who now find themselves the displaced victims of other people's wars and conflicts. They face the same privations that all refugees have to confront, but for them the challenges are amplified because their tender years make them that much more vulnerable.

It is the special plight of these innocents that we wish to spotlight, by dedicating World Refugee Day 2003 to Refugee Youth, and thereby open the eyes of a worldwide audience to their needs. But not only their needs. We wish to accentuate the positive by celebrating their many strengths, their huge potential, and their capacity to help themselves and their communities. Our aim is to provide refugee youth with a heightened sense of value and self-worth; to help them gather their strength and courage, spread their wings... and fly!

PLAYING SOLDIERS. ONLY THE GUNS AND BULLETS ARE REAL.

“They gave me a gun. They gave me training. I took drugs. I killed lots of civilians. It was war.” These chilling words were spoken in a dull monotone by a boy, barely into his teens, at a rehabilitation centre. And when asked what he wanted to do now that he was in safe hands, he replied “Join the military. I know what to do there.”

One of the worst fates to befall disenfranchised young people is their forcible recruitment as child soldiers. This boy is terrifyingly typical of many of the estimated

300,000 underage youths, most of them between 15 and 17, currently fighting in some of the world's most brutal wars. In Sierra Leone's recent civil war teenage soldiers were sometimes forced to kill or mutilate their own parents and neighbours as part of gruesome indoctrination ceremonies. Girls too are recruited, not to carry weapons, but to act as sexual slaves, often servicing dozens of partners. Constant exposure to horrific acts such as these create dangerous, traumatized zombies who, if they survive, need months or years of specialized care.

Even children who succeed in escaping from a war zone may not escape recruitment. Some refugee camps have been militarized. Cross-border recruitment is also a problem, and one ethnic insurgent group has even recruited children from communities in “safe” countries in Europe.

Given the vulnerability of displaced youth to recruitment, refugee children must receive increased protection. While measures such as global birth registration and universal recognition of children's rights will help, perhaps the best way to fight this scourge starts with two human fundamentals: strong family unity and education for all, including girls and adolescents.



Sri Lanca: A 17 year-old boy, who had the misfortune of finding a land mine while cleaning his garden, recuperates after having his thumb amputated.  
UNHCR/R. Chalasani

REFUGEE YOUTH:  
SOME FACTS AND STATS

**Who are “Refugee Youth”?** The concept of “youth” varies from culture to culture. Young people between 12 and 24 represent about 35% of all refugees.

**How many are there?** Of the 40 million displaced persons around the world, roughly half are young people. UNHCR and its partners assist an estimated 7.7 million people under the age of 18, which represents 45% of the world's refugee population. In Central Africa, 57% of the refugees are under 18.

**Where are they located?** 40% of the people under UNHCR protection live in camps. Another 13% live in urban areas. 47% are spread over rural and other areas. 50% of the refugees in Africa live in camps. Camps house less than 10% of the refugees in Europe, the Americas and Oceania.

**How many are soldiers?** Currently an estimated 300,000 youngsters around the world are compelled to fight as child soldiers. Many of them are girls who, forced into sexual slavery, face a greatly increased risk of contracting AIDS.

**How many are killed or injured?** UNICEF estimates that in the past ten years over 2 million children have died as a result of conflicts. In that time, 6 million have been maimed. At least one million children have been orphaned.

**Refugee education.** It is estimated that more than one million out of approximately 5 million eligible children receive basic education in UNHCR-sponsored classes.

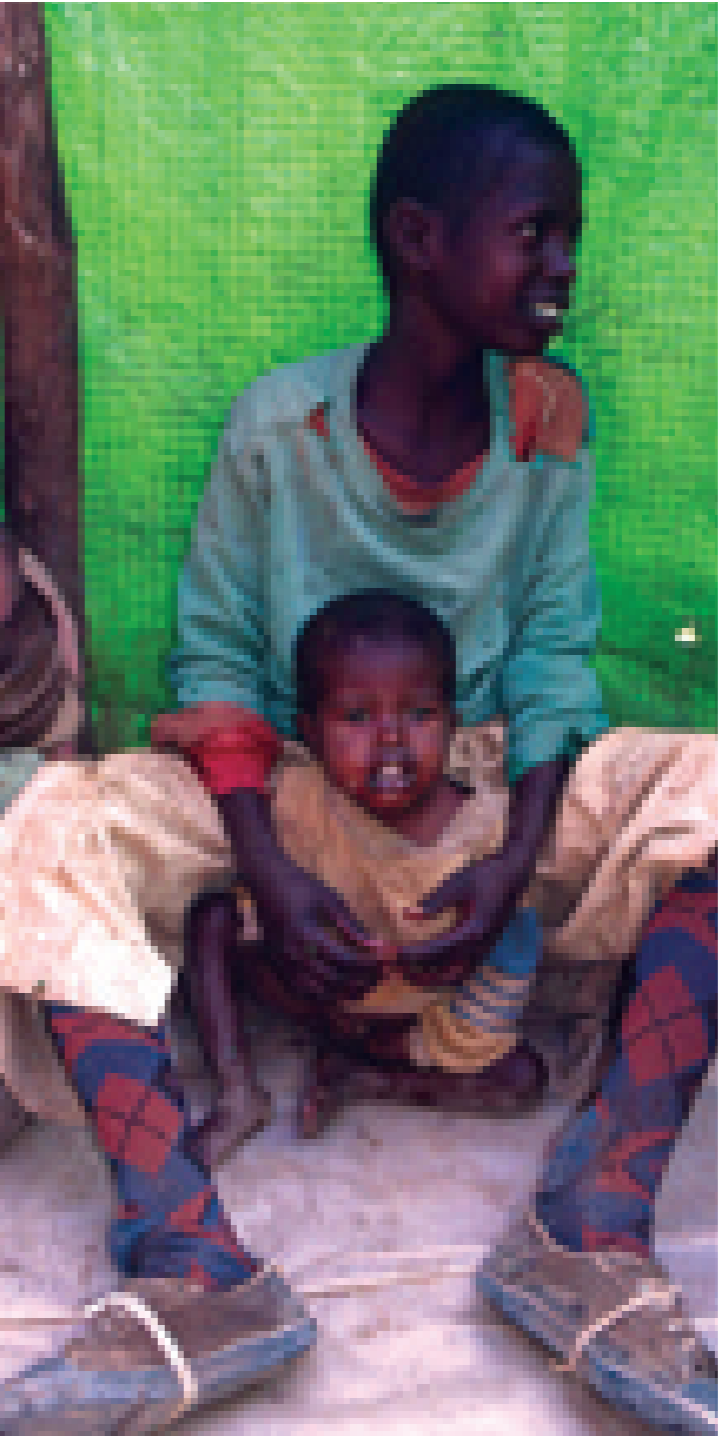
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A feeding centre for children under five in Ethiopia's Hartisheik camp.  
UNHCR/W. Stone