



African Students Organization

Building Bridges between Israel and Africa

IDC, 15 September 2019

Introduction

1. I wish to thank the organizers for the invitation to join this important Conference on refugee education.
2. I have worked with refugees for 30 years. One thing that I have found, wherever I was with refugees over those 30 years, is that education was the most important thing for young refugees, for their parents, for their families, and for their communities. Even before food, they talk about schools. This has been the case for all the refugee groups that I have encountered in my work with UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency.

Who are refugees

3. Refugees are a symbol of our turbulent times. They bring home to us in the most visceral and compelling way what is happening in our world - war, conflict, persecution, extremism, anarchic disorder and egregious human rights abuses forcing people out of their homes, communities and countries.
4. Every day, thousands of men, women and children have to make one of the most difficult decisions in life - to leave behind all that is dear to them and walk away to an uncertain and often frightening future elsewhere because they have no other choice. A total of 70.8 million people are refugees or displaced within their own countries. That is 1 in every 108 people of this earth.
5. Behind these statistics, there is an individual story of loss and suffering. A story of family separation, uprooting, deprivation and trauma. Many of them have seen their homes destroyed, members of their family killed, or tortured, their communities bombarded. Children make up half of the world's refugees and they bear a disproportionate burden of the suffering.
6. But the refugee journey is also a story of courage and resilience. It takes indeed real courage to be a refugee. Courage not to give up hope, and to make the most of the hand that has been dealt. Courage

not only to survive, but to persevere and build a new future against the odds, eventually to become contributing and enriching members of society once more. That's why refugees deserve our respect, understanding and support so that they can nurture and realize their hopes.

Refugees in Israel

7. When I reflect on the refugee debate in many Western countries, including Israel, it seems to me that there is too much emotion, and not enough reason involved. Facts are often distorted by fears and exaggerations.
8. A taxi driver I was recently riding with in Tel Aviv told me that he believed there were as many as 200,000 Eritreans and Darfuris in the country. He in fact said 200,000 "infiltrators."
9. Never mind the numbers (there are at present only about 30,000 Eritreans and Sudanese in the country), a very troubling use of language to describe refugees. The politicians started calling them infiltrators – clearly meant to instil fear and hostility; the media referred to them as infiltrators; and – reasonably enough in the circumstances – the public began thinking they were infiltrators. It is not right, legally and morally, to label these people as 'infiltrators' – or even 'illegal migrants' – and avoid the 'refugee' terminology altogether, and the rights and international legal obligations that it implies.
10. There should be no illusion that the Eritreans and Sudanese who fled their countries over the years were moving voluntarily, in search of a better life.
11. The asylum decisions taken by European countries and Canada affirm this. The acceptance rate for Eritrean refugee claims in these countries has stood at 85-90 per cent, compared to less than 1 percent in Israel. The only other Government that has consistently denied that the thousands of Eritreans leaving the country were leaving because of human rights abuses and lack of political freedom is the Government of Eritrea.
12. It is not right, legally and morally, to label these people as 'infiltrators' – or even 'illegal migrants' – and avoid the 'refugee' terminology altogether, and the rights and international legal obligations that it implies.

13. The flow of refugees, alas, is never 'orderly'. Fleeing for their lives, their movement is often chaotic and improvised, their assets left behind, and they are rarely able to cross borders through regular immigration procedures. International law therefore expressly prohibits the criminalisation of refugees who arrive without documentation or visa. It is never a crime to seek asylum. To the contrary, seeking asylum is a basic right enshrined in international law.
14. Protecting refugees is therefore a legal requirement and a necessity, not a policy choice. It is a universal value, firmly embedded in many cultural and religious traditions. And, as I said before, the burden of protecting refugees is small for Israel in global comparison. Consider, for example, Uganda, where a third of the population lives in extreme poverty, sharing its scarce resources with over a million refugees. Or Lebanon, where every sixth person is a refugee. Many other countries that have the least are doing the most for refugees.

Refugee education

15. A country as important as Israel can - and should - do more in providing asylum to and integrating the less than 30,000 refugee women and men, girls and boys who have lost everything. Given the right environment, and with the right support, these refugees are able to rebuild their lives and contribute to their host society economically, socially and culturally.
16. I cannot see any greater means towards these goals than providing refugee children and youth with quality, mainstream education that enables them to learn, thrive and develop their potential, and prepares them for participation in cohesive societies. Education makes the difference between inclusion or marginalisation, self-reliance or dependency, rebuilding a life or remaining in a situation of loss and despair.
17. Higher education is what turns students into leaders. By harnessing young refugees' creativity, energy and idealism, it positions them to become role models, and furnishes them with the means to amplify their voices and enable rapid generational change. But the manifold challenges in accessing or completing secondary school, which is the gateway to further education and improved employment opportunities, deal a crushing blow to a young refugee's dreams of a brighter future.

18. I am very happy that many of the people here are students, are refugees, and they can bring their life experiences and share them with all of us. I also know that there are many young refugees in this country that are at the age of being students and cannot be. Despite their potential, they are denied the opportunity education can provide.
19. I appeal to the government and higher education institutions to provide more schemes allowing qualifying refugee students to attend universities under the same conditions as nationals. To facilitate this, secondary school students need more academic support through extra-curricular programming and tutoring so they meet the standards for higher education. And before that, we need to significantly improve the quality of early childhood and primary education, which form the foundation of the lifelong learning cycle.
20. Universities can offer scholarships and other awards to refugee students. They can extend opportunities for those who cannot access a university through online learning platforms, where digital programmes are combined with teaching and mentoring.
21. Businesses also have an important role to play: they can offer internships, apprenticeships, training and job opportunities to refugees. And the support of the public is crucial in lobbying the government; in helping refugees learn new languages and skills; in volunteering with NGOs that support refugees.

Conclusion

22. In conclusion, I return to the theme of my opening remarks. Refugees leave their home, families, possessions and connections with their local community and walk away to an uncertain and often frightening future because they have no other choice. They are among the most vulnerable, and yet the most resilient people on earth.
23. They are resourceful individuals, some of whom have survived on their wits during long and dangerous journeys to the country of asylum. They find the strength to overcome adversity.
24. Indeed refugees are nothing if not the greatest embodiment of the human survivor spirit. We can all help them to nurture – and realize – their hopes and aspirations by accepting them for who they are, seeing and treating them as equals and affording them the chance to engage fully in all aspects of community life.
