

REFUGEES

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Children

*“If we are the future
and we’re dying,
there is no future.”*



UNHCR

United Nations
High Commissioner
for Refugees



Editor:

Ray Wilkinson

French editor:

Mounira Skandrani

Contributors:

Christoph Hamm, Christina Linner, Asmita Naik, David Nosworthy

Editorial assistant:

Virginia Zekrya

Photo department:

Suzy Hopper, Anne Kellner

Design:

Vincent Winter Associés

Production:

Françoise Peyroux

Administration:

Anne-Marie Le Galliard

Distribution:

John O'Connor, Frédéric Tissot

Map:

UNHCR - Mapping Unit

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Cover: A Bosnian girl in the Turanj refugee camp in Croatia in 1994.

Back page: A displaced Afghan boy at the Shamak camp in Afghanistan in 1996.

PHOTOS: © S. SALGADO.

UNHCR

PO. Box 2500
1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland
www.unhcr.org

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4 Despite considerable progress in the last decade, millions of youngsters continue to be uprooted. Education is a key to helping them survive. Youngsters from Chechnya attend classes in a building heavily scarred by war.

UNHCR / O. VOGELANG



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Photo essay by Sebastio Salgado not available in this online version for copyright reasons

So far so good... but what happens now?

In the decade plus since the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, literally millions of the world's dispossessed boys and girls, including huge numbers of young refugees, have been given a chance to

often deliberately, during this same period. Millions of others continue to suffer from disease or malnutrition and have been wounded, maimed or orphaned. AIDS has become a deadly scourge among disenfranchised youngsters worldwide. There are around 25 million young people either displaced from their homes within their own country or living as refugees in surrounding states.

UNHCR helps around half of them. It is often asked to do more by the international community and currently is reviewing all of its children's programs and its involvement with some internally displaced populations which fall outside its original mandate.

The unwelcome reality is, however, that this agency, together with others, is being asked to do more with less—only 80 percent of its budgetary requirements are being met.

So, despite significant progress in the last decade, the forthcoming conference will face some harsh realities and difficult decisions for the decade ahead.

● A powerful photo essay, portraits of refugee children from around the world by Sebastião Salgado, is included in this issue. Each child has been through traumatic times. But rather than highlighting hardship and suffering, the face of each youngster resonates quietly with resilience and hope.

● In a center page interview, UNHCR's new High Commissioner, Ruud Lubbers, outlines his vision for the organization's future, a leaner agency, perhaps, but by concentrating on its 'core' functions, a more effective one.

grow and prosper.

Untold numbers of at risk infants have been saved by the application of simple formulas or new remedies. Their older brothers, and an increasing number of their sisters, have been sent to school. Children uprooted from their homes by war and other persecution have been given food and shelter and then a new start to life.

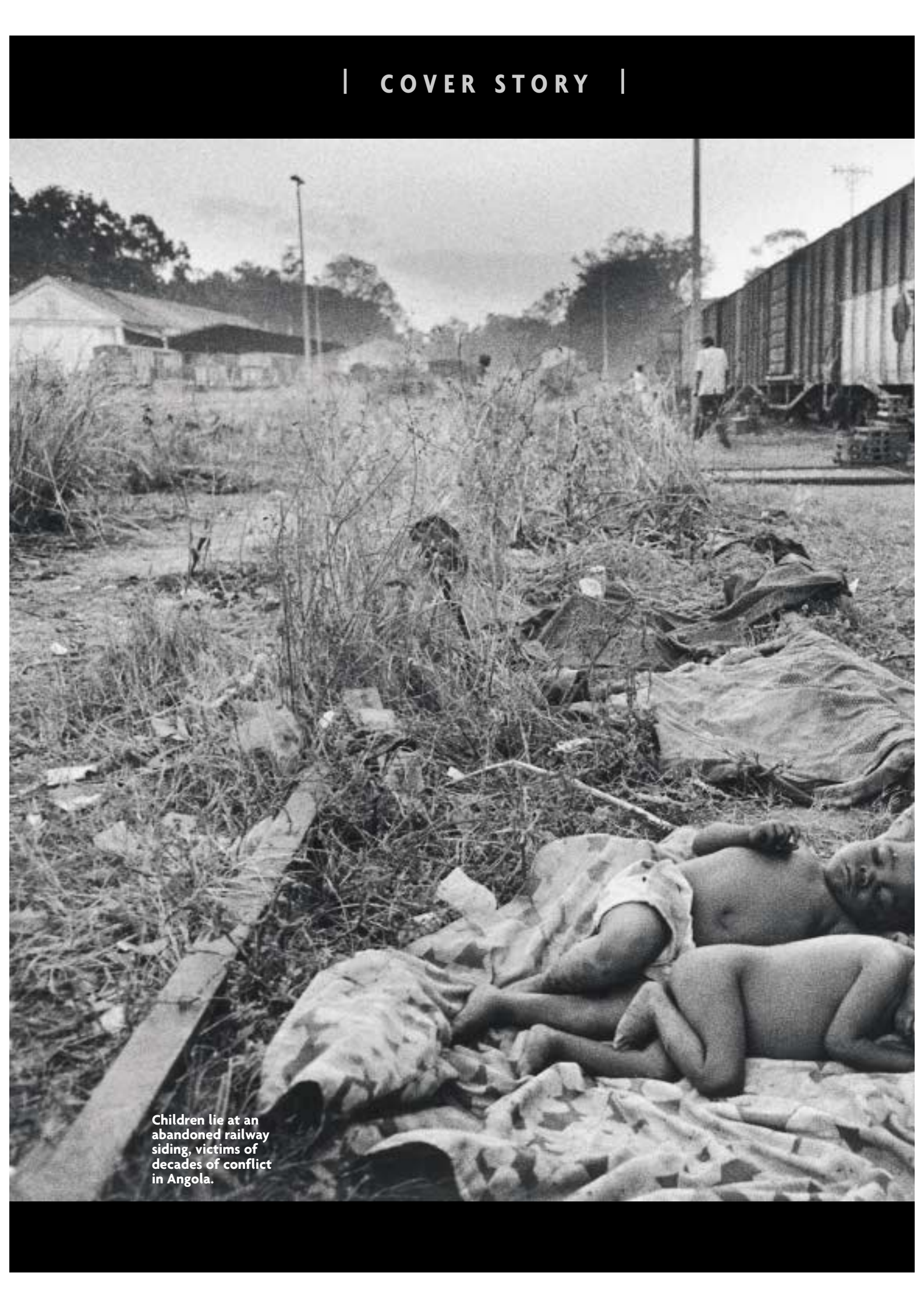
The Convention itself attracted the largest number of government signatories for any human rights charter in history. It helped promote an impressive number of other legal instruments and guidelines all designed to protect and help needy infants, youngsters and adolescents whether in their home village or a crowded refugee camp.

But when a special session of the U.N. General Assembly convenes in September to review 10 years of work in this field, delegates will concentrate on the darker side of the story.

An estimated two million children have been killed,

Resilience is a key to survival for threatened children. Displaced youngsters in Angola use a destroyed aircraft fuselage at the Museum of the Revolution in Luena as their playground.

© S. SALGADO



Children lie at an abandoned railway siding, victims of decades of conflict in Angola.

© S. SALGADO



**“LIFE IS A CLASSROOM,
A STREET WITHOUT GUNS
AND A FIELD WITHOUT MINES”**

*Everyone wants to
help children.
So why are so many
millions still suffering?*

by Ray Wilkinson

She was 12-years-old. Her tormentors forced her to dance naked on a table before she was raped. The ordeal continued each evening for weeks. Eventually the child was ‘sold’ for 200 German marks to a Bosnian Serb soldier. Nine years later the schoolgirl remains missing.

A 15-year-old teenager was also abused during the same period in the Bosnian town of Foca in 1992. Her attacker, who had a daughter the same age, had threatened to kill her

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Humanitarian agencies increasingly realize that education and vocational skills are as important as food and shelter in helping uprooted children, including these Tajik girl refugees in Afghanistan.

mother unless the woman revealed the hiding place of the girl.

“Mothers and daughters, together were robbed of the last vestiges of human dignity, women and girls treated like chattel,” a judge said. Addressing the 12-year-old’s molester, the judge told him the girl had been “a helpless little child for whom you showed no compassion whatsoever, but whom you abused sexually. You finally sold her like an object in the knowledge that this would almost certainly mean further sexual assaults by other men.”

Sexual abuse, especially in the heat and hatred of war, is often commonplace, but the significance of these two rapes was that three of the perpetrators were caught and brought before the special U.N. War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague. The court heard a horrifying catalogue of premeditated sex-

ual crimes committed during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early 1990s, leading Judge Florence Mumba to declare

UNHCR’s largest single ‘clientele’ are kids.

that the Bosnian Serb army had used rape as a terror instrument during the conflict.

The three defendants –Dragoljub Kunarac, Radomir Kovac and Zoran Vukovic– were sentenced to between 12 and 28 years imprisonment after being found guilty of using mass rape and en-

slavement as a weapon of war. It was the first time such charges—second only to genocide in their gravity—were recognized as a crime against humanity.

The landmark judgement was the latest in an increasingly comprehensive set of international conventions, regional laws and special programs which help protect children, in this case sending out a warning to future would-be sexual predators that they will now have to pay for their crimes.

“My parents, five brothers and sisters were killed and their bodies were eaten by dogs. Two of my sisters survived by hiding underneath the bodies. I was raped and a baby boy was born. Now I must look after him, two younger sisters and a brother.”

—A teenage survivor of the 1994 Rwandan genocide who is now one of thousands of children in that country who must look after other surviving members of their family.

Millions of young people are 'at risk' today, not only from sexual exploitation but from a variety of other causes. Many of them are refugees and displaced children who make up approximately half of uprooted populations anywhere in the world. Thus, though the fact is sometimes obscured by the use of the general term 'U.N. Refugee Agency,' UNHCR's largest single 'clientele' among 22 million people 'of concern' to the organization are 10 million minors.

United Nations agencies such as UNICEF and non-governmental organizations like Save the Children have, of course, been helping children for decades, but a wider global interest and involvement accelerated noticeably in the last decade or so.

The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child which spells out children's entitlements and the obligations of states toward them, has become a cornerstone for the protection of minors, attracting more signatories than any other human rights treaty

in history. All nations have ratified the document except two countries, the United States and Somalia.

Last year the U.N. General Assembly reinforced that document, approving two 'Optional Protocols' to the Convention, one covering the sale of children and child pornography and another establishing 18 as the minimum age at which children can be forcibly recruited as soldiers.

In 1996 Graça Machel, Mozambique's former first lady and the wife of former South African President Nelson Mandela, authored a ground breaking and devastating report entitled *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*. It was the most in-depth human rights assessment to date of the suffering of boys and girls trapped in war.

Governments, too, devoted increasing

The world of children at a glance

- **There are approximately 50 million uprooted people** around the world—refugees who have sought safety in another country, and people displaced within their own country. Around half of this displaced population are children.
- The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees cares for 22.3 million of these people. An estimated **10 million are children** under the age of 18.
- The majority of people flee their homes because of war. It is estimated that more than **two million children were killed in conflict** in the last decade. Another six million are believed to have been wounded and one million orphaned.
- In recent decades the proportion of war victims who are civilians rather than combatants has leaped from **five percent to more than 90 percent**.
- Children in 87 countries live among **60 million land mines**. As many as 10,000 per year continue to become victims of mines.
- More than **300,000** youths and girls currently are serving as **child soldiers** around the world. Many are less than 10 years old. Many girl soldiers are forced into different forms of **sexual slavery**.
- The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most important legal framework for the protection of children. The Convention has the **highest number of state parties** of any human rights treaty, being ratified by all countries except the United States and Somalia.
- Last year, the U.N. General Assembly approved two Optional Protocols to the Convention, one on **the sale of children and child pornography** and another establishing 18 as the minimum age for participation of children in hostilities.
- UNHCR has recognized the special needs of refugee children and youngsters uprooted in their own countries. In the last few years, the agency has **introduced many new programs**, expanded others and attempted to incorporate all of them into its operations.
- Children, whether accompanied by parents or on their own, **account for as many as half of all asylum seekers** in the industrialized world. In 1996, Canada became the first country with a refugee determination system to issue specific guidelines on children seeking asylum.
- At any one time there may be up to **100,000 separated children** in western Europe alone. As many as 20,000 separated children lodge asylum applications every year in Europe, North America and Oceania.
- Between 1994 and 1999, the U.N. requested **\$13.5 billion in emergency relief** funding, much of it for children. It received less than \$9 billion.
- The amount of assistance varied dramatically by region. Donors provided the equivalent of **59 U.S. cents per person** per day for 3.5 million people in Kosovo and Southeastern Europe in 1999, compared with **13 cents per person** per day for 12 million African victims.
- AIDS has killed more than **3.8 million children** and orphaned **another 13 million**. In the last five years HIV/AIDS has become the greatest threat to children, especially in countries ravaged by war. In the worst affected countries, it is estimated that as many as half of today's 15-year-olds will die from the disease.
- In 1998 donor countries allocated \$300 million to combat AIDS, though an estimated **\$3 billion was needed**.
- More than **67,000 children** were reunited with their families in Africa's Great Lakes region between 1994-2000, thanks to a global tracing program organized by humanitarian organizations.
- An estimated **45,000 households** in Rwanda today are headed by children, 90 percent of them girls.
- School buildings, like teachers and children, have become deliberate targets in war. During the Mozambique conflict in the 1980s-90s, for instance, **45 percent of schools were destroyed**.
- If developed countries met an agreed aid target of 0.7 percent of their gross national product, **an extra \$100 billion** would be available to help the world's poorest nations.
- An estimated **1.2 billion people** worldwide survive on less than \$1 per day. Half of them are children.
- **Ten million children** under the age of five die each year, the majority from preventable diseases and malnutrition.
- Around **40 million children** each year are not registered at birth, depriving them of a nationality and a legal name.

War in the classroom

Discrimination remains deep-rooted in many schools

by Paul Watson, Los Angeles Times

In the battle to win Bosnia's peace, thousands of NATO troops join legions of foreign bureaucrats with a multibillion dollar arsenal of tanks, helicopters and aid money. There is also a simpler weapon: the black felt pen.

In many Bosnian schools, it is not enough to teach history, art and grammar to the nation's Croatian, Serbian and Muslim children; they're also taught to hate those from other ethnic groups. So in 1999, the country's foreign administrators ordered that all ethnically offensive words in the textbooks be blacked out.

A commission issued a 24-page list of phrases, paragraphs and even whole pages. Teachers were instructed to find them in every textbook and make sure students could not read the words anymore.

In a grammar text for Serbian seventh-graders, a lesson on the passive voice appeared under the heading "Tribute in Blood," above a brief excerpt from the 1945 novel "Bridge Over the Drina," by Ivo Andric, a Bosnian Croat and winner of the Nobel Prize in literature.

It describes the medieval torture and massacre of Serbs by Muslim Turkish invaders who, according to the tale, kidnapped children ages 10 to 15 in wicker baskets strapped to horses. Teachers were told to rip out the two-page lesson.

Beneath a picture of a boy with an amputated leg, a caption in a textbook for Croats refers to an attack by "grand Serbian aggressors." The phrase was supposed to be blacked out—though some teachers had trouble following instructions.

"In many instances, instead of using black markers, they used yellow high-

lighters," said Claude Kiefer, who sets education policy for Bosnia-Herzegovina's foreign-run administration.

It is easier to censor words than change minds, a basic truth central to the overwhelming problems that Bosnia still faces after its war ended with an accord reached in Dayton, Ohio, on November 21, 1995.

DEEP WOUNDS

Although wounds have begun to heal, ethnic hatreds are still raw, and a united Bosnia is still just a dream waiting in the wings for the nightmare to pass.

The Dayton Accord was a flawed compromise forced by a brutal stalemate on Bosnia's battlefields and by the pit bull

Serbs, however, still live in almost ethnically pure areas, with three separate systems running schools, phone networks, power grids and other services.

Few places were fought over more viciously than the northern town of Brcko, a choke point between the two halves of what became Republika Srpska, where the three warring sides battled along converging front lines, blasting whole neighborhoods to rubble.

An international arbitration panel ruled in March 1999 that the three sides had to share the town but lingering ethnic hatred erupted into students riots in late 2000 when Serbian and Muslim teenagers rambaged for days.

Sanja Becirevic, 14, returned to Brcko from Germany in 1998 after six years as a refugee. She is one of only two Muslim pupils in a seventh-grade class of Serbs, with all Serbian teachers. The other kids make sure that she knows her place.

"I don't think bad things about them, but they think bad things about me," said Sanja, who was carrying a loaf of bread home to her mother. "They insult me because I belong to this nation."

"But since I'm a girl, I don't get it as much as the (Muslim) boy in my class. I just stay silent. I don't care what they say to me, I just laugh. Of course, it's stupid when you insult other ethnic groups."

On a side road less than a mile away, Duska Josipovic, a 13-year-old Bosnian Serb, was walking home with a classmate from an exclusively Serbian elementary school. She found it funny when asked if she had Muslim friends.

"They are people like us, but people cannot stand them—at least not me," said Duska, a refugee from the central Bosnian village of Petrovo. "They are somehow different, somehow unusual."

Muslims live three doors down from her, but the two families never talk to each other. The shy, polite seventh-grader sees nothing wrong in hating all Muslims.

"We could stand them before the war," she said. "But after the war, people cannot stand one another." ■



Even when children can return to school, the curriculum must be monitored to prevent the continuation of ethnic hatreds.

diplomacy of U.S. diplomat Richard Holbrooke.

With the eventual added persuasion of North Atlantic Treaty Organization bombing, Serbs agreed to accept Bosnia as an independent but divided country: 49 percent of its territory went to a Serb-controlled substate called Republika Srpska.

Bosnia's relative majority of Muslims settled for a federation with the Croats in the other 51 percent, with the promise that 'ethnic cleansing' would be halted and that more than 1.4 million refugees could go back to prewar homes in areas where they were an ethnic minority.

Most Bosnian Croats, Muslims and



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At least one million children have been orphaned by war in the last decade including these Rwandans who were hospitalized in neighboring Zaire in 1994.

► attention to children's issues. Canada, for instance, in 1996 became the first country to issue guidelines on how to handle unaccompanied children seeking asylum. The United States followed suit two years later. Washington, Sweden, Norway and other states increased funding for specialized children's programs.

New organizations were formed and alliances between organizations strengthened. In one such multi-group effort humanitarian agencies reunited more than 67,000 children with their families in Africa's Great Lakes region following the Rwandan genocide via a widespread tracing program.

In its 50 year history UNHCR successfully helped restart the lives of approximately 50 million refugees, about half of them children.

In recent years it established specific guidelines for helping refugee children. Together with the Save the Children Alliance, UNHCR launched a project called

Action for the Rights of Children (ARC) developing so-called resource packs which are then used by field staff to tackle children's problems. The same partners began a second initiative (the Separated Children in Europe Program) in which a network of NGOs in 28 countries work with separated children arriving on the continent.

And yet...

Despite the plethora of conferences and meetings, laws and conventions, despite the unprecedented attention and commitment of resources by the global community, the lot of millions of children, including refugees, remains desperate.

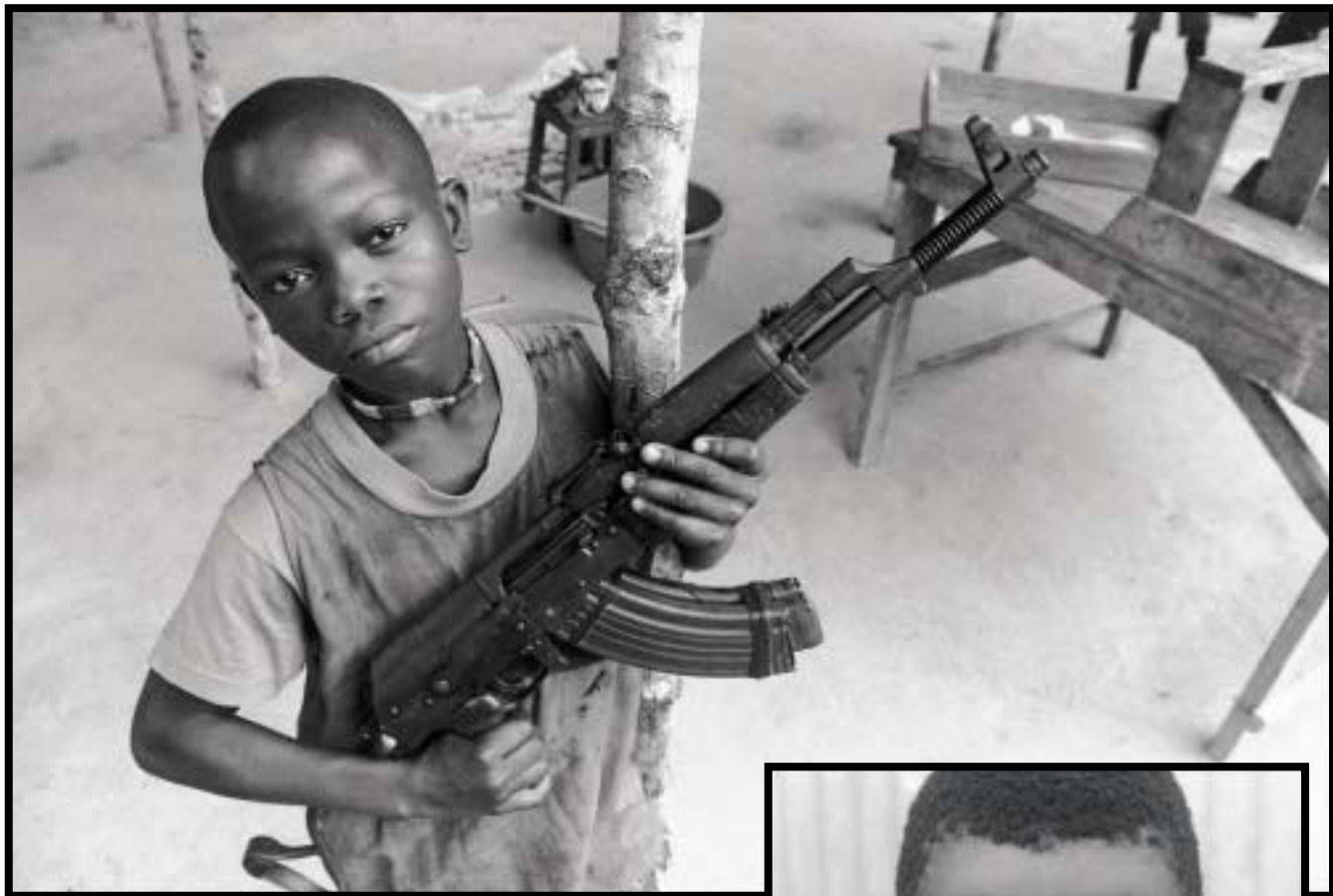
Consider: more than two million chil-

dren were killed by war in the last decade—equivalent to the population of central Paris. A further six million youngsters were wounded and maimed and one million orphaned.

“Modern wars are exploiting, maiming and killing more callously and more systematically than ever before.”

Unknown numbers of minors were raped, tortured and brutalized and millions more died of starvation and disease. AIDS alone claimed the lives of 3.8 million children and orphaned a further 13 million.

Today, there are around 300,000 youngsters who were kidnapped or coerced into becoming child soldiers. Many of the abducted girls were forced into sexual slavery and a world audience is now only too aware of the atroc-



UNICEF / G. PIROZZI

Children are coerced into becoming child soldiers and in the Sierra Leone civil war they helped unleash a dreadful reign of terror against civilians, including this 17-year-old whose hands were chopped off.

► ities committed by drug crazed rebels, often just children themselves, during the civil war in the West African state of Sierra Leone.

“They gave me training. They gave me a gun. I took drugs. I killed civilians. Lots. It was just war, what I did then. I only took orders. I knew it was bad. It was not my wish.”

—A child soldier in Sierra Leone.

“Two sons and a daughter were forced to accompany the rebels. When one brother collapsed exhausted, he was executed as he lay on the ground. His younger brother was gunned down as he tried to escape. The daughter was repeatedly gang raped...”

—Victims of the child soldiers.

Children in nearly 90 countries live in permanent danger of death or maiming from 60 million land mines planted by battling armies, rebels

and dissidents near their homes or in the fields they tend.

The number of children violently uprooted from their homes and either ‘internally displaced’ within their own countries or forced to flee as refugees to surrounding states, may be as high as 25 million—the equivalent of the population of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden combined.

These numbers are so enormous and difficult to put into any type of context, they tend to blur and dilute the individual suffering.

The original Machel report noted chillingly that for many young people their



UNICEF / G. PIROZZI

world “is a desolate moral vacuum devoid of the most basic human values in which nothing is spared, held sacred or protected.” Nothing much has changed in the ►

David vs Goliath

Every year, thousands of unaccompanied children apply for asylum in industrialized countries. But few get refugee status. Many go underground. Who is responsible?

by Judith Kumin

“Port lures illegals journeying westward.” “29 illegals bound for Britain detained.” “Fooled Sri Lankans refused refugee status.” Many western newspapers today carry similar headlines, warning of increased clandestine immigration or of ‘bogus’ refugees. But lost amidst the scare-mongering—and the negative tide of public opinion it invariably generates—is the fact that many of these uninvited guests are children, sometimes alone and often fleeing war and persecution.

Few of them get anything like the official or media attention which surrounded the telegenic Cuban boy Elian Gonzalez after his mother drowned while trying to escape the island and anti-Castro relatives attempted to keep him in the United States last year.

Hardly anyone blinked, for instance, when 16 unaccompanied Afghan children were found shivering among a cluster of adults trying to sneak across Austria’s eastern border shortly before Christmas last year. Or when a group of Somali children landed at Zurich airport, and asked for asylum. The case of a 16-year-old Nicaraguan street child recently granted asylum in Arizona, after having walked thousands of miles alone to the United States, went largely unnoticed.

The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service was unable to say how many unaccompanied kids such as the Nicaraguan urchin apply for asylum every year—they don’t keep such statistics. Other western governments are in a similar predicament. They acknowledge there is a ‘problem’ surrounding asylum seeking children, but often cannot identify its magnitude.

Even when information is available, it is not necessarily reliable, since it is often difficult to determine a child’s age, and a boy or girl who seems to be ‘accompanied’

on arrival may in fact be with adults neither willing nor suitable to look after the youngster (for this reason, UNHCR and many other agencies prefer to use the term ‘separated children’).

FAILING TO COPE

Still, it is clear that large numbers of these children seek asylum in industrialized countries and that governments find it difficult to cope. They vacillate between stringent control measures, including

While on paper, children’s rights are nearly universally recognized, they still face numerous forms of persecution.

locking children up in jail, x-raying them to assess their age or shipping them back to ‘safe’ third countries, and serious efforts to care for youngsters in the spirit of Article 22 of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child which requires signatories to provide adequate protection and assistance to children, whether alone or with their families.

During 1999, the most recent year for which at least some numbers are available, more than 20,000 separated children applied for asylum in western Europe, North America or Australia. This is a mere fraction of those who were driven from their homes worldwide by violence and persecution. Experts estimate that half of the world’s refugees and displaced people are children, and that over the past decade,

more than two million have been killed in conflicts around the world.

While on paper, children’s rights are nearly universally recognized (all but two countries have ratified the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child), they still face numerous forms of persecution, such as child labor, rape, female genital mutilation, forced military recruitment or are made to witness the torture or execution of parents and older siblings.

It is therefore no surprise that parents try to send their children to safety, or that children try to escape on their own. As early as 1938 and 1939, 10,000 German and Austrian Jewish children were saved from the Holocaust by the legendary “Kindertransporte” when their parents put them on trains and boats to England.

It is now widely recognized that children may be refugees in their own right. In 1996, Canada’s Immigration and Refugee Board issued Guidelines on Child Refugee Claimants, the first produced by any country operating a refugee determination system. Two years later, the United States’ Immigration and Naturalization Service published its own Guidelines for Children’s Asylum Claims. Both recognize that children may experience persecution differently from adults, and that child-sensitive status determination procedures are needed.

The most favored destinations for separated asylum seeking children are in western Europe, especially the Netherlands, the Nordic countries and Switzerland. A recent initiative of the UNHCR and the International Save the Children Alliance created the Separated Children in Europe Program, a network of non-governmental agencies working with children in 28 countries. One of the network’s biggest concerns is that while some of these children are indeed refugees, others are victims of traffickers who bring them to lucrative European markets to work as prostitutes or cheap labor—and some are both. ▶

David vs Goliath...

▶ In most countries, the problem is dealt with in a piecemeal way. Canadian officials freely recognize that they never gave it much attention until the summer of 1999, when around 130 Chinese children arrived, without their parents, on four boats on the country's west coast. And although UNHCR issued Guidelines on Policies and Procedures in Dealing with Unaccompanied Children Seeking Asylum in 1997, some of the agency's most basic recommendations are still not followed.

GUIDELINES

The Guidelines highlight issues which governments and child welfare agencies need to tackle. The most basic is the definition of a 'separated' child as one who is under 18 years of age, outside his or her country of origin and without parents or other legal or customary guardians to care for or protect the child. This sounds straightforward, but such children frequently arrive with false documents or with no papers at all. Many are unwilling or unable to tell their age.

The authorities, reluctant to be 'duped' into giving special treatment to adults posing as children, often set out to prove—through x-rays, dental examinations or other techniques—that the applicants are in fact over 18. But age assessments, even if they are safe, non-invasive and culturally appropriate, are only approximate at best, and children may be denied the special measures to which they are entitled, if they are incorrectly identified as adults.

In Switzerland, where 1,775 asylum applicants in 1999 claimed to be under 18, the Asylum Appeals Commission recently opted to stop using bone x-rays for age de-

termination after experts warned of a very large margin of error.

Although UNHCR asks governments not to imprison asylum seeking children, many governments do so. Few will admit that this is intended as a deterrent measure; some argue that it is for the children's own safety, to protect them from abuse by traffickers.

In 1999, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service reportedly held 4,600 unaccompanied children in detention, many of whom were seeking asylum. In Austria, where for many years children have been routinely detained, the Minister of Interior issued instructions in October 2000 to improve the conditions of detention, allowing children at least to receive legal assistance.

Even Canada, which in the past rarely detained asylum seekers, let alone children, jailed a dozen Chinese girls for many months last year, after they were spotted in the back of a van headed for the U.S. border. An Ontario judge ad-

monished immigration authorities for this lengthy detention and insisted that more attention be paid to the care of the girls saying: "These minors are, after all, children. Their families are thousands of miles away. Decency is something Canadians take pride in, and decency should prevail."

A GUARDIAN

Children cannot be expected to know their rights in a strange country. This is why UNHCR asks governments to make sure that a suitable guardian is appointed for separated asylum seeking children—another recommendation which has largely fallen on deaf ears, although states routinely appoint guardians for national children who are placed in state care.

Some notable exceptions exist: in Sweden, all separated children get a guardian known in Swedish as 'the good man.' The appointment of a guardian is required by law in Norway, but there is a shortage of candidates. In the Netherlands, a social



Unaccompanied Kosovar children waiting for a meal in Lecce, Italy in 1999.

AP PHOTO / J. GARFIS III

worker from the agency “de Opbouw” is appointed guardian—but the caseload is too large for much individual attention to be devoted to care, education and tracing of family members. In the United States and Canada, there are no formal guardianship arrangements, which can create problems in situations as mundane as when approval needs to be given for a child to have his or her appendix removed.

Appointment of a guardian, and involvement of child welfare agencies is also vital because some children arrive with adults who are not willing, able, or suitable to care for them, and because many children arrive with the address of an ‘uncle’ or a family friend in their pocket. For lack of other options, the border authorities often ask this person to collect the child, without verifying whether he or she can provide a suitable home for the child.

A teenage girl from West Africa was sent to live with her ‘uncle’ in Canada, only to confess in terror some months later to a church worker that she was pregnant with the uncle’s child, hadn’t been to school, hadn’t applied for asylum, and was being forced to work as a servant.

Legal advice is often as rare as guardianship, though asylum procedures in western countries are difficult to navigate without legal assistance. Few separated children seeking asylum know they have the right to a lawyer, or how to obtain one, and even fewer are able to pay for one.

Training for people working with asylum seeking children would help. Immigration and refugee determination officials, legal representatives, guardians, interpreters and others who come in contact with separated children would all benefit from special training to understand the principles and standards of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international laws. They need to have knowledge of the children’s countries of

origin and of relevant cultural issues. Learning how to conduct child-appropriate and child-friendly interviews can help to ensure that children’s needs are properly assessed and addressed.

NO EASY MATTER

But deciding just what is in the best interests of a child is no easy matter, even though Article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child dictates that it must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children. Just how difficult this can be has been illustrated by the debate in Canada with respect to the Chinese children who arrived by boat, most of whose asylum applications were rejected. Is it in a child’s best interests to be returned to parents who knowingly put the child on a dangerously unseaworthy vessel and sold him or her into a type of modern-day slavery? Or to be allowed to go free, into the arms of the ‘snakeheads’?

Few separated children are recognized as refugees in most western countries, though in Canada the recognition rate is around 50 percent. In 1999, the average recognition rate in Europe was only around five percent, though countries often allow these children to remain on humanitarian grounds, or simply because return home is impossible. Where it is determined that a child would not be at risk in the country of origin and a decision is made to return the child, this needs careful preparation. There has to be certainty that the child will receive appropriate care on re-

turn and not be left wandering alone around the airport in Istanbul or Accra or Cairo, for instance.

Some countries have established systems or programs for the return of separated children, but most have not. And in many cases, the children simply go underground after their asylum claims are turned down, in an effort to avoid being sent home. Little is known about the fate of these young people, who are clearly the most vulnerable of all. ■

► interim. In a recent follow-up report, she noted that “modern wars are exploiting, maiming and killing more callously and more systematically than ever before.”

The very nature of war has changed. Interstate conflicts increasingly have been replaced by vicious ethnic, religious or political squabbles within countries in which non-combatants are deliberately targeted and children are seen as either ‘problems’ to be killed or ‘prizes’ to be kidnapped and coerced into becoming sexual slaves or soldiers. Many are abducted or recruited directly from refugee camps.

The proportion of civilian victims in conflict compared to soldiers climbed from five percent during World War I to more than 90 percent currently.

These low-intensity wars carry none of the high visibility of conflicts like Kosovo and so receive less funding, though such conflicts are where the majority of child victims fight for survival.

Crowded, often unsanitary refugee camps and the battlefield have both become virulent breeding grounds for AIDS which, in the last five years “changed the landscape of war more than any other single factor,” according to Machel. It is now “the single most powerful new factor compounding the dangers for children in a conflict.”

Fifty percent of all new infections globally are in the age group of 15 to 25 and it is estimated that in the worst affected countries as many as half of all of today’s 15-year-olds will die from the disease. In 1998, the last year for which full figures are available, donor countries allocated \$300 million to developing states to fight AIDS, though an estimated \$3 billion was needed.

Mary Phiri, the editor of a monthly newsletter for teenagers in Zambia wrote poignantly, “If we are the future and we’re dying, there is no future.”

Much of the carnage against children takes place in such devastated and faraway countries as Afghanistan or Sudan. But in a rapidly shrinking world where transportation is easy and human smugglers and traffickers increasingly are willing to peddle anyone who can pay, minors are bringing their problems directly to industrialized countries. These states often don’t know how to respond, sometimes showing great kindness and at other times simply locking children up (see page 11).

In this at times schizophrenic climate, ►

Few separated children are recognized as refugees in western countries. In Europe the average recognition rate in 1999 was around five percent.



© S. SALGADO

Land mines are a scourge in around 90 countries, especially among children. These victims attend an orthopedic project in Afghanistan run by the International Red Cross while other children attend mine awareness courses.



© S. SALGADO

► the United States recently welcomed the first of an estimated 3,600 'Lost Boys' from the Sudan in the largest official resettlement of children there since the Viet Nam war. At the same time, thousands of other children, from toddlers to teenagers, who made it to that country on their own remain in the custody of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) facing the prospect of deportation.

Europe is a favorite minor's mecca. At any one time as many as 100,000 unaccompanied children from around the world roam the continent and in 1999

ingly, were smuggled or trafficked. France earlier this year was shocked when a rusting freighter literally crashed into the country's toney Riviera sparking a nationwide debate on what to do with the nearly 1,000 Kurds who staggered ashore. Half of them were children.

The reaction in Europe to this influx has been uneven. Scandinavian countries have comprehensive mechanisms to help separated children including the appointment of temporary guardians, but in other regions they are simply held in detention.

nearly 14,000 separated children sought asylum. Some were sent by desperate parents seeking a place of safety for their offspring. Others escaped to Europe on their own or, increas-

"Hi Daddy. When you were alive we used to walk together in the fields and bring flowers for Mummy. But once you went to Grozny and we have never heard from you since. Rusik will go to school soon. He told me that you had gone to get some presents and would come back when he grew up. He is a little boy and does not understand. Daddy, we can't do without you. Other children have fathers. When I grow up, I will do something to stop the wars and then all boys will live with their fathers." Your Spartak

-A letter to a father missing in the conflict in Chechnya.

In September, a Special Session of the General Assembly will review developments since a 1990 Summit on Children and will set priorities for the next decade.

Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of

UNICEF, said progress in tackling children's issues could be viewed from one of two perspectives—either optimistically as “a glass half full” or pessimistically as “a glass half empty.” There had been major progress, she said, in forcing children's problems onto the international agenda including that of the U.N. Security Council, achieving the near universal ratification of the children's convention and developing more flexible humanitarian assistance programs for children uprooted

from their homes by war and other causes. Nevertheless, the reality also appears to be that many of the crises engulfing children today are getting worse faster than resources become available to tackle them.

Olara Otunnu, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on children in armed conflict, told REFUGEES that in the last decade “in many areas such as Sri Lanka, Colombia, Angola things have gotten much worse for children” and the in-

ternational community had not yet come to grips with the problem. “We spend a lot of time at meetings,” he added. “We have been good at making lots of rules, but much less so at implementing them.”

Graça Machel agreed. She told the magazine: “We have made a lot of progress, but we have failed to stop many new conflicts erupting. No matter that we may have helped one million children if we suddenly have two million new victims.”

Turn to page 18 ►

Six years old and in court

Thousands of unaccompanied children end up in detention in the United States

by Amy Driscoll

The six-year-old girl sat alone in an immigration court. No lawyer. No guardian or family. A waif of a child, wide-eyed and newly arrived from Nigeria, sitting in a cramped courtroom at Miami's Krome detention center, where she had been summoned by the U.S. government.

The charge: illegally entering the country.

She slipped into the United States, immigration officials say, like thousands of other children each year who cross borders or land in airports with false immigration papers or none at all. Many are sent by impoverished relatives seeking a better life for the children. Some, including many Chinese children, are smuggled in to work in sweatshops. Others, like Mexican children, actually walk across the border by themselves.

All come under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, which assumes complete control of their lives as it seeks to deport them.

More than 4,600 unaccompanied minors who entered the country illegally in 1999 were placed in detention, according to the INS, although refugee groups place the number even higher. The figure has steadily risen in recent years, boosted in part by an increase in organized smuggling

of children.

Once detained, such children have the right to speak to an attorney—if they can afford to hire one or if they can locate one who will work for free. The result, advocates contend, are dozens of children deported each year without representation in court.

“In some cases, these are truly life-or-death decisions when a child is facing removal to his home country,” said Wendy Young of the New York-based Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. “To expect a child to go through that process without an attorney—well, the chances of winning are slim to none.”

COUNTRYWIDE SURVEY

A recent nationwide study by Georgetown University found that illegal immigrants are four to six times more likely to be granted asylum when they are represented by lawyers.

A forthcoming report by Young's Commission addresses the issue of whether the INS should serve as both captor and counselor for unaccompanied minors.

“There is an inherent conflict of interest. INS is first and foremost a law enforcement agency, not a child welfare agency,” she said. “The same agency that is charged with caring for the child is

seeking to remove the child from this country.”

Nationally, 21 percent of juveniles detained are deported within days. And even those released to friends or relatives face proceedings that may result in deportation.

For now, the fight to stay in the United States becomes something of a David and Goliath contest, pitting the small voice of a child against the might of the INS.

The Immigration Service believes around 100 children a year go through immigration court without any legal representation and spokeswoman Maria Garcia said the service makes every effort to help youngsters. They are given a fact sheet listing their rights when they are first detained. Immigration judges double-check in court that the children understand these rights. “These are children and we want to be sure they are fully informed,” she said.

However, U.S. Senator Bob Graham and Representative Alcee Hastings are proposing new laws that would give unaccompanied minors more access to the legal system and child welfare officers. “If a child comes to this country without a parent or legal guardian, they could be swallowed almost without notice by the INS,” Rep. Hastings said. “This must not continue to happen.”

Courtesy of the Miami Herald

“My focus is protection –

In an interview with REFUGEES, High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers

REFUGEES: What attributes do you bring to this job?

RUUD LUBBERS: My background includes business, politics, the NGO world and academia all which will be of value to UNHCR. For example, UNHCR is trying to form new partnerships with the business community to benefit refugees. I can be a bridge for that. UNHCR’s work is carried out in a highly political environment and I will not hesitate to use my political experience and contacts to help refugees and to build a better organization. One of my main goals will be to strengthen our partnerships with NGOs. My academic focus was on globalization and governance which are of direct relevance to UNHCR.

At the time of your selection, some media commented that you had no actual experience with refugees nor had you visited a camp.

Refugees are not found only in camps or in the developing world. Asylum is a global issue, one I did deal with during my years in politics and government. I do have a lot to learn about UNHCR and refugees, but I do not come into this a total novice.

How can you use your political experience?

I recently saw the crisis in West Africa at first hand. As I watched UNHCR staff struggle in the field, I decided I had to try to do more than just pat them on the back and wish them luck, leaving the difficult solutions to others. So I devoted much time in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia to enlisting support from regional leaders for the principles of safe access to and safe passage for tens of thousands of refugees stranded in southern Guinea. It remains a very dangerous and fragile situation there. But with Guinea’s

support, UNHCR and its partners were able to resume aid to the stranded refugees within a week.

What is your vision for UNHCR?

I want to see UNHCR become a truly multilateral institution, actively supported and co-owned by a broad cross-section of the international community. Fifty years after UNHCR’s founding, it is obvious that the refugee problem is not going to go away. Governments must be realistic. The nations of the world need an effective UNHCR, one that can fulfill its protection mandate, serve as a strong

advocate for refugees and ensure that governments meet their obligations under the 1951 Convention.

Is UNHCR getting the broad support it needs?

A number of countries do invest in UNHCR, but it’s too limited. The international community has given my office

“We don’t want to get bigger and bigger. We will be there when refugees need us, but we also need to be realistic.”

the mandate to protect and seek solutions for the world’s refugees. Yet many members of that same international community take little or no responsibility for actually supporting our work. This is not acceptable. Right now, we are voluntarily funded by a relatively small coalition of the willing. The fact that a number of governments decide case by case, on a voluntary basis, when and what they will support, makes UNHCR much too vulnerable.

So you want a more dependable, assured funding arrangement?

Yes, we are asking for a modest but fair share. For the past two years, our budget has been about 20 percent underfunded. We are in the process of

identifying our core activities. We need assured support for these core functions. We also need additional capacity for specific, unpredictable situations, emergencies and crises. Many more countries must view this as a normal, long-term partnership with UNHCR in which we work together in finding solutions for refugees. After all, that is what they have asked us to do.

Are you taking austerity measures, such as staff cuts?

I practiced stringent austerity for many years in business and government. We need to practice that at UNHCR as well. A lean organization can be a strong organization. We’ve got to see what people are doing. Is it relevant? Does it have to be done by us? Let’s concentrate on the core responsibilities which we are currently identifying. But it’s not so simple as just saying we need to prioritize and cut. Where cuts are not acceptable, it’s my responsibility to tell governments let’s not be stupid.

Are there overly high expectations on UNHCR?

UNHCR is considered a can-do agency, an institution with an operational capacity to deliver in difficult situations. So when people see a humanitarian problem, they think UNHCR can do it all. They also seem to think we can do it for free. They just call and say you do it. Well, there is a limit to what we can do—someone has got to pay for it. So we need to tone down expectations while at the same time trying to increase funding and ownership of UNHCR.

So should UNHCR do less?

We don’t want to get bigger and bigger. We will be there when refugees need us, but we also need to be realistic. We will do as much as possible within our core parameters but it is also obvious that there is a lot that can be done by others, outside UNHCR. We ensure international protection standards, for example.

“safeguarding and nurturing it”

outlines his vision for the future of the organization

But protection can also include physical assistance to refugees—the provision of basic, life-saving essentials. A lot of this can be done by NGOs. UNHCR will play a coordinating role, ensuring that the common effort to protect refugees as called for in our mandate is done in the best way possible.

What about the private sector?

Yes, partnering with others—NGOs and business—is the trend of the future. UNHCR and refugees have already received valuable financial and in-kind support from the private sector to meet specific needs in many parts of the world. But this is an area that needs to be developed further.

There has been a lot of talk about ‘donor fatigue.’ Has there been a basic change in attitude by the international community?

During the cold war, there was a political or ideological advantage in helping those fleeing the other side. Today, that ideological underpinning is no longer there. Today, the developed countries see victory in the cold war as proof of the superiority of democracy and free markets. Now we see compassion fatigue. There is no more ideological debate. They seem to be saying that they have proved their system of democracy and free markets is the best, but the growing imbalance between rich and poor is reflected in its most stark terms in the refugee problem.

Are internally displaced people (IDPs) a UNHCR responsibility?

They are the responsibility of the U.N. family and the international community. UNHCR has been involved in more than 30 IDP operations since the early 1970s, but always under specific criteria. For IDPs, we need to be invited in, with the consent of the United Nations and the country involved, and only if we have the

necessary resources. I will not say that UNHCR will care for all IDPs. I don't believe in that at all. If internally displaced people are in a serious situation, then the international community should work together to help them. The United Nations is currently working on a joint approach to helping IDPs and I support this.

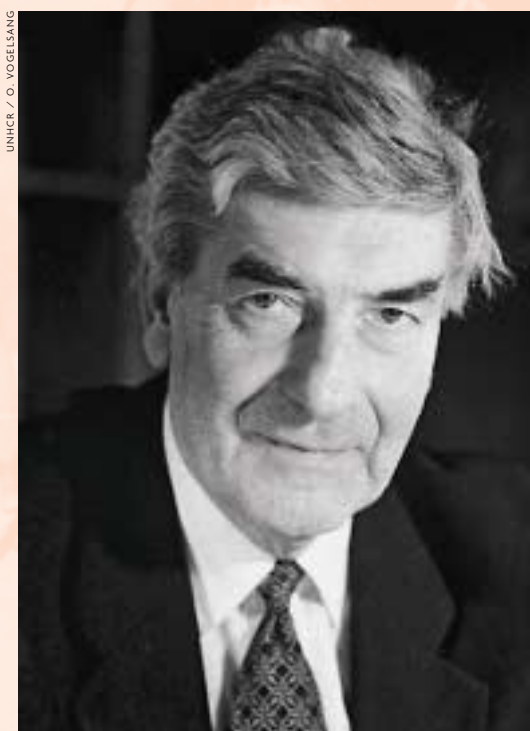
another over the past decade and its involvement in all of these humanitarian emergencies can divert emphasis from other, equally important protection needs. It is essential that protection be our core institutional task.

So you want to be less driven by crises?

Yes, that's correct. The refugee problem goes well beyond crises. We want to look beyond crises to causes and prevention and support for good governance. We need to find durable solutions. We need to build a UNHCR network that can partner with others to help developing countries strengthen their legal structures. It is a long-term political and preventive effort and it is extremely important.

You have been quite vocal about the lack of support from some countries, particularly EU member states.

Rich countries are being extremely short-sighted if they think they can keep asylum seekers from their borders by closing migration channels and continually tightening asylum policies, while at the same time refusing to support UNHCR's work to find solutions in regions of origin. It is in the best interests of the rich nations to help UNHCR in its work throughout the world. At the same time that they complain about increasing numbers of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants, the European Union's contributions to UNHCR have declined dramatically. There is a certain lack of rationality, political rationality, in this. UNHCR is going to do its best to work with the European Union. I have provided Mr. Prodi with an aide-mémoire outlining many areas where we have a shared interest in working together, ranging from institution-building in central and eastern Europe, to the ongoing Global Consultations process, to EU harmonization of asylum policy, to the problems posed by mixed migration and asylum issues. ■



UNHCR / O. VOGELSANG

Some critics say UNHCR's protection mandate has been diluted by over emphasis on emergency assistance and operational activities.

As High Commissioner, it is my responsibility to protect refugees. There will be no compromise on that. My focus is protection, safeguarding and nurturing it. But humanitarian assistance is also about protection. Sometimes, protection and assistance come together, to meet basic needs. We cannot turn our back on meeting immediate, life-saving needs in emergencies. That said, UNHCR has been heavily burdened by one crisis after

► *Continued from page 15*

The next 10 years therefore will be just as challenging as the last decade, especially for an agency like UNHCR, which under new High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers, is re-examining its worldwide role, including a six-month evaluation of its children's programs.

the senior education slot went unfilled for nearly two years.

That may be changing. According to one specialist, there is more institutional acceptance of the need for educational and other programs targetting children.

But this acceptance is coming at a difficult time. In an era of tightening bud-

He added, "In the field it is a daily struggle to meet the basic needs of refugees. Education, counselling, programs to alleviate trauma in children, sports, all the things which we know are so important, fall by the wayside."

"The cake available to humanitarian assistance has not increased along with



UNHCR / R. REDMOND

Even in the chaos of war, children are resourceful and resilient, including this youngster at play amid the wreckage of the war in Bosnia in the early 1990s.

How far, for instance, should an agency like UNHCR specialize? How many resources should be allocated to particular problems? Are some projects detracting from UNHCR's core function of international protection? What exactly is the right balance between available resources and competing projects, all of them worthy within their own context?

There has been a degree of ambivalence within the organization over the years on child issues. For instance, although UNHCR helps around 10 million youngsters, there are fewer than 10 staff members assigned full time to children's issues. Education programs suffered when

gets, a central concern at the forthcoming children's summit is likely to be whether agencies like UNHCR have the resources to even keep pace with the myriad of problems they face let alone being able to eliminate them.

Soren Jessen-Petersen, UNHCR's Assistant High Commissioner, told a conference late last year: "For every dollar which UNHCR needs to carry out its programs, donor countries are currently giving us just 80 cents. The shortfall, the missing 20 cents, are invariably the funds we need to help children have a future and especially, to implement education and vocational programs."

the needs," adds Christina Linner, head of UNHCR's children's unit. "We're all dipping into the same pot which has more and more mouths to feed."

"For six years, my school has been a railroad car. It is difficult to learn. During summer it's impossible to stay cool and during winter it's impossible to stay warm. During winter I wear all of my clothes, two pairs of pants, a shirt, a jacket and a hat. After one or two lessons in the cold, the teachers usually let us leave."

—A 17-year-old student in Azerbaijan. ►

Recruiting child soldiers

The link between displacement and recruitment

by Rachel Brett

Around the world from Sierra Leone to Sri Lanka images of gun-toting girls and boys are commonplace. At the same time, the flows of populations from armed conflict are all too well known. But what is the relationship between displacement and child recruitment?

One of the findings of the 1996 U.N. study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children was that youngsters separated from their families, especially during displacement, were one of the categories most 'at risk' of becoming child soldiers. Recognition of this vulnerability led to support for the principle of non-recruitment and non-participation in war of under-18s by UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies.

On a practical level, a part of a training project entitled Action for the Rights of Children (ARC) deals with child soldiers (there are an estimated 300,000 under 18 currently participating in wars) and the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement prohibit military recruitment of uprooted children.

Other major 'at risk' groups identified by the U.N. report include children with little or no education, those from the poorest sectors of society or from disrupted family backgrounds and those from war zones. This applies whether or not children are compelled or 'volunteer' to join and whatever types of units are involved, from regular government units to militias or rebels.

LINKAGES

The links between recruitment and displacement have other facets according to the U.N. or so-called Machel report. Well-off families try to shield their children by sending them to schools, other parts of the country or abroad or relocating the entire family. This is not a new phenomenon. It happened extensively during the war in Lebanon, for instance. Young males also left South Africa in large

numbers to avoid joining the army in the 1970s-80s.

Any movement of the 'rich' can have an unfortunate knock-on effect against less well-to-do children, making them more susceptible to recruitment because of a suddenly smaller pool of potential recruits.

The individual movement of children or families may not appear on displacement statistics, particularly in the cases of people who can afford to relocate themselves. But the increase in the number of unac-

placement is fueled by many factors including efforts to avoid child recruitment by either side and by children escaping from these groups and seeking to avoid recruitment.

This situation highlights a major challenge facing demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers. Traditionally this process occurs after the shooting has stopped, but in the case of Colombia, efforts to separate children from the gunmen is happening during a period of continuing instability.

How can these children then be adequately protected? How can they be successfully reunited with families which may themselves have been displaced? What about the 'normal' problems associated with social and economic reintegration?

Even peacetime recruitment can lead to displacement. The United Kingdom routinely recruits 16 and

17-year-olds, but according to the organization At Ease, there are regularly around 500 of these under 18 absent without leave, many of them seeking shelter in hostels for the homeless.

Given the linkage between displacement and recruitment, refugee and internally displaced children must receive increased protection. Measures should include: comprehensive global birth registration, the prevention of family separation and where that is not possible, promotion of family reunification; and education for all (including girls and adolescents) even during conflicts and an explanation to children of their basic human rights.

Rachel Brett is the Associate Representative (Human Rights and Refugees) Quaker U.N. Office, Geneva.



Child soldiers in Somalia in 1996.

accompanied minors seeking asylum and some of the more general flows of asylum seekers from war zones may be specifically linked to the risk of child recruitment.

Even if children escape from an immediate war zone, they may not escape recruitment. Some refugee camps have been militarized. Cross-border recruitment is a problem. And the Turkish insurgent group, the PKK has recruited Kurdish children from communities as far away as Sweden, Germany and France.

Obviously, the need to protect children from recruitment must be part of an overall protection strategy and why a new Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child requires all states, not only those directly involved in conflict, to prevent armed groups recruiting anyone under the age of 18.

Colombia's extensive internal dis-

Education, which Jessen-Petersen highlighted in his speech, is one of five priority areas which UNHCR designated as being in need of particular attention. The others are the separation of children from their families, their sexual exploitation and military recruitment and the often ignored but particularly

troubling world of adolescents—that twilight period between childhood and adulthood where so much can go wrong but when young people are often at their most resourceful.

Carol Bellamy told REFUGEES magazine her agency, like many others, was now devoting more resources to educa-

tion. “Perhaps in the past education had been rather overlooked in the rush to provide children with food, shelter and healthcare,” she said. “We are trying to change that. Education is a key strategy for preventing conflict and intolerance and securing conditions conducive to peace.”

Helping traumatized children

A Canadian program successfully helps disturbed refugee children...

by Nanda Na Champassak

My father died and my mother is missing. Suffer too much. Sister too. I'm always crying for my parents so that God will bring them.”

An estimated 10 million children, including the youngster from Sierra Leone who penned those few anguished words, have suffered grave psychological trauma in the last decade after escaping from wars and other forms of violence.

Many languish for years in refugee camps or dirt poor countries, far away from any kind of expert help, but even when youngsters reach comparative safety in such advanced countries as Canada, some continue to carry the scars of deep trauma.

Their illness presents a particular challenge not only to the child and immediate family but also to the community receiving them, including doctors, teachers and social workers.

Metropolitan Toronto is a veritable melting pot with children from more than 50 countries registered among the city's student population, all with different cultures, languages and some with troubled refugee backgrounds.

How should the system respond? Primarily teachers “need tools to be able to intervene and help children suffering from trauma,” according to Dr. Ester Cole, a senior consultant with the International Children's Institute (ICI). “They need to be trained in psychological first aid so that they can recognize trauma systems and know what to do and what not to do.”

She helped develop a community-based psychosocial program called Building Bridges to support children's mental

health. It has been successfully tested in six Toronto schools and is a compilation of so-called ‘best practice’ ideas gleaned from discussions with children, parents, educators, community workers and mental health professionals.

Project designers ruled out the idea of clinical visits to tackle a child's problems. “It seems a bit ludicrous to expect a refugee parent with her family in tow to take two buses to an unknown part of the city to tell her problems to a complete stranger via an interpreter,” one doctor noted.

Instead, a community-based program centered around the school was developed and according to David Gladstone, a retired school principal and Institute consultant, its first cornerstone was simply listening to troubled children.

SHARED WISHES

Not unexpectedly they expressed universally shared wishes—to have friends, play sports, do well at school, speak English and ‘feel safe.’ The Building Bridges program then had to address these problems without stigmatizing the stressed children and also deliver something as intangible as a sense of belonging.

A series of classroom activities were developed and were carefully crafted, to be an extension of what teachers already do rather than being an additional program. So-called ‘Buddy Teams’ promote friendship and try to bridge cultural differences. Other programs such as ‘Art is Inside Me’, ‘Stories in the Classroom’ and ‘Games We Like to Play’ help release emotional stress through self-expression and promote self-esteem and self-confidence. The ‘Change Exchange’ encourages chil-

dren to discuss and solve personal problems such as name-calling or bullying.

David Gladstone said for the Building Bridges approach to succeed an entire school must be involved and the Institute has produced guides and training workshops for principals, teachers, families and community organizations.

Building Bridges has been successful enough it is now being introduced in other Toronto schools and its ideas promoted even further afield.

Miriam Di Giuseppe, another former school principal and an educational consultant with the Institute, helped adapt the approach for implementation in schools in Croatia, Bosnia and Albania.

After one conference in Bosnia she said, “For the first time the students had an opportunity to express their needs and concerns quite freely to the adults in their lives. This proved to be quite an eye-opener for educators not used to hearing the voices of children” reinforcing her views that “schools should be used as a healing resource where children can express themselves freely.”

The Institute is currently completing a guidebook for a psychosocial program called Crossing Bridges for children in refugee camps. It retains many of the core aims and strategies from the Building Bridges program, but it has been adapted to provide practical ways to implement psychosocial programs in camps including activities where children can safely play, learn and heal.

Further information about the International Children's Institute can be obtained from their website: www.icichildren.org

Increasingly, humanitarian organizations view the schoolroom as a tool to help combat a whole series of related problems.

“Life is: a classroom with smiling school friends. Sunshine. A street without machine guns and a field without mines. Quiet. A home with a mother and father and brothers and sisters.”

—An Afghan girl resettled in western Europe.

All children obviously need schoolrooms and vocational training to forge their adult lives. But these same skills are doubly necessary for refugee youngsters either to help rebuild their own lives, their communities and their states if they do return home or resettle in a new country.

Education is not only a basic human right as defined by the Children’s Convention, but also a useful ‘protection tool’



UNHCR / A. HOLLMANN

Children in Georgia attend a psychosocial rehabilitation class organized by one of UNHCR’s partner agencies.

according to UNHCR. The simple act of attending class is the first step to restoring stability and normalcy in a chaotic situation. School also keeps kids off the street and away from sexual or military exploitation—classical refugee protection at work.

Despite the classroom’s obvious importance, however, it is notoriously diffi-

cult to reach the estimated 25 million minors currently uprooted from their homes living as refugees or internally displaced persons. Many live in sprawling refugee camps or war devastated countries such as Angola, far away from schoolrooms, teachers or textbooks.

In 1990 some 320,000 children attended UNHCR-sponsored classes. Latest estimates suggest that by 2000 this figure had risen encouragingly to one million out of five million eligible children. But even this improvement masked some intractable problems, especially in the area of higher education, where very few displaced boys or girls have a chance to further their skills.

To commemorate its 50th anniversary, UNHCR took a small step to try to alleviate that particular problem, launching a

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UNHCR / H.J. DAVIES

For the lucky ones, a return to their homes. Rwandan refugees in Zaire await repatriation in 1997 at a transit center.

Murder, flight... and pizza

A unique group of Sudanese refugee children restart their lives in a bewildering new country

by Panos Moutzis

Twenty-one-year-old Kuol Jok and his four Sudanese friends had hardly touched down from a flight halfway across the world before they were off to explore the unfamiliar sights and sounds of their newly adopted country—the trim sunburn homes, bulging supermarkets, towering office blocks, ‘electrical stairs’ and highways jammed with more cars than they had seen in their entire lifetimes.

A more familiar and worrying sight greeted them shortly after their return to their temporary accommodation—strangers brandishing weapons. A suspicious neighbor had spotted the youths struggling to open an unfamiliar front door lock and called the police in the city of Richmond, Virginia. As the officers milled around on the porch, the Sudanese youths simply sat on the floor and waited for the situation to resolve itself. The misunderstanding eventually was resolved.

WELCOME TO AMERICA

The story of Kuol Jok and his extraordinary odyssey began many years earlier in 1987 on the savage savannah of southern Sudan. The area had been wracked by years of fighting between government forces and various guerrilla groups, forcing untold numbers of civilians to abandon their homes. After wandering across the wastes of the Horn of Africa, some 12,000 boys aged between seven and 14 eventually banded together and collectively reached Kenya where they became known as ‘The Lost Boys of Sudan’ as they languished for years in refugee camps.

In 2000, the United States agreed to resettle as many as 3,600 of the youths whose parents were dead or missing. They are being flown in groups throughout this year to 10 states across America in the largest resettlement of minors undertaken by Washington since the end of the Viet Nam war.

It has been a dangerous and bewildering experience for youngsters who for much of their lives appeared doomed to be, at best, permanent refugees. But unlike many other displaced children around

Eventually he reached temporary safety in Ethiopia, but when civil war engulfed that country the refugees were forced to return to Sudan. Their wanderings continued. At one point Kuol was re-



Sudan's 'Lost Boys' in the Horn of Africa.

the world, these boys can now look toward a future with hope and almost unlimited opportunity.

Each ‘lost boy’ can tell a tale similar to that of Kuol Jok. His mother was killed during an attack on their village in the Bor area of southern Sudan. His eldest brother was murdered in an attack a year earlier. As he fled his village and began an extraordinary exodus he was seven years old.

He walked for several weeks eating leaves and sometimes even dirt to survive. When the group he was traveling with had to cross a river, he said many children who could not swim were drowned. He vividly remembers tiny hands reaching above the swirling waters before they were swept away.

united with his younger brother, Elijah, after four years. “He told me our father and younger sister had died and our village had been totally destroyed,” Kuol recalls. “I was devastated. I felt angry and hopeless, but I was happy I had found my brother.”

The two eventually joined 12,000 other youths who had been spared from being forcibly recruited into the Sudan People’s Liberation Army because of their age in a coordinated exodus to Kenya. They reached Kakuma in Kenya which grew into the largest camp for unaccompanied minors in the world. By the time their trek ended, many of the boys had walked distances of 2,000 kilometers, or the equivalent of hiking from Paris to Rome.

Eight years in a sprawling refugee camp on the dusty plains of northern Kenya was hardly ideal training for the new life they now face in the U.S. “We offer them a basic orientation and have to teach them everything from how to operate a stove, use a shower, open a bank account or make a telephone call,” said Kathleen Jackson, regional director for the Refugee and Immigration Service at the Catholic Diocese of Richmond.

For the first time, the youngsters are living in homes with electricity and running water compared with the ramshackle mud brick structures they

fore. They have adjusted quickly to the new order of things in America.

THE WHITE STUFF

Elijah had never heard of snow before his arrival and initially was even afraid to touch the ‘strange’ white stuff when he saw it fall for the first time. Going to the movies, learning how to use a computer and a Christmas Day visit to the White House were all larger than life experiences for the new arrivals. “That day I wished I had eyes in the back of my head so I could see everything,” Kuol said of his visit to Washington.

When he and other Sudanese first arrived, local African-Americans made cutting remarks about the ‘darkness’ of their skin, but after a series of open discussions between students, and especially after the new boys began playing basketball, differences were smoothed over.

“They are disciplined, well-behaved and take good care of each other,” said school teacher, Norma Roberts. But like their American colleagues, “one of the first skills we have to teach them is time management and to learn how to do their homework.”

Richmond neighbors are equally impressed with the Sudanese polite demeanor and interest in learning English and further education. “The response of the Richmond community has been overwhelming,” said Mei Leng Lau, a volunteer coordinator at the Catholic Diocese. “When people hear their stories, everybody wants to help. We have received donations ranging from new clothes, shoes, cash to volunteer services.”

There has been another unexpected fallout in Richmond. The arrival of nine Sudanese minors at the Virginia Group Home for Boys had a positive impact for some of the troubled American teenagers who also live there. According to director Christopher Shultz, “The Sudanese are good role models and a major inspiration for our troubled children. They are disciplined and well-behaved.” This particular Home offers an incentive for the new arrivals themselves—they have the option of attending any Virginia university free when they complete school.

The Sudanese may be a ‘very unique group of refugee children’ with an undreamed of opportunity for a new life, but there is still cause for concern according to Guenet Guebre-Christos, UNHCR’s Representative in the United States.

If they become caught up in a serious fight or commit a minor crime the boys could be subject to immigration laws that take no account of their unique background and history and in a worse case scenario they could even face indefinite prison detention. None of the Sudanese or their American caretakers interviewed for this article were aware of their vulnerability.

For the moment, however, they are content to revel in their good fortune with their heated apartments, new fangled computers and pizza. Richmond is a long way from the parched plains of southern Sudan. ■



Starting a new life: Elijah Jok surfing the Internet with his American teacher.

had built for themselves in the refugee camp. For eight long years they ate the same spartan diet—2,000 calories of beans, maize, oil and sorghum. The far richer American diet of spaghetti, pizza, hamburgers, ice cream and chocolate three times a day was a wonderful surprise—but it gave most of them digestive problems, at least initially.

A new etiquette was just as tricky. None of the boys had ever shook hands or taken advice or orders from a female be-

As an older arrival, he immediately took a job as a carpenter in a furniture factory, working six days a week, and saving to pay for school fees, especially classes in English. The Sudanese are given some initial support including food stamps and health insurance, but they are expected to become self-supporting as

quickly as possible.

Though they are both in Richmond, the two brothers were split up, Elijah being housed in a group home and enrolled in the local Meadowbank High School.

It is the largest resettlement of minors since the end of the Viet Nam war.



UNICEF / R. LEWIS

HOME: Return to Kosovo in 1999.

ventions with impunity must be made to pay a price far higher than political embarrassment, she added.

Change could be afoot in the field of international law where there has been tentative discussion on the idea of strengthening the 1951 Geneva refugee convention with an optional protocol on the protection of children.

Agencies said they will encourage the future participation of young people in shaping children's health, education and other programs.

UNHCR's Christina Linner said progress had been made in eliminating waste, overlap and expensive competi-

tion in the fragmented world of humanitarian agencies, but even closer coordination and cooperation could further improve efficiency. "There is still no clear division of labor about who does what for

"If we are the future and we're dying, there's no future," a Zambian newsletter discussing the impact of AIDS.

children," she said. "There is a lot of work to be done in this field."

A final objective seems to be quite clear for the new millennium—fewer conferences, less talk and more action to actually help children.

"If we had implemented half the resolutions we have approved, even half of them, we would be in very good shape today," Machel told REFUGEES. "It's time to cut back on the discussions and concentrate on action to help children." ■

► *Continued from page 21*

Refugee Education Trust late last year to fund secondary study. "Education should be a promise and not a dream," former High Commissioner Sadako Ogata said at the time.

Even when education does reach children, there are often hidden, subtle pressures at work.

In Uganda a successful school program was launched in the north of the country. So successful, in fact, that children from neighboring Sudan deliberately trekked across the border turning themselves into refugees so they could attend classes.

"Four-year-old Kou Ya and six-year-old Sia Ya were leading their water buffalo to pasture when they noticed a 'ball' in a ditch. Sia Ya threw it to her brother. The bomb exploded, killing the two youngsters and wounding a passing cyclist."

—An incident in Cambodia.

When refugee children in Bangladesh were offered scholarships for higher education, resentment was obvious as far away as the nation's capital because similar chances were impossible to obtain for local children. In some deeply Islamic countries where there is little tradition

of girls attending schools full time, small inducements such as extra cooking oil for the family have been offered to encourage parents to allow daughters to go to class.

School curricula must also be closely monitored to prevent them becoming what Graça Machel termed "centers for spreading hatred" by perpetuating damaging stereotypes about neighbors or former enemies in the teaching materials (see page 8).

The forthcoming Special Session for children "is not going to be a panacea for children," Carol Bellamy warned recently. "We are not going to find a magical formula of words that will lead men to lay down their guns or abducted children suddenly to be released. But it is clear that business as usual is not enough."

Machel advocates sweeping changes in the decade ahead.

The kind of assistance given to children must be reshaped to include not only food and water, but also educational and sports equipment. "It doesn't cost much to put 1,000 footballs or tennis balls into one of those packages, but they would mean so much to children," she said.

There must be a fairer distribution of assistance to children around the world, especially to those in the poorest countries. Nations which flaunt international con-