

REFUGEES

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"I will be in the forefront at the centre for asylum seekers – there we can PICK THEM OFF one by one..."

Message on a far-right website in the Netherlands

"All we can expect from this rabble is rape and drug dealing...I moved away from Vienna especially, and now they're sending this GARBAGE after me...No one here is a RACIST, or hates foreigners."

Local citizens complaining about plans to lodge asylum seekers in a guest house in Deutschaukirchen, Austria, March 2004

"We cannot be further OVERCROWDED, even if they are coming from HELL on earth, and we will not allow the Africanisation of Malta..."

Email from Maltese citizen to UNHCR's office in Rome, February 2006

"I often say asylum seekers are a bit like COCKROACHES, because it is take, take, take."

Mark Collet, British National Party, Yorkshire, UK, 2003

"You COCKROACHES must know you are made of flesh... We won't let you kill. We will kill you."

Broadcast on Radio Milib Collines during the first hours of the genocide in Rwanda, 1994

"Wherever you go, WE WILL CATCH YOU. If you go up, we will pull you down by your feet; if you hide below, we will PULL YOU UP by your hair."

Survivor's account of radio broadcast by Taliban governor Mullah Abdul Masum Niaz during rescue of thousands of Hazaras in Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan, August 1998

"I'd put them up against a brick wall and SHOOT THEM."

A woman, identifying herself as a 'care assistant', talking about asylum seekers in Dover, UK, 1999

Victims of Intolerance

“After the second or third warning, bang... we fire the cannon. Without too much talking. A cannon to knock out whoever may be there. Otherwise we are never going to put an end to this problem.”

Umberto Bossi, in an interview about irregular migrants arriving by boat, as reported by Corriere della Sera, Italy, June 2003.

“Illegal immigrants, asylum seekers, bootleggers... have targeted our beloved coastline. We are left with the backdraft of a nation's human sewage and no cash to wash it down the drain.”

Editorial in the Daily Express newspaper, UK, October 1998.

“Patrols will be undertaken in international waters without the constraints of political correctness.”

Newspaper advertisement by unknown vigilante group seeking people with “military experience,” Western Australia, July 2001.

“We didn't want them here... We held a meeting and came to a decision: They had to go.”

Inhabitant of Dajabon province, in the Dominican Republic, after Haitian farm labourers were attacked and their shacks burnt down.

“The growing problem which we are facing is rape, not least the special kind of rape which is the result of immigration – namely gang rape.”

Pia Kjaersgaard, leader of the Danish People's Party, in a newsletter, 2000.

Abusers or Abused?

by ANTONIO GUTERRES, UN High Commissioner for Refugees

It is chilling to read that a European politician, albeit one from a minor party, was recently in court for – among other grotesque statements – describing asylum seekers as “cockroaches.” This was the term used by the infamous Rwandan radio station, Radio Mille Collines, to describe the Tutsis in the run-up to the genocide that killed more than 800,000 people in 1994 – an event that will forever cast into doubt the old reassuring saying that



UNHCR/S. HOPPER/DP/GVA2005

“sticks and stones may hurt my bones, but words will never hurt me.”

Radio Mille Collines and other forms of hate-media laid the groundwork for the genocide in Rwanda, and sticks, stones and machetes did the rest.

Even if it is human nature to be suspicious of “the other,” intolerance of other races, religions, ethnic groups and political systems should not be tolerated beyond a certain point. There is an essential paradox here, which lies at the heart of all secular, democratic legal systems. There are lines that cannot be crossed if frictions, violence and ultimately a breakdown in social order are to be avoided.

Refugees are victims of intolerance virtually by definition: it is usually some sort of political, social, religious or ethnic intolerance that forces them to leave their own country for fear of persecution. Unfortunately, they are increasingly victims of intolerance in asylum countries as well – in both the North and the South.

In recent years, a number of asylum seekers and refugees have been murdered in some of the richest, most developed industrialized societies. And for each one who is murdered, hundreds are beaten up and thousands are verbally abused. Some of the murders and most savage assaults create a stir. Some are barely noticed. The rest of the physical and verbal abuse tends not to register on the general public. Sometimes intolerance manifests itself as simple indifference to the plight of others.

In an increasing number of countries, asylum seekers – and the refugees among them – have become a tool for political demagogues, or have been turned into faceless bogymen by an unscrupulous popular press.

Asylum seekers are easy to demonize. They are all foreigners, so an attractive target for those who are suspicious of, or actively dislike, foreigners or minorities with “foreign” origins. Asylum seekers are not a “race,” nor do they belong to a single religion. As a result, they are not protected under most race-relations laws (in those countries where such laws exist). This makes them easy prey for politicians and journalists who wish to pursue a wider anti-foreigner agenda.

There are two main underlying perceptions that have corroded public and governmental support for refugees: the belief that they abuse the hospitality of their hosts, and the belief that there are too many of them – with more on the way.

The systems designed to sort out who among the asylum seekers are refugees, and who are not, are often tortuous: over-complicated, under-staffed and slow. If would-be immigrants are indeed abusing the international asylum system, they should be discouraged from doing so and sent home.

This is not always easy. But in essence it is a management issue, not an ideological one.

But it is easier to blame the asylum seekers for subverting the system, than it is to admit the management of the system has been at fault.

Abuse of the asylum system is a hot topic among industrialized nations, especially in the European Union. But abuse of asylum seekers is not. The EU, the Council of Europe and the UN have between them assembled an impressive array of bodies devoted to researching and making recommendations about how to deal with the wider issues of racism and xenophobia. But these discussions have to date been drowned out by other political debates – border controls against terrorism, the failure to manage integration in some multicultural societies, freedom of speech versus respect of religions, and apocalyptic talk about a clash of civilizations.

Numbers are the other main driving force. Countries with huge refugee populations that stay for decades – like Iran, Pakistan and Tanzania – can, quite understandably, grow tired. The hostile debate in Germany in the early 1990s took place at a time when Germany received a million asylum seekers in just three years, mostly from the Balkans. But in some other countries, where the numbers are far less spectacular – both in real terms and per capita – the debate has been equally, if not more, vitriolic. Yet the numbers, both of refugees and of asylum seekers, are in many countries at their lowest for decades.

Most industrialized countries now have the time and the space to take a more rational approach to the management of asylum, and to make a concerted effort to dispel some of the hysteria surrounding the issue.

A similar opportunity to reassess the approach to asylum on the one hand, and economic migration on the other, has arisen

for some developing countries like Iran and Pakistan, from where more than 3.5 million Afghan refugees have gone home over the past four years.

In international and national law, clean distinctions are made between refugees, asylum seekers, legal and illegal economic migrants, minority citizens, travellers and others. These are vital distinctions but, once the moral bonds are loosened, these distinctions do not mean much down among the thugs on the street. A foreigner – especially a foreigner with a different skin colour – is the prey, the enemy, the cockroach that needs to be crushed.

In some countries, deliberate attempts to dehumanize asylum seekers are continuing: always presenting them as menacing statistics, as criminals and bringers of disease, or as some other form of generalized abstract aberration that is easy to hate. History tells us that fomenting hatred of “foreigners” is a dangerous path for any society to follow. At the far end of that path lie the horrors that create refugees in the first place. As they discovered in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the far end is sometimes closer than we think.

Our efforts to combat the intolerant attitudes that threaten asylum – and I recognize that there are many such efforts underway, especially at grassroots local levels – have been too hesitant and fragmented. I believe it is time for all concerned to make a joint stand against irrational suspicions and the clamour for exclusion, and that this is a matter of great urgency – for refugees, but also for states and peoples who believe in the importance of law and order.

Tolerance is not the mark of any specific civilization, but of civilization itself. Rather than bow to populist opinion, we must hold fast to universal values and principles – including protecting those in need.

“Tolerance is not the mark of any specific civilization, but of civilization itself.”

Asylum seekers and refugees are increasingly being subjected to physical and verbal abuse. Governments, the public and the media have tended to blame the victims, instead of seeking to protect them better.

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The corpse of a would-be migrant or refugee on a Mediterranean beach – one of some 6,000 similar deaths recorded in Europe over the past 12 years.

The Perfect Scapegoat

BY RUPERT COLVILLE

ON AUGUST 18 LAST YEAR, a 45-year-old refugee from Turkmenistan, Mahmum Tahirov, was enjoying an early evening stroll in the park, with his wife Tarana and ten-year-old son Araz, in the northern English city of Leeds. As they turned to go home, they were confronted by a local man walking his three dogs.

Without any apparent provocation, the man—who allegedly had verbally abused Tarana Tahirova on previous occasions—unleashed the dogs, shouting “Go, go, go.”

The attack continued for several minutes. According to the Tahirovs, the man stood watching with his arms crossed, making no attempt to intervene until he eventually called off his dogs and walked away, leaving all three Tahirovs bleeding on the ground.

As the police launched a public appeal to find the attacker, Mahmum Tahirov described the family’s ordeal to a local paper. “It was a very frightening experience,” he said. “...I think the man must hate refugees.”

On the east coast of England, a judge gave long prison sentences to two men who deliberately mowed down an Iraqi asylum seeker with their car, catapulting him through the air “like a rag doll.” One of them later commented to his girlfriend “They should all die.” And on the south coast, three men armed with iron bars burst into a house and battered an Iraqi man whom they believed to be an asylum seeker and a rapist. He was neither.

Refugees are created by intolerance: persecuted for reasons of race, religion, ethnicity, political opinion or membership of a particular “social group;” or else fleeing wars, anarchy or generalized violence. It is usually intolerance of some sort that in the end drives them to take the drastic step of fleeing their country to seek asylum in another land.

Unfortunately, all too often, they are greeted with intolerance there as well. In some countries, the connotations surrounding the words ‘asylum seeker’ and ‘refugee’ have mutated from evoking sympathy and respect to evoking distrust and scorn, and the asylum system has become a convenient target for those who wish to expound racist or xenophobic views.

“We should all recognize the peril to our rights when anyone is dehumanized because of the colour of their skin... And we should all recognize the great power of intolerance to foment violence and generate the conditions that can abet ethnic cleansing, genocide and terrorism.”

—KOFI ANNAN

British National Party leaders celebrate their acquittal on six charges and the jury’s failure to reach a verdict on six others—including one related to calling asylum seekers “cockroaches.”

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Many societies have a strong hospitality ethic... But most of the foreigner in their midst. If the latter

societies also have a built-in mistrust or fear gains ascendancy over the former, refugees are in trouble.

Simmering tensions in Australian coastal suburbs exploded last December, with violent race-based assaults carried out by local youths of different origins.

And instead of confronting this problem head-on (or even acknowledging its existence) governments, the public and the media have tended to blame the victims.

In some industrialized countries, the anti-asylum lobby has been considerably aided by external factors like the spectacular terrorist actions of Al Qaeda-affiliated groups in New York, Bali, Madrid and London; the beheadings of hostages in Iraq; the riots and attacks on embassies in the Middle East; and the rantings of extremist preachers within European countries themselves.

Extremists on both sides treat the other culture's extremists as the norm, and use that to justify their own behaviour.

FREEDOM TO VILIFY

DRAWING THE LINE BETWEEN WHAT IS ACCEPTABLE and what is not, in terms of freedom of speech, is extremely difficult, as was shown by a coincidental chain of three trials that occurred within days of each other in February of this year.

First of all, two British National Party leaders, who were filmed delivering a string of vicious comments about Muslims and Asians, as well as branding asylum

seekers as "cockroaches," were acquitted on half of the 12 charges of inciting racial hatred, with the jury failing to agree verdicts on the remaining charges.

A few days later, the notorious London-based preacher Abu Hamza al-Masri was jailed after being convicted of inciting murder (a seven-year sentence) and inciting racial hatred (three 21-month sentences). A couple of weeks after that, in Austria, the academic David Irving received a three-year sentence for denying the Holocaust in a speech 17 years earlier.

During the same period, a huge global controversy involving freedom of speech – and a wave of violent protests across the Middle East – was ignited by the publication of Danish cartoons that many Muslims found extraordinarily insulting to their religion.

Does freedom of speech encompass freedom to distort, defame, lie or vilify? Up to a point. Can you say anything you like about anyone or anything? The answer clearly is no.

No two countries are quite alike in what they permit and what they do not. Some countries have legislation that permits individual lawsuits for defamation of character – laws against libel and slander. Others have laws

that aim to prevent racial hatred alone, or racial and religious hatred. Some have very specific legislation against those who deny the Holocaust. Others legislate against assaults on national symbols such as the country's flag.

But you can – and many people do – say pretty much anything you like about asylum seekers, both in general and as individuals. Hardly any country has legislation that contains a clear-cut prohibition against vilifying asylum seekers. They do not belong to one race, nor do they belong to one religion. Indeed, the British National Party leaders used a defence similar to this against the cockroach charge.

People involved in the Nazi media propaganda machine in the 1930s, and the radio and print output during the genocide in Rwanda in the 1990s, were convicted in international courts. However, the convictions were for incitement to commit crimes against humanity or genocide, not incitement to racial hatred *per se*.

Take it one notch down, and prosecution and conviction become much more difficult. In the context of Rwanda, calling the Tutsis "cockroaches" was seen as a clear invitation to crush them. But more direct calls to kill were also made by presenters on the notorious

Rwandan radio station, Radio Mille Collines.

The British National Party leaders are able to argue they never made any direct calls to kill anybody – unlike Abu Hamza al-Masri (which is why he got a seven-year jail sentence and they did not). Yet what impulse do most people feel when they see or think of a cockroach?

The relationship between politicians, public and media is notoriously difficult to unravel, but when the circle involving all three turns vicious, the downward spiral towards anarchy and violence can be devastatingly sudden.

This was demonstrated all too clearly in Côte d'Ivoire in 2002, when a nation that had traditionally been extremely open to foreigners suddenly exploded in an orgy of xenophobic violence. Refugees and migrants alike were chased from their homes, which were then burnt to the ground. It is not known how many refugees were killed. However, it is virtually a certainty that some were, according to UNHCR officials.

And in Yugoslavia – in many ways the most emancipated of the former Eastern bloc countries, with hundreds of thousands of citizens in mixed marriages or with mixed parentage – it only took a few demagogues

Youths attacking an asylum centre in Rostock after it was set on fire by right-wing extremists – one of a string of such incidents in Germany in the 1990s. Millions of Germans subsequently took to the streets to demonstrate against racism and xenophobia.

a few years to destroy the fabric of mutual respect and tolerance necessary to keep society from falling apart. Once they took it to a certain point, the descent into barbarity and genocide was precipitous. People were forced to choose sides.

RACISM WITHOUT BORDERS

THERE IS AN OLD MIDDLE EASTERN SAYING WHICH runs as follows: "I against my brother; my brother and I against my cousin; my cousin and I against the world." Unfortunately, that saying is probably as true today as it was when it was first coined.

The potential for racism exists in all societies. Tensions between groups – religious or political groups and, above all, ethnic groups, or ones that are in some way "foreign" – are all too easy to arouse. They are the famous "other." Many societies have a strong hospitality ethic – which is of great benefit to refugees. But most societies also have a built-in mistrust or fear of the foreigner in their midst. If the latter gains ascendancy over the former, refugees are in trouble.

A staggering 58 percent of male Afghan asylum seekers interviewed in a 2002 UNHCR-commissioned survey in Moscow said they had been the victim of a racist attack in the previous 12 months. Some 27 percent said they were hospitalized, and the period spent in hospital averaged 22 days – an indication of the seriousness of the injuries sustained. In 79 percent of cases, the attackers used "crude weapons, including most commonly metal chains, bats, gas cylinders and beer bottles." A similar study a year earlier showed that an even higher percentage of African men in Moscow – 77 percent – said they had been attacked because of their race during the previous month.

It is a similar story in Ukraine, where a Rwandan doctor was beaten to death on his way home in Vinnysya, south of Kyiv, after celebrating the founding of a local refugee NGO, of which he was the chairman. Dozens of other assaults on refugees and asylum seekers have been reported to Ukrainian police in recent years. But not a single case has been solved.

In Croatia, an extremist fanzine has been inviting readers to look for "gay bars and clubs, Serbian Orthodox communities, Chinese restaurants, ice-cream parlours and various other shops run by foreigners." Prizes for those who send in addresses of such places include an original white Ku Klux Klan hood, a Molotov cocktail and a baseball bat. The fanzine's other content makes it clear this is not an attempt at satire.

In Malta, an Eritrean was followed by a white car. Two men jumped out and asked him for a lighter. Then they smashed him in the face, causing multiple fractures of the jaw. The Eritrean ran towards the police station. The white car cut him off. He ducked as a bottle



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was hurled at his head, then hid between two parked cars. The men continued hunting up and down the road for him, but eventually gave up.

Across the Mediterranean, sub-Saharan migrants and refugees – including Sudanese in Egypt, and West Africans in other North African countries – frequently report assaults, abuse, discrimination and exploitation at the hands of the local population. These factors may have played a role in the chain of events that led up to the December 2005 confrontation in Cairo between Egyptian police and Sudanese protesters that turned violent and left several people dead. Many Sudanese in Egypt cite their treatment by the local population as one of the reasons why they think they should be resettled in other countries – which is what the demonstration was all about.

In Iraq, Palestinian refugees have also suffered 'pay-back' for their relatively good treatment during Saddam Hussein's time, and several are reported to have been killed.

And in South Africa, in August 2005, members of a crowd demonstrating against the local authorities in Bothaville, Free State Province, turned their attention to a small community of Somali refugees and asylum seekers, looting ten of their businesses and burning two of them.

Also in South Africa, three Ukrainian sailors were charged with murder after allegedly hauling seven stowaways out of their hiding places in large pipes and forcing them overboard, just before the ship arrived in the port of Durban. Two of the seven Tanzanian stowaways are believed to have drowned while five others managed to swim to safety. Police believe the sailors forced

the stowaways overboard because ship owners are required to pay for the repatriation of illegal immigrants.

And continuing south, in Australia, a resettled Sudanese refugee in Toowoomba, west of Brisbane, told a reporter "The Aborigines here, they bash me up... for some reason."

EU'S "MIXED MESSAGES"

ACCORDING TO A EUROPEAN UNION BODY, the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), "Racist violence...remains unfortunately a common and persistent problem in most Member States of the European Union." An EUMC study of national findings on racist violence points out that the countries with the best data collection systems also have

Part of the 'Torches for Tolerance' campaign on the opening day of the 2001 World Conference against Racism, held in Durban, South Africa.

From the starting point of numbers (too many), and it is an easy step to begin

negative labels (bogus, criminal, fraud), the dehumanization and myth-making processes.



the highest figures for racist violence and tend to be seen as those experiencing the most racist incidents – which is not necessarily the case.

The United Kingdom, for example, has a very comprehensive system (although it does not separate out crimes aimed specifically at asylum seekers and refugees). In 2004, the UK reported 35,022 recorded racist and xenophobic incidents, of which 4,840 involved “wounding.” In 2003 (last full year available), Germany – with a much narrower base – reported 11,576 politically motivated right-wing incidents, of which 2,431 were xenophobic (465 of these were classified as violent).

Greece consistently comes top, or close to the top, of EUMC’s negative attitude surveys. In 2003, for example, 87 percent of Greeks described themselves as “resistant” to immigrants, and 77 percent were “resistant to diversity.” Yet Greece, along with Spain, Italy and Portugal, does not gather any separate data on racist crime or violence.

In fact, the gathering of statistics on racist and xenophobic violence is generally insufficient and unreliable, and virtually all countries that collect data – even within the EU – use different systems.

Even those who collect the most comprehensive data, have big gaps. Most data, for example, relates to foreigners (possibly including asylum seekers, although the latter are rarely separated out). The experience of nationals who belong to ethnic minorities is, according to EUMC, “absent from criminal justice data collection in practically all EU Member States.” The research problems are compounded by the fact that most EU states do not even have a definition of ‘racist violence.’

In its 2005 Annual Report, EUMC pointed out that states were giving

mixed messages: “Although Member States have introduced legislation affording improved protection to racial [and] ethnic minorities and populations of migrant origin under the terms of EU Directives, some have chosen to introduce other legislative measures which serve to restrict various rights and opportunities of migrants and minorities...”

“In some Member States and some sectors there is a clear economic need for an increased workforce, which immigrants could at least partly satisfy,” the report said. “Yet some Member States are curtailing access to the labour market of refugees and asylum seekers, or giving out messages through new legislation that immigrants are not welcome, for political rather than economic reasons. A further ‘mixed message’ can be generated by immigration policies alongside policies against discrimination.”

WRONG TARGET?

“DOES TIGHTER ASYLUM LEGISLATION REASSURE citizens and reduce their racism, or does it cater to the existing racism and justify it?” asks Niklaus Steiner of the University of North Carolina’s Centre for International Studies, in an analysis of the refugee debates in Germany, the UK and Switzerland during the 1990s.

Given the number of new asylum and immigration laws adopted in recent years, many European governments and parliaments clearly believe the former to be true. But many academics and researchers believe the opposite is the case: that if you give in to the nationalist or populist pressures to clamp down on foreigners – and asylum seekers are probably the easiest foreigners to clamp down on – instead of combating them, you are sending out reinforcing messages to those same populist and nationalist forces (including the extreme right).

In other words, you create a vicious circle, because you show that racism and xenophobia pay dividends as a political issue, which means they will come back onto the agenda again and again. This in turn starts to impact on asylum seekers, and on recognized refugees, legal immigrants and even citizens with foreign ancestry. Go far enough, and you alienate different segments of the population, and before long there is a law and order problem. This can then be used by the same nationalists and populists to push for further restrictions, and so on.

Just as racist thugs often do not differentiate between refugees and other foreigners, or even their own fellow citizens, an increasing number of punitive measures contained in new and ever tighter asylum laws do not differentiate between refugees and economic migrants. Their sole aim is to deter people from entry – to reduce the political heat by reducing the numbers.

TWISTING THE STATISTICS

THE NUMBERS HAVE FALLEN CONSIDERABLY. Across industrialized countries as a whole, the number of asylum seekers has halved over the past five years, and is now at its lowest level since 1987. This is logical, since the global refugee number is also currently at

“It is one thing to bemoan the persistence of prejudice, and quite another to actually do something about it. All too often, when faced with bigotry and nihilism, political leaders, governments and ordinary citizens are silent or complacent. Such passivity must not be allowed to masquerade as tolerance. It is more like complicity, since it emboldens the intolerant, and leaves victims defenceless.”

—KOFI ANNAN

its lowest level for a quarter of a century.

The asylum numbers game, however, has never been all that logical. There were genuinely very high numbers of asylum seekers in some European countries in the early and late 1990s – not surprisingly, given that there were major wars taking place in Europe. After the refugees from the Balkans, the Afghans and then the Iraqis became the top groups – increasingly giving up hope of any viable future in their home countries after decades of war and repression.

Yet in some countries where the political debate was hottest, these details – which at least partly, if not totally, explain the high numbers – were rarely mentioned.

Statistics became a major source of distortion of the asylum issue. The habits of the UK tabloid newspapers are examined in some depth on page 16. But perhaps the key foundation stone of the immense number of pejorative media reports about asylum seekers lies in a single statistical distortion, encapsulated in a persistent refrain which emerged during the 1990s: “the vast majority are bogus.” This has become totally enshrined in the discourse, not just of the newspapers, but also of the politicians and public at large.

This oft-repeated statement is based not just on a false statistic (that “only around 10 percent of asylum seekers are recognized as refugees”), but also on a wholly false interpretation of what the refugee recognition rate actually means.

The 10 percent figure was a rough average of the number of asylum seekers recognized as refugees during the initial round of the asylum procedure – known as the ‘first instance’ procedure. It does not take into account the quality and thoroughness of that procedure, and therefore the number of asylum seekers who are subsequently recognized on appeal.

Nor does it take into account the people given humanitarian status rather than full refugee status (for example people fleeing war or generalized violence). It is a bit like counting criminals by the number of people who are accused of crimes, rather than the number who are actually convicted of them (another statistical trick that has been used to “illustrate” that asylum seekers have a high tendency to be criminals).

Including successful appeals, and those receiving humanitarian status (or exceptional leave to remain as it used to be known in the UK), the recognition rate of asylum seekers in the UK has actually been more in the range of 30-50 percent. But still, doesn’t this mean that the ‘majority’ – if no longer the ‘vast majority’ – are bogus?

“Bogus” is a very loaded word. In this context, it

implies that every single person who is not recognized as a refugee is actively trying to defraud the system.

This, of course, is not the case.

Generally speaking, you can divide asylum seekers into three groups: those who are refugees; those who know very well they are *not* refugees (and therefore may be said to be misusing the system); and those who are in the grey area.

The latter are people who come from countries – the Iraqis, Afghanists, DR Congos, Sudans and Somalians of this world – which produce lots of refugees. The people in the grey area may not qualify for refugee status under the strict definition contained in the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, but when their country is racked by war, or anarchy, or is run by one of the world’s most famous oppressors such as Saddam Hussein or the Taliban, then one can understand why they feel they might be refugees. Such people may be sent home, if sending them home is possible or ethical, but they should never be labeled “bogus.”

But, nonetheless, “bogus” they became – not just in the UK, but also (with some variants) in several other countries. The media called them bogus, the politicians started calling them bogus (or vice versa) and – reasonably enough in the circumstances – the public began thinking they were bogus.

From the starting point of numbers (too many), and negative labels (bogus, criminal, fraud), it is an easy step to begin the dehumanization and myth-making processes. Research has repeatedly shown that tolerance towards asylum seekers and other people perceived as “foreigners” is weakest among those who have never actually met any.

A number of different studies have shown that hostile attitudes and physical assaults on asylum seekers and refugees are – to quote one such study – “most likely when hostile media images coincide with local experiences of deprivation and competition for services in short supply e.g. health and housing.”

When there has been an accelerating downward spiral of intolerance permeating the asylum system from top (policy-making government ministers) to bottom (policy-enforcing immigration officials and border guards), media can only be viewed as one aspect of the equation. The general public cannot be excused its share of the blame either. Public opinion can force politicians to change their tune, or it can encourage them to sing their message of intolerance even louder.

But at the end of the day, when it comes to combating intolerance, the actions of governments matter most. ■

The black and white advertisement

(top left) was produced by a local branch of a Swiss political party. It reads: “Now we Swiss are becoming the niggers!”

- Billions for asylum tourists
- Soft on criminals
- Billions for EU dreamers
- Citizenship for everyone – no questions asked. Enough is enough.”

The colour poster

(bottom left) was part of a major nationwide series in Switzerland covering the same themes but with slightly less crude headlines.



Words and Images

BY RUPERT COLVILLE

AUSTRALIAN 'FLOODS'

"DOES 'CONCENTRATION CAMP' REALLY describe former miners' lodgings upgraded with air conditioning, libraries, classrooms, Maytag washing machines, TVs and computers, and whose residents are well fed with culturally appropriate meals, like halal and vegetarian?" asked an Australian journalist in June 2001. She was referring to the Woomera detention centre in the Australian outback.

This question kicked off a text that is a master class in how to cram as many pejorative associations, myths and distortions as possible into a single 739-word column.

"Is it really 'inhumane' to detain in such centres, at a cost to the taxpayer of \$100 each a day, boat people and other asylum seekers who have come to Australia illegally, while trying to determine whether they are genuine refugees or cheats?" she continued. "Is it 'racist' not to shower visas on former soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan, suspected of committing atrocities? Yes, according to worthies with a pulpit."

Like many columnists of her type, one of the writer's favourite tactics is to set up straw dummies and whack them mercilessly to the ground. She moves effortlessly from roughing up the asylum seekers, to clobbering their supporters – and then back again: "It's no surprise that the 1,500 people who marched on Villawood detention centre last week included the same coalition of socialists, anarchists, students, unionists, greens and well-meaning dupes... There have even been

suggestions of an organised campaign by external agitators to encourage violence in the centres."

The theme of the detained asylum seekers presenting a physical threat is quickly amplified: "Inside the centres, a military flavour has emerged in some protests, say sources. In a raid last month at Port Hedland, police found weapons including, allegedly, a garotte made from a guitar string..."

Then, one after another all the red-button issues are trotted out. First, the asylum seekers are soaking up the readers' money: "But as a result of the riots, \$20 million has been spent in nine months upgrading security, bringing to \$250 million taxpayers spent on detention centres in 18 months."

“

Political language... is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."

—GEORGE ORWELL
in *Politics and the English Language*, 1946

Then Australia risks being overwhelmed: "The reality is that with 22 million refugees in the world, no nation can afford an open-door policy." At the start of 2001, Australia actually had the 32nd largest refugee population in the world, and received 12,400 asylum seekers during the year – slightly more than Ireland, and half as many as Belgium.

And finally the clincher – a cascade of direct and indirect accusations of illegality and criminality: "Last financial year, 4,100 illegal immigrants arrived in Australia by boat or plane... Almost half arrive without documents or with forged papers... Many of those in detention have paid about \$10,000 to people-smugglers who tell them they will get apartments and social security in Australia... You could argue the resourcefulness of these queue-jumpers makes them more valuable migrants. But our compassion is better directed to those people who wait their turn patiently in squalid

refugee camps overseas... nothing evaporates compassion faster than the feeling you're being tricked, by exaggeration and lies, into compassion."

In some countries, this article would have scandalized readers with its wild generalizations that demonize entire groups of people – asylum seekers in general, but also Afghans and Iraqis, glibly reduced to "former soldiers... suspected of committing atrocities." In Australia, few eyebrows were raised at this article, largely because – even if the writer's language was at the intemperate end of print journalism (but mild compared to some talk-back radio presenters) – the ideas were well established, and were being propagated by politicians on a daily basis.

Within four months, Australia was actively engaged in a war to overthrow the Taliban, and 18 months later another war against Saddam Hussein. The regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq were sufficiently bad to result in removal – yet the people fleeing them received little sympathy from politicians, media or the public.

OR WAS IT A TRICKLE?

FOR SEVERAL YEARS THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC had been subjected to a continuous stream of political statements and media commentaries on asylum seekers that suggested they were "flooding" or "invading" the country; that those coming of their own accord were "illegal" (not so under international law); and that they were "queue-jumpers" (while the 'real' refugees waited patiently to be resettled from overseas).

In September 2002, UNHCR did a simple survey using a media search engine which covered all of Australia's major newspapers and several regional papers. This survey revealed that over the previous two years, there had been 631 listed articles containing the words "Australia", "asylum" and "flood." Some of these were anomalies, but the majority were what they appeared to be – suggestions that Australia was facing extraordinary large numbers of asylum seekers. Such articles were often accompanied by photographs of overcrowded boats, which alongside similar TV coverage, reinforced the idea of an "invasion."

Yet Australia has never received anything approaching a flood of asylum seekers.

In an attempt to nail this particular myth, UNHCR stated the following in July 2001: "By global standards, the numbers arriving in Australia are very low. Often

Thousands of illegal immigrants are smuggled into Australia each year by gangs who charge thousands of dollars for the illegal trips

Thousands of people are ARRESTED each year for trying to SNEAK INTO Australia. "I am in no way racist"

they are referred to as a tide or a flood, but in reality, and compared to most European countries, a more appropriate word might be a trickle. Compared to the number of refugees in a significant number of very poor, developing countries – often in the hundreds of thousands and even in the millions – the numbers coming to Australia, at less than 10,000 a year, are very small indeed."

In Australia, much of the mainstream media – with honourable exceptions – was slow to wake up to the hype surrounding the asylum issue. But eventually, once they finally realized the flood was a mirage, there were no queues to jump, and the country's mandatory detention regime was probably the strictest in the industrialized world, many Australian journalists adapted their coverage of the asylum issue.

By 2006, much of the heat had gone out of the Australian asylum debate, after NGOs and academics had spent years doggedly chipping away at the stereotypes. Words like "flood" and "queue-jumper" started to diminish in the Australian media after the end of 2002. However, they still showed up quite frequently in readers' letters to the press for some time after that, suggesting that the terminology had become deeply rooted among the general public.

Over time, an increasing number of positive stories about refugees started to appear in the press, with rural employers in particular giving a thumbs-up to hard-working refugee labourers, who were presented as worthy human beings rather than as abstract threats.

The Woomera detention centre was closed down and dismantled in 2003, and a number of other positive modifications to Australian asylum policy have followed, including the decision in June 2005 to allow families with children to live outside the country's detention centres. In March 2006, a Senate Inquiry into the administration and operation of the Migration Act recommended a raft of further improvements to the system, including reducing mandatory detention of asylum seekers to a maximum of 90 days.

The number of asylum seekers coming to Australia has fallen to 3,200 a year – just one percent of the 2005 global total of around 335,000 spread over 50 countries. Even less of a flood.



‘ASYLUM MADNESS’ IN THE UK

MUCH OF THE ADVERSE OR INACCURATE MEDIA coverage of asylum and immigration can be put down to the complexity of the issues and the terminology, the willingness of some politicians to distort the issues in the belief it will bring them an electoral advantage, and the media's failure to check the facts, figures and interpretations that they have been fed. The refugee lobby is also sometimes guilty of failing to act quickly and effectively to counter myths when they are still in their infancy.

Ill-informed or sloppy journalists or editors are one thing; they can always be better informed. A media organization that deliberately pursues an agenda which is applied to all its contents – not just the editorials and opinion columns, but also the news coverage – is something altogether more deadly.

Four out of the five national daily tabloid newspapers in the UK – with an estimated combined readership of over 17 million (or almost one third of the country's population) – have been full of “news” about asylum seekers that is often not really news at all, but anti-asylum spin.

Out of the hundreds of blazing front-page stories and dramatically headlined one- or two-page inside

spreads carried by these four papers, over the past five years or so, the number of pieces that depict a reasonable or sympathetic individual asylum seeker or refugee can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

A media search reveals that *The Sun*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Star* and their three Sunday stablemates – *News of the World*, *Mail on Sunday* and *Express on Sunday* – between them produced a staggering 8,163 articles that mentioned the word ‘asylum seeker’ in the five years from 1 January 2000 to 1 January 2006. The search totals include some quirks and repetitions, but nevertheless provide a useful insight into the tabloid approach to asylum and immigration.

A key element of the tabloid strategy has been to confuse terminology. The term ‘asylum seekers’ is often used interchangeably with ‘immigrants’ (1,427 tabloid articles with both words over the five-year period). An ‘asylum seeker’ in one line, becomes an ‘immigrant’ or a ‘refugee’ in the next, with 575 tabloid articles employing all three terms. Incorrect and misleading phrases such as ‘illegal asylum seekers’ and ‘illegal refugees’ have also been employed.

As a result, they have all become part of the same soup: foreigners (with ‘gypsies’ – some foreign asylum-seeking ones, some local ones – thrown in for good measure).

During the same five-year period, the term ‘bogus asylum seekers’ appeared 713 times in the seven UK tabloids, and ‘asylum cheats’ 188 times. The words

‘criminal’ and ‘asylum seekers’ occurred in the same article 538 times; and ‘crime’ and ‘asylum’ appeared together 945 times (in 375 cases, within five words of each other). Fifty stories associated asylum seekers with rape – with titles like “Refugee is rape beast,” “Migrant monster” and “Iraqi in rape quiz.”

‘Asylum’ shared an article with ‘madness’ 271 times, 141 of them in *The Sun* which at the beginning of 2003 ran a campaign called ‘Stop Asylum Madness.’

According to *The Sun*, 839,000 of its readers cut out coupons which appeared in the paper daily over a period of several weeks in conjunction with an apparently never-ending series of ‘asylum madness’ news stories. The coupons were periodically taken in a large number of sacks, with *Sun* photographers in tow, and dumped at the Home Office – the UK ministry in charge of asylum and immigration. A few weeks later, the paper announced that more than 1 million readers had signed on to the campaign and told the government menacingly: “The clock is ticking.”

A fair amount of research has been done into UK media coverage of the asylum issue by university departments, NGOs and policy research institutes, but the sheer volume of anti-asylum articles, editorials, columns, cartoons, and even snide comments on the sports pages, has never been fully catalogued and exposed.

Nevertheless, the fact that during one 31-day period in 2003, the *Daily Express* ran 22 negative asylum or

refugee stories on its front page gives some idea of the intensity of the coverage.

THE DEFAMATION GAME

HARDLY ANYONE READS MORE THAN ONE newspaper a day, and so few people are fully aware of the unremitting nature of the anti-asylum war drums. Britain was repeatedly dubbed the “asylum capital of the world.” Asylum seekers were routinely branded as criminals or terrorists. They had a habit of importing HIV/AIDS and TB. They raped British women, and they ran over British children. They even ate British swans and donkeys, and poached most of the fish out of British rivers.

The ‘soft touch’ British state meanwhile was said to be lodging them in luxury hotels, giving them mobile phones, paying them huge amounts of state benefits and even giving them free golf and cooking lessons. The complete set of anti-asylum-seeker, anti-migrant and anti-gypsy articles – the tabloids much prefer ‘gypsy’ to ‘Roma’ – would fill a large exhibition hall.

Many of these stories were based on unnamed “police sources” and some (as the police themselves made clear) have been exposed as inventions. These include *The Sun*'s swan-eating eastern European asylum seekers, and the *Daily Star*'s Somali donkey-eaters. One *Daily Express* story entitled “PLOT TO KILL BLAIR: Asylum seekers with hi-tech equipment and maps caught half a mile from PM's home” was

“The mendacity of much tabloid coverage has poisoned public discourse about asylum issues.”



Racist expressions towards asylum seekers appear to have become common currency.”

—UK POLICE

angrily denounced by the local police in a statement: “Let me say in the clearest possible language that this story is rubbish and the *Daily Express* was told this in unequivocal language when it first asked us about it...”

A July 2003 study by the Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees in the UK (ICAR) showed that members of the public, while aware that the tabloids were stirring up ill-feeling, still broadly agreed with their viewpoints, and used the same language. Another study found that “interviewees... in drawing their own conclusions about the newcomers to their community, repeated media myths about predatory male asylum seekers threatening their wives and daughters and economic migrants coming to Britain.”

Not surprisingly, a 2005 EU study placed the UK second in a list of 30 European countries with regard to ‘resistance to asylum seekers.’ Yet UK citizens were shown to be relatively tolerant on the other topics, coming 20th in their ‘Resistance to Multicultural Society’ and 16th – out of 19 – in their ‘Resistance to Diversity.’

“The mendacity of much tabloid coverage has



poisoned public discourse about asylum issues,” said journalist Mike Jempson, director of ethics charity MediaWise. “Refugees are denied a voice, so the public don’t discover why people seek sanctuary and what they can do to help.”

The tabloids thunder with indignation when they are accused of racism, or of indulging in propaganda reminiscent of the Nazi newspaper *Der Stürmer* in the 1930s. They skilfully turn every criticism against the critic: the tabloids become the valiant but beleaguered crusaders for the ‘truth.’ Their critics, they claim, are driven by excessive ‘political correctness,’ and are out to curtail freedom of speech.

Never mind that Article 19 – an organization

dedicated to the preservation of freedom of speech – issued a stinging report in August 2003, describing “a complex picture of inaccurate reporting, unfounded statistical claims, inappropriate use of labels and one-dimensional images of asylum seekers and refugees living in Britain.”

Daily Express journalists have twice taken the highly unusual step of reporting their own paper to the UK’s Press Complaints Commission (PCC). In August 2001, the paper’s union chapter complained about the *Express*’s “sustained campaign against asylum seekers in pursuit of circulation.” And in January 2005, a second complaint was lodged after dozens of anti-Roma articles culminated in one entitled “1.6 million gypsies ready to flood in.” An unnamed journalist was cited by the *Press Gazette* as saying they were being “pressured into writing articles which they believed to be racist and inflammatory.” The complaints were rejected.

Pressure from NGOs like the Refugee Council and the MediaWise RAM Project eventually forced the PCC to issue a warning to editors about the use of inaccurate

and misleading language.

Richard Ayre, Article 19’s Chair, said that the point was “not to sanitize [the asylum issue], not to minimize it, but to report it fairly and accurately. Get it right and the media can offer us real insight into a critical area of public policy. Get it wrong and they will give us not insight but incitement.”

The British police seemed to agree. As far back as 2001, the Association of Chief Police Officers issued a ‘best practice’ guide, which said “Racist expressions towards asylum seekers appear to have become common currency and acceptable in a way that would never be tolerated towards any other minority group.”

This turning of racism and xenophobia into something commonplace and banal (a phenomenon that is by no means confined to the UK), with asylum used as a Trojan Horse to get around the race relations laws, is perhaps the most dangerous aspect of the whole defamation game. ■



Tackling Alpine Asylum Myths

In October 2003, the Swiss Foundation Against Racism and Anti-Semitism issued a series of advertisements: one, shown on

cinema screens as well as in newspapers, asked “How do the Jews get their money?” A pause, and then the reply appeared: “By working, just like the rest of us.” A poster in the same series asked “Where do Kosovars get their car radios?” The answer: “They buy them, like the rest of us.” And a third asked “What do blacks do with their wives at lunch-time?”

The reply: “They eat their meal, like the rest of us.” Switzerland was in the run-up to

a general election, in which asylum seekers and immigrants – with their alleged predilection for committing all sorts of crimes – were featuring prominently.

The ironic advertisements were controversial – in some ways more controversial than the stream of anti-foreigner posters they were countering (see page 12). Some pro-asylum commentators argued that they were playing into the hands of the anti-asylum lobby by helping to keep the immigration and asylum issues centre stage.

A PROVOCATIVE APPROACH

The following year, across the Alps in Austria, where similar hostile – if largely unsubstantiated – beliefs about asylum seekers had taken strong root, UNHCR also decided that a “soft” approach simply wouldn’t register in the minds of a busy public, and something more provocative was needed to get people to at least consider the idea that some of the things they were hearing about asylum seekers and refugees were not true, or were highly exaggerated.

And so it was that the citizens of Austria, going peacefully about their daily business in the summer of 2004, were suddenly confronted by two strange men, the first with his finger entering one ear and coming out of the other, and the second with his entire head in the process of being unzipped down the middle.

Both of them looked a little pleased with themselves, as they gazed out from 3,100 billboards, hung out in cafes and bars on 60,000 ‘freecards,’ popped up on websites, morphed onto electronic info boards in Vienna’s Metro system, and paraded up and down on T-shirts.

The captions made it clear that these dubious characters were asylum seekers, up to their usual game of abusing the asylum system.

“Asylum seekers never show their real faces,” says the poster with the zip. “Asylum seekers get up to sneaky tricks,” says the one with the finger through his ears. The strapline at the bottom promises to reveal “All prejudices” on UNHCR’s Austrian

website, where the agency posted 12 of the most common myths and short, sharp explanations about why they were misguided.



The campaign achieved some measurable successes. The number of visitors to the UNHCR website hit record highs. The postcard carrying

the images was voted “Freecard of the Year 2004” by a Vienna magazine. A second phase of the “Fairness in Place of Prejudice”

campaign was launched in the autumn with the help of testimonials by the Federal President Heinz Fischer, a prominent Austrian scientist Josef Penninger and the famous musician Hubert von Goisern.

And finally, the weekly magazine *Die Furche* built a series of five articles around the theme of the campaign, which subsequently earned Austria’s most prestigious media prize for its author, Wolfgang Machreich.

Whether or not the campaign – which was produced *pro bono* by the international advertising company Publicis – won over many people is hard to prove. However, it certainly stimulated a fair amount of debate about the prevalent myths and prejudices in Austria. Echoes of

The ironic advertisements were controversial – in some ways more controversial than the stream of anti-foreigner posters they were countering.

that debate continue to this day in the media, and in public statements by federal and local government officials.

It could be argued that the campaign bust a thirteenth myth – the one which says an aggressive and provocative pro-asylum campaign will annoy people and is therefore bound to fail, however truthful it may be. UNHCR’s Roland Schoenbauer, who directed the campaign, is convinced it was the only way to make an impact.

“Given the detrimental political discourse that had been taking place, and the lack of financial resources to run a huge campaign, we had to do it like this,” he says. “Positive messages simply wouldn’t have worked in that kind of environment.”

Belgium bucks the trend

BY VANESSA SAENEN

HOLIDAYS ARE ALWAYS the loneliest time for people far from home. This simple truth inspired an unusual initiative last Christmas by *Het Belang van Limburg*, a local newspaper in the Belgian province of Limburg.

The paper suggested readers in each of the province's 44 communes give substance to the slogan "Hospitable Limburg," by inviting asylum seekers into their homes for Christmas dinner. In the end, more than 100 Belgian families opened their doors to foreigners they had never met before – and the number would have been higher if there had been enough asylum seekers to match the number of would-be hosts who came forward in response to the paper's appeal.

The Christmas project was coordinated by Gert Reynders, editor of *Het Belang van Limburg's* Tuesday supplement, entitled "The Good News Paper." He said he believed it was the paper's "journalistic duty" to reduce the "staggering level of ignorance" about asylum seekers and refugees. He saw the Christmas dinner idea as a means to counter all the negative slogans, stereotypes and shocking images.

Several journalists devoted their Christmas Day to covering the story, criss-crossing the province to take dinner-table photos and interview hosts and guests. Their stories then appeared in the next edition of the "Good News Paper."

The initiative was a resounding success. Afterwards, Reynders said, some of the hosts wrote to the paper "to say



One of 100 Belgian families and their asylum-seeking guests on Christmas Day, 2005.

how grateful they were for having had a chance to get to know asylum seekers."

Limburg province, which borders Germany and the Netherlands, has plenty of experience with immigration. From the moment coal was discovered there in 1901 through to the 1970s, immigrants came to work in the mines. The province's website still boasts that Limburg has "black gold" and a "colourful character."

"Because of our familiarity with immigration issues, we have a more open attitude than in some of the big cities, like Antwerp or Brussels," said Reynders. "So we were pretty sure to find fertile ground for our Christmas action."

Belgium's French language daily *Le Soir* has also tackled immigration issues in an unusual way. The paper's Sunday

magazine recently published portraits of a number of foreigners who were occupying a local church in a bid to secure regularization of their status. The portraits put a human face on these so-called "illegals," each of whom had been "adopted" by a local resident. The same portraits could be seen at the entrance of the occupied church, and some local shopkeepers were also displaying them as a sign of solidarity. "By having their names, photos and stories posted, the illegals take risks," wrote *Le Soir*. "But it is an act of dignity."

POSITIVE APPROACH

MODERN BELGIUM IS A LABORATORY of multiculturalism: a federal state where power is shared among language

communities (Dutch, French and German) and regions, including the city of Brussels. Belgium was one of the original signatories of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and although its asylum system is not without problems, UNHCR's Representative in Brussels Judith Kumin calls it "one of Europe's better examples," citing "good reception arrangements and a robust recognition rate."

A key moment in Belgium's recent asylum history centred on the tragic case of a failed Nigerian asylum seeker, 20-year-old Semira Adamu, who was suffocated to death as she resisted deportation in 1998. This led to considerable soul-searching – especially by the country's media.

Unlike papers in some other European countries, Belgian newspapers show little inclination to launch virulent

anti-asylum campaigns accompanied by a constant stream of stories depicting asylum seekers and refugees as criminals or welfare scroungers.

Although the far-right political party Vlaamse Belang toes an anti-immigrant line, the Federal government minister responsible for social integration, Christian Dupont, insists on the value of diversity. "All great nations," he recently told a pan-European conference on migration, "welcomed the travelling stranger and insisted that he should feel at home."

In the same spirit, a key aim of Fedasil – the Belgian government agency responsible for the reception of asylum seekers – is to establish mutual respect. The agency is unique in its active sponsorship of cultural and educational events designed

to help Belgians and asylum seekers understand each other. Recently it rolled out a new educational game "Chez Mo & Co." which aims to give children an idea of what it is like to be an asylum seeker in a Fedasil reception centre.

However, even Fedasil's awareness-raising projects can be controversial. When the organization was planning an itinerant photo exhibition on refugees and asylum seekers, and chose Antwerp's prestigious brand new main library as a venue, their request was refused. The city's mayor said he was concerned the exhibition would give a bad name to the surrounding area – which hosts a lot of refugees and illegal immigrants – and also said he did not believe the theme was appropriate for the new library's first exhibition.

"The reaction of Antwerp city was very unfortunate," said Fedasil's Communications Director Mieke Candaele. "...Yet, what happened in Antwerp was an isolated case. The exhibition has been – and will be – shown in numerous other cities, and receives undividedly positive reactions." ■

Bridging the divide

"The difference between my African roots and western 'values' tears me apart. And I want to share this with others." – PIE TSHIBANDA

A desire to build mutual understanding has been one of the driving forces of Belgium's famous stand-up comedian Pie Tshibanda, a Congolese refugee who has become a Belgian citizen. For the past six years he has presented his one-man show to audiences all over the Francophone world, performing in major venues and also appearing regularly on TV and radio. Sometimes outrageous, often sad, but always hilarious, he uses humour to dismantle the barriers of suspicion and misunderstanding.

Pie Tshibanda was a distinguished psychologist, teacher and writer before fleeing Zaire (now DRC) in 1995, after producing a video and writing articles and comic strips about ethnic cleansing. Arriving in Belgium at the age of 44, he had to start all over again, confronting total anonymity and isolation in a foreign land, while trying to navigate his way through the complex asylum bureaucracy.



In his show, he tells of going door-to-door in the Belgian village where he was placed when he first left his reception centre, in order to introduce himself to his neighbours. People peeked nervously out at him from behind their curtains, as he stood outside in the rain. He introduced himself to one household after another and gradually became "one of them," refining his story-telling skills as he went along. He launched his first one-man show, "A crazy black man

in a white man's land," in 1999 and has performed it hundreds of times since. He currently alternates this show with another production, entitled "I'm not a witch-doctor."

"The audience, black and white, laughs at its own image in Pie's mirror," wrote the French daily *Le Monde*. Another French paper, *Le Canard Enchaîné*, was similarly impressed: "He's often funny, he's forceful, very revealing: how surprising it is to see that we westerners have a few things to learn about hospitality."

"Belgium's asylum system is one of Europe's better examples... good reception arrangements and a robust recognition rate."

“Tired of Refugees” *Is African tolerance in decline?*

BY KITTY MCKINSEY

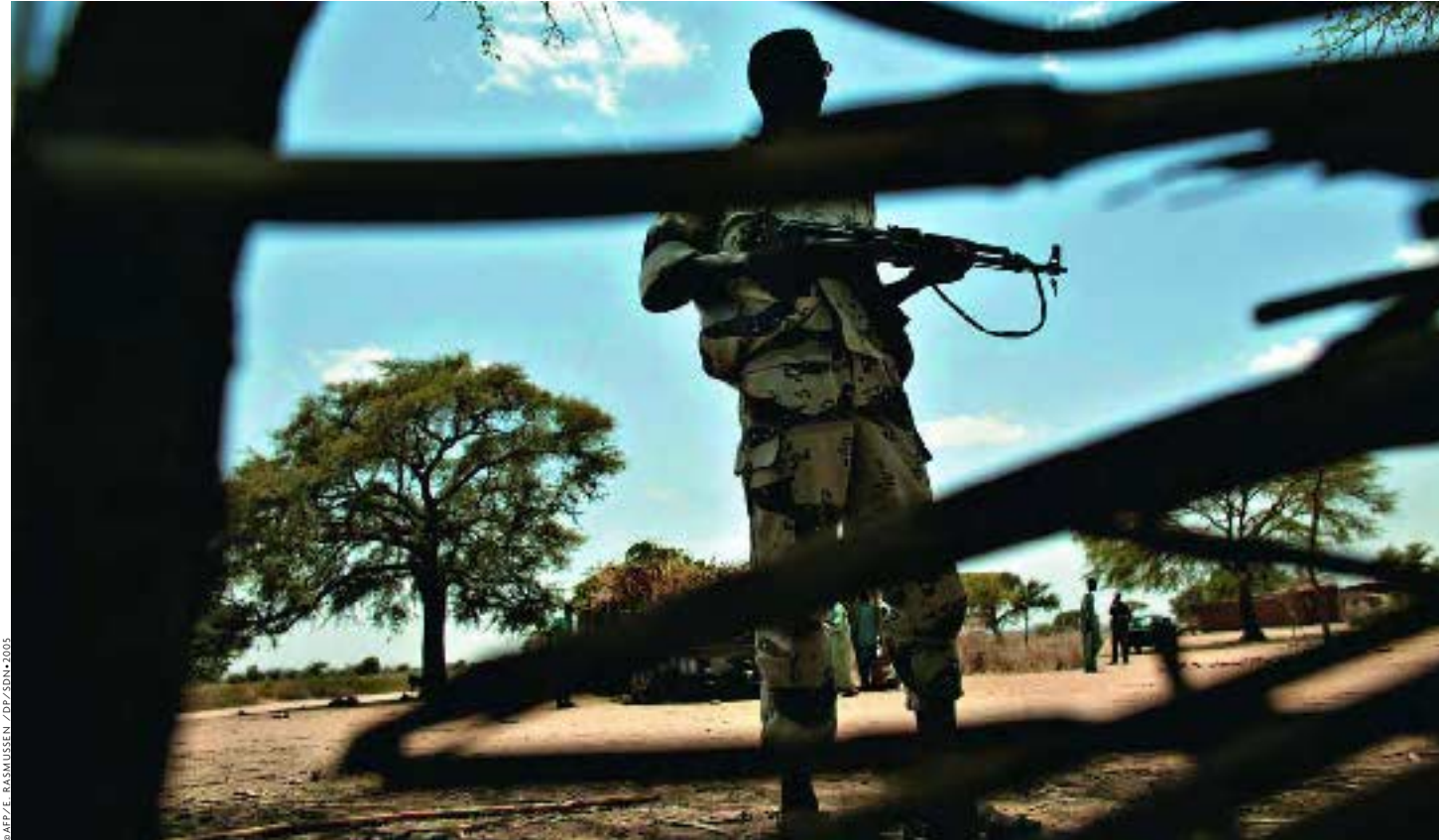
THEY SAY DEAD MEN TELL no tales, but the dead of Gikongoro speak eloquently. The body of a man is frozen in time, his hands futilely shielding his face. Another man writhes in unspeakable agony. A mother tries in desperation to protect the baby cradled in her arms. One man's throat has been slashed. A child's head is missing entirely.

Now a ghostly chalky white, the mummified bodies of some of the 25,000 victims of an orgy of killing in the southern Rwandan hills lie on wooden racks in a grisly genocide memorial, offering their own mute tales of the insanity that gripped the tiny African country of Rwanda in 1994, when Hutu extremists rose up and exterminated 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus.

Details of the three-day frenzy of killing by guns, grenades and machetes here at Gikongoro are filled in by a man who by all rights should be dead too. Emmanuel Murangira, a Tutsi volunteer at the memorial in a former school, still bears a deep bullet hole in his forehead, over his left eye, evidence of the night he was left for dead under the bodies of his family, friends and neighbours.

“My whole family was killed in the genocide,” he tells a visitor, “five children, my wife and 50 people in my extended family. I was one of only four people who survived in Gikongoro.” Some 25,000 people from many villages had obeyed the local authorities' instructions to gather in the school, where they were promised they would be safe. Instead it turned into a killing ground.

How does he manage to tell his story, over and over, to the many visitors to the memorial? “I don't like to be asked about it



An armed fighter, allegedly *Janjaweed*, in a village in Darfur.

because it brings back bad memories, but I have to tell it...” Murangira's voice trails off. The logical conclusion of his sentence – “To keep it from happening again” – is left unsaid.

Fewer than ten years after the cry of “Never again” went up in Africa after the Rwandan genocide, in another part of this huge continent, men and children were once again being slaughtered, and women raped, simply because of their ethnicity.

The rebellion that broke out in Darfur, western Sudan, in February 2003, has been depicted as a war by government soldiers, militias and rebels against civilians, or as a clash between nomadic herders and settled farmers over scarce grazing and farmland.

But many of the victims of the murder, rape, pillage and arson that show little sign of abating have a simpler explanation: they say they are being persecuted for being black by fellow Sudanese citizens with lighter skins (often referred to colloquially, if inaccurately, as “Arabs”).

One displaced man told a visitor to Kalma camp in South Darfur in 2004 that he and his fellow villagers were targeted “because of the colour, the black colour,” pulling the skin on the back of his hand by way of illustration. “They attacked us because we are Fur, 100 percent Fur.” (Darfur means ‘homeland of the Fur.’) A Fur woman said that the men who attacked her village screamed: “We are going to kill you. We are

going to use you women, and we are not going to leave anybody. Because you are black, we are going to finish you all.”

Three years after the war started in Darfur, nearly two million people eke out a hazardous existence in miserable, unsafe settlements around the region's cities, still unable to go back to their destroyed villages.

THE CURSE OF INTOLERANCE

WRESTLING WITH THE LEGACY OF SLAVERY and colonialism, Africa today still hasn't escaped the curse of intolerance. The 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in Durban, South Africa, noted that Africa still struggles with all these

problems, which it said constitute a violation of human rights “and deny the self-evident truth that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

And if intolerance is sickening wherever it occurs, in Africa it has all too often turned deadly. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a six-year war that went largely unnoticed outside the immediate region claimed over four million lives and sent more than 400,000 Congolese into exile, with a further three million displaced inside the country. The war officially ended in 2002, but villagers are still fleeing localized fighting in the eastern part of the country. Atrocities – particularly the gruesome practice of hacking off hands, arms and legs – continue. According to medical experts, as many as 1,200 people in DRC are still dying from war-related causes every day.

While the Africa that produced the 1969 OAU Convention on Refugees – generally regarded as one of the most refugee-friendly pieces of international legislation in existence – continues to produce acts of remarkable generosity towards refugees and others fleeing violence, especially at the local level, there have also been some major reverses at the national level. Countries with a rich history of welcoming outsiders – like Tanzania in East Africa and Côte d'Ivoire in the West – have recently grown much less hospitable, or become downright hostile to refugees.

Last August, for example, a South African mob attacked shops belonging to refugees and asylum seekers in Bothaville, a town in Free State province. Eight of the ten foreign-owned shops that were attacked and looted – two of them were burnt to the ground – were owned or run by Somalis. After they lost everything in the attack, some of the Somalis were reduced to working as shop assistants in the premises they themselves had formerly owned.

A UNHCR investigation into the incident determined that “xenophobia played a key role in the attack. There were perceptions of foreigners taking available job opportunities, not making meaningful contributions to the community and undermining the businesses of the local communities.”

As a response to this and numerous other acts of physical and verbal abuse of refugees and other foreigners in South Africa, UNHCR has been funding a campaign called Roll Back Xenophobia, which is run under the supervision of South Africa's National Consortium for Refugee Affairs.

The campaign aims to stimulate the education of civil servants from a wide range of sectors – including the police, and health and education departments – about refugees and their rights.

Godwin Ale Willow, a soft-spoken Sudanese refugee, has participated very actively in Roll Back Xenophobia, speaking openly about how he became a refugee and how difficult it is to find acceptance in South Africa.

Standing head and shoulders above most people, and – in his own words – as “dark as midnight,” Willow has attended community meetings where he was told to go home. He has braved the hostility of hawkers competing for customers and has been put on display as an “oddy” from beyond the Limpopo, the river separating South Africa from the rest of the continent.

Despite the enthusiasm with which he embraced the Roll Back Xenophobia campaign, and his participation in the November 2004 public hearings on xenophobia chaired by the government's Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Foreign Affairs and the South African Human Rights Commission, Willow is resigned to the likelihood that his physical appearance will continue to determine how he is treated for the foreseeable future.

HOSPITALITY WEARS THIN

FIVE THOUSAND KILOMETRES AWAY IN West Africa, various codified concepts of hospitality towards foreigners have

Côte d'Ivoire provided a graphic example of how like wildfire, once the cultural, political

xenophobia can spread and legal restraints are removed.



For decades, Tanzania received wave after wave of refugees from its troubled neighbours, including these Rwandans lodged in Benaco camp after the 1994 genocide.

© S. SALGADO/BW/TZA/1994

benefited refugees over the years. In Mali, for example, the term *Djatiguiya* is used to describe the custom of greeting foreigners with open arms.

And in next-door Côte d'Ivoire, the similar concept of *Akwaba* set the tone for the country's policy towards foreign migrants and refugees for decades (the concept also exists in neighbouring Ghana). Côte d'Ivoire was conspicuous for its religious and ethnic harmony under the leadership of its first president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny.

"*La Côte d'Ivoire appartient à tout le monde*" (Côte d'Ivoire belongs to the whole world) was his motto. And he put it into practice, welcoming millions of fellow Africans and taking the best from their cultures. Not only did outsiders become cabinet ministers, but foreigners—more than a quarter of the country's population—made

a significant contribution to "the Ivorian miracle" that created one of the most developed economies on the continent.

But following Houphouët-Boigny's death in 1993, and a coup against his successor in 1999, all that ended. An armed rebellion in September 2002 split the nation in two, the economy slid downhill, and the attitude to foreigners turned ugly. Thousands of foreigners—including both migrant workers from neighbouring states and refugees from Sierra Leone and Liberia—were forced out of the shanty towns where they lived, and their homes were burned down. Many were assaulted and others robbed of the little money they possessed. It was a graphic illustration of how xenophobia can spread like wildfire, once the cultural, political and legal restraints are removed, either by

direct action on the part of the authorities or in a situation of near anarchy.

On the other side of the continent, for decades Tanzania stood as a model of tolerance and hospitality, and set the "gold standard" in accepting wave after wave of refugees from the tumult in the Great Lakes region. On a visit to the country in March, UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres paid "warm tribute" to the country's "very generous and hospitable" people and government.

However, over the past ten years, Tanzania's patience with hosting the largest number of refugees in Africa has worn noticeably thinner. "We are tired of refugees," the ruling party announced in December 2004.

Refugee advocacy groups have been disturbed by some of the Tanzanian

government's actions in recent years. In October 2002, Tanzania decreed that all remaining Rwandan refugees should leave by the end of that year. Some received threats that their houses would be burned down, in an apparent attempt to force the issue. In September 2003, Tanzania expelled 922 Rwandan refugees who had lived in Ngara refugee camp since fleeing the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide in 1994. In February 2005, UNHCR protested when nine Burundian asylum seekers were forcibly returned to their own country—a practice known as *refoulement*, and prohibited under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, of which Tanzania is a signatory.

Refugees in Tanzania also face increasing restrictions on their freedom of movement and rights to work. The government

forbids refugees from venturing more than four kilometres from their camps, a policy that prevents them both from farming and from finding more markets for their goods. Authorities also closed down a thriving market in Lukole 'A' camp that served more than 50,000 Burundian refugees. And in each of the five camps in the Kibondo region, both refugees and local Tanzanians were affected when the camp markets were shut down.

"Restrictions on movement and the closure of markets... have led to a deteriorating food security situation," the World Food Programme reported in July 2004. Simultaneously hit by cuts in food rations because of insufficient money from donors, many refugees have been forced to sell household goods, and some have allegedly been driven to steal just to feed themselves.

Nevertheless, the Tanzanian government still hosts some 348,000 refugees

in 13 camps—the largest refugee population on the continent. (Another 200,000 Burundians live in settlements outside the UNHCR-run camps, and there are estimated to be about 200,000 other unregistered refugees living in villages in northwestern Tanzania.) Tanzania also continues to maintain one of the most liberal admission policies in Africa, and UNHCR offers health, education and other services to many local communities in an effort to mitigate the effects of decades of hosting so many refugees.

And even if Tanzania has reduced its previously very generous standards, there are certainly still plenty of bright spots both there and elsewhere in Africa. In stark contrast to many industrialized countries, for example, most African states have refrained from taking legislative measures that would make it more difficult for refugees to receive asylum.

Against the backdrop of the horrors of Darfur, the generosity of neighbouring Chad stands out. Despite being one of the poorest nations in the world, Chad has accepted 220,000 Sudanese refugees, 200,000 of them in 12 camps run by UNHCR. (In the south, Chad also hosts 45,000 refugees from the Central African Republic, with more coming all the time.)

Even before the Chadian government called in UNHCR and other agencies to help care for the Sudanese refugees, Chadians along the Darfur border in the east of the country opened their homes and shared their precious food stocks with the refugees, who mostly belonged to their own ethnic group, the Zaghawa.

The locals "gave us everything they had," said refugee Salim Ahmed, living with a local family in Tine in 2004. "Now

they are in the same situation as the refugees." As in Tanzania, UNHCR is helping host communities that have shared their scarce resources with the refugees.

Sometimes, the local population can be less welcoming, however. In Malawi, in March of this year, the government issued a strong press release after receiving reports that refugees residing outside designated camp areas were being attacked by members of the public. "Harassment and attacks on asylum seekers and refugees, just as harassment and attacks on any human being, are criminal acts and punishable by law," it stated, warning that anyone caught committing such acts would be prosecuted.

Nevertheless, all across the continent, localized gestures of hospitality and generosity continue to smooth the way for people who have lost everything when they fled their homelands. Last year, for example, a local chief in southeastern Ghana opened his palace to recent arrivals from Togo, and urged his people to show the same hospitality to scores of other Togolese refugees in the area.

Chief Togbe Tu Agbalekpor III of Hevi called his people together in May 2005 to appeal to them to welcome the Togolese into their homes. The villagers responded positively, offering rooms and farm land. That very evening, the women of the village began cooking huge pots of cassava and stew for more than 100 refugees.

Veronica Edzodzi, 29, who fled to Ghana with her sister, husband and young daughter, was overwhelmed. "You can't believe it until you've experienced their love," she enthused. "It's incredible. The people of Hevi are angels on earth."

That's certainly something Africa—and the rest of the world—could use more of. ■



Liberian refugees standing outside the UNHCR office in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, after their house was burnt down by a rampaging mob in September 2002.

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Across the continent, localized gestures of hospitality and generosity continue to smooth the way for people who have lost everything.

VICTIMS OF GENOCIDE

More than 2.5 million people have been killed in acts of genocide since the mid-1970s

Victims of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, in a village school in Nyarubuye, a year after their deaths. A total of some 800,000 people – mostly Tutsis, but also moderate Hutus – were slaughtered in 100 days.



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Some 10,000 skulls were unearthed around Chong Ek, Cambodia. In all, 1.7 million people are believed to have been killed during the 1975-79 genocide. Targets included intellectuals, Buddhist monks, politicians, civil servants, ethnic Vietnamese and Laotians and even people who wore glasses.



COURTESY OF THE UNHCR VIDEO UNIT

The bodies of victims of the Rwandan genocide filmed on 1 May 1994 by a UNHCR cameraman from the Tanzanian side of the Kagera River, which forms the border between the two countries. The footage, which was released to TV stations across the world, was one of the earliest pieces of visual evidence that the genocide was under way.



© PANOS/P. LOWE/DFP/ANSA/1992

Nearly 8,000 men and boys were killed in or near Srebrenica in July 1995, a mass killing that was classified as genocide. In all, several hundred thousand people were killed during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Relatives of genocide victims can never forget. Here, two women grieve over their murdered loved ones at a 2005 ceremony marking the 10th anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre.



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The Lethal Legacy of the Conquistadores

BY WILLIAM SPINDLER

THE YEAR OF THE “DISCOVERY” of America, 1492, was also the year when the large and long-established Sephardic Jewish community was expelled from Spain and Portugal. And, in the same year, the armies of the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella marched into Granada, the last of the Spanish Muslim kingdoms, bringing an end to seven centuries of Moorish rule on the Iberian peninsula.

The drive to forge a single nation out of Spain’s diverse cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious traditions was based to a large extent on intolerance, as exemplified by the Spanish Inquisition, a campaign launched in 1478 to stamp out religious dissent. The concept of *limpieza de sangre* (“cleanliness of blood”) was used to justify the persecution of thousands of Spaniards of Jewish or Muslim ancestry, accused of secretly practising their former religions.

“You cannot project backwards our modern morality to a society which did not know toleration, in politics as well as religion,” argues Professor Agostino Borromeo, an Italian historian who has been granted rare access to the Inquisition’s archives.

On the other hand, some of the effects of past intolerance and persecution are still felt today in Latin America, more than 500 years after Christopher Columbus set sail in search of a new route to the Indies.

The true discoverers of the New World were, of course, its first inhabitants, who are thought to have arrived there some 20,000 years ago from Asia, through the Bering Strait. By the time Columbus arrived, a vast array of cultures and ways of life had developed, ranging from highly organized multi-ethnic empires such as the Inca, which ruled some 12

million people, to nomadic hunter-gatherers like the Ona and Yamaná of Tierra del Fuego.

The Aztec, Maya and Inca accomplishments in engineering, science, architecture and the arts, and the splendour of their civilizations, stimulated the imagination – and the greed – of the European invaders. However, it would be a mistake to idealize pre-Columbian societies as some lost Utopia: many of them had thrived on constant warfare, slavery and the brutal subjugation of other, weaker, peoples.

This internal strife was a major factor in the dramatic collapse of the Inca and Aztec empires at the hands of a few hundred well-armed *Conquistadores*.

Bartolomé de las Casas, the first priest ordained in the Americas, railed against the inhuman treatment of the natives by the conquerors: “It was a general rule among Spaniards to be cruel,” he wrote, “not just cruel, but extraordinarily cruel so that harsh and bitter treatment would prevent Indians from daring to think of themselves as human beings... they saw themselves... crushed to the earth by the horses, cut in pieces by swords, eaten and torn by dogs, many buried alive and suffering all kinds of exquisite tortures.”

DEVASTATING IMPACT

THE IMPACT OF THE CONQUEST, exacerbated by the native population’s lack of immunity to European diseases, was devastating. The population of the Americas when Columbus arrived is estimated at some 30 million. Over the next 50 years, it plummeted by up to 75 percent.

With insufficient indigenous labour, the colonial plantations and mines ground to a halt. A solution to this problem was found in one of the worst forms of persecution and exploitation ever seen

– the slave trade.

Although slavery had existed for centuries in many parts of the world, including Africa and the Americas, the transatlantic slave trade – in which many countries, including England, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, Portugal and the United States participated – was unprecedented in its scale and consequences.

According to UNESCO’s Slave Trade Archives Project, “the various waves of slavery resulted in the deportation of an estimated 25 to 30 million persons, not counting those who died on board ship or in the course of wars and raids.”

A LEGACY OF DISCRIMINATION

BOTH THE CONQUEST OF LATIN AMERICA and the subsequent expansion of the slave trade left a legacy of discrimination which lies at the root of the social exclusion of indigenous and Afro-Latin Americans today.

In 1811 the German scientist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt was surprised by the colonial society’s obsession with race: “In a country governed by whites, the families reputed to have the least mixture of Negro or mulatto blood are also naturally the most honored,” he observed. “The greater or less degree of whiteness of skin decides the rank which man occupies in society.”

Independence from Spain and Portugal in the 19th century did not significantly change the prejudices and structures of the colonial era. Indigenous and Afro-Latin Americans continued to be at the bottom of the social hierarchy. In fact, some of the worst forms of abuse against these groups, amounting in some cases to genocide, have been carried out since Latin American countries became independent. These



Mayan Indians from Guatemala, who became refugees in Mexico, receive documents entitling them to own land in Mexico – an increasingly rare act of generosity by a host nation.

include campaigns of extermination against native peoples in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Paraguay.

Some of the descendants of the African slaves have suffered a similar fate.

Haiti shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic. Relations between the two neighbours have not always been easy because of historical and ethnic differences. Haitians, who tend to have darker skins than Dominicans, have crossed the border for decades, either to look for work or to escape violence and persecution in their country.

In 1937, in one of the worst instances of racially motivated violence in Latin America’s recent history, President Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic ordered his army to kill all the Haitians in the country. Some 30,000 people were killed in the course of a few days with machetes and clubs.

“The Dominican Republic’s government made the people believe that their country and culture was being taken over by the Haitians,” Haitian author Marie Chantale S. Déclama explains. “They warned that the mixing of the two nations would mean the end of the culture of the Dominican people. Generalissimo Trujillo devised a simple test for identifying Haitians from Dominicans by the way Haitians pronounced *perejil* (parsley). According to Trujillo, Haitians do not trill their r’s when speaking. When Trujillo gave the order to kill all the Haitians, his soldiers... simply had to ask them to say *perejil*.”

RECENT TIMES

FROM THE 1960s ONWARDS, POVERTY, unequal distribution of wealth and restricted civil and political rights led to conflicts in many parts of Latin America.

In Guatemala, for example, a brutal counterinsurgency campaign resulted in the internal displacement of an estimated one million people and led to acts of genocide being committed against indigenous Maya communities suspected of supporting left-wing guerrillas.

“Entire villages had been destroyed and all their inhabitants killed,” the UN-sponsored Guatemalan Historical Clarification Commission concluded. “The policy had been total destruction, not only ‘scorched earth’, but, in some cases, every human being had been killed, including women, children, babies and elderly people. Pregnant women and babies had been victimized with particular brutality... such atrocities could not be explained other than as an attempt to exterminate the ethnic group as such.”

Between 1981 and 1984, more than

In Guatemala, a brutal counterinsurgency campaign led to acts of genocide being committed against indigenous Maya communities suspected of supporting left-wing guerrillas.



GETTY IMAGES/US COAST GUARD/DP/411-0004

A US Coast Guard vessel pulls up alongside a boat carrying Haitian boat people.

200,000 Guatemalans, many of them indigenous Maya, sought refuge in Mexico.

After the 1996 Peace Accords, refugees began to return. By 1999, some 43,000 refugees had gone home with the help of UNHCR, while another 23,000 chose to stay in Mexico, where by and large they have been well treated. Many of the root causes of the conflict in Guatemala, however, remain. The Maya continue to face discrimination and are denied access to land, resources and basic rights.

TODAY'S REALITIES

FAR FROM BEING RELEGATED TO THE distant past, slavery and killings of indigenous people continue to this day in Latin America. The authorities in Brazil, for example, last year raided 183 farms in remote parts of the country and freed more than 4,000 people living in conditions of slavery. Official government estimates suggest that there are still more than 25,000 enslaved Brazilians, even though slavery was formally abolished in 1888.

In Colombia, a 40-year-old conflict

between the army, right-wing paramilitaries and left-wing guerrillas is badly affecting the country's one million indigenous people and there are fears that entire communities could disappear after being forced to flee their traditional territories. Indigenous culture is closely linked to the land, and forced displacement often leads to the total collapse of traditional authority and cultural patterns. Afro-Colombians also suffer disproportionately from the effects of the conflict.

Haitians, irrespective of whether they are fleeing poverty or violence, are still generally not welcome in the region. The United States immigration authorities, for example, treat Haitian boat people differently from Cubans. Whereas Cuban boat people are routinely asked by US Coast Guard officials if they have any concerns about returning to their country of origin, Haitians are not asked the same question. Instead, they themselves must take the initiative to express their fears while on the boat. UNHCR said it is concerned that, as a result of the application of this so-called

"shout test," Haitians may not be given sufficient opportunity to express their fears of persecution.

With the important exception of Colombia, armed conflicts have been resolved or have faded away in most of Latin America. Democracy has grown strong roots in the region, but prejudice and racism are still a fact of life, carrying with them the seeds of possible future conflict. Despite a high degree of racial mixing, most Latin American countries continue to be "pigmentocracies," societies where rights and resources are apportioned in accordance with the colour of the skin, as in the time of Humboldt.

In the words of Rigoberta Menchú, a Maya woman from Guatemala who won the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize for her struggle for the rights of indigenous people: "Latin America has a pluralist culture and if this plurality is not accepted – if instead intolerance, imposition, exclusion and the alleged superiority of one race prevails – then undoubtedly there will be wars in the continent." ■

Despite a high degree of racial mixing, most Latin American countries continue to be "pigmentocracies," societies where rights and resources are apportioned in accordance with the colour of the skin.

| PEOPLE AND PLACES |

Two new Assistant High Commissioners have recently taken up their posts at UNHCR, completing the UN Refugee Agency's top management quartet headed by High Commissioner António Guterres and Deputy High Commissioner Wendy Chamberlin.

Judy Cheng-Hopkins, from Malaysia, has been appointed as UNHCR's new Assistant High Commissioner for Operations. She comes with 27 years of UN experience, including a decade in Africa with the UN Development Programme in Zambia and Kenya, and various key positions at UNDP headquarters. She also served as the World Food Programme's Director for Asia, the CIS and the Balkans, and



UNHCR/S. HOPFER/DP/GEVA-2006

was responsible for major WFP emergency operations in Kosovo, North Korea and Afghanistan. Most recently, Ms Cheng-Hopkins served as Director of WFP's New York office where, in addition to dealing with UN interagency issues, she also set up and managed WFP's private sector fundraising in the United States. "I am sure that her wealth of experience will be of great benefit to UNHCR," High Commissioner António Guterres said of Ms Cheng-Hopkins. "Her field experience, management experience and knowledge of UN operations across a wide spectrum of humanitarian and development activities will be particularly relevant." Ms Judy Cheng-Hopkins, who took up her position on 15 February 2006, will be responsible for overseeing UNHCR's field operations.

Erika Feller, an Australian national, has been appointed as UNHCR's first ever Assistant High Commissioner for Protection. Ms Feller has more than 33 years of experience in international human rights and refugee law, a field in which she is a widely acknowledged authority. Her work has been published extensively in many refugee and international law journals. During her 19 years at UNHCR, she has served in a variety of capacities in the Department of International Protection, most recently as its Director. She has also served as UNHCR's Regional Representative for Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore, and earlier as Regional Coordinator for the Comprehensive Plan of Action for Indo-Chinese refugees in South-East Asia. Stressing that refugee protection is an obligation, not a choice, Ms Feller has pointed to some sharp contrasts in the current era: "One of high rates of voluntary return and falling asylum numbers, but also of protracted refugee situations and waning generosity on the part of certain host states. Abuse of children, violence against women, *refoulement* of refugees and restriction of basic rights, such as freedom of movement, are endemic in many displacement situations."



UNHCR/S. HOPFER/DP/GEVA-2006

Michel Paul Moussalli

UNHCR's former Director of International Protection Michel Moussalli died in Geneva on 13 January 2006, after a long illness. After joining UNHCR in 1961, Moussalli moved to Tunisia where he organized the repatriation of Algerian refugees to their newly independent homeland. Moving on to Ethiopia, Moussalli played a key role in the preparation and adoption of the 1969 Organization of African Unity's refugee convention. This was the first major legal agreement to explicitly extend refugee recognition to people fleeing acts of external aggression, occupation or foreign domination. After a spell in Belgium, Moussalli became UNHCR's Director of Administration and Management and finally a popular and highly respected Director of International Protection. Moussalli devoted his career to strengthening UNHCR's protection mandate, visiting countries worldwide to encourage their accession to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. He retired in 1992 but returned briefly the following year to serve as Acting Representative in Algiers and in 1994 as UN Special Representative on the situation of human rights in Rwanda in the wake of the genocide.



UNHCR/A. HOLLMANN/BW/GV-1992

Ray Wilkinson

After a long and distinguished career as a journalist, and eight and a half years as editor of REFUGEES magazine, Ray Wilkinson has retired. Building on his wide-ranging experience as a foreign correspondent, Wilkinson transformed REFUGEES from being a typical institutional publication into a magazine that aimed to present serious content with vividness and style. We wish him every success in his future endeavours.



UNHCR/VV. WINTER/DP/8/14-2005