

U.N. High Commissioner Highlights Refugee Protection

High Commissioner António Guterres asked nations to keep their borders open for people fleeing from war and persecution at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR) annual conference on refugees in October 2011.



U.N. High Commissioner António Guterres asks nations to keep their borders open to people fleeing war and persecution.

There is a growing concern about anti-foreigner sentiment that has been heightened during the numerous recent refugee emergencies. Challenges facing the UN-

HCR and other agencies have increased with the back-to-back succession of crises in the last year. The Commissioner depicts that the worst is yet to come.

This year marked the 60th anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention in conjunction with the 50th anniversary of the 1961 Convention of the Reduction of Statelessness.

Amid these milestones, election outcomes in Ivory Coast, political shifts caused by the ‘Arab Spring,’ and drought in the Horn of Africa are all contributing to a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented proportions.

The High Commissioner acknowledged the generosity of countries such as Egypt, Ethiopia, Italy and Malta, Kenya and Yemen in providing refuge for those who so desperately needed it. Despite this, Guterres warned that the global protection of refugees is being eroded with growing discrimination, the rise of racism, and xenophobia. “In anxious times such as the ones we are living in, messages of otherness and exclusion play on common fears of the new and unfamiliar,” he noted.

Guterres recognized that governments must respond to justified concerns of security and the social and economic requirements of their citizens, yet cautioned against the needs of refugees being overlooked. Refugees fleeing from their homes due to conflict, drought, or food insecurity should not become collateral damage of anti-immigrant sentiments.

United States Works for Reform of Nationality Laws that Marginalize Women

Refugees International hosted a meeting in October at the U.S. Institute of Peace to consider the issue of statelessness and the particular challenge it poses for women around the world. State Department Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs Maria Otero said that the United States is working for reform of nationality laws in at least 30 countries.

“In many cases, nationality laws permit only the father to transmit citizenship to his children,” said Otero. “And in other scenarios, nationality laws strip women of their citizenship upon marriage to a foreign spouse, or prohibit women’s foreign spouses from acquiring naturalized status.”

Lack of citizenship contributes to poverty and vulnerability. Without a valid citizenship document, children are hindered from attending school and may fall

victim to gender-based violence, trafficking and arbitrary arrest and detention.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has also placed women’s nationality rights as an important priority on the State Department’s agenda. Diplomats in various countries are encouraging their citizens to push for reform of nationality laws that discriminate against individuals.

“We know that these are tough, often complex issues,” said Under Secretary Otero. “But here today, and through our work around the world, we are laying strong foundations of un-

derstanding: that nationality rights—especially for women—are key to countries’ democratic governance, peace, stability and economic development.



Stateless Bidoun Mona Kareem (l) and U.S. Under Secretary Maria Otero (r).

In My Opinion...

Our Year In Review

As I look back on local and global developments that transpired in 2011, I recognize small but meaningful successes in a rapidly evolving economic and political milieu. The year has shown us fundamental and lasting changes in certain regions of the world—the consequences of which we will continue to feel for some time to come. As we acknowledged at our national conference, the 60th Anniversary of the U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 50th year marking the Reduction of Statelessness signify important universal achievements that serve as a beacon of hope for the millions displaced, and for those who advocate on their behalf.

Several regions in Africa have experienced major changes this year. In South Sudan, the promise of independence is now tempered with escalating tension at the



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northern border, creating a high volume of refugees in South Sudan and Ethiopia. Challenges to establishing a stable government continues to make the future uncertain. The global influx of refugees from Somalia has increased greatly due to famine conditions and political conflict between Al-Shabbab and the Transitional Federal Government (TGF). Regional response to the crisis includes humanitarian action and military intervention. The situation remains volatile with no clear way forward.

In Europe and the U.S., the economic downturn continues to wreak havoc on global financial systems. Middle- and working-class individuals have experienced prolonged hardship with little respite, further adding to the feeling of uncertainty about the future.

Yet a glimmer of hope prevails. The ‘Arab Spring’ that swept from Tunisia through Egypt and Libya has begun an unprecedented shift toward democratic forms of government. The transitions have been messy, resulting in the illegal detention of migrant workers and refugees, alarming stories of organ theft and blatant examples of violations of human rights. Although the ‘Arab Spring’ has come to symbolize a semblance of freedom for those who yearn for it, it is tainted by these failings to protect the most vulnerable among their communities.

Amidst stories of conflict and violence, I was also heartened to hear of the prestigious recognition of three activist women—current Liberian president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and fellow Liberian Leymah Gobwee, along with Yemeni Tawakkol Karman—as awardees of the Nobel Peace Prize in September. Their non-violent efforts in promoting peace, democracy, and fearless involvements in protecting human rights despite challenging circumstances are admirable.

Locally, a positive development was marked by the first ever Refugee Congress hosted by the UNHCR at Georgetown University. The meeting agenda focused on effective reform of policies related to refugees and the dissemination of reform suggestions to Congressional representatives. This inaugural meeting will continue to evolve with the participation of immigrants and refugees and their input on immigration policy.

I end this year with mixed feelings of pensiveness and cautious optimism. The challenges facing us are formidable, but we begin the preparations for a new year with the hope to overcome. I urge all to keep African refugee and immigrant issues at the forefront of our concerns. I dare to imagine a peaceful year ahead, one that offers respite to the many suffering from fear of persecution and physical threat. I look forward to a year where the spirit of community continues to prevail.

**Mental Health Assistance:
Screening Refugees for
Trauma Effects**

The United States refugee resettlement program focuses on refugees achieving integration partly through economic self-sufficiency. Refugee mental health needs are now considered an important aspect of integration. In order to address the special needs of traumatized refugees, it is vital for mental health screening to be included as part of the required medical exams.

This will allow for resettlement sites with appropriate resources to better serve refugees.

The Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) in St. Paul, Minnesota, has made this a priority. Since 1995, the CVT has received referrals of mentally ill refugees. This prompted the creation of an advocacy unit that promotes inclusion of mental health screening along with the required medical exams for refugees.

CVT is also currently collaborating with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and four refugee groups to develop a culturally appropriate mental health questionnaire for refugees. This will help to identify those who would benefit from mental health services and assist health care screeners to refer them accordingly.

One emerging local resource at CVT is the Healing and Partnership Project. Through this program, CVT trains refugee leaders in Minnesota to identify people who are suffering from trauma and direct them to services.

Resettlement agencies currently lack the proper tools to identify traumatized refugees. With the right support, they can further assist newcomers in their transitions to successful lives. Given their troubled pasts, most refugees would benefit from this mental health assistance. Additional resources are available at:

- The Center for Victims of Torture:
www.cvt.org
- National Institute of Mental Health:
www.nimh.nih.gov
- Services for Survivors of Torture:
www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/services_survivors_torture.htm
- Dept. of Health and Human Services:
www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr

Pre-Travel Security Checks Stall Resettlement Raising Migrant Voices

Refugees seeking admission to the United States have been faced with a hindrance to resettlement. Upon discovering a lapse in security in early 2011, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) halted the U.S. Refugee Program, canceling nearly all refugee travel to the country.

DHS stated that the interruption was not permanent. Yet U.S. admission numbers have been dropping significantly, leaving resettlement organizations anxious about short- and long-term implications. Hundreds of refugees who had already been interviewed and approved were told that the offer of resettlement had been rescinded. Many were told that they had not

passed the new “pre-travel” security clearance, and DHS was offering little explanation as to why. Final security screening appeals are unable to be lodged.

Those notified of de-approved status are left with few alternatives except to return to their original home countries, from which they had fled from violence and persecution. Because U.S. constitutional rights to due process do not apply for refugees overseas, DHS is not obligated to disclose the reasons behind its rescinded decision. The increased vulnerability of refugees caused by this process is one that continues to weigh heavily on refugee advocates.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) released its *World Migration Report 2011: Communicating Effectively about Migration* in December 2011. The report, which includes a review of migration trends and major policy issues of 2010/2011, notes that although this era of humanity has the highest record of mobility in history, migration remains one of the most misunderstood matters of the modern world. According to its findings, public discussions and distorted communication about migration, particularly during economically challenging times, present a negative depiction. This has only added to deepening discrimination and increasing hostility against migrants and migration-related issues around the globe.

The report argues that effective communication on the nature and socio-economic contributions of migration along with an effort to address public fears with factual findings would lead to a more meaningful public dialogue.

“It is all too evident that migration is often the catch-all issue that masks public fears and uncertainties relating to unemployment, housing, and social cohesion in host countries. Migration can also be blamed for the loss of human capital and for economic dependency in countries of origin,” says IOM Director General William Lacy Swing.

Swing emphasized how all societies faced with increasing diversity need to prioritize communication as an effective policy tool to inform the public. Mistaken perceptions, such as that illustrated in a 2001 U.S. public opinion poll, are telling examples: migrants were thought to be 39 percent, as compared to the actual 14 percent, of the population.

The report suggests key strategies for better communication, such as integrating diversity into mainstream media, thereby insuring representation of multiple viewpoints, and raising the voices and visibility of migrants through social media tools, to better counter negative stereotypes and restore balance to the public discussion.

Immigrant Self-Employment On the Rise

A growing number of immigrants are blending previously acquired business savvy with the tools and technology available in the U.S. to record small business successes. Leila Rodriguez, Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Cincinnati, documents this in her research “Traces of Home, Legacies of Culture: Business Development among Nigerian Immigrants in New York City” presented in November at the American Anthropological Association.

Rodriguez spent a year in New York interviewing 45 business owners and tracing Nigerian networks of suppliers, employees, and customers. Not surprisingly, she discovered that many were already entrepreneurs in their country.

Through tracing the movement of goods and the exchange of money, Rodriguez shows how wealth is generated and distributed within the network. Hiring practices included employing family members, thought by some to be more hardworking and loyal, to recruiting outsiders. Most expressed a preference for maintaining social distance from the customer base as close personal relationships were perceived to affect timely payments.

Funded by the National Science Foundation, the study provides a glimpse into how Nigerians, considered the largest group of African immigrants in the U.S., adapt and implement new small business models and strategies.



Small business owner shown here makes use of a laptop computer to track business transactions.

NEWS BRIEFS

Adopting Traditional Financing in the New World

Refugees come to the United States with dreams and aspirations for a better life. However, as new arrivals they have limited understanding about and access to basic financial resources. “Basically, they are facing the same financial challenges that low-income Americans face, but with the additional challenges of learning the language and culture,” said Molly Short, Executive Director of Journey’s End Refugee Services. Not to mention that as newly arrived migrants, refugees have no credit scores or financial history that would enable them to get bank loans.

To succeed in their new environment, most refugees have adopted financial know-how from their home countries. Relying on their networks, refugees use community micro-lenders, financial clubs, and other means of collective banking to supplement their income. Steve Stero, a Liberian native who was living on limited earnings, was able to purchase his first vehicle using this system. Like Steve, many refugees use communal banking to increase their assets and grow their credit score, which eventually allows them to partake in the mainstream economy.

Indebted Upon Arrival

Third-country resettlement offers a lasting solution for many displaced refugees who are unable to repatriate or integrate into the country of first asylum. The promise of a stable and permanent destination often makes this the most desirable choice. Yet third-country resettlement also has its pitfalls. The most daunting of these is the fact that every refugee admitted to the U.S. for resettlement is required to pay their own transportation costs.

Since most refugees do not yet have an income or viable assets, their only option is to obtain a loan forwarded by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) for this purpose. Upon arrival to the U.S., a family of four could conceivably owe IOM close to \$4,000 for airfare.

Advocates of the IOM loan argue that this is a good way to motivate resettled refugees to find employment and quickly become self-sufficient. Others maintain that with cultural and linguistic differences already posing formidable challenges, this debt presents an additional obstacle. Alternative options suggested include alleviating this financial burden, instead encouraging early self-sufficiency through an attainable savings

Documenting Pasts and Presents: Horn of Africa Refugees in America

Resettled refugees rarely get the opportunity to publicly share their stories and personal experiences. Convinced in the power of direct story-telling, Seattle-based writer Sandra Chait has collected stories of people from the Horn of Africa in her new book *Seeking Salaam*. From relationships between individuals to interactions between communities and across generations, Chait probes into changing issues of identity, religion, and ties to the homeland.

The book is based on 41 interviews of people from Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. Her findings illustrate that complex historical, political, and social ties and differences between communities are often transposed from their pasts to their new lives in the U.S.. Resettlement patterns and community relations are partly determined by these pasts. American host-community perceptions of Northeast Africans also affect experiences of resettlement and reception. By assembling these stories and affording them a voice, Chait illuminates refugee resilience while offering insights to American readers on the lives of newcomers.

Sandra Chait, a native of South Africa, is a former lecturer in English and African Literature at the University of Washington in Seattle.

FY 2012 African Refugee Admissions

As of December 31, 2011 ● Ceiling for FY 2012 is 12,000

Country of Origin	Refugees	Country of Origin	Refugees
		Sudan	164
Burundi	36	Tanzania	2
Central African Republic	36	Togo	8
Congo	8	Uganda	4
Dem. Rep. Congo	504	Zimbabwe	1
Eritrea	240		
Ethiopia	105	TOTAL	2,079
Gabon	1		
Ivory Coast	1		
Liberia	30		
Rwanda	18		
Sierra Leone	1		
Somalia	920		

Source: U.S. Department of State, PRM

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