

## **World Refugee Day - 20 June 2003**

### **Message from the JRS International Director Refugee youth: the present and the future**

June 20 is World Refugee Day, an occasion to reflect upon and raise awareness of the plight and suffering of an estimated 50 million refugees and displaced people worldwide. This year, the day has been dedicated to young refugees, with the official theme of "Refugee Youth, Building the Future". The decision to focus attention on this particularly vulnerable group of refugees is highly significant and important.

According to the UNHCR, youth is a term that groups together people between the ages of 13 and 25 – teenagers and those in their early years of adulthood. This is an age group that faces very specific dangers and is especially vulnerable during times of war and conflict, which is by far the main cause of displacement.

When conflict overcomes a nation, leading to large-scale displacement, the education of the young is normally cut short, sometimes depriving a whole generation of what is a basic right. Without an education, young people often feel a loss of self worth and a sense that they have had their life chances severely reduced.

Refugee youth also face other dangers associated with the environment of conflict. They are often separated from their families, or worse, traumatised by the loss of a parent or brother or sister. They can be exposed to exploitation, sexual abuse and violence, which leave deep scars that are very difficult to heal.

Forced recruitment into armed groups or forced labour in times of conflict are also dangers particularly associated with young people, despite International Treaties and Conventions outlawing such activities. The cost of such abuses is high. What future has a society or nation whose young people's lives have been ruined by war and displacement? What chance of future development has a community whose youth are without education and whose lives have been scarred by trauma, abuse or recruitment into armies?

It is the duty and mandate of organisations such as the Jesuit Refugee Service to protect young refugees from such abuses and to assist them to achieve their rights, such as education and health care during times of displacement as well as to provide them with alternative activities such as skills training and income generating activities, so that they may be afforded the chance of a better future.

On World Refugee Day, 20 June, let us focus our attention on all refugees, especially the young, and with resolve, renew our efforts at helping them to rebuild their lives and work towards a better future.

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