

Refugees

by Claire Powell and Dave Collett

What is a Refugee?

A refugee, defined by the United Nations, is a person who is unable or unwilling to return to their country because of a well-founded fear of persecution based on their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or because they belong to a particular social group.

Why Do They Come?

Most refugees flee their country to escape armed conflict. They often leave with their families and apply for asylum in another country. Many of them do not want to leave their own country but have no choice. The journeys they undertake to reach a safe place may be almost as risky as staying in their own country. They would do anything to escape their suffering; crossing deserts, mountains, seas and rivers, sometimes using dangerous means of transport. They also hide in parts of ships that are too cramped, too hot and too smelly for anyone to check. Many never arrive.

World Refugee Day

On the 20th June each year people celebrate World Refugee Day. An important part of this celebration is the award given to a person or group who excels in helping refugee causes.

To Help or Not To Help?

There are an estimated 14 million refugees and asylum seekers in the world. Some countries in the world, especially the rich, are adamant against allowing too many refugees coming into their country. One worry is that there may be too many of them seeking asylum therefore causing a great problem for these developed countries. Their next worry is resources. These refugees may fill their hospitals, their schools, take over their jobs as well as abusing their social welfare system. At the end of the day, some fear there could be no more resources left for the people of these developed nations. Another worry is the thought that the refugees might not be genuine. Also, the fact that the country they flee to is culturally different to their own makes the citizens of these developed nations feel that their culture is being stolen from them.

Criminal activity seems to be a growing concern. People worry that asylum seekers who arrive penniless and without any documents might be criminals or involved in acts of terrorism. In many countries, new anti-terrorism laws have made migration legislation much stricter. Increasingly, governments are locking asylum seekers in detention centres regardless of their status. Unfortunately, this causes further criminalisation as genuine asylum seekers resist what they see as injustice. However, protests and riots lead to criminal charges and prison sentences.

These negative assumptions are not true. First of all, numbers indicate that Asia and Africa has the world's highest influx of refugees. Secondly, most rich or developed countries' economy rely on these refugees as they are the ones who are often more than willing to do the kind of work that no one else would even think of. Furthermore, the migrants tend to be very hardworking and highly motivated at their jobs and are the backbone of agricultural labour. Thirdly, governments like to play with words such as 'crime' and immigration' to gain popularity with their citizens during elections. Moreover, after all the problems a refugee has faced fleeing his own country, the last thing he wants is to be mistrusted. Finally, it is absurd for the rich nations to claim that their culture is being swamped by refugees, considering that the refugees are in a minority there.

Perhaps politicians should remind themselves of the fact that, whether they are dealing with genuine asylum seekers or economic migrants, they are dealing with human beings, not numbers, and the people should be treated humanely.