

# A Global Campaign to End Refugee Warehousing

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The publication of this 43rd edition of the *World Refugee Survey* launches the U.S. Committee for Refugees' (USCR) campaign to end the warehousing of refugees: the indefensible practice of keeping refugees in camps or segregated settlements, deprived for years of the basic rights guaranteed in the UN Refugee Convention and without hope of a normal life. Over the course of USCR's 46-year history advocating for refugees, we have observed that more and more refugees worldwide are spending longer periods of time in such situations—to the point that there are currently more than seven million refugees who have been warehoused for ten years or more. We challenge this practice as illegal, immoral, and degrading and seek to expose it so that the world can put a stop to this waste of humanity. For too long the world has been blind to their plight and to their very existence.

Presently, more than half a million refugees from Myanmar have lived without the right to work or travel for up to 20 years in Thailand, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and India. More than half a million Sudanese are stuck in camps or segregated settlements that have been operating for two decades. Over the course of twenty-five years, more than two million Afghan refugees have been in exile in Pakistan and Iran. Finally, the case of warehoused Palestinian refugees throughout the Middle East pre-dates the Convention itself, with more than two million living in camps and urban slums deprived of their Convention rights.

Indeed, in the 53 years since the enactment of the UN Refugee Convention, warehousing has become so widespread as to constitute a global crisis. More than two-thirds of the planet's 12 million refugees are denied the right to earn a livelihood, access to education, the freedom to move about, or the right to step into a courtroom and seek justice when they are wronged—all of which are guaranteed under the Convention.

Despite the enormity of the problem, no world leader has made ending it their priority. Instead, terrorist attacks, wars, and other dramatic events have drawn our attention away from refugee situations before they are resolved. With each new crisis, the focus on previous ones fades. Refugee warehousing is the unfortunate by-product of our limited global attention span.

Even when protracted refugee situations have received attention, the focus has been limited to the three durable solutions: voluntary repatriation, resettlement, and permanent

local integration. For instance, in March 2004 the UNHCR meetings in Geneva addressed the prospects for repatriation in Africa but paid comparatively little attention to how refugees can be afforded their Convention rights while they await repatriation or other solutions. Refugees are entitled to the Convention's protection from the moment of their flight. Their exercise of these rights should not be postponed while the international community searches for durable solutions.

**Campaign against Warehousing** Warehousing will not cease until the international community adopts a new paradigm of what constitutes fair and humane treatment of refugees. Although improving the lives of refugees in accordance with the Convention will not be easy, it is no more difficult than preparing countries for repatriation, resettling refugees in a third country, or solving other complex problems that require commitment from host countries, donor nations, and humanitarian agencies.

The 2004 *Survey* examines the causes of warehousing as well as the problems associated with keeping refugees in camps or segregated settlements for long periods. It also examines how some host countries, including Zambia, Côte d'Ivoire, Syria, and Guinea, have afforded refugees some of their Convention rights. These examples deserve further study.

The global community can also learn from efforts like the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, which began in 1991 with a small coalition of human rights organizations. An idea that was initially dismissed as utopian grew rapidly in six years to capture the world's attention and gain passage of a critical treaty banning the use and production of landmines. Millions of landmines are still stockpiled worldwide, but production and use are down and there is increasingly widespread international rejection of landmines.

In the upcoming year, USCR will continue to visit camps and talk to refugees about the conditions they endure. We will work with local communities, refugees, advocates, non-governmental organizations, UN agencies, host and donor governments, and others committed to addressing refugee problems. We hope that the international community will arrive at a consensus that the practice of warehousing refugees is morally unacceptable and take responsibility to ensure that refugees enjoy all their Convention rights. The world simply cannot place the lives of refugees on indefinite hold. Only through the combined and sustained efforts of the international community will this intolerable practice end.

