



Photo credit: M.A. Bordas

## Growing Up to Nothing

by Lavinia Limón, President and CEO

**T**o our knowledge not one refugee has obtained their rights under the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Convention) since we published *World Refugee Survey 2004—Warehousing Issue*. This is disappointing but we are not surprised. When we began our anti-warehousing campaign many colleagues thought we were naïve. They said we didn't understand the complexities of armed conflict, political intrigue, the economics of developing countries, ethnic rivalry, and international indifference. But we were not naïve. We have been reporting about these complexities for 43 years. We simply decided to believe the world can and should do more to treat refugees like human beings.

It has been gratifying to see the endorsements of over 150 organizations and prominent individuals to the international sign-on Statement Calling for Solutions to End the Warehousing of Refugees. Throughout the year we have received support from people representing governments, international organizations, local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the general public, and refugees themselves. They agree that the current treatment of refugees must improve and are rightfully appalled at the long-term disempowerment and internment of refugees. They express heartfelt concern about the human consequences of warehousing. The general public is surprised that the warehousing

of refugees has been allowed to go on for so long and wants it to stop now. Virtually everyone agrees that warehousing must end and NGOs, editorialists, and scholars have called for governments to change policies on the treatment of refugees.

Donor nations point to the policies of host countries. Host countries point to the lack of support from the international community. UNHCR and other international agencies call for durable solutions.

We have observed this flurry of “burden-sharing” with both amusement and anger—amusement when we are emotionally detached and anger when we are emotionally connected to the wretchedness of refugees' lives. Of course, emotional detachment is our own refuge and cannot be misconstrued as analytical expertise.

Technology has added a new dimension to this discussion. Many refugees have access to media and the internet and have responded to the anti-warehousing campaign through emails to USCRI's website. They express amazement that their individual rights are even under discussion. They thank us for bringing their plight to the world's attention and ask how they can participate. Some express worry that asking for their right to work and freedom of movement will cause their host government to implement even harsher policies. Many read our reports of the interna-

tional discussion and ask when they will be able to take responsibility for themselves.

We are very cautious in our response to refugees. We too worry that they are vulnerable to harsh retribution if they criticize their caretakers and hosts.

We understand that no people have ever demanded their rights without strife and, sometimes militancy. Some refugees respond that they are already facing deprivation and hopelessness and have nothing to lose. But we counsel patience. We explain that good will exist throughout the various sectors responsible for their well-being and that peaceful change is possible. We hope we are right.

The reaction and discussion among people and organizations working on behalf of refugees is, no doubt, a necessary process to re-chart the course of international refugee protection. The authors of the 1951 Convention chartered a course based on individual human dignity but in the ensuing 50 plus years we have been sidetracked. We have been sidetracked into believing that political and economic considerations are more important than essential human dignity.

With the publication of *World Refugee Survey 2005—Warehousing, Inventory of Refugee Rights* we have begun evaluating and tracking the status of refugee rights throughout the world. We hope this information will provide policy makers with concrete information and spur changes that expand refugee rights.

We hope this inventory will move us past the discussion and finger-pointing about warehousing. Each of us must ask ourselves the question, "What should I do?" "What policies should I change or implement to end the warehousing of refugees?"

The answer to these questions may not be obvious or simple. Most of us feel we don't have the power or resources to change fundamental policies so we continue in our day-to-day activities convinced we are helping refugees even as they languish in camps or live furtive lives of poverty and fear in cities. But look into the eyes of these four Burundian refugee children in Tanzania. Think about what you will tell them about their future. Tell them how long they should wait for a normal life. Tell them they are growing up to nothing.

*Photo credit: JRS Tanzania/R. Cagatin*

