CATAWBA COUNTY | DIVERSITY COMMITTEE

Life as a Refugee

For the 32 million uprooted people around the world, a shortage or lack of the essentials of life - clean water, food, sanitation, shelter, health care and protection from violence and abuse - means that every day can be a struggle just to survive. This year, with the world economic crisis threatening to slash aid budgets and amid enormous global uncertainty, we need to ensure refugees are not forgotten. Of the millions of people forcibly displaced by conflict, persecution and natural disasters, everyone has a story to tell; they are real people, just like you and me, and they have real needs. Not so long ago, New Orleans led the nation in poverty, in children at risk, in illiteracy, in its murder rate. Then, as they fled together after Katrina, they became the second major movement of American refugees. Rather than shanties and camps, they were sheltered in homes and arenas. Refugee does not just refer to someone "over there" but can affect our own US citizenship.

A comprehensive assessment of the needs of refugees and other people cared for by the United Nations refugee agency revealed that 30 percent were unmet - a third of them in basic and essential services. Improvements in nutrition and water supplies, access to primary health care, strengthened child protection programs, better protection for women from sexual violence and abuse, and improvements in living conditions and sanitation facilities are just some of the needs that are not being met worldwide.

Refugee camps started all over Europe after World War II. They were located in schools, empty buildings and army barracks. They were temporary, for a residual group of people who had not resettled. Since then the situation has changed dramatically. Today refugee camps come in many shapes and forms. Many refugees now living in camps have lived there for a long time and cannot go home. The United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is in charge of camps.

Some camps are built in the most inhospitable, isolated and barren areas. They are supported by international aid, which is undependable, erratic and inadequate. Once camps are set up, governments tend to disengage from the lives of refugees, and the responsibility is shifted to the UNHCR.

There are many camps and they are getting very big. Organizers tried to keep the camp size at 3,000. But now for instance there are 90,000 refugees living in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya and in the Kahola district there are 30,000 to 40,000 refugees per camp. People are put in little tiny squares of land to build their houses and their latrines and they have no land. They live on top of each other. Some camps resemble prisons. Less than one per cent of refugees, a tiny minority, resettle

in the West, yet resettlement comes to dominate the thinking of all refugees. Normally refugees carry no ID card, but a ration card is assigned to each family. So if you are a refugee and get caught outside the camp, you cannot prove your identity. Refugee camps have a very authoritarian set up and people get arrested if they are found four kilometers out of the camps. Getting out of the camp involves a long process. You have to go to the camp leader, who is probably another refugee, and then, if he likes you, you might be able to get a letter from him. Then you go to the government official, who may be in the camp, or whose office may be miles away, to get another letter to take to the UNHCR, which then authorizes you to go to the city where you may find someone to help you.

It is an absolutely authoritarian structure. Some people have lived in camps for decades. This affects people differently; men are declassed and unable to fulfill their role as breadwinners for the family, so there are huge problems with substance abuse among men, and women have nothing useful to do. People serve their time like a prison sentence. An enormous amount of time is spent sleeping and you know what that means psychologically. Women have the duties of getting the water, finding the firewood. You hear a lot about rape in the camps and out of the camps. Unfortunately camps operate outside the legal structure. Eighty per cent of camp dwellers are women and children, although there are some men and young people. Women tend to collect other kids that have been abandoned as well as the elderly. They often struggle to find enough food to feed their families a meal out of their rations. Food is not always available in camps; weeks have gone by without food in Southern Sudan. Malnutrition is a major problem. Living in camps also poses problems for the socialization of children who are obviously going through the most crucial phases of their development. The only capital coming to the refugee camp is the food and selling the food to try to meet basic necessities is always a temptation for the refugees. They sell food to the locals or to each other. There is always some type of refugee economy within the camps. People try to make things themselves, to sell a few things and some refugees are employed for different kinds of jobs,

UNHCR does refugee determination, acting as a jury to determine whether asylum seekers are recognized as refugees or not. UNHCR has not recognized tens of thousands of asylum seekers as refugees, so these people have closed files, even though they are still refugees because they cannot go back to their countries, so they live in constant terror of the police. If the police find out that they don’t have residency permits or refugee cards they can get arrested.

The United Nations' (UN) World Refugee Day is observed on June 20 each year. This event honors the courage, strength and determination of women, men and children who are forced to flee their homeland under threat of persecution, conflict and violence.

We hope this article has given some insight into another segment of our world population. Refugees are among us. Torn From Home: My Life as a Refugee exhibit at the Hickory Museum of Art is an inspiring, hands-on journey in the extraordinary lives of the people looking for new life in a new land. This exhibit runs January 26th through May 2, 2010. This exhibit is traveling to 10 cities in the United States. It features seven themed areas: Home, Losing Home, Registration, Refugee Camp, Medical Clinic School and Going Home. The Diversity Committee had the privilege of touring this exhibit and wanted to inform county employees of its presence in the area and the people it represents.

(Some of this article was taken from Life in Refugee Camps by Olga Yold.)