

The State of the Refugee Highway 2015

Dzaleka refugee camp is in Malawi (Africa). The CIA World Factbook ranks the people of Malawi as the 4th poorest in the world. The average person makes \$1,000/year less than a person in Haiti¹.

Dzaleka wasn't always a refugee camp. It was originally a political prison. It was turned into a refugee camp in 1994 in response to a wave of refugees fleeing the violence and genocide in Rwanda, Burundi and DR Congo. Suffice it to say, Dzaleka is not a place to which anyone would flee if they had another option.

I was walking through the camp one day and heard a child clear her throat behind me. I turned around and this is what I saw...

See www.vimeo.com/iafr video clip – “Welcome (to Dzaleka refugee camp)-HD.mp4”

That little girl made my day. But her song and smile haunt me as well. While she whole heartedly welcomed me into her space, I couldn't help thinking how the world around her – the world I in which I live – refuses to offer her a place she can call home. She is one of the 59.5 million forcibly displaced people in the world.

Let me “paint by number” for a moment to try and help us get a basic idea of what is going on along the Refugee Highway today.

- In the past 3 years, the number of forcibly displaced people in the world has increased by 40%.²
- 1:123 people is forcibly displaced in the world.³
- 51% of them are children.⁴
- Three countries produce just over half of the world's refugees: Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia (53%).⁵
- If the world's uprooted people shared a common nationality, they would make up the 24th largest country in the world.⁶

Every day 42,500 people around the world are newly uprooted due to war and persecution.⁷ In the course of this 20 minute talk, 580 women, children and men will be forced to run for their lives. By the end of the Roundtable this week, 117,000 people will have been newly displaced.

Daily news headlines give us some exposure to the wars, persecution and violence that force people to flee their homes. But many refugee producing countries get little attention anymore – Colombia, DR Congo, Sudan, South Sudan, Pakistan and Central African Republic are all among the top 10 nations producing forcibly displaced people.⁸ Indeed, we are in the midst of an escalating global refugee crisis to which solutions are elusive.

The UN and Humanitarian Agencies are doing what they can to meet the essential needs of forcibly displaced people. They are stabilising their freefall by creating temporary safe places like refugee camps to which they can flee and in which their basic needs for security, water, food, shelter and healthcare can be met. But refugee camps are like hospital

¹ CIA World Factbook. Source: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2004rank.html#mi>

² UNHCR Global Trends 2014, page 5.

³ Introduction to the Refugee Highway (2015), media presentation produced by International Association for Refugees. Available at www.IAFR.org/iafr-multi-media.

⁴ UNHCR Global Trends 2014, page 3.

⁵ UNHCR Global Trends 2014, page 3.

⁶ UNHCR Global Trends 2014, page 2.

⁷ UNHCR Global Trends 2014, page 2.

⁸ Refugee Realities 2015, produced by International Association for Refugees. Available at www.IAFR.org/articles-handouts.

emergency rooms more than they are long-term solutions. The average amount of time people are living in displacement is now 17 years.⁹ No one should spend a lifetime in an emergency room.

But long-term solutions are difficult to come by.

The UN has identified 3 possible long-term solutions to displacement.

Solution # 1: Refugees can return home. This requires that the conditions that caused displacement are resolved. But refugee producing conflicts are increasingly protracted. The UN has identified 33 protracted refugee producing crises, most of which have lasted more than 20 years with no end in sight.¹⁰ The number of refugees returning home hit a 30 year low in 2014 (126,800).¹¹

Solution #2: Refugees can integrate into their country of refuge. The trouble is that 86% of the world's uprooted people are hosted by developing countries.¹² These countries cannot possibly absorb and integrate all of the people seeking refuge within their borders.

Solution #3: Refugees can be resettled to another country. About 105,000 refugees were resettled in 2014. That is less than 1% of the world's growing refugee population. Over 99% of the world's refugees were not resettled. 80% of those who were resettled were received by the US (73,000) and Canada (12,300).¹³ While resettlement is helpful to those lucky enough to be chosen, it is clearly not solving the problem of finding long-term refuge for the world's forcibly displaced. Refugee camp cemeteries testify to the lack of solutions for the festering wounds in our world.

Meanwhile, the UN and partner humanitarian agencies are struggling to meet the essential needs of refugees.

A refugee pastor recently wrote the following from a refugee camp in Africa.

"Most of us fled our countries due to rampant insecurity and persecution. The causes for our flight will never allow us to return to our homelands again. The way to Dzaleka was not easy. Each of our stories is a tragedy filled with imprisonment, intimidation, extortion, violence and many evils – especially for women. We lost everything. We had no other option but to accept whatever evil was done to us. It was the price we had to pay to flee our homelands and seek a place of refuge.

Upon our arrival, we were registered with the camp administration. They gave us a very small plot of land in the camp on which we were to build a small shelter – our new home. It is not easy work as we are not given any money or tools to build it.

One of the major challenges we face is that of food security. We receive a monthly ration of cornmeal, cooking oil, beans, and soap. We do not receive anything else – no sugar, paraffin, firewood, or charcoal. Our small ration is not even sufficient for a week.

This hardship tempts many to make bad decisions. It is especially difficult for women to persevere. Some engage with men in order to get things like body lotion, charcoal, clothing and food."¹⁴

⁹ CBC News: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/three-reasons-the-number-of-refugees-is-as-high-as-it-is-today-1.2651327>

¹⁰ UNHCR Global Trends 2014, page 11.

¹¹ UNHCR Global Trends 2014, page 20.

¹² UNHCR Global Report, 2014, page 2.

¹³ UNHCR Global Trends 2014, page 21-22.

¹⁴ 6/2015 letter from Emmanuel Full Gospel Church (Dzaleka refugee camp, Malawi) to 1st Covenant Church (Mpls) for World Refugee Sunday.

There are more problems than solutions. It is easy to feel helpless. It's little wonder that hundreds of thousands of refugees have come up with a 4th "solution" to their displacement – risk everything and turn to human smugglers to help them cross the Sahara desert and then the Mediterranean Sea to Europe – or cross Turkey and aim for the shores of Greece and later, Italy. Many don't make it alive.

In May (2015), IAFR hosted a webinar on The Refugee Crisis in the Mediterranean, during which a Somali refugee in Malta shared about his journey.

"My journey to Libya began in 2011. I left Somalia because of war. I went through Ethiopia (18 days) then to Sudan (for 1 month) and then I attempted to cross the Sahara (27 days). It was not easy. People die there. We saw them.

I arrived in Benghazi, Libya, with 4 friends from Eritrea. A man with a gun asked why we came there. They made us follow a car and took us to prison. I was jailed for 18 months. The jail was operated by warlords. They made me work for them.

I was released by a man who told him that if he worked on his farm for no salary, he would arrange for my freedom. It was worse to work for the farmer than it was to be in jail. The farmer often beat me. I have scars from this today. After 2 months I was freed.

Black Africans are not welcome in Libya. We suffer insults and worse. It would cost over \$2500 to return to Somalia, but less than \$1000 to take a boat to Europe. I was told where to find a man with a boat.

97 people were on my small boat. 5 were women – they were raped by soldiers. The boat was only 2.5 meters - plastic with an outboard engine. We had 20 liters of petrol. After 3 days/3 nights at sea all of our food was finished. People were crying. Large ships passed us by. Everyone was praying. There was no other choice. We spent more than a day without drinking.

A Maltese military ship rescued us and brought us to Malta."¹⁵

I'm sure that most of us are sufficiently overwhelmed by these realities. So let me try and create a little hope. I'd like to offer 3 reasons to not lose heart as we seek the protection and welfare of forcibly displaced people.

From the deportation of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden to the exile of the Apostle John on the Island of Patmos, the Bible is filled with stories of forced displacement. And throughout the biblical narrative, we find God often at work in special ways among displaced people.

In her darkest moment, God revealed himself to **Hagar** as the God who sees and the God who hears. The trafficking of **Joseph** to Egypt led to God's rescue of Israel in a time of severe famine. **Esther** discovered God's special purpose for her life in exile. **David's** years on the run from King Saul profoundly shaped his relationship with God, to whom he often referred as "his refuge". **Daniel's** faithfulness in exile became a revelation of God to a powerful nation. **Philip's** displacement from Jerusalem brought the gospel to Samaria. **Aquila and Priscilla's** forced displacement from Rome to Corinth brought them across the path of the Apostle Paul.

In spite of the overwhelming complexities of the present global refugee crisis, we have every reason to believe that God is actively engaged in the lives of those on the Refugee Highway – just as he has been ever since we left the Garden.

A second reason that we need not lose heart is because refugees are more than people in need.

¹⁵ 19 May 2015 IAFR webinar, "Refugee Crisis in the Mediterranean".

The press and politicians focus on the desperation and needs of forcibly displaced people. But when we get closer to those forced to flee their homes and countries, we find that they are resourceful and resilient people. Step into any refugee context and you'll find refugees caring for one another in creative ways.

Although off of the radar of the church at large, refugee churches can often be found providing care and support for the most vulnerable people in their midst – orphans, widows, single mothers, the disabled, the sick and the elderly.

I interviewed a refugee pastor last October. Listen to him share how refugee churches are transcending their circumstances and caring for others – even those in the host community outside the camp.

See www.vimeo.com/iafr video clip – “Interview with a refugee pastor-HD.mp4”

Although refugees are among the most vulnerable people in the world, they are much more. They are an important part of the solution to the crises in which they find themselves. They work tirelessly to care for one another, rebuild community, and create a sense of hope and meaning. They are more than people in need. They are valuable partners in ministry.

A third reason that I do not lose heart is the fact that local churches can be found all along the Refugee Highway. And I'm not the only one who hopes that local churches will play a key role in seeking the welfare of forcibly displaced people. Antonio Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, has expressed similar hope. Listen to his words.

“...for the vast majority of uprooted people, there are few things as powerful as their faith in helping them cope with fear, loss, separation, and destitution. Faith is also central to hope and resilience. Religion very often is key in enabling refugees to overcome their trauma, to make sense of their loss and to rebuild their lives from nothing. Worship and religious traditions help uprooted people reconfirm their identity as individuals and as members of a community. Faith provides a form of personal and collective support among victims that is crucial for their ability to recover from conflict and flight. As such, faith contributes much more than many people think to the protection and well-being of refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR and eventually to finding durable solutions...”¹⁶

Our local communities of faith have much more to offer than many of us realize. The world is in crisis - and hoping that the church will be part of the solution. May the world see God at work in and through us.

While politicians and mainstream culture talk of building walls to keep people out, the church is called to roll out the welcome mat to foreigners – including refugees and asylum-seekers. The Bible repeatedly conveys God's expectation of his people to pay special attention to the needs of the orphan, the widow and the alien. And what alien is most like the orphan and the widow, if not the refugee?

May the song of the young refugee girl in a forgotten refugee camp, be our song here as well.

*Welcome! Welcome, welcome, welcome!
I love you!*

¹⁶ From the Opening Remarks by Mr. Antonio Guterres, UNHCR, at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, 12 December 2012. UNHCR Dialogue on Faith and Protection. Transcript available online at <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=search&docid=50c84f5f9&query>