

20 June 2024
World Refugee Day

Dear fellow sisters and brothers who follow Jesus Christ,

My heart is heavy but not without hope as I write this to you.

We find ourselves facing many existential challenges in this century. One of the global issues defining the 21st century is forced migration. Pick any election in the world this year, and you will likely find that the people defined by words like “*refugee*” and “*asylum seeker*” have become a decisive factor influencing voters. I am writing to you to clarify realities, address misrepresentation and confusion, and offer biblical perspective concerning this issue.

You may be asking, what gives me the right to speak to this issue? The short answer is that I have been serving as a missionary to refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people (IDP) since 1980. While I read the news and research related issues, I also have an abundance of firsthand experience from which to draw¹.

There were less than 20 million² refugees³, asylum seekers⁴, and internally displaced people⁵ in the world when I started serving refugees back in 1980. When I founded International Association for Refugees (IAFR) in 2009, the UN identified 43 million⁶ forcibly displaced people (FDP)⁷ worldwide. At the end of 2023, the UN documented over 117 million. The majority are women and children⁸.

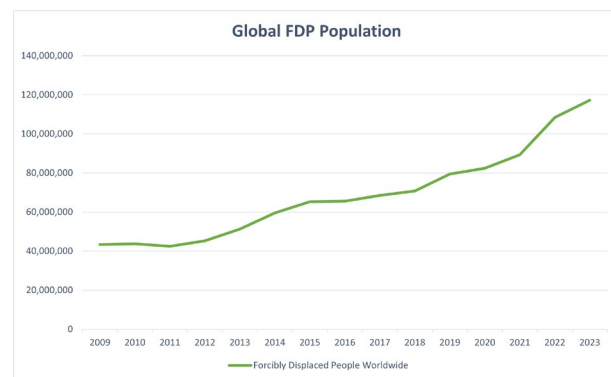


Table 1 Statistics from the UNHCR Global Trends.

Because these people have lost place in the world, they are easy to misrepresent. They have no voice. They are invisible. They can't vote. Influencers, politicians, and the media describe and define them for us. They are often portrayed as a problem and as a menace to society. They become scapegoats for unemployment and crime. Some politicians put themselves forward as being able to protect us from

¹ See a short ministry biography with more details at the end of this letter.

² According to www.statista.com, there were less than 8.5 million refugees in 1980. The number of asylum seekers in those days never rose above 1 million. I believe it is safe to say the total number of forcibly displaced people worldwide was significantly under 20 million.

³ Refugees are people who are outside of their country of nationality and have a well-founded fear of losing their freedom or life if returned. They fled from war, persecution, and gross violations of human rights.

⁴ Asylum seekers are people who have fled their country of nationality for the same reasons as a refugee but whose claim for protection is still in process or not definitively evaluated.

⁵ Internally Displaced People are people who have fled their home but not their country for the same kinds of reasons that cause refugees to flee their country of nationality. They have not crossed an international border but often live with refugee-like vulnerabilities in their homeland.

⁶ Source: UNHCR, Global Trends 2009, page 1.

⁷ Forcibly Displaced People include refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people. See footnotes 2,3,4.

⁸ UNHCR, Global Trends 2023, page 2.

these “dangerous people”. **My sisters and brothers, we need to be wise and discerning when we hear anyone misrepresenting vulnerable and voiceless people in order to advance their personal agenda.**

We must keep in mind that **asylum seekers and refugees are vulnerable people in need of refuge. By definition, they have been forced to flee their homes and homelands due to war, persecution, and gross violations of human rights.** They are the uprooted and vulnerable ones needing protection. We do not need to protect ourselves from these children, women, and men. We can embrace the privilege of offering them protection in their darkest hour.

Those who misrepresent asylum seekers and refugees often reinforce some common misunderstandings. Some think “*they should get in line and wait their turn*” to enter our country. But there literally is no such line for asylum seekers. Others feel that they should stay in their country of origin or in some other country as they wait for their case to be determined. These perspectives fail to understand that **these people fear that their freedom and lives are in danger.** As they set out to find a country of refuge, they are extremely vulnerable and have few resources with which to survive.

I often hear people call asylum seekers “*illegal aliens*”. This is untrue – even if they did not enter our country through an official border crossing. The US and most European countries have signed the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *UN Refugee Convention*. Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “*everyone has the right to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution*”. The Refugee Convention clarifies that “*refugees should not be penalized for their illegal entry or stay*”, recognizing “*that the seeking of asylum can require refugees to breach immigration rules*”. Please note that 1) asylum seekers are not “illegals” even if they did not enter a country with valid papers or through an official entry point and 2) that nations like the USA and most European countries have obliged themselves to submit to these documents and therefore have a moral obligation to provide protection to people in need of it.

A complicating factor many nations face is that some migrants who are not *forcibly* displaced pose as asylum seekers. This is an abuse of the asylum system. Nations rightly need to vet whether people are legitimate asylum seekers. But we should not punish genuine asylum seekers because some people abuse the system.

It is becoming increasingly common for politicians to address this issue in an over simplified manner that causes great harm and puts people’s lives at risk. They use a broad brush to deter all sorts of migrants – including legitimate asylum seekers – from crossing their borders. They put up fences and walls and even militarize their borders. This seemingly strong response appeals to many voters, even as it violates their nation’s commitment to respect the human right to seek asylum. They choose to sacrifice people in need of protection in order to prevent other migrants from entering illegally. A more nuanced response is needed that rejects any “solution” that denies forcibly displaced people their human right to asylum.

As a fellow follower of Jesus Christ, I encourage you to refuse to support any option that would result in denying refuge to people who are running for their lives. We must support creative options that do not further endanger them.

The heart of Christ must beat within the body of Christ. As the physical representation of Jesus Christ in the world (the body), we are to show up in the world as Jesus – as an unmistakable force of love, hope, and life. **When we speak up about issues like immigration, we must ask ourselves if we sound like Jesus.**

“I was thirsty and you gave me drink.
I was hungry and you fed me.
I was a stranger and you gave me lodging.
When I needed clothes, you gave me something to wear.
When I was sick, you took care of me, and when I was in prison, you visited me⁹.”
- Jesus

We need to ask ourselves; how would Jesus finish this sentence:

I was seeking protection and refuge, and you...

In December 2012, I was pleasantly surprised when I heard the then UN High Commissioner for Refugees tell a group of faith leaders from around the world that the UN needed our help. He said that the UN and its partners are doing a pretty good job when it comes to helping people survive forced displacement. But he went on to say there is *a crisis of hope* among the people they serve and that the UN “*does not deal in the currency of hope*”. He spoke to religious leaders in the room and said that he hoped we would live up to our claim to be able to strengthen hope among forcibly displaced people.

This is my hope as well.

My heart is heavy as I see the unprecedented scale of forced displacement continue to escalate in our world. I am discouraged whenever I hear faith leaders describe these vulnerable people as a threat.

But I remain hopeful. I have seen a growing number of churches and followers of Jesus choose to engage this issue from the starting point of love rather than fear. My hope is that you are among them – and if not, that you will choose to join with us now.

May the peace of Christ be with you.

Your brother,

Thomas Albinson
President, International Association for Refugees

A brief biography

1980 – 1995	Pioneered a refugee ministry in an Austrian refugee camp with Slavic Gospel Association.
1995 – 2009	Served as Director of Refugee Ministries with International Teams (now One Collective).
2001	Helped launch the Refugee Highway Partnership with World Evangelical Alliance.
2013 – 2022	Served as Ambassador for Refugees with WEA.
2009 – Present	Founded International Association for Refugees (IAFR) and serve as President.

⁹ Matthew 25:35-36, First Nations Version