

CCSJ calls for justice for Refugees

The Catholic Commission for Social Justice (CCSJ) urges citizens to reach out in love and compassion to our brothers and sisters who are the victims of famine and/or war in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. Millions of people are fleeing their homes due to e.g. political upheaval, poverty, famine, environmental degradation, and climate change e.g. in Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan, Eritrea, Nigeria, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

The horn of Africa is facing the worst drought in 60 years. The media brings into our homes the faces of starving children and adults who have walked for days, weeks and even months seeking food and water. Many die on the way. The media reports that "families fleeing the drought-affected areas are forced to abandon the elderly, the sick, the weakest children and pregnant women" (www.catholicculture.org).

L'Osservatore Romano reported on 14 July that more than **2 million babies** in the Horn of Africa are malnourished and need urgent assistance. The report states: "A half a million of these babies are in imminent danger for survival, with long-term consequences for their physical and mental development. More generally, it is estimated that 10 million people need immediate humanitarian assistance, more than double the number that the UN agencies are currently able to assist.

As Pope Benedict XVI said on Sunday 31 July, "It is forbidden to be indifferent in the face of the tragedy of the starving".

Let's remind ourselves that the theme for this year's World Refugee Day on 20 June was: "*Real people, real needs.*" It is sad that during the year when the world marks the 60th anniversary of the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the humanitarian crisis facing refugees around the world grows by the minute. The UN Refugee Agency estimates that there are more than 43.7 million persons who have been forcibly displaced from their homes (June 2011 figures). This number includes about 15.4 million refugees. The rest include asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, and stateless persons.

CCSJ urges all countries not to close their borders but to welcome "the stranger" and to put in place legislation, policies and practices that will enable them to meet the needs of all those who have been forcibly displaced from their homes. Each one is a child of God who possesses fundamental human rights and whose inherent dignity must be respected, protected and promoted.

As the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon said on World Refugee Day (20 June 2011): "The burden of helping the world's forcibly displaced people is starkly uneven. Poor countries host vastly more displaced people than wealthier ones. While anti-refugee sentiment is heard loudest in industrialized countries, developing nations host 80 per cent of the world's refugees. This situation demands an equitable solution.

"No one wants to become a refugee. No one should have to endure this humiliating and arduous ordeal. Yet, millions do. Even one refugee forced to flee, one refugee forced to return to danger is one too many. On this year's World Refugee Day, I ask people everywhere to spare a thought for the millions of children, women and men who have been forced from their homes, who are at risk of their lives, and who, in most cases, want nothing more than to return home or to start afresh. Let us never lose sight of our shared humanity."

The Catholic News Agency reports that "Archbishop Antonio Maria Vegliò - head of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People - told Vatican Radio on 21 June, 2011, that the commission 'has been assisting millions of refugees over the last 60 years.' But refugees today face new challenges because of changes in political climates across the globe. 'There is a hardening attitude of countries so that it seems that refugees are the problem and not the reasons why they have to flee.'

"Despite neighboring countries struggling to accommodate refugees and victims of political violence, Archbishop Vegliò insisted that closing borders 'is not the answer. Countries should guarantee the rights of the refugees and act according to the spirit of the 1951 Convention, to assist those in need, to welcome them, and treat them on the same level as citizens.'"

Refugees face significant challenges on a daily basis e.g. death by hunger, drowning or suffocation on overcrowded boats as they seek to escape from terror, exploitation, human trafficking, child labour, rape, torture, and murder.

The world is learning more and more about the humanitarian crisis from people such as UK Guardian journalist Kristin Davis in her article: "Kenya's Dadaab refugee camp is a haunting place" (14 July, 2011). The following is an extract from her very moving article:

"I was unprepared for what I saw at the Dadaab camp in Kenya. Totally unprepared for the utter sense of panic in the people I met there. These were the newcomers, people who could not fit into the largest refugee camp in the world. Because they could not fit, they were left outside in the nothingness that surrounds the camp. Their unbelievably difficult journey towards food, water, and shelter had led them to none of those things.

"They were panicked because many had lost children during the journey to Dadaab, and many children were dying on arrival. Past the point where food and water could bring them back to life. They were panicked because hyenas circle the area every night looking for the weakest of the children.

The women I met are mostly alone, trying to protect babies and small children by themselves with nothing but thorny twigs. Most of these women have collected "unaccompanied minors" along their journey to the camp. These children are no relation to the women who now try to keep them alive. They are probably orphans. But that will take some time to sort out.

"In the meantime, kind women who have been robbed of their every possession,

including their clothes, are extending their warm embrace to sometimes seven extra orphans. These women's faces haunt me. Their strength and determination inspire me. I am filled with wonder at how they are finding their strength. I asked them to tell me their stories so that I could tell the world what is happening to them, but I fear that I will never be able to do enough for them.”

As Catholics, we are called to **SEE, JUDGE, ACT**. There is much that we can do to assist e.g.

- pray,

- donate money to reputable organizations to ensure that donations reach those who need assistance

- engage in advocacy work to prevent countries closing their borders to refugees and urge developed countries to share responsibility for the millions of refugees - 80% of whom are in developing countries. See below:

Please **pray** for the victims of famine and for those who have been forcibly displaced in our world. Worship material can be accessed at e.g.

<http://www.cafod.org.uk/worship/refugees>.

A Prayer for Refugees (http://www.invitationtoprayer.org/prayers_refugees.html)

Almighty and merciful God,
whose Son became a refugee
and had no place to call his own;

look with mercy on those who today
are fleeing from danger,
homeless and hungry.

Bless those who work to bring them relief;
inspire generosity and compassion in all our hearts;
and guide the nations of the world towards that day
when all will rejoice in your Kingdom of justice and of peace;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

You can also **donate money** to provide food aid, water, medical supplies etc. to organizations such as:

<http://www.cafod.org.uk/estafrica> or

<http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c368.html> or

www.redcross.org.uk *or*

www.caritas.org *or*

www.refugeesinternational.org/donate

Chris Bain, Director of the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), says:
“Every donation is having an impact on the front line of this crisis. You can literally make the difference between life and death for thousands of people over the coming weeks.”

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION RING LEELA RAMDEEN ON 299 8945