

THE TRUTH CLINIC

AMERICA'S CRISIS OF CONSCIENCE

By: James W. Breedlove

While the Bush administration is marking time trying to defend its current Iraq surge policy the human tidal wave of refugees is pouring across the neighboring borders seeking solace, respite, and relief from the oppressive misery.

They number approximately four million and the flood of refugees is growing at an astronomical rate. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 50,000 per month are fleeing Iraq with the majority crossing into Syria and Jordan.

Recently this crisis worsened when Syria and Jordan tightened residency rules for Iraqi refugees raising fears that mass deportations will begin. Both countries have indicated they cannot sustain supporting the legions of human debris.

While the Iraq refugee crisis is in the current spotlight the world refugee problem is not new. Throughout history, people have fled their homes to escape persecution. There are an estimated 10 million refugees in the world; an increase of 14 percent in one year. If the number of internally displaced persons (those that have not crossed an international border) is included the worldwide refugee population is 23 million.

In the aftermath of World War II, the international community responded to their collective failure to provide safe haven to refugees fleeing genocide at the hands of the Nazi regime with an agreement containing non-refoulement.

Non-refoulement is a principle in international law that addresses protecting refugees from being returned to places where their lives or freedoms could be threatened. Non-refoulement forbids the expulsion of refugees into an area where they might be again subjected to persecution. This was codified within the 1951 Geneva Convention and 1967 Protocol. The binding agreement was ratified by 140 countries.

However, in the years since ratification, many of the wealthy industrialized member nations have either reneged or significantly hedged on their commit-

ment to protect refugees. Some have even adopted hostile and restrictive policies that subject refugees to arbitrary arrest, detention, and the denial of social and economic rights. In the worst cases, non-refoulement has been violated and refugees are forcibly returned to their home countries to face the very persecution they fled.

The United States of America is a prime violator of refugee human rights principles. Having engaged in a pre-emptive war of choice that directly or indirectly exacerbated this massive displacement, the U.S. has a clear and compelling duty to take the lead in addressing the crisis its actions have precipitated.

In the four years since the war in Iraq was initiated the U.S. has taken in a total of 701 refugees all of which had applied for refugee status prior to the fall of Saddam Hussein. Last month only one Iraq refugee was cleared to enter the country.

Recently the State Department announced a program to resettle 7,000 Iraqi refugees in the U.S. by the end of 2007. However, administrative problems with the program will reduce that number to an estimated 2,500. One of the excuses given by the government is the unanticipated 4-6 months that it takes for a refugee to clear security. In the meantime Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Sweden, and Australia have collectively taken in millions of refugees with no significant security complications. Yet America has done little to help or relieve the human and financial burden borne by refugee benefactors in the past four years. Not only has the U.S. underfunded its own refugee program, but it cut its support to UNHCR from \$19.9 million in 2005 to \$7.9 million in 2006. Yet America justifies spending Five hundred billions dollars supporting devastation and destruction of Iraq and making refugees of its people. America has a moral obligation to assist in alleviating the Iraqi refugee problem since its sanctions, invasion, and occupation wiped out the Iraq economy and drove the vast majority of the population into dire poverty. Add the civil conflict that resulted from pitting the three major ethnic and religious groups against each other and the seeds were sown for the great Iraq refugee crisis. Americans once were numbed by the riveting video footage that showed the punishing, cruel, and devastating horror that befell the refugees not only from Iraq but also from other countries. Now the starvation, deprivation, and mutilation has become so accepted in our psyche that we barely wince when we see the hollowed, hopeless eyes of the traumatized

and terrified refugees huddling in their own filth while waiting for the peace of death to ease their pain. Just two weeks ago Americans witnessed the inexorable and excruciating struggle for life of innocent little children hidden away in the dark and desolate wasteland of an abandoned Iraqi orphanage. Yet we do not challenge our leaders who speak noble but hypocritical words about peace, democracy, and brotherhood and do little to stop the continuing human suffering. In the midst of this desperation and chaos it seems that America has lost all sense of who we were and forgotten the humanity that once symbolized America's moral leadership to the rest of the world. America is mired in a crisis of conscience.

We need to rediscover our moral conscience even as we insulate our political conscience to justify a senseless quest for world domination.

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