



GLOBAL SISTERS REPORT

A project of National Catholic Reporter

SEEKING REFUGE



Global Sisters Report brings
a sharper focus to the plight of
refugees through this special series,
which follows the journeys
refugees make.





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Introduction

GSR Staff

More than 68 million people had been displaced from their homes because of factors such as war, threats from gangs, natural disasters, and lack of economic opportunities at the end of 2017, the highest number of displaced since the aftermath of World War II. Of those, the United Nations considered 25.4 million to be refugees: people forced to leave their countries because of persecution, war, or violence.

Global Sisters Report brings a sharper focus to the plight of refugees through this special series, Seeking Refuge, which follows the journeys refugees make: living in camps, seeking asylum, experiencing resettlement and integration, and, for some, being deported to a country they may only vaguely remember or that may still be dangerous.

Though not every refugee follows this exact pattern, these stages in the journey are emblematic for many — and at every stage, Catholic women religious are doing what they can to help.

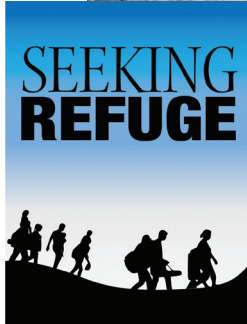


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■ Mercy Sr. Marilyn Lacey greets a South Sudanese refugee at a refugee camp in northern Uganda in January 2018. Ten years ago, Sister Marilyn founded Mercy Beyond Borders, a nonprofit group that helps educate girls and support women's entrepreneurial projects in South Sudan and Haiti. (CNS/Courtesy of Sr. Marilyn Lacey)

SEEKING REFUGE



Sisters' refugee ministries light the way forward

GSR Staff

For the past several weeks, Global Sisters Report has focused on the specific stages in the journey of refugees taken by an estimated 25.4 million people around the globe.

At every stage in our Seeking Refuge series, we found sisters and people working with them. They aid refugees in settlements and camps in Uganda and Jordan and assist asylum-seekers in the United States. They help resettle refugees in Europe and the U.S. heartland and find ways to work around increasingly hostile government policies designed to repel those who seek safety and economic opportunity. They restore dignity and a sense of hope to people whose dreams are dashed by deportation.

For many, this is a decadeslong ministry, but in our reporting this year, we found a new urgency and a new inspiration.

Pope Francis has made the care of migrants and refugees a major focus of his papacy. No other religious or political leader has done as much as the pope in calling attention to the moral dimensions of the current refugee dilemma and in reminding the world of our shared obligations to others.



In voicing the Vatican's backing of the first global compact on migration debated recently at the United Nations, Archbishop Bernardito Auza, the Vatican's representative at the United Nations, spoke of the four verbs Francis evokes in reference to migrants and refugees: "to welcome, to protect, to promote and to integrate."

Auza said U.N. efforts to respond to the challenges of migration are based "on the firm foundations of these principles that guarantee respect for the human dignity of all migrants." That this was done in a cooperative spirit is a reminder that even though the U.N. is an imperfect institution, it may be able to show us new and hopeful ways countries can work together to effect change.

The words of Pope Francis and action of the sisters demonstrate that the solution prescribed by the governments of the United States, Hungary and others — to block migrants at their doors — is no solution.

Wars (as in Syria and South Sudan), challenges caused by climate change (in Haiti and Zimbabwe), and political crises (in Honduras and Nicaragua) cannot be willed away. Countries must work together to tackle these seemingly intractable problems. Until then, migrants and refugees will continue to leave their homes in search of peace, stability and new opportunities.

It's important to be reminded that few people would leave home if they had a true choice. Deprivation or desperation leads someone to board an overloaded boat and sail across the Mediterranean Sea toward the unknown, to walk through the Sonoran Desert or pay smugglers thousands of dollars to cross multiple borders in search of a better life.

Politicians will try to exploit our fears, telling us that our resources are limited, that "they" are coming for our jobs, that "they" are changing the long-established and somehow superior culture, that "they" are asking for something they didn't work for, that "we" stand to lose somehow. We must resist this. Our Seeking Refuge series illustrates how communities and countries can be strengthened when strangers are welcomed and integrated.

The testimonies of migrants and refugees who have

left their homes and countries because of war, political conflict, economic dislocation, the effects of climate change can seem overwhelming, particularly with a 24-hour news cycle that inundates viewers with images of desperate adults and frightened children. It is easy to look away, to declare the challenges of migration someone else's problem. But we should not. We cannot. Sisters show us the way, and much is possible.

A recent Leadership Conference of Women Religious newsletter on the issue of family separation and detention in the United States outlined four action steps and suggestions to support immigrant families:

Pray: Organize prayer vigils and ask pastors to include prayers for migrants in Sunday liturgies.

Speak up: Contact government representatives to oppose repressive legislation and advocate for humane policies.

Take action: Contact local Catholic Charities offices; join the Share the Journey global solidarity campaign with migrants and refugees.

Learn more: Read Justice for Immigrants' backgrounder on the cost of family separation and other related readings. Recent columns from Srs. Janet Gildea, Tracy Kemme and Nancy Sylvester also offer insights, inspiration and practical suggestions on how to help change minds and hearts.

Francis, quoting from the Beatitudes, reminds us that "the great criterion ... on which we will be judged" is: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

These words inspire and the work of sisters and the larger Catholic humanitarian network — Caritas, Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Charities, Catholic Legal Immigration Network Inc. and Jesuit Refugee Service — give us the means to act on this inspiration.





SEEKING REFUGE



■ Moises García farms coffee in the hamlet of Zapote in western Honduras, where he says at least 20 people have left in 2018. (David Agren)

For Hondurans, staying home is more perilous than taking the migrant path

David Agren

María's nightmare started with gang members demanding that her husband pay a "war tax" — a euphemism for extortion — on a cargo truck he owned. He always paid the 6,000 lempiras (\$250), but gangsters killed him anyway, bursting into their San Pedro Sula home two years ago and dragging him away. He was found dead shortly after, with signs of torture and six gunshot wounds to the head.

María, 29, fled with her three children, all under the age of 10, to another part of Honduras. Then, just months later, her brother — who had been deported from the United States 18 months earlier — was also killed by gang members. Figuring she was next, María fled the country with another brother.

"We left the next day with 2,000 lempiras [\$84] ... practically nothing," she said during an interview at the offices of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras.

She left her children with their grandmother, fearing they would suffer too much on the journey, and headed to the U.S. María made it as far as Tabasco state in southern Mexico. There, she was detained and deported by Mexican migration officials, though her brother "ran faster than me," she said, escaped and made it to the U.S.



María, a pseudonym to protect her identity, is among the thousands of Central Americans attempting to escape violence and poverty but ultimately deported back to the country and conditions they fled. The northern triangle countries of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras rank among the deadliest in the world, with the homicide rate at times topping 80 people per 100,000.

Even with tougher U.S. immigration policies and a route through Mexico full of risks such as kidnapping, robbery and rape, incentives to leave are strong, observers in Central America say. They cite three main reasons for the outward migration: violence, poverty and plans for family reunification, though each of the three countries has different dynamics. as teenagers.



■ Scalabrinian Sisters Joana da Silva (left) and Lidia Mara Silva de Souza administer the Returned Migrant Attention Centers in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, Honduras. (David Agren)

The violence forces many to flee, said Scalabrinian Sr. Lidia Mara Silva da Souza, director of the Honduran bishops' Human Mobility Ministry, which attends to migrants transiting the country and those returning, involuntarily or otherwise.

"The biggest problem is extortion. We all pay it," she said. Such is the practice in the neighborhood where the Scalabrinian sisters live, Silva said. "In the payments we make to private security companies, extortion is included, and they have to pay the gangs, so we all pay."

Women have fled Honduras in larger numbers in recent years, Silva said, often to protect their children, who are preyed upon by gangs or forcibly recruited—Boys become foot soldiers while girls are required to become gangsters' girlfriends against their wills.

"It's to save their children from gangs," she said. "The issue is violence because these women not only work to feed their families, but they have to pay extortion — and their children are at risk."

A Dose of Dignity

Those seeking refuge face numerous obstacles. Families are being turned away before they can reach the border to ask for asylum. Those who managed to cross the U.S. border found their children at risk when a "zero tolerance" policy announced by the Trump administration in April separated more than 2,300 children from parents. The policy provoked outrage and has since been rescinded; a federal judge ordered that children be reunited with parents. Now under tougher U.S. policies, domestic and gang violence will no longer typically qualify for asylum claims.

Into this climate of violence, deportees are arriving back in Honduras in massive numbers. The Observatorio Consular y Migratorio de Honduras has counted 39,585 returned migrants arriving between Jan. 1 and July 15 (almost all from the United States and Mexico) — 44.7 percent more than during the same period in 2017, according to Honduran newspaper *El Heraldo*.

The three Scalabrinian sisters from Brazil run two Returned Migrant Attention Centers at the airports in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. The centers receive planeloads of migrants several times a week and help returnees with having IDs reissued, finding transportation or offering medical and psychological help.

Mostly, though, the sisters try to offer a warm welcome, serving the migrants coffee and *baleadas* — Honduran specialties of flour tortillas and red beans — and a dose of dignity for people arriving with their dreams dashed and "devastated," Silva said.

"Something I believe is pastorally fundamental when we speak of migrants and refugees and displaced peoples is looking them in the eyes so they feel that they are important, that they have dignity, that they feel they matter," Silva said.

Those who have been deported often can't return to their former neighborhoods because the threats they fled remain. Moving to a new area is risky because the gangs



■ Fr Germán Navarro greets parishioners in the Copán department of western Honduras. (David Agren)

look suspiciously at newcomers; those previously living in zones dominated by rivals are assumed to be enemies.

Since returning to Honduras, María occasionally works processing coffee. She tried to start a small retail business with seed money from a nongovernmental group, but a new set of extortionists forced her to abandon those plans before she even opened.

María still receives telephone threats, she said, connected with her late husband's business. "The gangs always have someone deep inside the police," she said. That's why her family never reported her husband's killing, even though he was a physician. It's also why many Hondurans distrust the authorities.

"These criminal groups can find anyone," said Jaime Flores, coordinator with the Observatory for the Rights of Children and Youth of Honduras with Casa Alianza (Covenant House in Latin America.) "They have a network that can find you wherever you are."

Ingrid Alvarado worries about that. She fled northern Honduras in February after the Mara Salvatrucha MS-13 — which disputes the control of neighborhoods with the rival Calle 18 gang — demanded that her 14-year-

old nephew join its ranks. "They said that if my nephew [who lived in her home] didn't join, I would pay with my life and my children's lives, too."

She and her nephew made it through Mexico, where she says she escaped being raped twice, by riding small buses to the U.S. border at El Paso, Texas, where they requested asylum.

Alvarado, 26, says her nephew's asylum claim is still being processed. She abandoned her claim after three months in detention, saying, "I couldn't take it any longer," along with worries about her two children, ages 4 and 7, whom she left with her grandparents. She returned to Honduras in May to a new neighborhood, controlled by Calle 18. The mere fact she had lived in an area dominated by MS-13 makes her suspicious to them, she said.

Warnings by U.S. officials, most recently by Vice President Mike Pence, attempt to dissuade migration. Honduras' First Lady Ana García recently tweeted photos of her talking to separated families in Texas, along with the admonishment, "Don't take the risk of the migrant route." Honduran officials encourage in-

vesting the money in starting a small business, even though extortion is commonplace and police protection nonexistent. (The foreign ministry didn't respond to an interview request. Security at the Returned Migrant Attention Centers denied access to visitors.)

Central Americans know the risks. The Scalabrinian sisters minister to families of migrants killed in Mexico by drug cartels and those who lose limbs from falling under the "Bestia" freight trains they steal rides atop in Mexico.

"What happens on the way to the U.S. border would be less grave than what they live here," Flores said of the migrants' thinking.

The poor fund the poor

A wave of political unrest and repression followed a coup in 2009 that ousted then-President Manuel Zelaya. President Juan Orlando Hernández won election in 2013 amid allegations that money embezzled from the state social security system funded his campaign. Another spate of violence erupted after his disputed re-election late last year. The unrest prompted an estimated 30 percent increase in outward migration in early 2018, Silva said.

Social and economic factors also push people to leave. Mining concessions and other megaprojects are displacing populations in parts of Honduras. Inequality has increased: Honduras ranks as most unequal country in Latin America and sixth most unequal country in the world, according to the World Bank.

Elites in Honduras enjoy tax breaks, such as on profits on fast-food restaurants, at the expense of people in lower economic classes, said Ismael Zepeda, economist with Foro Social de Deuda Externa y Desarrollo de Honduras (FOSDEH), a nonprofit public policy organization. Electric bills have increased, while the sales tax rose to 15 percent from 12 percent.

Remittances from migrants provide much of the "macroeconomic stability" in the country, and many Hondurans work in the informal economy, where "studies show most people earn less than the minimum wage," Zepeda said.

"The poor are the ones that fund the poor," he said. "The extra 3 percentage points [of sales tax] fund the main anti-poverty program."



■ Ingrid Alvarado takes a hair-dressing course for returned migrants in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. (David Agren)

No northern triangle country does especially well in attending to people who live in poverty or returned migrants, said Elizabeth Kennedy, a social science researcher in Tegucigalpa. But in Honduras, "this is close to a corporate state. They don't provide services for their citizens and they even talk about farming out the services — and do so with great pride."

Kennedy's previous research of children fleeing neighboring El Salvador published in 2014 showed violence was a factor in the majority of migration cases.

"Violence in these three [Central American] countries is targeted. It's not generalized," she said. "Seventy to 80 percent of homicides are someone being shot on their way to work, in their car, in their home, sleeping in their very bed ... it's clear then that person was targeted."

Gangs control entire neighborhoods and enforce their own rules on the population, she said.

"Gangs prefer that one person from each of the [neighborhood] households is in some way associated with them ... that lessens the likelihood they will be reported," Kennedy said. "The gang believes that it is benevolently providing protection for its family, so of course you

would pay them a small amount in return [extortion] for that.”

Additionally, “what’s in the neighborhood belongs to the gang,” she said gang leaders believe. “They feel that the girls and women in their neighborhood are their property and they have a right to use them. ‘You belong to us. You live here. You’re supposed to be part of us’ ... that’s why [boys] can be forcibly recruited.”

Outward migration is felt in rural areas, too. In the hills of Honduras’ western Copán department (state) many in the local population grew sugar cane and coffee on small plots but find prices unattractive and the costs constantly climbing. In the hamlet of Zapote, 20 people have left in 2018 from a population of just 200 families, local coffee farmers said.

“If the price of coffee goes up, these people in the United States will return,” said Moises García, a coffee farmer who previously picked carrots in Canada under a temporary work program and was able to expand his landholdings in Honduras with the earnings.

Drug cartel activities are common in the region, which lies on the transit route from South America to Mexico. While those leaving insist they’re doing so for economic reasons (many are loath to cite drug cartels as the reason), locals speak quietly of people fleeing because of threats.

Fr. Germán Navarro, a pastor in Copán, said the number of intentions at Mass for people en route to the U.S. has increased in 2018. Some stop by to ask for a blessing, but many just leave, sending him messages from Mexico, asking for prayers as they encounter tough situations.

Roberto, 24, was among those heading north. He lost much of his land after a relative died and left debts for which his family was the guarantor. He could earn the money in the United States needed to get the land back. Earlier this year, he paid a “coyote” \$7,000 to take him to Houston; a cousin and six friends also paid the same smuggler.

They rode the length of Mexico in a trailer, and upon reaching the U.S.-Mexico border, waited in a safe house for two weeks. Roberto, who kept his name private for safety, suspects the human smugglers were part of a drug cartel. They were waiting for an illegal shipment, he said, and “used us as a decoy” as they moved the drugs across the Rio Grande River into the United States.

Roberto was caught and deported back to Honduras in May, facing even deeper debts from his attempt to leave. But one person in his group made it, which Roberto attributed to “luck.”

Now with no way to escape given his small land holdings and the poor prices for sugar cane, he ponders his fate.

“I was destroyed,” he said of his return. “Knowing how things went, knowing all the money that I owe, you think ‘how?’” he said, his voice trailing off.

As for María, her children are, for now, keeping her in Honduras, she said. But she confesses a temptation to leave again — “when I get desperate.”

David Agren covers Mexico as a freelance correspondent for Catholic News Service.





SEEKING REFUGE



■ Kids watch horseback riders during a Beef Empire Days parade in Garden City, Kansas, on June 10. GSR photo / Dawn Araujo-Hawkins

As resettlement agency in Kansas closes, other doors open

Dawn Araujo-Hawkins

For months, Dominican Sister of Peace Janice Thome has been thinking about what she'll do when the Garden City, Kansas, location of the International Rescue Committee closes this September.

For four years, the local IRC office has been a valued resource for the many refugees who end up in the small Midwestern meatpacking town. It's been a hub where newly resettled refugees could find things like education and food and housing assistance. But come September, it will be one of dozens of casualties of President Donald Trump's new policies aimed at stifling refugee resettlement in the United States.

Last year, the Trump administration capped the number of refugees allowed to resettle in the United States at 45,000, the lowest number since the White House began capping admissions in 1980. Then, in February 2018, the State Department told agencies that any locations resettling fewer than 100 refugees per year — like the Garden City IRC office — would need to downsize or close.

In shuttering resettlement agencies, the Trump administration is echoing a political ethos that first began brewing in Kansas. In 2015, Republican Sam Brownback, then governor of Kansas, signed an executive order prohibiting state agencies — and any organization receiv-

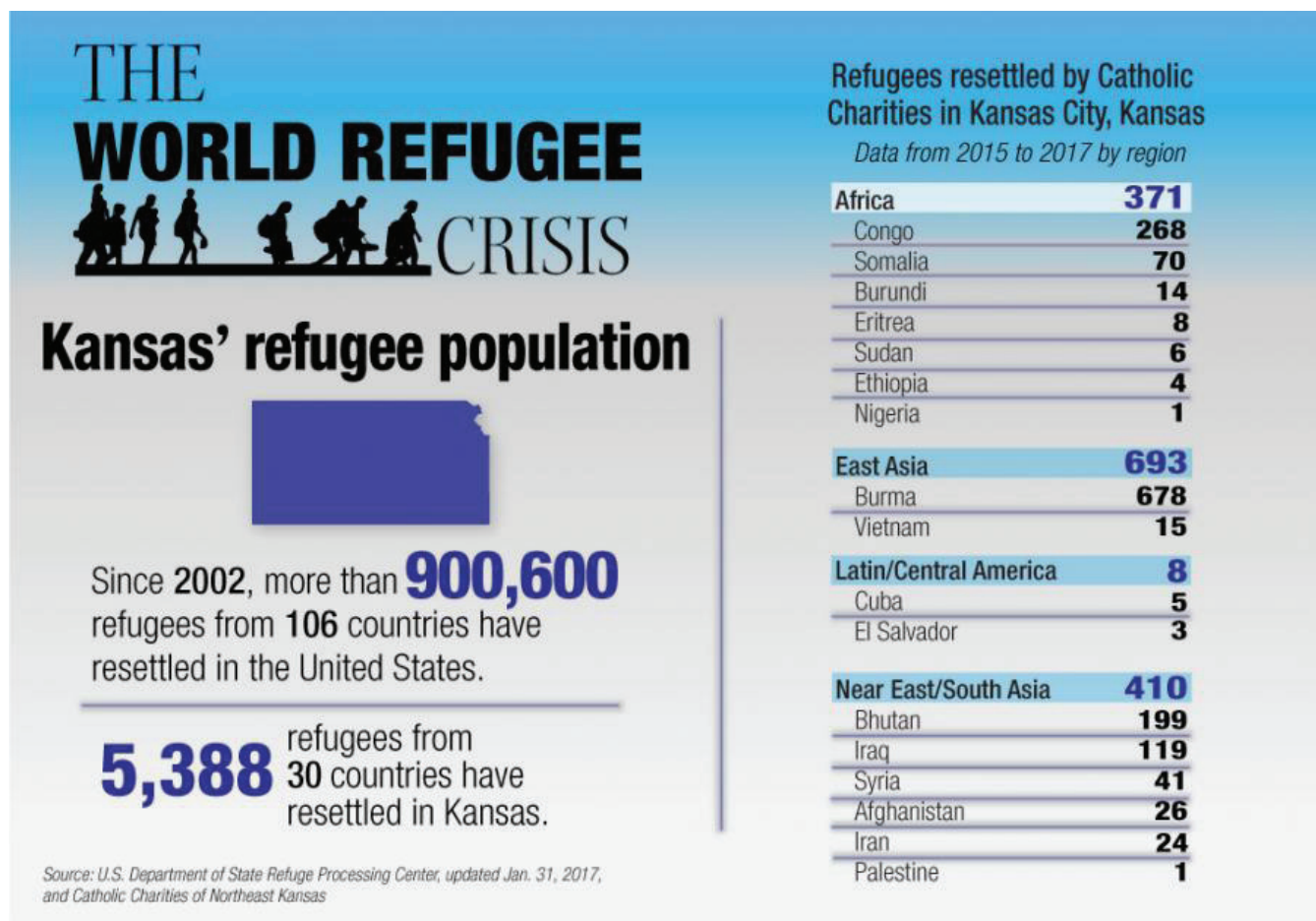


ing grant money from the state — from helping Syrian refugees build their lives in Kansas.

At first, Brownback's move wasn't distinctive. Three days before, a group of gunmen and suicide bombers in Paris killed 130 people in six coordinated attacks. When a passport belonging to a Syrian refugee (later determined to be counterfeit) was found next to the body of one of the suicide bombers, it set off a maelstrom of anti-refugee rhetoric in the United States; on the day Brownback signed his executive order, 25 other governors announced their states would no longer accept refugees from Syria.

Brownback's policies didn't stop refugees from coming to Kansas — no governor has the legal authority to wall off his or her state — but it did lob the state into a moral battle over the its obligation to those seeking refugee in the U.S.

Sr. Esther Fangman, a Benedictine Sister of Mount St. Scholastica, served as a volunteer counselor for refugees in Kansas City, Kansas, for almost a decade before she was elected prioress of her community last summer. She said in the aftermath of Brownback's policies, her refugee clients reported an uptick in children being bullied in school and in adults encountering discrimination.



Then, in January 2016, Brownback expanded his original executive order to prevent state resources from being used to help refugees from any country come to the Sunflower State. Four months later, he withdrew the state from the federal refugee resettlement program, making Kansas the first state to do so for “security concerns.” Texas, New Jersey and Maine would follow suit.

And then there was the violence. In October 2016, three men were arrested for plotting to bomb Somali refugees in Garden City. Then, in February 2017, a man shot and killed an Indian engineer in a Kansas City suburb after yelling at the engineer to “get out of my country.”

“Because of what’s happened in the [state] government the past two years, there is much more fear,” Fangman said. “The dream of the United States is



that you have a chance to make it here. Now, all of a sudden, that begins to shift. They begin to wonder: Will my children have a dream? Will they make it?”

Meanwhile, other Kansans have countered the violence and xenophobia with an outpouring of support for refugees. In the aftermath of Brownback’s policies, Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas — the largest resettlement agency in the state, based in Kansas City — has seen an influx of volunteer requests from people who want refugees to know they are welcome in the state, said Rachel Pollock, director of the organization’s refugee and immigration programs.

“It’s honestly been challenging for us as a resettlement agency,” she said. “It’s a great problem to have, but we have more people wanting to engage than we know what to do with.”

Pollock said the refugee aid community in Kansas has rallied to make up for the state’s withdrawal from the federal resettlement program. Because it was necessary to have a central agency that could administer the federal money coming into Kansas for refugees, the

IRC office in Wichita utilized a federal program that allows a private entity to step in for the state and created the Kansas Office for Refugees, known colloquially as KSOR.

And while the switch in partners has forced local agencies to quickly adopt a brand-new way of doing business — a challenge Pollock said is hard to put into words — she said there has been a silver lining. Refugees were never the state’s sole focus, she said, and resettlement work was just one of many issues for which they partnered with outside agencies. “But the Kansas Office for Refugees is dedicated to this work, and they specialize in the work,” she said.

Welcome to the Sunflower State

Kansas isn’t a major primary resettlement destination. According to data from the U.S. State De-



■ Brookover Feedlots in Garden City, Kansas GSR photo / Dawn Araujo-Hawkins



partment's Refugee Processing Center, about 5,300 refugees from 30 countries were resettled in Kansas between 2002 and 2015, most fleeing hunger and civil unrest in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or ethnic and religious persecution in Burma, also known as Myanmar. In comparison, California, the No. 1 resettlement destination in the U.S., resettled 3,100 refugees just in 2017.

About 75 percent of the refugees who come to Kansas are placed in the state's urban centers: Wichita and Kansas City, as well as suburbs part of Kansas City's metro area. A few are sent directly to rural Kansas, but many more move to agricultural locales like Garden City, Dodge City and Liberal after first being resettled elsewhere in the United States.

Thome, whose ministry of presence with refugees and the economically poor in Garden City is about to enter its 22nd year, said there's a pull toward secondary resettlement in rural Kansas because of the numerous meatpacking plants. Refugees are expected to secure employment within eight months of coming to the United States, she said, and while meatpacking is notoriously dangerous, it's one of the few jobs refugees can get quickly.

"It doesn't take much English to work at a packing plant," she said.

Albert Kyaw's first job in the United States was in 2007 at the SugarCreek Packing Company in Pittsburg, Kansas, a southeastern college town with a population of about 20,000. Kyaw had fled his native Burma in 2002 after he was arrested for reporting state labor abuses to the International Labor Organization. His wife and three kids joined him in a Thai refugee camp two years later before they were all resettled in Kansas.

Today, Kyaw, who was a teacher in Burma and Thailand, works as a Burmese translator for Garden City Public Schools. He likes Kansas and thinks it's a good place for refugees because "job availability is everywhere." In fact, he thinks the job market in Kansas is so favorable for refugees that they'll keep coming, if not as primary resettlers, then certainly as secondary migrants, no matter what the politicians in Topeka do.

"I think that doesn't matter much," he said, laughing.

Of course, Thome said, it's easy to be optimistic in Garden City. It's diverse — more than 22 percent of Garden City's residents are foreign-born, according to the latest Census data — and it's a welcoming community.



■ Albert Kyaw in a Garden City hotel GSR photo / Dawn Araujo-Hawkins

There are still Trump campaign flags waving atop local businesses, and the surrounding county voted decidedly for Brownback's re-election in 2014, but refugees and immigrants are integral to Garden City's economy. And that, Thome said, changes things. She's quick to point out that 2016's would-be bombers were not local; anyone in Garden City harboring anti-refugee sentiments would be smart enough to keep that information to themselves.

"But the attitude about refugees and immigrants here in our area is not the same throughout the state," she said.

Looking toward the future

The battle lines have been drawn, but it's hard to say where Kansas goes next. Brownback left the state in January to become Trump's ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, but Pollock said she doesn't think any of his policies will be rolled back. She's never heard of a state withdrawing from the federal resettlement program only to rejoin it later.

Brownback's successor, Jeff Colyer — a former International Medical Corps surgeon who's twice been to Syrian refugee camps in Jordan — has been mum on the issue of refugees since assuming the office in January and did not respond to GSR's requests for comment.

Colyer hopes to be elected to his first full term as governor in November, but he first has to get past Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach in the GOP primary August 7.

Unlike Colyer, Kobach — the early frontrunner in the gubernatorial race — has been open about his refugee policy. Featured on his campaign website is a column

he penned for the conservative website Breitbart News in June 2017 about the need for a temporary ban on all refugees coming to the United States.

"The refugee program must be halted temporarily so that 'extreme vetting' protocols can be put in place," Kobach wrote. "In a different day and age, such severe screening might not be necessary. But that is not the time we live in. America is under attack, and the refugee program has become a convenient tool for terrorists."

As part of Trump's immigration policy transition team, Kobach apparently floated a plan to ban Syrian refugees from entering the United States. He had previously made a national name for himself by co-writing an Arizona law that made it a crime to be in the state without documentation.

Whoever wins in November, resettlement workers in Kansas agree there's not much that person could do, officially, to make the state more unwelcome to refugees. But the next governor has the potential to further fan the flames of xenophobia that Brownback lit. And that — as Harold Schlechtweg, advocacy coordinator for the International Rescue Committee in Wichita — told GSR, would be "terrible."

Fangman is not convinced politicians in either Washington or Topeka will do the right thing and undo what's been set in place. But she hopes regular Kansans will step up, as some she knows already have, and open their hearts to the refugees who will become their neighbors.

"There was a time 40, 50 years ago that the United States was about what we could do for others. That's not the image that's being projected today," she said. "Refugees leave their country only because it's not safe and they fear death. Their courage is something I admire tremendously and is an inspiration to me."

There was a time 40, 50 years ago that the United States was about what we could do for others. That's not the image that's being projected today."

— Esther Fangman, Benedictine Sister of Mount St. Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas

Dawn Araujo-Hawkins is a Global Sisters Report staff writer. Follow her on Twitter: @dawn_cherie.





SEEKING REFUGE



■ Naw Sar Eh Do, left, and Niang En Chin laugh as they practice taking their diploma in their left hand and shaking the principal's hand with their right for their graduation from North Side High School June 8, in Fort Wayne, Indiana. (GSR photo / Dan Stockman)

Fitting in without losing cultural roots, Burmese refugees advance in Indiana

Dan Stockman

Niang En Chin was in second grade when her family fled their home in Myanmar.

Niang's family is from the ethnic Chin minority, which is persecuted in Myanmar. Most Chin are Christian, having converted under British colonial rule, and suffer at the hands of the military regime ruling the country, which prefers the Buddhist majority.

Niang, now 18, has thrived in Fort Wayne, Indiana, where her family was settled in 2010. She graduated as one of the top 10 students in her class at North Side High School in June and plans to attend Indiana University in the fall, her first step in her plan to become a doctor.

Niang never wants to forget her roots, she said, but what she remembers most about Myanmar is fear: fear of starving, fear of not being able to get an education, fear of the police.

Now, Niang and her Burmese high school friends have a different concern: Losing their language and culture as they try to integrate and succeed in a new society. Niang can speak her native Burmese language and can read a little bit of it, but she cannot write in it.



America has long been known as a melting pot, but those who work with refugees say that idea misses the point. In a melting pot, the ingredients lose their individuality and become one with the whole. Rather than assimilation, they say, the goal should be integration — to be part of the whole without losing cultural, ethnic and religious identity.

But refugees trying to integrate into a new society are often so focused on fitting into a world where everything is different that cultural identity becomes a secondary concern, said Margaret Distler, executive director of the St. Joseph Community Health Foundation in Fort Wayne, a sponsored ministry of the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ.

Distler's work allows her to see the often invisible but profound change that happens as a refugee integrates into a new society.

"There's a point — usually when they've been in the country about three years — where they go from living day-to-day to doing some planning," she said. "Once you learn how to live, you start looking forward. You go from, 'How do I survive?' to 'How do I thrive?'"

As of 2016, about 6,000 Burmese refugees have been settled here since 1991, after Myanmar's military crushed a pro-democracy uprising in 1988 and tens of thousands of Burmese fled to refugee camps in Thailand and Malaysia. Others are Muslim Rohingya and Christian Chin fleeing religious persecution.

Rohingya began arriving in Fort Wayne in 2013 and now number more than 1,000 — the largest Rohingya community in the United States, reports the Indianapolis Star. The Burmese mosque built here in 2015 was the first Burmese mosque constructed in the world in more than three decades.

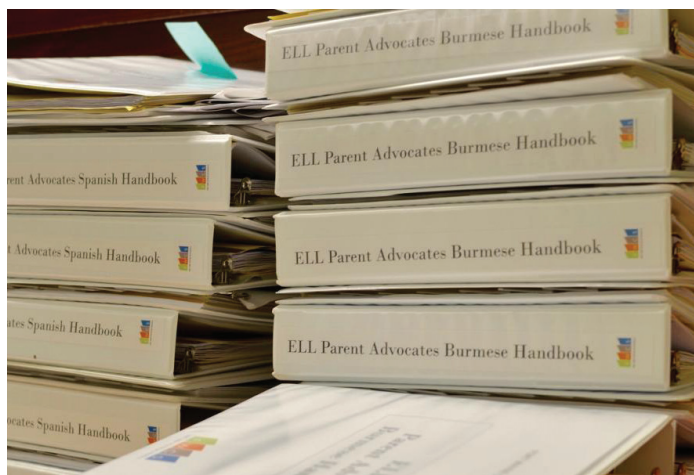
Today, the total number of Burmese in Fort Wayne is closer to 20,000 because of children born to Burmese refugees and secondary migration, in which Burmese who had been settled elsewhere moved to be near relatives or the large Burmese community in Fort Wayne, said Kyaw T. Soe, a Burmese translator in the area. Fort Wayne's total population is approximately 266,000.

The Poor Handmaids are an integral part of the story of Burmese refugees in Fort Wayne. Working with Catholic Charities, the official resettlement agency in Fort Wayne, their St. Joseph Community Health Foundation created and funded the Burmese Advocacy Center, which from 2008 to 2013 coordinated assistance to the thousands of Burmese refugees resettled here before officials decided it wasn't needed anymore.

The Burmese Advocacy Center was a one-stop gateway to 10 different agencies helping refugees, such as state assistance, volunteer interpreters and job training.

"We were the local convener of services," Distler said.

The number of Burmese refugees arriving peaked in 2007 and 2008, when more than 1,400 Burmese refugees arrived; since then, the numbers have been as low as 40 in 2012 and nearly 300 in 2015, The Journal Gazette reported. They have fallen off in recent years as democratic reforms in Myanmar have caused fewer Burmese to seek asylum; in 2014, the United Nations' refugee agency stopped accepting new applications for resettlement to the United States from Burmese in nine refugee camps in Thailand.



■ Handbooks for the parent advocates of English Language Learner students whose native language is Burmese in the parent advocate office of the Fort Wayne, Indiana, public schools (GSR photo / Dan Stockman)

“Every parent – myself included – our biggest fear is our children losing our language and culture. It is priceless.”

– Kyaw T. Soe, a Burmese translator in FortWayne, Indiana



The large numbers arriving in 2007 and 2008 strained the city and county's social services, Distler said, and the Burmese Advocacy Center not only allowed refugees to find the services they needed in one place, but also allowed agencies to coordinate and target those services while avoiding duplication. Though Catholic Charities provides refugees with an apartment and a list of basics, there is much they still need and need help to find.

"Their needs were extensive," she said. "They had very little income when they came here."

Yet another challenge

Every challenge refugees face trying to integrate seems to involve trade-offs, even language, Niang said. Children not yet in school may be fluent in Burmese or one of Myanmar's many ethnic languages, but not English; teens like her are afraid of losing their native language but have to concentrate on being fluent in English; and adults may struggle to learn just enough English to get a job, she said.

Some ethnic Burmese who were born and raised in Fort Wayne speaking, reading and writing English are on the other side: struggling to learn the Burmese language, which they have never spoken or read.

Soe, a translator for Fort Wayne Community Schools, teaches Burmese language to Burmese who have lost it or never had it.

"If they cannot read and write in Burmese, they can't get back to Burma, they can't communicate with family members, and they can't help their parents here," Soe said.

Language is also a key part of culture, and while the refugees gave up almost everything when they fled Myanmar, many are determined not to give up their cultural identity.

"Every parent — myself included — our biggest fear is our children losing our language and culture," Soe said. "It is priceless."

Some struggle to integrate for the rest of their lives. The longer a migrant spent in a refugee camp before resettlement, the longer it takes for integration, Distler said. Age is a factor, too: People over 40 don't integrate into society as quickly as younger refugees.

"Parents would focus on their kids and not have time for themselves to learn the language," she said. "Often, they would be stuck in endless poverty."



■ Kyaw T. Soe, on the phone with a Burmese parent about her sick child, came to the United States as a political refugee from Burma in 1993, and is now a translator and parent advocate for the Fort Wayne, Indiana, public school district. (GSR photo / Dan Stockman)

The hope for a completely different life has sustained refugees for generations, said Sr. Joellen Tumas, a sister of the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ, which came to the United States in 1868 from Germany. The congregation, based in Donaldson, Indiana, about an hour west of Fort Wayne, this year is celebrating 150 years in the United States.

"We came as an immigrant community — immigrants to serve immigrants," Tumas said. "Over the years, as the faces of immigrants have changed, we've served different groups of people, but they're all refugees and immigrants."

"Whatever the need is, we are there," Tumas said. "And we're always looking for a new need. A lot of times, we don't have to look for it. It falls in our lap."

Bridging the health care gap

By 2012, Distler said, officials at the St. Joseph Community Health Foundation realized that about 60 percent of the people the Burmese Advocacy Center was serving had figured out how to navigate the American system and were thriving. Staff then looked around and found there were 23 agencies in the community that were already effectively providing services to refugees,



so St. Joseph Community Health Foundation resources could probably be better used elsewhere. They closed the Burmese Advocacy Center and turned to a new effort: medical interpreters.

The foundation's core mission is to ensure health care is accessible to the most vulnerable, including refugees trying to integrate into the community, Distler said. It is difficult or impossible to integrate if health conditions make you unable to work or get around, she said, and medical interpreters can bridge the gap between refugees and the health care they need.

Though the foundation and other agencies helped train many translators over the years, they were proving inadequate when it came to the interaction between doctor and patient.

"We had a lot of bilingual people, but someone who is bilingual is not necessarily trained as an interpreter," Distler said. "And interpreting medical or legal issues is another thing entirely."

Medical interpreters must be trained in U.S. confidentiality laws and about when not to paraphrase, she said, but also must learn things such as where to stand: They should stand behind the patient, so the native language is like a voice in their head, and the doctor can look the patient in the eye.

Distler said becoming a medical interpreter requires about 65 hours of intense training, but the programs the foundation funds have qualified more than 40 Burmese for medical interpretation, as well as 69 others speaking 18 languages.

Some of those have gone to work for the Fort Wayne-Allen County Department of Health, where they have been crucial, said Dr. Deborah McMahan, the county health commissioner.

"The sisters and the St. Joseph Community Health Foundation, they're such a great example of putting your money where your mouth is," McMahan said. "I'm so grateful for those trained medical interpreters. They've really changed the way we're able to care for people."

McMahan said refugees get minimal health screening before they are resettled, and those screenings focus on acute and short-term health problems such as water-borne infections, but not issues such as diabetes or HIV.

It would be easy to focus on the problems refugees bring, McMahan said, but seeing treatment and prevention as an investment rather than just another expenditure puts the focus on what refugees can contribute.



■ Naw Sar Eh Do examines the commemorative coin graduates of North Side High School in Fort Wayne, Indiana, receive at commencement. (GSR photo / Dan Stockman)



■ Sen Nu smiles during practice for the graduation ceremony for North Side High School June 8, in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Nu's family came to the United States as refugees from Burma, now known as Myanmar; she graduated in the Top Ten in her class. (GSR photo / Dan Stockman)

It is much easier to address those issues for those who know how to navigate the system and are not focused solely on survival, McMahan said.

"When you're in a refugee camp, every day, you get your food given to you, you can't work, your life is on hold," she said. "Then you bring them here, and you change all that. They drive an hour and a half, work all day, drive an hour and a half back, go to the store to get food. They have to learn how to work with money, and they have ... to figure out how to live a new life here. It's crazy."



And refugees bring more issues with them than physical health.

“I don’t think the average American understands how traumatized these people can be,” she said. “Americans don’t have to worry about people breaking into your home, raping your wife and children in front of you, and then killing them.”

Dealing with those issues in the refugees they knew about was hard enough, McMahan said, but there was no way to know about those who came to Fort Wayne in secondary migration until the department began doing medical exams for people applying for green cards.

“We see a lot of tuberculosis outbreaks in the secondary migration refugees because they get a health exam when they arrive in Chicago or Indianapolis, but then they move here before they’re treated,” she said. McMahan said investing more in addressing basic issues such as health, housing, financial skills and education would allow many more refugees to fulfill their potential rather than working 70 hours a week in a factory, as many do. “It’s great to have Asian restaurants and groceries, but I’d like to have Burmese doctors and Burmese architects,” McMahan said.

‘A big hope’

Niang is determined to see McMahan’s dream of a Burmese doctor come true. Niang is one of five students in the top 10 students of her North Side High School graduating class who were not born in the United States. Three, including Niang, were born in Myanmar; one was born in Thailand and raised in Myanmar; and one is from the Philippines. If you ask Niang about the difference between her life in Myanmar and her life



■ Niang En Chin laughs during graduation practice June 8. (GSR photo / Dan Stockman)

in Fort Wayne, the answer is, “everything.” “Here, we don’t have to worry about food,” she said. “We don’t have to be scared. We don’t have to be afraid of the police.” How did she go from a refugee not allowed to attend school in Malaysia to preparing to study pre-med? “We had a big hope, I guess,” she says. She also wants to share that “big hope” with others. Once she’s a doctor, she said, she wants to set up clinics in the United States to provide free or low-cost health care and eventually do the same in Myanmar. “I hope for a good education, I hope to be a doctor, I hope to be successful,” Niang said. “That’s what keeps me going.”





SEEKING REFUGE



Controversy over migration continues to upend European politics

Chris Herlinger

■ Legal passports and travel documents for Rasha Meish and her family, Syrians who were granted asylum in Italy (GSR photo / Chris Herlinger)

Though the flow of refugees into Europe has slowed in the last two years, it has not stopped, and the controversy over migration continues to upend European politics.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose government has been welcoming migrants into Germany, agreed last week to change policy and stop migrants without legal documentation at the border.

In Italy, Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, leader of a right-wing political party, said next year's elections for the European Parliament should be a referendum on migration. His comments followed declarations by Italy's new government that it wants changes in the EU migration system, arguing that Italy and other first-arrival countries like Greece are bearing too much of the burden for the rest of the Europe.

Under European Union rules known as the Dublin regulation, asylum claims for European Union members are usually determined in the country where the migrants enter first.

Greece and Italy are, along with Germany and France, the countries with the highest number of asylum applications. In 2017, Germany had 198,255 claims; Italy had 126,550; France, 91,965; and Greece 56,940, according to EU figures. In all, a total of 650,970 persons sought asylum in the EU countries in 2017.

Italy played a prominent role in recent EU debates over migration. A new EU agreement approved late last month calls for greater shared responsibility for rescuing migrants on the sea, a demand strongly urged by the new Italian government, Reuters reported. "Italy is not alone anymore," said Giuseppe Conte, Italy's new prime minister.

The new agreement does not force any country "to do anything," The New York Times reported June 29, though EU members are contemplating new centers to screen migrants and finding ways to "distribute" refugees among a larger group of countries, the Times reported.

Some are not reacting well to the new agreement. "The plan is a muddle that leaves important details blank. Most important, it ducks the main challenge: to devise a common EU policy on refugees," said a July 4 editorial by the editors of the Bloomberg news service.





■ The families of Rasha Meish, left, and Maisa Al Said, far right, outside the resettlement house Casa della Speranza on grounds owned by the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit in Rome. Seen here are children of the two women and family friends. (GSR photo / Chris Herlinger)

SEEKING REFUGE



Painful memories, new cultures confront resettled families

Chris Herlinger

A cool late afternoon breeze in the garden on the outskirts of Rome is always welcome for Rasha Meish and Maisa Al Said. It is a gentle reminder that the civil war in Syria is far away.

That war drove the two women's families from their homes. Happily, the day-to-day strains of life in a war zone are now over. But the families, related by marriage — Al Said's brother is married to Meish's sister — must contend with painful memories and a cruel hardship: Meish was blinded from a bomb explosion near her home in Damascus.

Ahead is the next challenging step in resettlement: finding permanent housing and work.

In one regard, the families are fortunate: their temporary residence is a resettlement house — Casa della Speranza, or "House of Hope" — on quiet, shaded grounds owned by the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit, an international congregation founded in 1889 in the Netherlands. The grounds house the sisters' general curia, or administrative offices, with 28 sisters from 10 countries living there.

Now in their second year at the house, the families are easing their way into life in Italy. Their time with the sisters, Al Said said, has "been beautiful — like one family."

But a major change awaits them: As agreed to with the sisters, the Syrians are preparing to



leave the home later this year, though the deadline has some flexibility. “They will continue living here with us until they find another house where they can live,” said Sr. Francisca Florentin Garcete, a Missionary Sisters Servants from Paraguay.

Resettlement is rarely easy. After the initial trauma of being forced to flee, followed by a period of limbo — in the case of the two Syrian families, a shared experience in refugee camps in southern Lebanon — comes the process of seeking asylum, then creating new lives in a place with a strange language, strange ways and an uncertain future.

It is a story being repeated throughout Europe. While the numbers of those arriving in Europe has slowed in comparison to the masses of people landing in 2015 and 2016, “they have by no means stopped,” said Joshua Kyller, Catholic Relief Services’ country manager in Greece.

By nearly all accounts, the welcome provided by Greece and Italy is now becoming frayed. Much “of the political capital that kept doors open [in countries like Greece and Italy] has been spent and much of the goodwill from volunteers and local communities has been overtaxed,” Kyller said. The focus now is ensuring “durable solutions” so that those who have arrived can

“integrate into society and start their new lives,” Kyller said.

For arrivals trying to settle in a new country, the weight of memory intrudes: missing relatives; nostalgia for a former life; adjustment to different types of religious services (the two Syrian families think the mosques in Rome are too noisy); and, of course, the cuisine.

Meish’s and Al Said’s families still don’t like pasta that much. “The food, the food — falafel, kebab, kibby,”

Meish said, reciting her list of Syrian delights she misses.

‘There aren’t any other options’

In some ways, Lebanon was not bad, even in a Syrian refugee camp, said Yara, Al Said’s 23-year-old daughter.

“The social life was good,” she said, and the Arabic-language schools were decent. “Life was beautiful. We could speak the same language.”



■ From right: Paraguayan Sr. Francisca Florentin Garcete, Maisa Al Said and Yara, Al Said’s 23-year-old daughter, walk on the grounds of the general curia of the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit in Rome. (GSR photo / Chris Herlinger)



Yet as much as the families yearn to return to Syria, with an unsettled war and continued uncertainty about their country's fate, they believe their futures, at least for now, hinge on staying in Italy, where they have been formally granted asylum.

"Our house [in Syria] is destroyed," Yara said. "If we go back there, what will we do there? Everything is finished."

"There aren't any other options," Al Said, a seamstress, said, shrugging. "Where can we go now?"

Settling in a new country doesn't mean that thoughts of going elsewhere stop. The allure of Northern Europe with its more robust economies remains attractive for many of those who find themselves in first-arrival countries, said Sacred Heart Sr. Florence de la Villeon, who heads the refugee ministry of the Rome-based International Union of Superiors General.



■ Rasha Meish, a Syrian refugee who was blinded during the Syria war and who has been granted asylum in Italy, with her Italian identification card (GSR photo / Chris Herlinger)

Greece has the highest current unemployment rate among EU countries, at 20.1 percent, while Italy's jobless rate is the third highest, at 10.7 percent. By contrast, Germany's unemployment rate is the second lowest, at 3.4 percent.

The experience of Meish's family is emblematic of the changes underway among refugees settling in Europe: Meish has brothers in Germany, France and Sweden, and other family members remain in Syria. Meanwhile, Al Said's husband is in Brazil, and it is not clear if or when he will be reunited with his family.

Amid the struggles of resettlement, these two families and other refugees have support from a broad Italian church alliance to help ease their way.

The ecumenical organization Sant'Egidio, working

with Italian Protestant churches and the Italian government, created a program of "humanitarian corridors" in late 2015 to assist those who are particularly vulnerable. Volunteers working in refugee camps interview and select families who are eventually allowed to enter Italy legally. More than 2,500 persons have entered Italy under the program, according to Sant'Egidio.

"The selection of the families is done according to the needs," said Argentine Sr. Carmen Elisa Bando, one of several Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit, also known as Holy Spirit Sisters, working with the Syrian families. She noted that Meish's family was among the first groups to arrive in Rome, in 2016. The two families fled Syria in 2014; Meish's family arrived from the Lebanese refugee camp in February 2016 and Al Said's family in October of that year.

In addition to Meish's eye condition, one of Meish's children, 11-year-old Omar, is a special-needs child. (Meish has three children; Al Said has two children with her in Rome. She has another son who is with his father in Brazil.)

"It was a big joy for us when he entered school," said Florentin.

In Rome, other refugee families are living in temporary residences with other congregations like those provided by the Missionary Sisters Servants. (In addition to the families from Syria, the Missionary Sisters Servants are hosting a family from Cameroon.) Refugees being resettled in Italy are also living in shelters operated by Centro Astalli, which is the Italian name for Jesuit Refugee Service, as well as by organizations like Caritas, de la Villeon said.

Refugees normally live in these quarters up to a year, though sometimes the length of stay is extended to two years.

At a shelter in Athens

In Athens, Greece, Jesuit Refugee Service, with assistance from the Missionary Sisters Servants, runs a shelter that houses 50 refugees from, among other countries, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Cameroon. It also operates an education center for 175 children, both recent arrivals and those from immigrant families who have settled in Athens, and an integration program for new arrivals that provides legal, social and medical support.

The atmosphere among the refugees at the Athens shelter is noisy, lively and spirited.





■ Indian Sr. Preethi Silva, a member of the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit, with a child of a refugee family in Athens, Greece. Silva helps administer a shelter in Athens run by Jesuit Refugee Service. (GSR photo / Chris Herlinger)

“They share a lot,” said Indian Sr. Preethi Silva, who helps administer the shelter, working with Sr. Ada Lick from Austria. “When the Syrians celebrate a birthday, the Afghans will bake a cake.”

But the atmosphere is also tempered by the troubles the refugees face.

The family of Abdul Maroof Haidari, a government administrator, fled Afghanistan two years ago because of threats from the Taliban. He and his three children, ages 6 to 14, recently left Athens to rejoin his wife and their mother, Mahboba, who is living now in the Netherlands.

For Haidari, Athens evokes painful memories. A tortuous journey took his family from Afghanistan to Iran, Turkey, then Greece — partly over land, partly by boat. His wife gave birth to a son who had severe physical and medical problems. He died a year later.



■ Austrian Sr. Ada Lick, a member of the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit, in Athens, Greece, with Afghan refugee Abdul Maroof Haidari. He and his family fled their country two years ago because of threats from the Taliban. (GSR photo / Chris Herlinger)

Haidari blames the journey for his son's death, and the experience drove his wife to seek refuge in Belgium, where her brother lives. She made it as far as the Netherlands, where the family hopes to settle permanently.

"I'm happy that we'll be together," said Haidari, a volunteer at a kitchen Jesuit Refugee Service runs in Athens. He appreciates the support he and his family have received from Jesuit Refugee Service and the Holy Spirit Sisters but, in an interview in May, he said he was eager to rejoin his wife.

"We've had a difficult time here, so hard," he said, before leaving for the Netherlands in late June. "I'll be happy to go to Holland."

By contrast, Syed Abuturab Naqui hopes he and family can stay in Athens because of his claims of religious persecution in their native Pakistan. The family are Shiite, a minority in predominantly Sunni Pakistan. Naqui and his family have been in Greece two years and want to stay because of what Naqui calls the wider sense of freedom, particularly religious freedom, that the family finds there.

Naqui is the son of a religious scholar who he says was killed by Pakistani authorities for his criticism of religious persecution of the Shiite minority. Naqui's journey in 2016 with family across land and sea included stops in Iran and Turkey and a year on the island of Lesbos.

Naqui's wife and the couple's three sons accompanied him; after arriving in Athens, the couple had a fourth son. In all, he and the family have spent two

years in Greece, including a year at the Jesuit Refugee Service shelter.

It is not easy proving a case of religious persecution, Naqui acknowledges, and his focus now is entirely on having his asylum claim heard for the fourth time. It has been rejected three times already because, he said, it is hard to make a claim of persecution based on his father's experience.

"I am here to save my life and my family's," he said, saying that the Pakistani government could eventually target his sons also. "I could sacrifice if it was just me, but they are tracking my family, too."

Athens' noisy city streets are far away from the quiet hills surrounding Rome's outskirts. But Naqui finds solace, peace and hope there.

The hope of permanent resettlement is real — his oldest son is learning Greek and he is studying it, too, though "I'm not learning it well."

Still, "I've been here two years," he said and "no one is asking us about religion."

For the Syrian families in Rome, being allowed to stay means focusing on next steps. One is Meish's medical condition; seeing a doctor can take months, and she is still trying to find an eye specialist to perform surgery that could help her regain some sight. Though basic medical care in Italy is free or provided at low cost, specialized operations can be costly and the family right now cannot pay for such an operation.

Then there is the issue of employment. Meish worked as a hairdresser in Damascus, but she is not working now due to her disability. Yara is volunteering at a residence for the blind and hopes to return to graphic design, her focus of study when she lived in Syria.

"It's difficult," she said of trying to get a design job in Rome. "There are a lot of [Italian] artists here, and they're looking for work."

"It's not easy," said Florentin, the Paraguayan sister. "People will always prefer an Italian for the job."

Even so, now that the children are settling in and learning Italian, staying in Italy makes the most sense, the families say.

Integration, say the sisters, often hinges on generational differences in learning a new language. "Integration is possible, but it will be much easier for the children than for the parents," Bando said.

Despite such challenges for adults, Bando said women facing resettlement may have certain advantages over men.

"The [refugee] women here in Italy are full of determination, and one reason they tend to do better ini-



■ Syed Abuturab Naqui said he hopes he and family can stay in Athens, Greece, because of his claims of religious persecution in their native Pakistan. The family are Shiite, a minority in predominantly Sunni Pakistan. (GSR photo / Chris Herlinger)



■ From left: Paraguayan Sr. Francisca Florentin Garcete, Indian Sr. Preethi Silva and Argentinean Sr. Carmen Elisa Bando, members of the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit in Rome, outside the sisters' general curia, or administrative offices (GSR photo / Chris Herlinger)

tially than the men is that they are forced to enter the reality of work sooner,” she said, based on what she has seen with refugee women from different countries.

“For example, women find cleaning jobs more easily than men, and that puts them in contact with the everyday work world more quickly. Men take longer.”

At the residence provided by the sisters, the families cook together and celebrate holidays and festivals with the sisters. “We pray to the same God,” Yara said.

They say they are afraid at times about the future, about the uncertainty — where they will find a home, for example.

Yara, who appears confident in Italian and says she likes learning the language, said that life in Rome has both advantages but at least one serious drawback — missing relatives left behind in Syria and scattered elsewhere in Europe.

“We have peace,” she said, “but we don’t have family.”



SEEKING REFUGE



Sisters shelter, support asylum-seekers as they adapt to US

Maria Benevento

■ A tutor works with an English as a second language student at Centro San Pablo, a drop-in center for migrants in Salem, Ohio, run by St. Paul Church. They are writing words in shaving cream. (Sr. Rene Weeks)

Toting a sheet of smiley-face stickers and a wagon filled with toys, 3-year-old Jocelyn was fearless. As she played in the living room, covering everyone she encountered with stickers, her mother, 18-year-old Andrea, occasionally paused from cooking to admire her handiwork. Meanwhile, 7-month-old Carlos demonstrated the crawling skills he had acquired that morning.

This happy family scene might not have been possible without Bethany House of Hospitality, a shelter in Chicago's western suburbs, where Andrea, Jocelyn and Carlos (identified by pseudonyms for their protection) currently live. Andrea, who arrived in the United States from Guatemala when she was 17, is seeking asylum for her and her children.

The house, which is sponsored by 28 congregations of women religious and serves female asylum-seekers who arrived in the United States as unaccompanied minors but risked aging into adult detention, doesn't usually shelter minors. But when the staff and board realized that on Andrea's 18th birthday, the small family could be separated or, at best, subjected to poor conditions in family detention, they made an exception.





■ A common living space at Bethany House of Hospitality in Bartlett, Illinois, a shelter for young women seeking asylum, is pictured June 19. (GSR photo / Maria Benevento)

“Her need was so great and to think of separating her from those two little children, we all had to say, ‘We can’t say no to this,’ “ said Sr. Peggy Geraghty, a Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary and a Bethany House board member. “We couldn’t bear to split one family, let alone all the families that are being split now.”

Andrea is one of eight women currently staying at Bethany House. Fleeing dangerous conditions in their home countries, they arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border and were initially put in children’s immigration detention — most of them in Chicago or Texas.

The house opened in October 2017 after Sr. Patricia Crowley of the Benedictine Sisters of Chicago called a meeting of her contacts from the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) Region 8 in Illinois to discuss how sisters could address immigration issues. It has already housed 17 women (including the current eight) and three children for periods ranging from a week to several months until they are able to support themselves or move in with relatives.

As religious congregations shrink and their members age, collaborative projects might be the future of religious life, Crowley and other board members suggested.

With multiple congregations funding the operation and a board made up of eight sisters, Bethany House was able to rent a building with large common spaces and 10 bedrooms, and hire several staff people to manage the house and connect the young women to resources.

This model is one of the many ways that Catholic sisters around the country are supporting asylum-seekers — through services including legal aid, shelter and assistance adjusting to life in the United States.

Asylum-seekers benefit from such intensive support because they face multiple challenges in their efforts to thrive in the United States. Like other refugees, they arrive fleeing persecution and often suffering from trauma, then have to assimilate and support themselves in a new country.

Unlike refugees who are vetted in their home countries by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, asylum-seekers aren’t preapproved to migrate and must navigate the court system to prove their right to remain while attempting to integrate and survive with little or no government assistance. (Learn more about the difference between a refugee and an asylum-seeker.)

Salih, who asked to be identified by only her last

name to protect her identity, was shocked and horrified when, upon arriving at the United States' southern border as an unaccompanied minor, she was handcuffed and detained. She cried daily and felt guilty, although she hadn't thought it was wrong to seek protection in the U.S. after fleeing Sudan.

Now, Salih's life seems to be looking up. She was freed from detention and later supported by the Interfaith Community for Detained Immigrants, a non profit founded by Catholic sisters but involving various faiths, that provides pastoral care, advocacy and other support to those affected by immigration detention. Salih has an apartment in Chicago with the Helpers of the Holy Souls. She has found a supportive community at Bethany House (where she used to work) and among other immigrants and advocates, like Crowley and other religious, who help connect her to resources.



■ Salih, an asylum-seeker from Sudan, speaks with Sr. Patricia Crowley, the board president of Bethany House of Hospitality, who works with the Interfaith Community for Detained Immigrants, June 19 in Salih's apartment in Chicago. (GSR photo / Maria Benevento)

Since asylum-seekers can receive work permits if their case isn't resolved after 180 days, Salih is working legally and hopes to soon start college to become a dental hygienist and a social worker, but she doesn't have the peace of mind that would come with winning asylum and knowing she can stay in the U.S. long-term.

That assurance won't come anytime soon; Salih's next court date is set for 2021.

Fleeing persecution

Salih and other asylum-seekers must prove not only that they would be in danger if forced to return home,

but also that they are in danger for the right reasons.

Asylum-seekers first enter the country (either without permission or on a temporary visa) or arrive at a U.S. border or port of entry and request to stay. If they express a "credible fear" of returning home, U.S. law requires they be admitted to the country temporarily while they apply for asylum.

Only persecution because of race, religion, political opinion, nationality or membership in a particular social group qualifies migrants for protection. While in the past, domestic violence and gang violence sometimes fit in one of those categories, Attorney General Jeff Sessions recently intervened in immigration court to say those reasons normally should not qualify.

Franciscan Sr. Suzanne Susany of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, an attorney who provides free or low-cost legal services to immigrants, including asylum-seekers, often encounters migrants from Central America escaping gang violence, as well as others from countries such as Venezuela and Turkey, fleeing for political reasons.

Susany spoke of a recent client with a child from Central America, whose asylum application was denied. "She returned to her country and she was planning to move to Mexico immediately because she was petrified of being in her own country. ... There is truly fear and fear of death."



■ Immigrants dressed in traditional clothing during a feast day at Sr. Paul church in Salem, Ohio. (Sr. Rene Weeks)





■ A map of the world in Bethany House of Hospitality in Bartlett, Illinois, features stickers that show the places of origin of those who live and work there. (GSR photo / Maria Benevento)

In the small town of Salem, located in Northeastern Ohio near Youngstown, Sr. Rene Weeks, a Dominican Sister of Peace and the director of Hispanic ministry at St. Paul Church, runs the church's immigrant drop-in center, called Centro San Pablo, which serves many asylum-seekers.

One man Weeks knows left Guatemala to escape a gang, tried to return home, and then fled to the U.S. again after his life and family were threatened.

"He has an asylum claim that has basically dragged on and on and on," Weeks said. "He's afraid to go back. He said, 'You know, they have very long memories down there.' And people are still around that he fled from."

Residents of Bethany House don't typically talk in depth about their reasons for fleeing. Asked why they came to the United States, they respond simply: "to be safe," "to have a better life," and "I escaped."

"In reality, I came because I was threatened," said Andrea. "I couldn't stay in my country."

A young woman from Eritrea, who asked to be identified as Eden, explained that in her home country, "You don't have rights, you don't have freedom, they don't allow you to speak what you feel."

Darlene Gramigna, Bethany House executive director,



■ Bethany House of Hospitality staff meet June 19, at Bethany House in Bartlett, Illinois; from left: Jessica Alaniz, staff case manager, Darlene Gramigna, executive director, and Benedictine Sr. Patricia Crowley, founder (GSR photo / Maria Benevento)

said the women have all experienced trauma — in their home countries, on the journey to the U.S. and in children's detention. Some receive benefits through a government program for trafficking victims, and Gramigna said that whether the women tell them or not, staff members know they may have been raped during the

journey to the U.S.

Some Bethany House residents benefit from the Marjorie Kovler Center, which offers counseling to victims of state-sponsored torture, while others have experienced extreme violence that isn't state-sponsored, Gramigna said. "Almost everybody should be in counseling if they're not already."

The few former or current Bethany House residents who have received their verdicts all won asylum. This success is partially because most — although not all — already had legal representation when they began living there.

Legal representation makes asylum-seekers five times more likely to win their cases, but the government doesn't provide immigrants with attorneys and asylum-seekers struggle to afford them.

Low cost and pro bono legal services "are extremely important, because the people who are seeking asylum really have left everything, so they really have no resources," said Susany.

Bethany House residents' connection with legal services and advocacy is part of the reason they were referred to the house and given into its custody the night before they turned 18, rather than being "shackled and brought to adult detention" at midnight, Gramigna said.

Increasingly, asylum-seekers, especially those arriving on the southern border, are detained in centers where it is nearly impossible to access legal services. "I have [represented detained asylum-seekers] but I've tried to get them out," Susany said. "The first thing you do is you apply for bond."

Adjusting to US life

For asylum-seekers who are not detained, sisters also help them transition into life in the U.S. and access necessary services.

Difficulties adjusting to the U.S. include facing anti-immigrant sentiment, proving employment qualification without formal education, and encountering unfamiliar sights such as pets wearing scarves, Uber drivers and Amish people, said Gramigna.

For Nuru, an Ethiopian Bethany House resident who asked not to be identified by her real name, a major adjustment was learning independence after coming from a country where she couldn't venture out alone.

Back home, "You can't trust people, you have to take your brother, or your father maybe," she said. "But here, you can go anywhere you want."



■ A girl hits a piñata at Centro San Pablo in Salem, Ohio. (Sr. Rene Weeks)

Bethany House has also helped her befriend people from various cultures.

"It's a little bit difficult to live with people you don't know, people who don't understand the language you speak," said Nuru. "A little bit hard. It's challenging, but I'm used to it now."

Watching the young women find community after arriving from detention suspicious of other young people and wary of group activities is particularly rewarding, said Gramigna, as is seeing people find the resources and the confidence to move out on their own.

Weeks' drop-in center in Salem, Ohio, also helps with adjustment to the U.S. It offers English instruction and assistance with challenges such as enrolling children in school, accessing health care and legal services or getting connected to a local church. Even when the center isn't open, Weeks gets phone calls asking for help.

She has recently been helping support families and connect people with legal aid after more than 140 people were arrested June 19 in an immigration raid on a local meatpacking plant. Although asylum-seekers were among the 66 people released by June 25, Weeks pointed out that some people who don't qualify for asylum in the U.S. might still be fleeing danger.

In fact, some asylum-seekers are opting to move to Canada rather than remain in the U.S. In Buffalo, New York, Franciscan Sr. Beth Niederpruem works at



Vive, a shelter for immigrants waiting to seek asylum in Canada.

The 120-bedroom shelter, which held about 70 people when Niederpruem spoke with GSR, received as many as 320 migrants at some points in 2017. Many hope to connect with family in Canada or go through a quicker asylum process while others, such as a surge of Haitian temporary protected status holders, are worried they will lose protections in the U.S. Typically immigrants arriving from the U.S. cannot seek asylum in Canada, but there are some exceptions for those with relatives there and people who arrive on foot.

While migrants are at the shelter, Niederpruem helps them deal with the trauma nearly all experience, and they are also connected with services they need such as health care, clothing and education.

“The people that come are very traumatized because they are running for their life and it’s taken them quite a bit of energy to get out of their country,” she said. “They need time to relocate and find something that will work, but it’s not an easy journey.”

Despite the challenges in their past, asylum-seekers still have ambitions for their futures.

Although adjusting to life in the U.S. is “too hard” at first, “Later, when you find more people to help you and some people to care about you, you feel free,” said Eden, who wants to be a nurse and is grateful for being pushed to study.

Even those Bethany House residents who haven’t picked a career path know they want an education. Their prospective fields of study include law, medicine, nursing and social work.

However, some also note that these dreams are contingent on receiving asylum.

Andrea is small enough to be mistaken for a child herself, but her thoughts were on her responsibility to choose a profession and provide for Jocelyn and Carlos. She will start school as soon as she finds a source of childcare. She wants to learn English and thinks she might like to study law or be a flight attendant.

She marveled at people’s generosity, remarking that she receives something for herself or her children every couple of days: diapers, clothes, even a crib.

But she hasn’t forgotten that she is still waiting to find out if she’ll be allowed to stay. “I hope that they give me asylum here so I can give my two children a future.”



■ A child living at Vive, a shelter for asylum seekers in Buffalo, New York, wraps herself in an American flag. The photo was taken approximately seven years ago. (Sr. Beth Niederpruem)

Maria Benevento is an NCR Bertelsen intern. Her email address is mbenevento@ncronline.org.





SEEKING REFUGE



Jordan takes in masses of Syrians but prefers they don't stay

Melanie Lidman

■ Azraq refugee camp in Jordan was entirely planned and constructed before the first refugees arrived in May 2014. It has 10,479 corrugated metal shelters carefully organized in neighborhoods and blocks. (GSR photo / Melanie Lidman)

Jordan's Azraq refugee camp is located in the desolate desert, two hours southeast of Amman. Without a tree in sight, everything in the camp is brown, coated by a desert dust so prevalent even the beige-tinged sky seems to hang low and close.

In perfect rows, three meters between each building, 10,479 corrugated metal huts break up the horizon. Azraq Camp is the pride of the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR). Usually, refugee camps are chaotic and messy, with desperate refugees building makeshift accommodations wherever they can. But Azraq is different. It is one of the world's first refugee camps planned, constructed and finished before the first refugees arrived: a refugee camp designed as carefully as a 1950s American subdivision. Azraq's well-organized layout does have perks: Residents have easy access to health care, education, cash assistance and subsidized food at the World Food Project hangar, a cavernous wholesale supermarket. Around 35,000 people are registered as living in the camp that opened in May 2014.





■ The inside of a family's shelter in the Azraq refugee camp is outfitted with a silver isolation material that minimizes the searing heat in the summer and provides some protection from the cold in the winter, but there is no electricity. (GSR photo / Melanie Lidman)

Most Syrian refugees in Jordan do not live in places like Azraq. According to the U.N., 81 percent of refugees in Jordan live in urban areas, finding housing in cramped apartments, working informal jobs that pay in cash, doing their best to get by in the crowded streets of Amman and other cities.

Because the urban refugees are scattered around the city, they have much more difficulty obtaining comprehensive services. Although they also receive refugee identity cards and can get the same support as those in the camps, it is more logistically challenging to inform them of their rights and ensure they receive them.

While large international organizations provide services at the organized refugee camps, many urban refugees are falling through the cracks. As the war in Syria drags on and the refugee situation shows no sign of abating, sisters and Catholic organizations in Jordan are concentrating on aiding city refugees, trying their best to connect them to as many resources as they can muster, or just lending an empathetic ear.

A history of welcoming

Throughout history, Jordan's blend of traditional hospitality and political stability has made it the destination for wave after wave of refugees. First the Palestinians came, in 1948 and 1967, following wars with Israel. Today there are more than 2 million Palestinian refugees in Jordan who have full citizenship. Culturally, they still identify as refugees, though international organizations no longer consider them as such.

Iraqis and Kuwaitis came during the Gulf War in the 1990s, then the Iraqis came again in the early 2000s after the American invasion, and again in 2014 when the Islamic State group terrorized the country.

Since 2011, more than 655,000 Syrian refugees have streamed across the border, escaping an eight-year civil war. In the beginning of 2018, Jordan had 740,000

refugees, according to UNHCR Jordan has a 16.5 percent unemployment rate, and the number of residents living under the national poverty line climbed, from 13 to 14 percent over the last decade, according to the World Bank.

The desert country of 10 million people is quickly running out of water and doesn't have the natural resources for the meteoric population growth resulting from the influx of refugees. According to U.N. population and refugee data, Jordan's rate of accepting Syrian refugees in the last decade would be equivalent to the United States adding more than 20 million into its total population. In fact, the U.S. has admitted only 21,205 Syrian refugees since 2002, U.S. State Department data shows.



■ Hanaa Abdullah poses with her children and her brother's children in her brother's apartment in Madaba, Jordan. Abdullah and her brother both fled Syria and now live in rental apartments in the city but have difficulty making ends meet and getting the services they need. (GSR photo / Melanie Lidman)

Welcome to visit, but please don't stay

Like many other countries, Jordan severely limits the ability of refugees to work, in hopes that they will soon return to their home countries before getting too com-

fortable. The country reluctantly issued 46,000 work permits for refugees in 2017, but the vast majority of refugees cannot legally work. This thrusts them deeper into poverty, and makes them more dependent on international organizations.

Another part of Jordan's strategy to ensure refugees don't stay in their country is to assign them to live in the Azraq Refugee Camp. The desolate landscape, rudimentary accommodations, and sheer boredom make many residents consider the camp an "open air prison." Zaatari Refugee Camp, the larger and more well-known Syrian refugee camp in Jordan only a few miles from the border, has a freewheeling economy and a main drag named "Champs-Élysées," where enterprising Syrians have set up businesses from hair salons to bridal studios.

But in Azraq, the camp's U.N. directors tightly control every aspect of life. They decide who can run stores and where the public can gather. They are installing a cash benefit payment system that reads the iris of the eye, like something out of a science fiction movie. Refugees must obtain permission to leave the camp.

"Azraq is not a pop-up camp that people came and immediately settled," said Emanuel Kenyi, the local associate external relations and reporting officer for the UNHCR. Kenyi is originally from South Sudan but spent most of his life as a refugee in Uganda. "Azraq was planned for a year before the first people moved in. As Zaatari was getting filled up, they started planning Azraq before the refugees arrived."

Jordanian authorities are trying to convince urban refugees that life will be easier in the camp, so as to



■ The Caritas clinic in Amman is one of the places where urban refugees can obtain subsidized health services under agreements with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. (GSR photo / Melanie Lidman)

avoid situations where refugees assimilate into city life and decide to stay. Many refugees struggle to pay rent and feed their families in the cities, where services are patchwork and more difficult to access.

Stepping in to fill the gaps

Urban refugees are spread out and busy trying to cobble together a survival, requiring more personalized solutions.

In many ways, sisters are uniquely positioned to provide this kind of case-by-case assistance, because they are integrated with the community and have a familiarity with Catholic organizations providing aid. In Zarqa, a suburb of Amman, Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena run the Pontifical Mission Mother of Mercy Clinic, which provides prenatal care and vaccines for more than 1,000 people every month.

The clinic opened in 1989 next to a Palestinian refugee camp with the goal of helping the displaced. To

day, the clinic provides heavily subsidized medical care to refugees and foreign workers from Afghanistan, Chechnya, Syria, Egypt, Iraq and Bangladesh, in addition to impoverished Jordanians.

The Dominican sisters are themselves refugees from Iraq, forced to flee in 2014 when Islamic State militants attacked the area of Nineveh. The congregation lost 33 convents, three schools and six Montessori kindergartens in bombings across Iraq, according to Sr. Habiba Toma Binham. Binham said the refugees they serve know the sisters are intimately familiar with the pain of losing a home and facing an uncertain future.

The clinic frequently treats psychiatric diseases and psychosomatic issues, when refugees complain of pain that doesn't seem to have a biological explanation.

"They are worried about their lives and future," said Rasha Altoum, a social worker at the clinic. Altoum is a third-generation Palestinian refugee. "They come here to be comfortable, because we give them the chance to talk freely without fear."

Altoum recalled a young Iraqi girl who came to the clinic, eyes tightly squeezed shut, telling the sisters she



■ A child-friendly space in the Caritas clinic in Zarqa, a suburb of Amman, gives parents the opportunity to go for medical appointments and consultations without worrying about what to do with their children. (GSR photo / Melanie Lidman)

had gone blind. “Her family was always thinking about leaving [Jordan to go back to Iraq], and she was scared so she reacted by kind of going blind,” she said. “So we let her speak about what she’s feeling. We asked, ‘What are you afraid of? What can we talk about?’”



■ Dominican Sr. Habiba Toma Binham, left, and Sr. Maryan Nahla Kame in the records room of the Pontifical Mission clinic in Zarqa, are refugees themselves, having fled Iraq in 2014 when Islamic State militants attacked the Nineveh area. (GSR photo / Melanie Lidman)

‘We were all once refugees’

Many sisters find commonalities among the refugees’ challenges, regardless of where people have come from. One is an insistence on getting immediate help, stemming from overall uncertainty and instability.

“People in need are always angry,” said Soheal Abbassi, the supervisor for Caritas in Zarqa. “They have their needs, their kids’ needs, they have to pay the rent, they are really worried and scared. We tell them, ‘We are trying to help you, but nothing is for sure.’”

Caritas runs 22 centers across Jordan, focusing on health and education. Caritas also provides remedial tutoring service and runs “catch-up school,” an after-school framework for Syrian children who couldn’t gain admission to government schools because of severe over-enrollment.

Abbassi said Jordanians know the situation for refugees is dire and are trying to keep the welcome mat unfurled. “There’s some, maybe not anger, but they are wondering, ‘Why isn’t the help going to us, why are all the non-profit organizations working with refugees,’ “

Abbassi said. Jordan requires NGOs working with refugees to dedicate 30 percent of their programming to Jordanians in need, but there is still some resentment.

“There’s also less assistance coming now,” Abbassi said, pointing out that international donors have tired of the Syrian conflict. “So there’s less for refugees and less for Jordanians. So now everyone is angry because there’s less for everyone.” And Jordanians know the current situation is probably their new reality for the foreseeable future. “Last year, people were saying it will be calm in Syria, but it’s still not safe to go back,” said Abbassi. “We know it will be at least two to three years until everything is safe.”

Even when the violent conflict is over, that doesn’t necessarily mean the flow of refugees will stop, as survivors find it is impossible to make a living in the shattered country. “Today, there are still new refugees coming from Iraq, and it’s been 20 years since the first war,” said Abbassi.

As sisters and international organizations try to create a safety net for urban refugees, they also point out that their most important role might be just to listen.

The Hashmi neighborhood is a rough corner of Amman, with about 200 Iraqi refugee families as well as Egyptians who work illegally in construction. Sr. Carmela del Barco, a Dorotea sister originally from Italy who has been in Jordan since 1975, said the arrival of a wave of Iraqi refugees four years ago turned the sisters’ convent into an informal counseling center.

The sisters’ official ministry in Hashmi is running a school for 500 students from first through 10th grade as well as leading catechism and religious discussion groups. But a large part of their time is also sitting in their living room or visiting parishioners in their homes, listening to their stories and trying to help them the best they can.

“We do small stopgap measures,” said Sr. Rania Khoury, one of the three Dorotea sisters, known formally as the Sisters of St. Dorothy, Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, in Hashmi. “They like to come here to speak, it’s a very important spot for them. We are near the church. ... We can’t do everything, but we try to help families with sick babies and children.”

On some months, international donations allow them to provide diapers and formula for 150 babies or help a family pay for a medical test.

“When we have nothing, we try to listen so they can feel better,” said Khoury. “If you just listen so they can express everything, they feel better than before. They leave here feeling calmer.”



The Sisters of Sr. Dorothy used to have a presence in Syria, but after a sister was killed in a 2013 bombing, the congregation left.



■ Left: Dorotea Srs. Carmela del Barco and Rania Khoury are in their sitting room in Amman's Hashmi neighborhood, which has turned into a de facto counseling center for the approximately 200 Iraqi refugee families who arrived over the last four years fleeing the Islamic State. Right: Sr. Hanne Saad, a Franciscan Missionary of Mary volunteer at Caritas in Amman, helps Syrian and Iraqi refugees navigate the medical system to get the tests and medication they need. (GSR photos / Melanie Lidman)

The most important thing

Some problems are impossible for the sisters to solve, so they can only provide emotional support. “Just being with refugees, that is the mission,” said Sr. Hanne Saad, a Franciscan Missionary of Mary who volunteers with Caritas in Amman and works mainly with Syrian and Iraqi refugees. “We don’t need to talk, we need to listen.”

Saad said the biggest challenge is the refugees feeling helpless and depressed because they cannot work. “They have the energy to work but they can’t,” she said. Those are the kinds of problems the sisters can’t solve. Still, they try to strengthen the refugees. “We have hope in life, because if you don’t have hope, you don’t have life,” she said.

That is the hope that Hanaa Abdullah, a tailor-

ing teacher who fled a village near Deir ez-Zor, in eastern Syria, clings to every day. She lived in Azraq camp with her husband and three children for seven months in 2016 before they were able to secure a permit to live outside the camp.

“The first months in the camp, I was just sitting and crying,” Abdullah said. “When I wanted to get out of the camp, I got help. I’m happy to be out. It’s better for the children’s psychology, education. And life is better here.”

After moving to Madaba, a large city south of Amman, the family had new challenges: how to pay for rent and electricity, how to enroll the children in school, how to collect the cash assistance awarded to refugees, where to get health care. She gets text messages irregularly from the U.N. refugee agency.

“I try to be as strong as I can in order to be in a better situation,” she said. Her daughter, Joud, 10, is still traumatized from the plane bombings that raked their hometown. “When we first got here, whenever Joud would hear a plane she would put her head in my lap and start shaking, covering her ears,” said Abdullah. Now, Joud is less scared of planes, though the family is still trying to adjust to their new lives in Jordan.

“The biggest happy story for us is that we’re together as a family,” Abdullah said. “The rest is less important.”



■ A nurse at the Pontifical Mission Mother of Mercy Clinic in Zarqa weighs a young Syrian refugee ahead of his vaccinations. The center vaccinates more than 1,000 children per month. (GSR photo / Melanie Lidman)

Melanie Lidman is Middle East and Africa correspondent for Global Sisters Report based in Israel.





■ From left: Esther Ruth Modonig, Martha Akuol and Sarah Yar are high school students at St. Mary Assumpta Girls Secondary School near Adjumani, run by the Missionary Sisters of Mary Mother of the Church. They are leaders of the South Sudanese students group. (GSR photo / Melanie Lidman)

SEEKING REFUGE



Refugee students want ‘a future after all the trauma they’ve had’

Melanie Lidman

A girls’ boarding school in northern Uganda is providing real-life lessons in adjustments for both South Sudanese refugees and Ugandan students.

The St. Mary Assumpta Girls Secondary School in Adjumani purposefully mixes classes to better incorporate the new arrivals, said Sr. Anna M.A. Apili, the school administrator and member of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Mother of the Church congregation, which runs the school. Of the 704 students, 320 are refugees who have arrived since 2014.

Shared tribal language and culture give the refugees a sense of belonging, though all of the students are encouraged to speak English since not all students are from the same tribes.

Apili said that first year was the most difficult, when some of the South Sudanese students resorted to violence to “punish” girls they accused of telling lies.

“Now we have a student association for South Sudanese to solve their problems inter-





■ South Sudanese refugees in a settlement near Adjumani build an informal school with the financial support from the Charity Sisters of Jesus. Refugees who were teachers in South Sudan organized a neighborhood school because there were not enough formal schools in the camps. (GSR photo / Melanie Lidman)

nally,” said Caleb Mutungi, the school’s director. This means meetings where South Sudanese students can discuss their problems separately from the Ugandan students.

The school also tries to discourage early marriage, which is more common in South Sudan than Uganda and even more common in the camps, because families are so desperate for cash from dowries. Additionally, the school systems are different, with South Sudan following the Kenyan model and Uganda following the British model, which means the South Sudanese students are usually older by three or four years.

But in most other ways, the South Sudanese are considered regular students, including running for class elections. Last year the valedictorian, who spoke at graduation, was a refugee. “The students all do well

because they’re focused, they’re not distracted because they’re here,” said Apili. “They want to make a future after all the trauma they’ve had.”

Some of the refugees were also soldiers, which has compounded their trauma, Apili said. “We found out one girl was an army commander because when she got angry, she would command the other girls,” she said. “Sometimes the girls are a bit wild. They have been brought up in a war.”

The school doesn’t have enough resources for individual counseling, even though many of the refugees are traumatized by their experiences in South Sudan, and as they fled to Uganda. Apili said she tries to find external funding for especially troubled cases, and the school organizes a counseling week each year to talk about the importance of mental health.

But she has also found that providing them with an educational framework of a residential boarding school gives them stability that is lacking in their life, and options for the future.

“Life here is difficult, but it has its advantages,” said Martha Akuol, 17, a native of the Jonglei state in South Sudan, who has been in Uganda for four years and dreams of being a surgeon. “If we stayed in South Sudan, we wouldn’t be studying.”

Akuol is one of the student leaders for the school’s South Sudanese Student Association, and said that, despite the best efforts of the school, there are still times she feels like an outsider. “If you quarrel with a Ugandan, they say, ‘Well, you left your country!’ Those are really retaliating words.”

Akuol said she appreciated the way that Uganda has hosted so many refugees, but she wishes the rest of the world would follow suit.

“You should treat refugees as regular people,” she said. “Instability doesn’t only affect one country.”

One of Apili’s main jobs is to secure funding to cover the tuition for refugees, which comes from international organizations such as the Windle Trust. Even with the support, the school is able to provide secondary education for only 320 refugees; thousands more unable to

attend simply because there are not enough schools.

In Tandala, a camp near Adjumani, there are just two primary schools to serve 5,000 school-age children. Each primary school has accepted 1,000 students, with 200 students in each classroom. Those are the lucky ones. More than 3,000 children are at home, or spend mornings gathered under a tree at “community schools,” informal classes run by former Sudanese teachers unable to transfer their certification to Uganda.

But after primary school there is nothing. The Ugandan government is hesitant to set up higher-level schools because they don’t want to encourage refugees to stay longer than is immediately necessary.

“There’s a glaring gap of secondary education, there’s simply nothing after primary school,” said Jesuit Fr. Kevin White, the country director of Jesuit Relief Services. “We know what happens when youth are idle. There are pregnancies, alcohol and drug abuse, and sometimes they are even going back to South Sudan to fight, just because they’re bored.”

Tabea concurs, and offers a potential solution. “We need to educate the refugees, but higher studies is too expensive for us to fund [for everyone],” she says, but adds, “We want to have an online learning center for brilliant refugees.”

Melanie Lidman is Middle East and Africa correspondent for Global Sisters Report based in Israel.





SEEKING REFUGE



■ Angelika Ouma, left, the director of the Bishop Caesar Asili Memorial Nursery and Primary School, and head teacher Sr. Laura Kaneyo sit outside the school, overseeing an expansion that will enable them to open an additional classroom. (GSR photo / Melanie Lidman)

Ugandans, displaced once themselves, welcome South Sudan refugees

Melanie Lidman

Some days, Angelika Ouma isn't even sure what side of the border she's on. "I was born in Sudan, then I came here [to Uganda] when the situation was bad, then I went back to Sudan when it was bad in Uganda, and now I'm back here," said the nursery school teacher, 73.

Over 60 years, Ouma's career has crisscrossed the border in pursuit of a peaceful place to teach children: She completed primary school in Uganda but returned to Sudan for higher education. Fleeing violence in Sudan, she first worked as a nursery school teacher in Uganda, where she met her husband. Together, they fled to South Sudan when northern Uganda was unsafe. Ouma finished her career and retired, expecting to relax in South Sudan. But, suddenly, after fighting broke out in her village, she found herself, now widowed, once again fleeing across the border.



Now, along with the Missionary Sisters of Mary Mother of the Church, she helps coordinate emergency nursery school classes for more than 70 South Sudanese refugees from her community in Kocoa village in northern Uganda. Refugees make up about a quarter of the students at the Bishop Caesar Asili Memorial Nursery and Primary School.

In addition, a small percentage of South Sudanese refugees who were able to secure scholarships at schools outside the settlements have been absorbed into regular classes with Ugandans. Read about the Missionary Sisters' work at a girls secondary school in Adjumani.

As countries around the world grapple with the wave of refugees flooding their borders, Uganda has quietly accepted a million South Sudanese refugees, almost half of the more than 2.5 million people who have fled South Sudan since 2014, according to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees. Today, the country absorbs an average of 500 refugees from South Sudan per week, which is considered a quiet period. At some points, 1,000 children were fleeing South Sudan every day.

This has made Uganda, in the course of just a few years, the country in Africa with the largest refugee population and one of the top five host nations around the world.

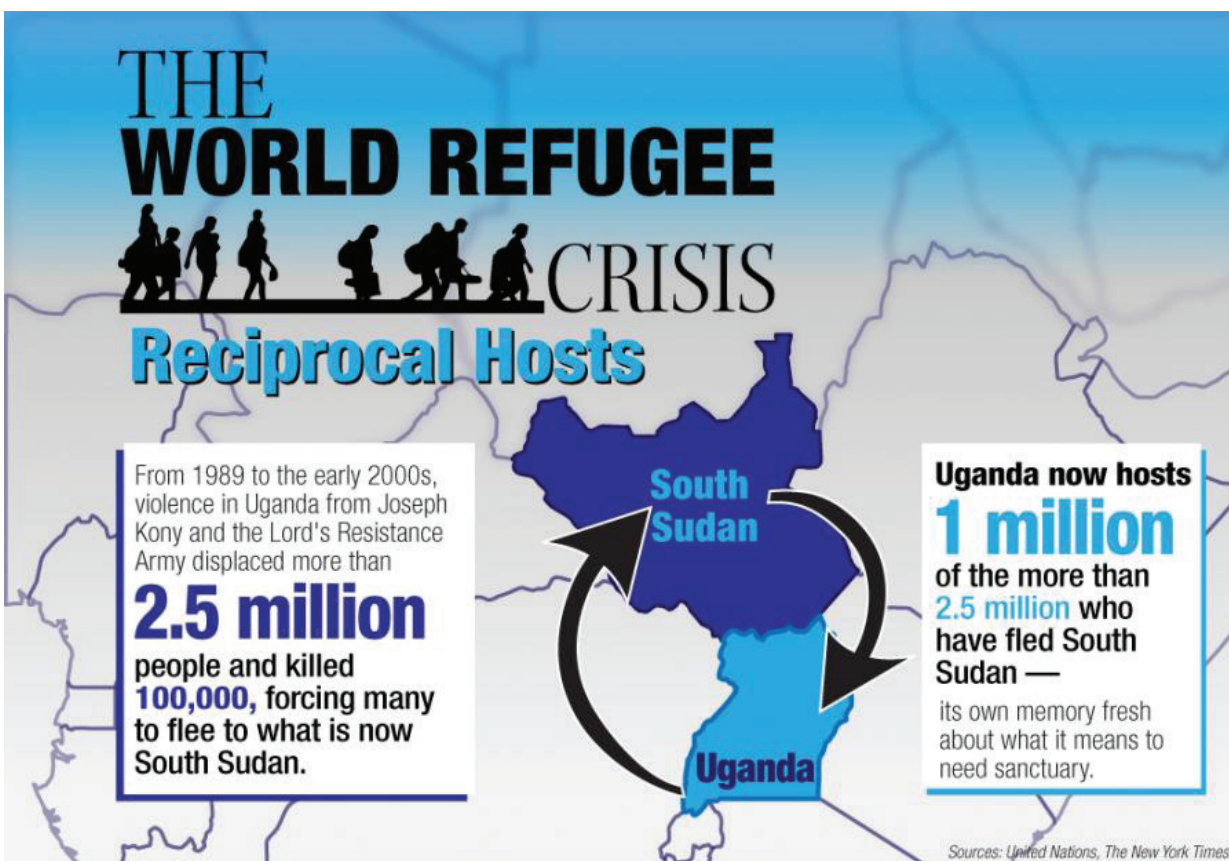
The country also hosts almost a quarter of a million refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo and over 70,000 refugees from Burundi and Somalia, according to 2017 U.N. data.

Although there are significant challenges, and many refugees living in settlements complain of issues with security and sanitation, Uganda's attitude toward refugees is considered more liberal and accepting than many other countries.

Uganda has "one of the most open refugee policies in Africa, and most likely in the world," U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi told reporters after visiting the Imvepi Refugee Settlement in Uganda in January.

Part of that is because the memory of being a refugee is still fresh for many northern Ugandans, where the majority of settlements are located.

Starting in 1989, Joseph Kony, a self-described prophet bent on overthrowing Uganda's longtime



(GSR graphic / Toni-Ann Ortiz)



president, Yoweri Museveni, instructed his followers to kidnap children as young as 8, brainwash them and force them to burn down homes and rape and kill their neighbors. The violence displaced more than 2.5 million people in northern Uganda and left 100,000 people dead. Kony and his guerrilla group kidnapped more than 30,000 children, both boys and girls, and forced them to commit atrocities during two decades of war.

The Lord's Resistance Army eventually crumbled into disarray and the war petered to a halt in the 2000s. Despite international attempts to capture Kony, he fled to Sudan or the Central African Republic with a small group of supporters and is still at large.

Northern Uganda began to emerge from the years of terror. Those who had fled their villages — many to the part of Sudan that is now South Sudan after it gained independence in 2011 — returned. Religious leaders oversaw traditional forgiveness ceremonies to try to heal the communities' wounds. Sisters and educators created special training and educational opportunities for returning child soldiers to help them integrate. With time, these traumatized children became community leaders and advocates for peace.

Farmers planted crops in land that had previously been abandoned. Gulu, the regional capital, started growing at a breakneck speed, with a network of newly paved roads linking it to other cities in the region.

Then civil war broke out in South Sudan in December 2013. Before long, hundreds of thousands of South Sudanese began to flee across the border to Uganda's relative stability.

"There's a culture here in Uganda of welcoming," explained Sr. Helen Tabea, a member of the Evangelizing Sisters of Mary from Uganda, and an English teacher and program coordinator with the Jesuit Refugee Service in Uganda. "And the fact that Ugandans have experienced difficult times for a long time, we remember what it's like. The South Sudanese and the northern Ugandans are basically cousins. They speak the same language."

Jesuit Fr. Kevin White, the country director of the refugee service, says Uganda has an excellent refugee law today "and it's because they have a live memory of when they themselves were refugees."

The government of Uganda is careful to refer to refugee "settlements," not "camps." Every few months,



■ Each refugee family in Uganda's settlements receives a 30-meter-by-30-meter (1076-square-yard) plot of land to build their house and start growing their own vegetables, in a bid to make the refugees self-sufficient and avoid massive inflation in Uganda's already impoverished northern region. (GSR photo / Melanie Lidman)

they build a new settlement, which quickly fills to capacity. Bidi Bidi, now considered the world's largest refugee settlement, on par with Kenya's Dadaab camp, with almost 250,000 people, opened in August 2016 and was filled by December.

Refugees in Uganda can move freely about the country and obtain work permits. Most are assigned a 30-meter-by-30-meter (1076-square-yard) plot of land in a settlement, where they are encouraged to build their own homes, dig a pit latrine, and grow some of their own food, in an effort to encourage self-sufficiency and promote dignity. It also fights a common side effect of refugee camps in rural places around the world: soaring inflation for the local population when refugees are given cash by international nongovernmental organizations.

"The humanitarian response about Uganda has been quiet because Uganda is doing a good job," said White. "You only get attention when it bleeds."

He gave the example of a summer 2016 cholera outbreak that was dealt with effectively. "The irony is that, if it wasn't contained, we would have gotten headlines and maybe more money."

Although Uganda's policies are better than those in most surrounding countries, the situation isn't tenable, White noted.

In some parts of northern Uganda, refugees will soon outnumber nationals, as Uganda is on track to absorb an additional 400,000 refugees during 2018. In 2016, the region of Adjumani had 170,000 refugees and 210,000 Ugandan nationals. Land is quickly running out, and refugees who come these days may only receive a 10-meter-by-10-meter plot of land, which will not be enough to grow their own food.

There is not enough water in the area to support such a large population, and trucking in water has become prohibitively expensive. Trees are disappearing as a growing population cuts them for firewood.

For now, the Ugandans have been welcoming their neighbors to the north, but as competition for resources increases, this goodwill may disappear.

Tabea said the plots that encourage refugees to cultivate their own food are essential to maintaining good relations between the refugees and the local population. "[Refugees] must stand up on their own, and people do," she said. "People start working, or they sell small items. Uganda doesn't have a lot of resources but we do have very rich soil. Within two weeks you can have vegetables and within a month you can have beans if the rains cooperate."

'We've always had wars around here'

Sisters in northern Uganda have had to quickly adapt their ministries for a changing population, especially those working in education.

Yet, despite the severity of the South Sudan refugee problem, the changes at individual schools and ministries were not very drastic. Many of the sisters were already working with Ugandan refugees who were starting to return, so were familiar with the traumas refugees face.



■ Even though most of the students are on break, the house mother at the Bishop Caesar Asili Memorial Nursery and Primary School prepares lunch for some of the South Sudanese students who might not otherwise get enough to eat during the school vacation. (GSR photo / Melanie Lidman)

If the walls could talk at the new Bishop Caesar Asili Memorial Nursery and Primary School, they would tell the history of a fractured region. The building was

originally constructed as a novitiate for the Missionary Sisters of Mary Mother of the Church congregation, but in 1992 rebels from the Lord's Resistance Army broke into the compound, killed a watchman and kidnapped a sister, who was later rescued. The congregation left the area and moved south to safer parts of Uganda. Sudanese seminarians from the Comboni congregation moved in, but then went back to South Sudan.

The sisters began returning to the area over the last decade, first re-establishing a health center and maternity lab. The school opened in early 2017 as a nursery and primary school. Refugees make up about a quarter of the enrollment.

"The refugee children have a different character from the children here, they have wild behavior because they are traumatized," said Sr. Laura Kaneyo, the head teacher.

She said the children are often fighting. "They were born in the war, they grew up in the war, they don't know peace," she said. "Without a big heart you cannot handle this group of people, you must have patience and tolerance."

Kaneyo depends on people like Angelika Ouma, the kindergarten teacher who was a pillar of her community in Nimule, South Sudan. When Ouma fled to Uganda in the current round of fighting, many families followed her to Adjumani so they could enroll in her school again.

Ouma is part of the South Sudanese Madi tribe, and her husband, now deceased, was a Ugandan Madi. The fact that the tribal identity straddles the border has made the transitions logistically easier, though still emotionally wrenching.



■ Children mug for the camera outside of a nursery school run by the Charity Sisters of Jesus at a settlement near Adjumani, northern Uganda. The camps do not have enough formal education framework for the thousands of children, so the Charity Sisters of Jesus run an informal daycare. (GSR photo / Melanie Lidman)

She looks out over her charges, a dozen rambunctious boys of varying ages who are at the school, even though it is vacation time, because there is nothing to do at the settlement. They gather to sing traditional Madi songs for a guest and then help the school's "mama" cook lunch.

Sitting in a plastic chair, she watches as workers put the finishing touches on an expansion to the school, which will allow them to open another classroom and serve more children, both Ugandan and South Sudanese.

She doesn't know which side of the border she will end up on, or if she will be alive to see peace. Like many South Sudanese refugees, she longs for a day when she can return "home," to South Sudan, even though she has spent more than half of her life in Uganda. But she also knows how to provide stability for her main concern, the children under her care, despite the question mark that is their future.

"Since 1955, we've always had wars around here," said Ouma. "From the time I was 10 until now, we've always been at war."

Melanie Lidman is Middle East and Africa correspondent for Global Sisters Report based in Israel.





■ Pope Francis poses with migrants during his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican June 6. (CNS / Paul Haring)

SEEKING REFUGE



Learn more from these resources about migration trends, Catholic action

Numerous Catholic organizations are involved in the worldwide refugee and migration crisis, including the Vatican, congregations of women religious and local parishes. Here are links to the websites of some key organizations, along with the United Nations' and other statistics:

- United Nations statistics on international migration
- Four facts to know about the global refugee crisis from the United Nations
- The latest facts about forcibly displaced people and refugees worldwide from the United Nations' refugee agency
- Share the Journey — Share the Journey is an online project of the Vatican dedicated to encountering and accompanying migrants and refugees.

Among those joining this effort are:

- Catholic Charities
- Caritas Internationalis
- Catholic Relief Services
- U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
- Jesuit Refugee Services also endorses the campaign.
- The Vatican's Migrants & Refugee Section
- The Vatican's document on the proposed global compacts on migrants and on refugees
- Catholic Social Innovation in Today's Global Refugee Crisis — This report from the Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities (FADICA) and Boston College takes a look at how church-led organizations and programs are creatively serving refugees and migrants.
- Migrant Project/Sicily — A program founded by the International Union Superiors General (UISG) in Rome to aid migrants in Sicily by developing one-on-one relationships with them and helping them assimilate to their new home. Read more in our story about it.
- The U.S. Catholic Sisters against Human Trafficking world refugee toolkit for World Refugee Day, June 20
- UISG Migrants — A summary of the work sisters at UISG do to assist migrants.
- Scalabrini International Migration Network
- Global Sisters Report's coverage of migration since April 2014





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