

**Remarks by Wilbert van Hövell,
Regional Representative for Western Europe,
Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
at the award ceremony of the fifth Children's Peace Prize
(The Hague, 3 December 2009)**

Your Excellencies, Prime Minister of The Netherlands
and Minister of Development Cooperation
Honourable Members of Parliament,
Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Mrs Wangari Maathai,
Mr Dullaert,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to be here and I would like to thank the KidsRights Foundation for inviting UNHCR to participate in today's important event. I was asked to share some thoughts with you about children displaced by persecution and conflict.

Although refugee crises do get solved at some point, many contemporary conflicts show little sign of abating and some are actually worsening. UNHCR works for some 25 million people who are uprooted by persecution or conflict. Around 10.5 million of them are refugees who have crossed an international border and 14.4 million are people who have fled within their own country.¹ Based on available data, children below the age of 18 represent some 44% of both categories. Children below the age of 5 constitute on average one out of ten of all people on the move because of human rights violations and conflict, whereas one third are school-aged children. Among all age groups, boys and girls are equally distributed.

During my work for the United Nations I have met numerous displaced children, from Rwanda to Bangladesh and from Kosovo to East-Timor. Traumatized and exploited children, children looking for their lost parents, malnourished children, but also children in many places who are trying to cope, who are going back to school, albeit in a refugee camp, who sing beautiful songs and start making jokes again. Every day we should pay tribute to their resilience, courage and resourcefulness.

Refugee children face far greater dangers to their safety and well-being than the average girl and boy. The sudden, violent onset of emergencies and the disruption of families and community structures deeply affect the physical and psychological well-being of children of all ages. Another cause for this are the acute shortages of resources with which most refugees are confronted.

Among the most vulnerable are orphans and those separated from their families. Separation often occurs during flight, however when faced with war, instability and extreme

¹ The total number of refugees and internally displaced persons is higher. These figures do e.g. not include the 4.6 million Palestinian refugees who fall under the mandate of another UN agency (UNWRA). The total number of persons of concern to UNHCR is 34 million, and includes also stateless persons, asylum-seekers and returning refugees. The figures are from beginning 2009.

poverty, parents may also send their children to distant countries to seek safety or, as part of a survival strategy, to ensure an income for the rest of the family. In Europe too, considerable numbers of unaccompanied youngsters have arrived over the years. Often they are exploited by smugglers. Many of them originate from countries in conflict. Finding effective responses, which take into account the best interests of the child, poses many challenges.

The lives of displaced children are often disrupted at a crucial stage in their physical and mental development. Poor hygiene and insufficient food, especially in the early stages of an emergency, can have a devastating impact on mortality rates of the very young. Where refugee camps are overcrowded, further threats to health are present. Many refugee children risk losing years of schooling. Older children are often compelled to take on additional responsibilities, as breadwinners or carers for younger siblings, which in turn causes them to drop out from school. Girls risk being discriminated on account of both their age and their gender.

I could mention several other problems, such as lack of birth registration, violence and abuse, trafficking of children (especially girls), detention and discrimination by a hostile environment. Displaced children can also be at particular risk of forced recruitment, such as in eastern Congo (DRC). Armed groups continue to use children as porters, cooks, messengers, but also as soldiers and sex slaves. These are terrible human rights violations and serious war crimes. All of us, governments, United Nations and other actors, have a responsibility to protect children against such crimes and to combat impunity. We appreciate the active stand the Dutch government is taking on these issues.

Ladies and gentlemen,

With the essential support of host and donor governments, and the active engagement of refugee men, women and children themselves, positive change is possible. Early registration, active tracing to re-unite children with family members, a proper lay-out of refugee camps, targeted programmes to eliminate food insecurity, education facilities, protective measures and other initiatives are making a difference in the lives of millions of displaced children. UNHCR works closely with UNICEF and many other agencies to bring these improvements about.

More so than others, refugee children are vulnerable and dependent. But they are also holders of rights. Our collective actions have a much better chance of success if they are grounded in the rights of the child, as set out in the Convention of the Rights of the Child twenty years ago; if they are oriented towards her or his best interests; and if they take into account the views of children themselves.

Like any other children, children in refugee camps, too, have resounding voices and many bright ideas. With all their energy and hope, they want to survive, cope and make the best of it, even in the face of adversity when their natural optimism has been undermined and sadness has entered their lives. Many of them may even adapt more easily to their new environment than us, adults.

I will never forget the Sudanese youngsters between 14 and 18 in a refugee camp in Ethiopia not far from the border with Sudan. This was at the end of the 1980's. Having fled from the civil war in Sudan at the time, they had formed a refugee committee and were helping to organise a camp of some 14,000 children, mostly boys, with very few adults around. It was amazing. I have rarely seen such courage and energy. These young refugees knew what they wanted. Fortunately, impressive individuals can be found in many refugee settings, be it in Iraqi refugee populations in Syria and Jordan, amongst the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal or in camps for Congolese refugees in Kigoma in Tanzania.

What probably binds them, is a great sense of initiative and a genuine determination to take matters again in their own hand. In the community they can be role models. They help to restore decency and hope. They are the future and they are investing in it, not only for themselves but also for the community as a whole, because one day most refugees do go home to resume their lives.

Let me reiterate how much we appreciate the Children's Peace Prize initiative of the KidsRights Foundation, with the august support of the Committee of Laureates of the Nobel Peace Prize. We applaud your initiative, in general and in particular this year. Thank you very much for inviting us to share these few observations with you on the specific plight of children in exile. They do not only need the sympathy but the active support of all of us.

Thank you.