

World Refugee Day, 20 June 2009

## Fear of the stranger informing policies towards refugees

### *Welcoming refugees safeguards international protection*

“It is extremely worrying that the **world’s richest states** continue to shirk their responsibilities with regard to refugees. Instead of welcoming people, forced by extreme poverty and violence to flee their homes, they **are slamming their doors shut**. Their actions are making the global system of international protection unsustainable”, says JRS International Director, Peter Balleis SJ.

On 20 June, World Refugee Day, JRS calls on governments to respect their human rights obligations and create an environment conducive to the integration of refugees and migrants. **JRS also reminds citizens they are not powerless**; governments depend on their consent to act. If citizens become more positively disposed to the plight of forcibly displaced persons, governments will be encouraged to improve their policies.

Developed states lead the way in implementing policies and laws that prevent refugees from entering and remaining in their territories. The **Italian government** illegally returns undocumented migrants to Libya without any attempt to determine whether or not they are in need of protection. The **US authorities** indiscriminately prevent the arrival of boats carrying Haitians fleeing poverty and serious human rights abuses. Conditions for asylum seekers in **Greece** are so bad that some EU states no longer consider it as a safe country in which to seek refuge.

Politicians and the media depict the arrival of the stranger as a threat to public security or perceived cultural identity. Too often, they disregard positive contributions made by refugees and migrants to the economic and cultural well-being of their host nations. They fail to recognise that refugees do not choose to leave their homes, they are forcibly displaced. Consequently, developing states are left to bear the responsibility of hosting 80 percent of the global refugee population.

“The once open-door policy of developing states is rapidly closing. The message – **there is no room at the inn** – has been received loud and clear by many developing states – **Cambodia, Kenya, Panama, Thailand** – which have adopted increasingly restrictive policies towards displaced populations. These countries view developed states, driven by fear of the stranger, as no longer interested in sharing responsibility for global international protection”, said Fr Balleis.

Yet, some overburdened states have shown it is possible to accept more refugees within their borders. Last March, the **Ecuadorian government** began a process to regularise the status of more than 50,000 hitherto unrecognised refugees. One month later, **South Africa** announced the adoption of procedures to provide temporary protection to more than one million Zimbabweans fleeing their homes.

More than a decade of increasingly draconian responses to forced migration has not reduced the number of refugees worldwide; if anything, it has only intensified the suffering of the most vulnerable. Closing our eyes to refugees compromises the principles of justice and solidarity upon which all free societies are built. **Opening our hearts to their suffering compels us to welcome the stranger.**

JRS works in over 50 countries in six continents around the world. It employs over 1,000 staff: lay, Jesuits and other religious to meet the education, health, social and other needs of 500,000 refugees and IDPs, more than half of whom are women. Its services are provided to refugees regardless of their race, ethnic origin, or religious beliefs.