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Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children Releases Landmark Report on Refugees with Disabilities in Countries Affected by Conflict

Finds refugees with disabilities to be among the most underserved and neglected people in the world

NEW YORK/GENEVA (June 23, 2008) — The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children today released "Disabilities among Refugees and Conflict-Affected Populations," the first major report to address the critical needs of a virtually invisible population: refugees and people displaced within their own countries who suffer from physical, sensory or mental disabilities.

"Being uprooted from one's home is an enormous challenge in itself, but refugees with disabilities face even greater hardship and isolation and are all but forgotten by their communities and by the world," said Carolyn Makinson, Executive Director of the Women's Commission. "Our report confirms that their needs must be addressed *at the very start* of any emergency. It is critical that refugee camps are built with easy access to shelter, food and water and opportunities must be created for them to fully contribute to society."

The report is the culmination of a six-month project led by the Women's Commission and co-funded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). It is based on fact-finding missions to Ecuador, Yemen, Jordan, Thailand and Nepal (as well as significant field input from Darfur and Kenya), interviews with United Nations agencies and local organizations on the ground, and focus group discussions with refugees and others uprooted from their homes. Colombian, Somali, Iraqi, Burmese, Bhutanese and Sudanese populations were studied in camps and urban environments, in both emergency and protracted situations, with a particular focus on women, children and adolescents.

"The Women's Commission sought to place refugees with disabilities higher on the international agenda and to provide tools and guidance for improving critical assistance," said António Guterres, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "This research has accomplished just that."

Among the greatest challenges identified by the report were the identification of and accumulation of real data on the numbers of people with disabilities. This population is currently not counted in refugee registration drives or identified in data collection rounds. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that there are 600 million

people with disabilities worldwide—between 7 and 10% of the world’s population. Based on this estimate, the Women’s Commission believes that between 2.5 and 3.5 million of the world’s 35 million displaced people also live with disabilities; however, among those who have fled conflict or natural disasters, the number may be even higher.

The report notes serious problems with the physical layout and infrastructure of the camps—few services are accessible to people with disabilities, including toilets, shelters and health facilities. In general, no special accommodations are made for getting food and other supplies that refugees with disabilities need on a daily basis. Many are housebound, rarely leaving their shelters. Not surprisingly, their voices go unheard in decision-making activities for their communities.

“Disabilities among Refugees and Conflict-Affected Populations” also reveals a disparity between refugee camps and urban areas: in camps there is a greater awareness about the needs of the disabled and better services than in urban environments, where refugees with disabilities are unable to access services offered by the host government and virtually no one is providing special assistance to them. The Women’s Commission also found greater discrimination and stigmatization towards the mentally disabled population; assistance programs, when available, tend to focus on those with physical and sensory disabilities.

Yet, key findings also include a few positive developments, in particular with regard to children in refugee camps. Many children with disabilities are attending primary schools, some of which have special education teachers. For the parents of the disabled, some camps offer support groups as well as home visits for instruction in sign language, Braille and rehabilitative exercises.

To reinforce the report’s findings and improve protection and services for refugees with disabilities, the Women’s Commission created a resource kit to provide practical guidance for UNHCR and humanitarian agency field staff. Major recommendations include making refugee camps accessible to people with disabilities and ensuring that they have full and equal access to the mainstream services that other refugees receive.

Since 1989, the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children has worked to improve the lives and defend the rights of refugee and internally displaced women and children. Our research and advocacy lead to life-changing improvements for this vulnerable, yet resilient, population. The Women’s Commission is legally part of the International Rescue Committee, a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization.

To download the report, go to: womenscommission.org/disabilities

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