

# Lives in Transition

## The Global Refugee Community and Arizona's Response

This past year Arizona's unique Mexico-U.S. border issues received increased national attention. While Arizonans have been working on ways to resolve border-related issues for years, the entire country watched this past year as congressional immigration debates flared up in Washington.

Less attention was paid to the separate issues facing other foreign-citizen groups in our state. Arizona's refugee population is one such group. To better appreciate this aspect of human migration and the role it plays in our lives locally, it helps to first understand the issue from both global and national perspectives.

### The Global Refugee Population

Every year, millions of people around the world are displaced by the effects of war and various forms of political and civil unrest. Forced to flee their homes and countries for fear of persecution—including the risks of death and torture—they often find themselves in refugee camps scattered along the borders of neighboring countries. Many leave their homes on such short notice that they are unable to bring with them photographs, money, clothing or food. They may even have to leave behind family members or personal documentation, including identification cards. Within days, hours and sometimes minutes, people find themselves on foreign

soil, where they are unfamiliar with the language and don't know where they might be forced to move from day to day. They quickly fall to the mercy of the host country's government and international humanitarian-aid organizations.

To get a sense of the magnitude of the world refugee population, imagine sitting on a bench in downtown Phoenix on a busy Monday morning—cars, buses, pedestrians and soon a light-rail train zipping by. Within an hour, you will have seen tens of thousands of people passing by from numerous cities reaching east and west as far as Apache Junction and Goodyear, and north and south as far as Cave Creek and Maricopa. Now consider Arizona's entire population, which is nearly 6 million, and multiply that by two. That is the estimated number of refugees worldwide: more than 12 million people.<sup>1</sup> According to NineMillion.org, more than 9 million of these refugees are children. The tens of thousands of people passing your downtown city bench would represent only a tiny fraction of the global-refugee population.

A large percentage of the world's 12 million refugees are from African nations, but many are from various other regions of the world, including Europe, central Asia, east Asia, southeast Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean.

### Origins of U.S. Assistance

The United States has a long history of providing humanitarian aid.

The first major concerted U.S. effort on the refugee front came during the mid-1970s and early 1980s, when large populations of Vietnamese and other Indochinese refugees were relocated to the United States. Many were originally housed in government facilities, including available military bases, across the country. Realizing that it would not be practical or safe to return refugees to Vietnam and various other countries, the government turned to faith-based and other local

organizations for assistance in permanently integrating these refugees into the U.S. population and culture. Numerous non-governmental organizations in this country had been assisting refugees and individuals seeking asylum for quite some time. Their preexisting and growing infrastructures proved invaluable to the resettlement of the Indochinese refugees.

In large part due to this major resettlement movement, the United States began to expand and define its international policy toward refugees. This event marked the modern era for the development of refugee resettlement programs in this country.

Federal legislation began changing in the early 1980s, and a system for identifying global refugee populations began to develop. Nonprofit organizations continued to play a large role in refugee resettlement. Eventually a system was put in place to determine the number of global refugees that would be allowed into the United States each year. That system continues today.

Each year, the U.S. State Department prepares a report that is submitted to Congress concerning proposed refugee admissions. The President then sets the total yearly ceiling of refugee admissions after consultation with Congress. Prior to Sept. 11, 2001, the actual yearly historical admissions came relatively close to the yearly ceilings. Post-9/11, the actual admissions relative to the ceilings dropped dramatically, and there has been a gradual percentage increase in refugee admissions since then. Figure 1 on page 39 illustrates those trends.

Since 1975, the United States has resettled more than 2.5 million refugees within its borders. As explained by Ellen R. Sauerbrey, Assistant U.S. Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration, in 2005 alone this country "opened [its] doors to more than 53,000 refugees from 55 countries. We hope to exceed that number [in 2006]."

**J. James Christian** is an associate attorney at the law firm Tiffany & Bosco, PA. His practice involves investment fraud and commercial litigation. He is actively involved with various civic and nonprofit organizations.

**Kyrsten Sinema** is a local attorney and State Representative for District 15. Prior to serving in the legislature, she was a school social worker who worked with refugee populations. She also serves as Board President of COAR (Community Outreach & Advocacy for Refugees).

**FIGURE 1. U.S. Refugee Actual Admissions and Ceilings 1998-2005<sup>2</sup>**

Year	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Actual	76,181	85,076	72,143	68,925	26,767	28,304	52,835	53,738
Ceiling	83,000	91,000	90,000	80,000	70,000	70,000	70,000	70,000

first asylum,” refugees destined for the United States and other countries are identified by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). To a

**From Crisis to U.S. Resettlement**

The path to U.S. resettlement for almost all refugees is painstakingly slow. With more than 12 million refugees worldwide, generally less than one percent of that population actually ends up being permanently resettled in a foreign country. And only approximately one-half of that one percent is resettled in the United States.

This is in large part because the world community sees resettlement in a foreign country as the solution of last resort. Before resettlement, the goal for refugees is first to attempt to repatriate them. Most refugees want to return to their countries of origin. However, that’s not always a realistic and safe answer.

If refugees cannot return home, the next solution is to have them settle permanently in the country to which they first fled. This solution is limited by the ability of host governments to care for and integrate refugee populations into their own.

The last solution, and the one used least frequently, is resettlement in a foreign country like the United States.

Before a person is deemed a “refugee,” they have generally witnessed or experienced widespread persecution or fear of persecution within the borders of their home country. This fear can have many origins, including civil or political unrest, war or senseless killing of minority populations. Under U.S. law, the well-founded fear necessary to be eligible for refugee status may be founded on persecution due to race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion. In addition to holding this well-founded fear, persons seeking U.S. refugee status must be unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin. In

other words, they must have fled their home to another country before they can even be considered for permanent resettlement in the United States.

lesser extent, refugees may be identified as such by U.S. embassies or certain non-governmental international-relief organizations.

After being identified, they are referred to the U.S. Refugee Program for resettlement consideration. An officer from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services decides whether a particular person is



Refugee status in this country is defined in § 101(a)(42) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, as later amended by the Refugee Act of 1980. This definition of “refugee”—well-founded fear of persecution plus an inability to return to one’s home country—is the generally accepted definition in the international community.

Once in a neighboring or other host country, referred to as “the country of

a refugee and eligible for resettlement under U.S. law.

The identification process and the application process for ultimate resettlement in the United States is often long and tedious. Lack of documentation and an inability to prove a well-founded fear of persecution can make it



... exceedingly difficult to complete the process. Individuals might be forced to remain in refugee camps for months, years and in some cases even decades. The president of Latvia, Ms. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, had this to say about her experience as a child in refugee camps and the plight of other refugees:

No one leaves their home willingly or gladly. When people leave en masse the place of their birth, the place where they live, it means there is something very deeply wrong with the circumstances in that country and we should never take lightly these flights of refugees fleeing across borders. ... When the moment comes to leave your

home, it is a painful moment. ... It is a painful condition not to know where you are going to lay your head, to look at the lights shining in distant windows, to think of people living their normal lives, sleeping in their own beds, eating at their own table, living under their own roofs. ... [W]hen you come to refugee camps and some people spend

## Getting Involved Locally

The opportunities for providing assistance to local refugees and local refugee-resettlement organizations are plentiful. In addition to monetary support, newly admitted refugees are often in need of all sorts of everyday items, including things as simple as toothbrushes and as practical as beds and other furniture.

From the legal community's perspective, pro bono services are often needed by individual refugees and local resettlement organizations. Robin Marcos, director of the Phoenix branch of the International Rescue Committee (IRC), has developed a system by which her organization will accept practically any donated items and exchange them for shopping credits at charitable organizations if the item is not able to be used by IRC. This allows the various nonprofit organizations to maximize their resources and ensure that all donations prove helpful. Contact the local IRC branch at (602) 433-2440. Additional information regarding the IRC can be found online at [www.theirc.org](http://www.theirc.org).

A special program that has been developed by the AZ Lost Boys Center provides a unique opportunity for local attorneys to provide one-on-one mentoring services to Sudanese and other refugees. The AZ Lost Boys Center is a social services organization that was created as a reaction to the influx of Sudanese refugees to the Phoenix metropolitan area in 2001. That year the United States decided to resettle approximately 3,800 orphaned youth and young adults from Sudan. A large percentage of these refugees ended up resettling in Arizona. Without family and community support, resources and connections necessary to achieve their goals, it is often difficult for refugee populations to integrate into society and rise to elevated economic positions. The program developed by the AZ Lost Boys Center pairs refugees with local attorneys. This pairing provides refugees with the needed connections and resources that will help ensure their success. For more information on this program, please contact Ralph Serpico of the AZ Lost Boys Center at (602) 262-2310,



or visit the center online at [www.azlost-boyscenter.org](http://www.azlost-boyscenter.org).

Community Outreach & Advocacy for Refugees (COAR) coordinates with Arizona State University students to provide mentoring to refugee families throughout the valley. Volunteers adopt a family and work closely with the whole family to provide individualized attention and friendship to families learning a new culture. Volunteers engage in many different tasks with their families, including teaching children how to use a library, parents how to shop at a grocery store, and more. COAR also has a program called Reaching Higher that provides mentorship to high school-aged refugee teenagers and helps them prepare for college. This program seeks volunteers to help teens learn about the admissions process, scholarships and grants for school, and college-level

course work. To learn more about how to participate in COAR's work, contact Cara Steiner at [csteiner@coarweb.org](mailto:csteiner@coarweb.org).

The Lutheran Social Ministry of the Southwest coordinates with local churches and community organizations to provide assistance to incoming refugees. If you would like your church or community organization to get involved with refugee resettlement through this organization, contact Craig Thoreson, Director of Refugee Resettlement, at (602) 248-4400. Assistance may be as minimal as conducting a drive for needed everyday items, to as involved as sponsoring a refugee family in their initial transition to the Valley.

Catholic Charities Community Services and Betania Community Center also provide refugee resettlement assistance. Both organizations have the need for volunteer services and other community support. Catholic Charities is affiliated with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington, DC, which is the largest refugee resettlement VOLAG in the country.

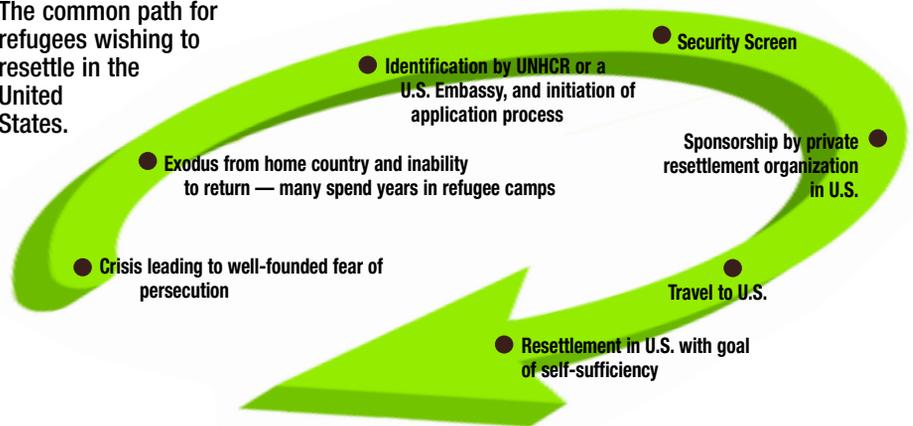
More information about Catholic Charities can be found online at [www.catholiccharitiesaz.com](http://www.catholiccharitiesaz.com). Betania Community Center can be reached at (602) 277-5957.



decades and much of their lives in refugee camps, you are living outside of space and of time, you have no roots, you have no past, you don't know whether you have a future, you have no rights, you have no voice, you have nowhere to participate in, you are not a citizen, you have no papers, sometimes you haven't even got your name, and you have to pinch yourself to reassure yourself that yes I am alive, I am me, I am a human being, I am a person. Do I count in this world, I don't know, I'll wait until tomorrow.<sup>3</sup>

Refugees who happen to fall within the very small minority of individuals who are eligible for U.S. resettlement have gone through a rigorous admission process. Examples of reasons why refugees may be turned away include the presence of communicable diseases, serious physical or mental disorders, histories of drug abuse or addiction, or histories of committing crimes of moral turpitude.

**FIGURE 2.**  
The common path for refugees wishing to resettle in the United States.



Refugees must also pass a rigorous security check administered by the U.S. Department of State. The USA Patriot Act added new obstacles for refugees. A largely unintended consequence of this piece of legislation has been the inability of certain particularly vulnerable refugees to be approved for resettlement in the United States. The act broadly defines the term “material assistance,” and precludes

refugees that have provided material assistance to dissident groups in foreign countries from coming to this country. Though this might sound reasonable at first glance, the practical consequences of the broad interpretation of the material-assistance provision have precluded human-rights violation victims who provide material support under situations of physical duress from entering the country.

Finally, before refugees can travel to the United States, they must obtain sponsorship assurance from an approved refugee resettlement national voluntary agency—VOLAG—in the United States. There are 10 major approved national VOLAGs operating here. They work and contract with local resettlement agencies across the country. On a weekly basis, members of each national VOLAG gather to review a roster of eligible refugees to determine if their organization will have the ability and resources necessary to sponsor the resettlement of a particular refugee (or refugee family). Once sponsorship is secured, the International Organization for Migration arranges for transportation to the United States. Refugees are expected to pay the cost of their travel. Loans are provided for the majority of refugees who are unable to pay their own travel, which must be repaid once the refugee is established in this country.

Figure 2 (above) illustrates a typical path for a refugee seeking entrance.

### Arizona's Concerted Efforts

After the weekly VOLAG allocation meetings, each VOLAG contacts its local resettlement affiliates to determine the exact

placement of the newly sponsored refugees. This is where local resettlement organizations step in.

The major local resettlement organizations in the Phoenix metropolitan area are the International Rescue Committee, Catholic Community Service of Southern Arizona, the Lutheran Social Ministry of the Southwest, and Betania Community Center. Some of these local groups are branches of larger affiliates with local refugee resettlement programs, but all share the same goal: the resettlement of refugees with an emphasis upon self-sufficiency.

Various social service organizations also play a role in resettlement. The AZ Lost Boys Center, for example, provides community resources that help refugees integrate into the community and develop to their fullest potential. And volunteers with COAR—Community Outreach & Advocacy for Refugees—help refugee families integrate into their new communities and help prepare refugee teenagers for college.

From the moment refugees step off the plane at Phoenix International Airport, the local resettlement organizations are there. Even before arrival, the organizations have arranged many things, including those of immediate need like housing, hot meals and personal hygiene items. An extensive amount of paperwork has to be completed. Registration with the Social Security Administration must be done immediately so that refugees can begin working. Leases need to be signed. English and cultural-adaptation classes need to start. Medical screening needs to be completed. And on and on.

At the state government level, each state may elect to participate in the federal refugee resettlement program. Arizona has made such an election, and the Governor's Office has designated the Arizona Department of Economic Security as the local-state agency charged with administering the program. Within the department is the local Refugee Resettlement Program, headed by Charles Shipman.

The state program offers many services to refugees, including refugee-medical assistance and refugee-cash assistance. Both of these services are available to refugees for

—continued on p. 46



## Lives in Transition

eight months. In place of the cash-assistance program, refugees may instead choose to participate in a matching-grant program that may ultimately offer them a larger assistance package over a shorter period of time. The matching-grant program is often more helpful than the cash-assistance program for large refugee families. The actual dollar amount provided to refugees and refugee families under either program is relatively nominal.

As global politics continue to change, the diversity of the U.S. refugee population continues to expand. Arizona alone took in refugees from more than 40 coun-

tries last year. This year refugees from Afghanistan, Angola, Belarus, Bosnia, Burma, Cameroon, Colombia, Congo, Cuba, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Haiti, Iran, Iraq, Liberia, Romania, Russia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Vietnam and Zimbabwe, to name some of the countries, have arrived. As of November 17, a total of 2,028 refugees had arrived in Arizona in 2006. The number of Arizona arrivals over the last 10 years are shown in Figure 3.

**FIGURE 3.**  
**Arizona Refugee Arrivals 1996-2005<sup>4</sup>**

2005	2,198
2004	2,378
2003	1,205
2002	1,130
2001	2,569
2000	2,527
1999	3,142
1998	2,871
1997	2,380
1996	1,960

### Lives in Transition

When crisis and the human spirit collide, lives in transition emerge. During these times of change, the resilience of refugees proves to be unparalleled. However, the challenges facing refugees cannot be overcome without the assistance of others. Those others are you and I.

### endnotes

1. U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, *World Refugee Survey 2006*, available at [www.refugees.org/article.aspx?id=1565&subm=19&ssm=29&area=Investigate](http://www.refugees.org/article.aspx?id=1565&subm=19&ssm=29&area=Investigate) (last visited Nov. 13, 2006).
2. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), Office of Admissions, Refugee Processing Center (RPC) Report, Fiscal Years 1998 to 2005; U.S. Department of State, *Proposed Refugee Admissions for FY 2005 – Report to Congress*; and information provided by the Arizona Department of Economic Security.
3. Statement by the President of Latvia, Ms. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, at the Ministerial Meeting of States Parties to the 1951 Convention and/or Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, Geneva (Dec. 12, 2001), available at [www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/news/opendoc.htm?tbl=NEWS&page=home&id=3c3031534](http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/news/opendoc.htm?tbl=NEWS&page=home&id=3c3031534) (last visited Nov. 13, 2006).
4. Statistical information provided by the Arizona Department of Economic Security.