

The Refugee System Has Become a Racket

By JOHN VINSON

The word “refugee” stirs sympathy in most people’s hearts, suggesting a person who flees his homeland for his very life. This sympathy is appropriate, but as with all virtuous feelings it has to be held in balance with realistic and practical thinking. Otherwise it becomes maudlin sentimentality, a feel-good exercise which does little practical good and often a great deal of damage. Some who indulge in this kind of sentimentality also manipulate the sympathy for questionable purposes.

Unfortunately, this kind of manipulation pervades the present system of admitting “refugees” and asylum seekers to the United States. Traditionally a refugee has been a person seeking admission with a “well-founded fear of persecution” by his government, often fear for his life. The same applies to asylees, the only difference being that an asylum seeker is already in the country of refuge.

Since passage of the Refugee Act of 1980, however, the definition of refugee has significantly changed so that it no longer conforms so much to the sympathetic image inspired by its original meaning. The reasons are twofold. First of all, the understanding of persecution has broadened considerably to include various types of social discrimination, not necessarily government sanctioned. Such discrimination may not be pleasant, but it commonly isn’t life threatening and also not so harsh as systematic political oppression. Second, the designation of refugee most often is given to everyone in an entire class of people believed to face discrimination. Thus an individual in the group need not prove any personal hardships or difficulties.

It is easy to see how such an arrangement can lead to abuse. Vast numbers of people around the world would like to come to the U.S. to improve their economic situation, and many also can claim to be members of groups facing varying degrees of intolerance and discrimination. Thus we have accepted many “refugees” who occasionally go back to their home countries for visits—which says something about the supposed levels of persecution they fled.

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Such points aside, the overly sympathetic humanitarians seem to believe that we Americans are morally obligated to welcome all people from everywhere who have complaints about their homelands. Here again is sympathy unbounded by practicality or even common sense. It stems from America’s messianic cult of immigration and its utopian dogma that our country is the savior of the world—with unlimited capacity to bless the world’s unfortunates by simply opening our doors.

In this dreamy warm-hearted utopia, our humanitarians absolve foreign governments and their peoples from having any responsibility to better themselves. That task belongs to morally superior Americans. Most, it seems, are Caucasians, thus suggesting that the White Man’s Burden still lives, though now in a rather strange and convoluted form. Its practitioners are quick to bristle at racism, real and imagined, while posing as benevolent lords to benighted huddled masses.

The real motives of some, however, scarcely match their professed benevolence. For them, the refugee system has become a source of personal and institutional enrichment. And this, in turn, has prompted many critics to regard that system as an outright racket. But it wasn’t always so. In times past, U.S. sponsors of refugees used their own money to assist them. Not so today.

The common arrangement now is for religious and secular organizations called Volags (volunteer agencies) to receive payment, courtesy of the U.S. taxpayer, for every refugee they usher into the country. Often they foist them off on American communities without adequate warning or preparation—communities that may already struggle to provide for their disadvantaged citizens. Also, the refugees quite often have customs and cultures that make it difficult to fit into American life, a source of significant stress for both them and their American hosts.

The Volags, however, needn’t worry about the practical consequences of their altruism because after a few months they no longer have any responsibility for the refugees. So what happens if the refugees still need help and assistance? No problem. They’re eligible to apply for all the welfare benefits available to American citizens, without the restrictions imposed on other immigrants.

Thus again, the U.S. taxpayer takes a hit while the

Volag folks enjoy their enhanced moral status and taxpayer-subsidized salaries. The Volags with church ties also seem to have come up with a novel understanding of Christian charity: generosity with other people's money. Public subsidies for religious activity, it would seem, are a clear violation of the separation of church and state, but strangely, hardly anyone says anything about it. Just where is the ACLU when, for once, we really need it?

And the profiteering doesn't stop with the Volags. Business interests, ever in search of cheaper and cheaper labor, have found the refugee system much to their liking. They welcome newcomers from any source to avoid paying good wages to Americans.

This corrupt system cries for reform, but the task will not be easy. Those who challenge the racketeering will find themselves cast as morally suspect by the Volags' media allies. Thus they will encounter charges of "racism," "nativism," and all the other junk invectives of politically correct bully-speak.

Nevertheless, it is encouraging that citizens in different communities have stood up to the Volags and refused to become victims of the system. Perhaps in time this awareness and determination will bring change to the system as a whole. The first order of business is to abandon the notion of America as world savior and restore the original understanding of what a refugee is, namely one who personally faces death or severe persecution from his government.

Also, genuine reform would seek to relocate refugees to countries near their homelands, rather than the U.S., where the cultures would be more compatible and the costs of supporting them would be much less. For refugees admitted to the U.S., support from the private sector must come from sponsors' own resources, not from the public purse.

Moral posturing and profiteering in the name of compassion make a mockery of true compassion. What has become the "refugee racket" is a perfect example. ■

Who Are the Top Volags?

From the Office of Refugee Resettlement's online list of "Volags" — voluntary agencies — that contract for resettlement and placement of refugees in the United States. Many or most Volag administrators and workers have good intentions, but the actions of their organizations raise legitimate concerns, including ethical issues.

Church World Service is the relief, development, and refugee assistance ministry of 35 Protestant, Orthodox, and Anglican communions in the United States. The Immigration and Refugee Program is its largest program. <http://www.churchworldservice.org/>

Episcopal Migration Ministries, a program of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church, responds to refugees, immigrants, and displaced persons both domestically and internationally. <http://www.ecusa.anglican.org/emm/>

Ethiopian Community Development Council is a non-profit community-based organization that also conducts humanitarian, educational, and socio-economic development programs in Ethiopia. <http://www.ecdcinternational.org>

Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) was founded in 1881 and is the national and worldwide arm of the organized American Jewish Community for the rescue, relocation, and resettlement of refugees and migrants. <http://www.hias.org/>

International Rescue Committee, founded in 1933, provides emergency relief, rehabilitation, protec-

tion of human rights, post-conflict development, resettlement services, and advocacy for those uprooted or affected by conflict and oppression in over 25 countries. <http://www.theirc.org/>

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, organized in 1939 to help World War II refugee survivors rebuild their lives in the United States, is now the largest Protestant refugee and immigrant-serving agency in the United States. <http://lirs.org>

U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants is a non-profit refugee resettlement, immigrant service, public education, and advocacy organization serving the needs of refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants through a network of nearly 50 community-based partner agencies in the United States since 1911. <http://refugees.org/>

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is the public policy and social action agency of the Roman Catholic bishops in the United States. Its Migration and Refugee Services is the lead office responsible for developing USCCB policies on immigrants, refugees, and migrants. <http://www.usccb.org/mrs/>

World Relief is an international relief and development organization committed to relieving human suffering, poverty, and hunger worldwide, founded by the National Association of Evangelicals in 1944 to assist victims of World War II. <http://www.wr.org/>

Source: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/partners/voluntary_agencies.htm. ■