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UPROOTED PEOPLES

In the Face of Displacement

BY VALERIE ONG

People are uprooted because of conflict, natural disasters, economic hardship or persecution.

Millions of uprooted people have been forced to leave their homes and are unable or too fearful to return home. This is a political and humanitarian crisis which is often overlooked and easily forgotten.

Who are these uprooted people? What does it mean to be uprooted?

People are uprooted from their families, homes, communities and countries because of conflict, natural disasters, economic hardship or racial, religious, social and political persecution. The context and circumstances differ among uprooted people, but a common thread—displacement—runs through them all.

Among the uprooted are asylum seekers, refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and economic migrants. Asylum seekers are those who have fled their home country and are seeking refuge in a country outside their home country. A refugee is someone seeking refuge whose protection needs have been officially recognized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). An IDP is displaced within his/her home country and does not receive special protection of international refugee law. Additionally, many in severe poverty are often forced to leave home in order to survive.

This issue of the *Memo* illustrates some specific stories of displacement. Rachelle Lyndaker Schlabach sheds light on the plight of Iraqi refugees (p.2); on issues closer to home, Gabe Schlabach writes on Native American displacement (p.3), MCC West

Coast service worker, Mirna Moeljono, on domestic immigration (p.4), and Krista Zimmerman, on New Orleans resident displacement after Hurricane Katrina (p.5); MCC Representative for Sudan, Rob Haarsager paints the picture of one Sudanese refugee’s experience (p.6); and Theo Sither focuses on Colombian IDPs (p.7).

As war wages, power trumps humanitarian need. The cries of uprooted people are drowned in a sea of political discourse. They are in limbo and in want of life’s basic necessities. They are unable to return, but the challenge to find welcoming new lands to re-establish their roots is yet another obstacle. The question for us as Christians is how we should respond to the cries of the uprooted. Perhaps we should start by acknowledging our responsibility to do so.

Jesus was uprooted. A refugee, he fled Bethlehem in Judea, to escape King Herod, and sought refuge in Egypt (Matthew 2:13–15). Embodying the struggle of uprooted people, Jesus said, “foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). Throughout the Scriptures, Jesus continually calls us to welcome and care for the strangers, the vulnerable, among us.

MCC walks alongside uprooted peoples around the world, and the Washington Office seeks to advocate for legislation that welcomes the stranger and addresses the challenges faced by uprooted peoples. Your voice can speak volumes on behalf of the displaced. ■

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BY RACHELLE LYNDAKER
SCHLABACH

As policymakers in
Washington debate
what should be done
about the war, the needs
of these refugees have
been nearly forgotten.

Lament and Longing

*How lonely sits the city
that once was full of people
Judah has gone into exile with suffering
and hard servitude;
She lives now among the nations,
and finds no resting place.*

These words of woe, from Lamentations 1:1–3, reflect the desperation of a people uprooted from their homes. Written 2500 years ago by a poet lamenting the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon, these words could be spoken today by countless people forced from their homes by war, poverty or natural disasters.

In the Middle East, a crisis of displacement has been unfolding for several years. More than two million Iraqis have fled to neighboring countries, primarily Jordan and Syria. Another two million are “internally displaced”—still in Iraq but unable to return to their homes due to the ongoing violence. This crisis will continue long after the war has ended.

As policymakers in Washington and elsewhere debate what should be done about the war in Iraq, the needs of these refugees have been nearly forgotten.

Each *week* the war in Iraq costs the United States approximately \$1.4 billion. That figure exceeds the *yearly* budget for the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees to do its work all around the globe—not just the Middle East.

U.S. funding for those displaced by the conflict in Iraq has been inadequate, and the United States has been reluctant to open

its doors to Iraqis seeking asylum. Between October 2006 and October 2007, “1,636 Iraqis were resettled in the United States at a time when as many as 3,000 a day were fleeing Iraq” (*Washington Post*).

In October Sen. Kennedy (D-Mass.) added an amendment to the defense authorization bill that would make it easier for Iraqis who have worked for the U.S. government or a related agency to enter the United States as refugees. The House did not include similar language, and as this goes to print, it is unclear whether the provision will be included in the final bill.

MCC has supported this provision as a step in the right direction, but it still falls short of providing refugee status for vulnerable Iraqis not connected to U.S. operations there. Furthermore, most Iraqis would prefer to stay in their homeland rather than migrate to the United States—if they were only able to live in relative security, with basic needs met.

Recently, small numbers of refugees have begun to return to Iraq from Jordan and Syria. Some point to this as evidence that security levels have improved enough for people to feel safe. But UNHCR numbers reveal that 70 percent say they are returning either because they can no longer extend their visas or have exhausted their resources.

Sadly, it appears premature to celebrate the return of Iraqis to safe and secure homes. But, without doubt, that remains the dream of many who are uprooted.

Several chapters into Lamentations, the writer pens these words (3:22–23):

*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
[your] mercies never come to an end;
They are new every morning;
Great is your faithfulness.*

God’s love and mercy extend to exiles far from loved ones. I pray that we—in our congregations and as a nation—will find ways to make that love tangible to those longing for home. ■

WASHINGTON MEMO is written by Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office staff. It interprets national legislation and policy, seeking to reflect biblical concerns for justice and peace as represented in the work and statements of MCC U.S. and Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. All biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

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The Trail of Tears—1838 and Today

One hundred and seventy years ago, 17,000 Cherokee men, women, and children made a long and perilous journey from their lands in Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee and Alabama to “Indian Country” in Oklahoma. They travelled 1,200 miles by foot. Approximately 4,000 died from starvation, exhaustion and disease as they faced the cold of a brutal winter.

This was not a voluntary journey. The Cherokee were forced by U.S. soldiers at gunpoint to relocate, despite an 1838 Supreme Court decision that said the state of Georgia could not force the Cherokees off their land. This unconstitutional relocation, the “Trail of Tears,” which was carried out under the presidencies of Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren, was one of the most shameful chapters of United States history.

This 1838 incident was not the first such relocation to be called the Trail of Tears, however. The phrase was first coined to refer to the Choctaw relocation of 1831, and can fittingly refer to all incidents of forced migration of Native Americans. In total, approximately 100,000 Native Americans were forced off their land and pushed west to make way for U.S. expansion and greed, an appalling number that does not even include those killed by bullets or disease.

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

In 2005 Congress passed the Real ID Act, which includes an easily overlooked section that allows the Department of Homeland Security to ignore any laws “necessary to ensure expeditious construction” of the fence on the U.S.-Mexico border. This reckless anti-immigrant policy has led to the government seizing Native land on the U.S.-Mexico border.

The U.S. government has long recognized the sovereignty of Native American Tribes. This means that the federal government is obligated to relate to each Native American Nation as one government to another. Ignoring the boundaries of Native land is not only a slap in the face to Native Americans, but it is an unconstitutional reminder of the worst U.S. policies towards them.

And it will have long-term effects. Not only will Native families in the path of the border have to give up the land they have held for generations, but 23 Native tribes will have an ugly and humiliating wall running through their land, making travel to work, to shop, and to visit friends and family much more difficult. Additionally, the fence runs through sacred sites and burial grounds, adding insult to injury.

It is unfortunate that in 2008 the United States government continues to ignore its own laws and continues to infringe upon the rights of Native Americans. It’s past time to call upon the government to treat Native Peoples justly, but that doesn’t make it any less necessary. ■

BY GABE SCHLABACH

Ignoring the boundaries of Native land is not only a slap in the face, but it is an unconstitutional reminder of the worst U.S. policies towards them.

SPRING SEMINAR 2008: UPROOTED PEOPLES

Please join us in Washington, DC on March 2–4, 2008 for our annual Spring Seminar. We’ll explore this theme of uprooted peoples in more depth—including workshops, plenary speakers, congressional visits and time for fellowship with other advocates. More information is available on our website at mcc.org/us/washington or by calling 202-544-6564. We hope to see you there!

BY MIRNA MOELJONO

Mirna Moeljono is a service worker with West Coast MCC. She works with Indonesian Mennonite churches in southern California to connect them to immigration and other services.

As an immigrant to the United States myself, I realize that words can give strength and hope.

I'll Be There When You Need Me

“I may not always be with you but I’ll be there when you need me”—that is what I say to my brothers and sisters in Christ.

As an immigrant to the United States myself, I realize that words can give strength and hope. Sometimes I cannot help people because I don’t have all the knowledge and resources necessary, but I can give them hope.

Working on immigration issues is never easy. The rules change all the time and I know they have a big effect on many people. I often feel a heavy responsibility for the survival of immigrant people among unwelcoming communities.

I work with West Coast MCC to help Indonesian immigrant churches. Together with my co-worker, Gloria James, I assist immigrants who need to complete applications for citizenship and to process other immigration forms. I translate documents and provide training and education. We often help connect clients with a local immigration attorney.

Through my work, I have recently met “Pin-Pin,” a Chinese Christian woman who applied for asylum because of her subjective fear of return to Indonesia on account of her Chinese ethnicity and Christian faith. I met a student named “Hankie” who just began his journey in the United States. I also met “Happy,” 32, who overstayed a visa and is working as a sushi maker in order to support his family in Indonesia. I also met “Andy,” a refugee with whom I had opportunity to share my faith in Jesus Christ.

From these new friends I am learning many new immigrant stories and the politics of the immigrant situation—especially in regards to those who seek asylum from my home country, Indonesia. According to the United States, the government of Indonesia has committed to suppress ethnic and religious violence. But according to those who leave, the government is unable to control anti-Chinese and anti-Christian violence. And U.S. courts have set a very high standard for Indonesian asylum seekers (requiring evidence of direct, personal threats and expert testimony in many cases). As long as the standard remains so difficult, many will probably continue to remain out of status.

As a Christian, I was taught to be a spiritual friend, patient and positive. As an immigrant myself, I understand how immigrants think about life, God, family and the future, especially when they tell stories about their own struggles to survive. I have felt rewarded that I can meet different people and learn from them—recognizing that God can use other people to teach me about immigration through our interaction. These experiences encourage me to stay with MCC, to minister in the church and with marginal and immigrant communities in southern California, especially with the Indonesian immigrant community. I feel blessed to be here, where I am needed. ■



The Right to Return to New Orleans

BY KRISTA ZIMMERMAN

Individuals in the United States are sometimes accustomed to hearing about displaced people in other countries. After Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, however, hundreds of thousands of U.S. residents were also displaced. And many of them still seek the ability to return home.

Since the storm, agencies like Mennonite Disaster Service and Mennonite Central Committee have been working with people who need assistance to recover and return. But the federal government sometimes stands in the way.

New Orleans lost more than 43,000 rental units after the storm. Rents skyrocketed as a result and people had difficulty finding affordable apartments. Instead of quickly rehabilitating public and government subsidized housing, the federal government pursued a “recovery” plan that prevented families from returning to structurally sound public housing units and sought to demolish as many units as possible. Before this article went to press a court in New Orleans approved the demolition of over 3,000 units of public housing.

Without affordable rental housing or access to government housing, many New Orleans residents are still trying to return but cannot find ways to do so.

According to the City of Houston, it is still home to approximately 100,000 displaced residents of New Orleans. A recent state of Texas survey claimed a total of 250,000. It also found that 59 percent of the surveyed reported they were unemployed and that many had serious health problems.

Meanwhile, community leaders throughout the Gulf Coast rally around the belief that people displaced by Hurricane Katrina possess the same “right of return” accorded to displaced persons in other countries by international law. They believe that despite lack of government assistance (and outright opposition in some cases) that the right of return to the Gulf Coast is one supported by international human rights norms.

The United Nations’ 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement include in their definition of “internally displaced persons” individuals forced to leave home because of natural disaster who have not crossed an international border. The American Society of International Law recognizes the application of the Guiding Principles to those displaced by Hurricane Katrina, even though the Bush administration has argued against it.

The Guiding Principles provide direction to authorities working with displaced people. They dictate that protections for displaced persons should continue once initial displacement ends, and they call on authorities to establish the conditions and means for displaced persons to return home in safety and with dignity. They also recommend full participation of displaced persons in the planning and management of their return.

The federal government’s current efforts to return displaced Gulf Coast residents to their communities fall short of the standards set forth in the Guiding Principles. But a bill pending in the U.S. Senate, the *Gulf Coast Housing Recovery Act*, would make significant improvements to these efforts. It guarantees minimum levels of public and government subsidized housing replacement, thus paving the way for many residents to return more quickly. It also mandates inclusion of those affected in the planning and recovery process.

For these reasons, and many others, the Washington Office and MCC’s Gulf Coast recovery team are supporting the legislation. Please ask your Senators to back the *Gulf Coast Housing Recovery Act* and visit the Washington Office web site for tips on writing letters in support of the Act. ■

Without affordable rental housing or access to government housing, many New Orleans residents are still trying to return but cannot find ways to do so.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Learn more about the demolition of public housing in New Orleans:

defendneworleanspublichousing.org

nlihc.org

peopleshurricane.org

Santina's Story

BY ROB HAARSAGER

Rob Haarsager has served with MCC Sudan for three different terms and is currently the MCC Sudan Representative.

Though filled with hope for her future, Santina had many concerns about when the right time was to return.

In 1990, Santina Siama was working as a teacher and living in the town of Yambio, in southwest Sudan. The civil war had started seven years earlier, but Yambio had not been affected by the fighting.

But all that changed later that year when news of an impending attack on the town by the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) reached the residents of Yambio, and many of the residents of the town fled to the Central African Republic for safety. Though the people of Yambio were generally sympathetic to the rebel cause, they did not want to be caught in the middle of a crossfire between government and rebel troops, nor face possible recriminations once the fighting was over. So, Santina left with her three young children, while her husband left in a different direction, never to be heard from again.

The years as a refugee were difficult. Santina and her children were accepted as refugees by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and given some assistance such as shelter and food. Eventually, schools were started and for several years she worked as a teacher.

In 2000 Santina faced another, more personal crisis when she began losing her eyesight. The diagnosis was diabetes, which was difficult for her to control under the conditions in which she was living. Soon,

she was no longer able to work as a teacher and it became much more difficult for her to provide for her family.

In January 2005 there was great news for Santina and several hundred thousand other Sudanese living as refugees in countries bordering Sudan—peace was signed! The Comprehensive Peace Agreement ended 21 years of fighting. A new, semi-autonomous government of Southern Sudan would be formed and in six years citizens would have the opportunity to vote for independence.

Though filled with hope for her future, Santina also had many concerns about when the right time was to return. The management of the refugee camp began to say that everyone should leave. They even reduced food rations and eventually closed schools, but they did not offer a way for people to return. Those who did return paid their own way, or walked, and Santina was not able to do either.

Finally, two years after the signing of the CPA, UNHCR announced a program to assist refugees with transportation back to Sudan. Santina and her daughter signed up and in January 2007 they boarded a plane that would take them to Juba. After having been a refugee for 17 years, Santina was finally going home.

Santina is very glad that she is back in Sudan, but the concern over how to provide for her daily needs weighs heavily. She visited the eye clinic in Juba and found that her only real hope for improvement would be to have surgery, something she can't afford. Santina is a survivor and continues to have hope, both for her own future and that of her homeland. ■

WAGING PEACE IN SUDAN

Government policies here in the U.S. affect the lives of refugees like Santina. The United States helped to produce the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and must continue to monitor its implementation, lest the fragile peace fall apart. It is also imperative that the United States increase funding for urgent recovery programs so refugees can return home.

Coming in January: *Waging Peace in Sudan*, a new Web site from the MCC Washington Office with background materials, small group resources and advocacy tools. For more information, go to mcc.org/us/washington/ or contact Tammy Alexander at talexander@mcc.org or 202-544-6564.



Displacement in Colombia

On a visit to Colombia last year I participated in an event called *Un Momento por la Paz* (A Moment for Peace). This is a weekly event that takes place at the Teusaquillo Mennonite Church in Bogotá, during which members of the church and community are invited to a time of reflection, healing and fellowship. I sat in a circle and listened to stories of war and trauma.

One woman sat next to her fifteen-year-old daughter and explained that they are not native to Bogotá but recently arrived here due to threats and abuses. Her daughter, with tear-filled eyes, continued to tell the story of how she was raped by a paramilitary gang and is now pregnant as a result. They were threatened with more abuses if they did not leave.

A country notorious for its human rights violations, Colombia is home to more than 3.8 million internally displaced people, second only to Sudan. Colombia is engaged in a civil war that has lasted for over four decades.

A September 2006 report by the Latin America Working Group Education Fund (LAWGEF) states that, “an estimated 3.6 million people were displaced by political violence between 1985 and September 2005, 2.9 million in the last decade alone. The crisis continues: the number of people fleeing their homes from political violence increased 8 percent from 2004 to 2005, estimated at more than 310,000 people displaced in 2005.”

Vast populations of people have lost their lands and are longing to go back. However, much of the land is now in the possession of armed groups. Forced displacement continues today as a tactic to take land from communities to be used for illicit purposes.

The LAWGEF report goes on to state, “paramilitary groups would round up and kill local leaders, causing rural families to flee in terror, and then use the land they

abandoned to consolidate their local power, finance their operations, protect drug production and trafficking, and launder drug profits.” Colombia is the world’s biggest producer of cocaine, which largely funds the illegal armed groups (the paramilitaries and the guerillas).

Peace in Colombia must involve justice for the displaced. In 2005 the Colombian government began a paramilitary demobilization process, which resulted in 30,000 paramilitary troops demobilizing. However, the issue of displacement and return of land was not addressed. Millions remain away from their homes and many more continue to suffer displacement, while many of the demobilized troops have rearmed.

In the new year, continue to pray for Colombian sisters and brothers and take action on their behalf. Participate in the 2008 Days of Prayer and Action for Peace in Colombia on April 27 & 28 (mcc.org/us/washington/days) and call for justice. ■

BY THEO SITTHER

Peace in Colombia must involve justice for the displaced.

CAPITAL QUOTES

“The refugees are witnesses to the cruelty that stains our age, and they cannot be overlooked. America bears heavy responsibility for their plight. We have a clear obligation to stop ignoring it and help chart a sensible course to ease the refugee crisis . . .”

—Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), chair of the Senate Immigration, Border Security and Refugee Subcommittee.

“In the midst of migrants in search of a better life there are people in need of protection: refugees and asylum-seekers, women and children victims of trafficking. . . . Many move simply to avoid dying of hunger.”

—António Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

“Funding for non-military foreign affairs programs . . . remains disproportionately small. Consider that this year’s [defense] budget—not counting Iraq or Afghanistan—is nearly half a trillion dollars. The total foreign affairs budget request for the State Department is \$36 billion—less than what the Pentagon spends on health care alone.”

—Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Nov. 26, 2007, arguing for more funding for diplomacy and development.



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SOUND THE TRUMPET!

Over the past year, we asked readers to respond to a variety of issues. Here is a summary of where they stand.	
Gulf Coast Housing Recovery Act	S. 1668 received a hearing by the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs where it remains as lawmakers attempt to work out partisan differences. A version of the bill was passed by the House of Representatives.
Apology to Native Americans	The Native American Apology Bill has been introduced to both the House, where it waits in the Committee on Natural Resources, and Senate, where it awaits a floor vote.
Jubilee Debt Relief	Rep. Maxine Waters' (D-Calif.) bill, H.R. 2634, received a hearing in the House Committee on Financial Services and now awaits committee action for a floor vote. It has 88 co-sponsors. Sen. Bob Casey's (D-Pa.) companion bill, S. 2166, has 13 co-sponsors and awaits action by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.
Colombia Resolution	The House passed H.Res. 426, a resolution to recognize 2007 as the year of the internally displaced person in Colombia.
Military Spending	The defense appropriations bill was passed in November, providing about \$460 billion in defense spending for the coming year. This does not include the cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.
Cluster Weapons	Legislation to limit the use, sale and transfer of cluster munitions was introduced in the Senate, with 14 co-sponsors (S. 594), and in the House, with 21 co-sponsors (H.R. 1755).
Iraq	In October President Bush requested supplemental appropriations of nearly \$200 billion to cover the cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Congress has not yet approved the money as this goes to press.