



**UNHCR**

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

Despite a series of inaccuracies and sweeping, unsubstantiated generalities, Mauro De Lorenzo makes a few good points in “Dignity, Safety and Health for Refugees” (Think Tank Town, [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com), May 2).

He is right, for example, to condemn the many protracted refugee situations in which millions of uprooted people around the world spend years and even decades with no solution in sight. He is also correct in noting that far too many of the world’s refugees live in camps where they have no freedom of movement nor opportunities for self-sufficiency. UNHCR also agrees with his concerns over the lack of effective and transparent national asylum systems to carry out refugee status determination.

But Mr. De Lorenzo is willfully unrealistic in characterizing the nature of these problems and is mistaken throughout as to the facts.

He implies, for example, that UNHCR chooses to erect camps for convenience sake even when refugees could settle and fend for themselves. Nothing is further from the truth. UNHCR is mandated to pursue solutions such as repatriation or local integration for refugees. The main reason camps exist – despite UNHCR’s advocacy efforts for other options – is that local integration is unfortunately, if usually, the least preferred solution of host governments. And sadly, those governments very often enforce restrictions on refugee movement, employment and access to land.

Still, camps do permit humanitarian organizations to provide more and better assistance for hundreds of thousands of refugees. Though dismissive of tracking aid in this context, the author does seem to appreciate the importance of financial accountability elsewhere in his article.

There are indeed better alternatives to camps. Some of Mr. De Lorenzo’s complaints about the lack of freedom refugees experience in them are true. But UNHCR pursues those alternatives wherever possible, and was pushing for better options well before the term ‘warehousing’ recently came into vogue. To lay responsibility on UNHCR for concerns host countries have about the economic, environmental and security impact of refugees is naïve.

Refugees are not forbidden to sell or barter rations for other products they need, including soap and clothing. UNHCR in fact provides these to refugees whenever resources allow. Funding shortfalls do delay and reduce food distributions to refugees and the fragility of this voluntarily-funded system is certainly cause for concern. But the author again gets his facts wrong. Data on the group he cites as an example -- Burundian refugees in Tanzania -- show that refugee children are far better off than locals in every nutritional category, usually by a margin of 50 percent. His suggestion that international protection somehow equates to malnutrition owes more to his own bias than reality.

UNHCR does not impose unpaid work or collective punishment on refugees. The incidents alluded to in Kenyan camps occurred when food distribution procedures were changed to put rations in the hands of individual families, rather than through community leaders. While the new system proved to be far more equitable, the leaders protested the loss of influence and UNHCR’s efforts to halt their informal methods of justice.

A brief reference to refugee resettlement is similarly flawed. Contrary to what the author implies, UNHCR is not responsible for filling annual resettlement ceilings set by the President. Alongside its collaboration with UNHCR, the United States independently selects, processes and resettles tens of thousands of refugees every year.

Mr. De Lorenzo is perhaps most contemptuous of UNHCR's refugee status determination (RSD) work. Simply put, RSD is primarily the responsibility of governments. As the numbers reflect, however, many do not have the capacity and UNHCR steps in if and when governments do not. RSD is a challenging task and UNHCR is constantly working to improve its procedures. It provides invaluable assistance to refugees and governments alike in 80 countries worldwide, handling 12 percent of global RSD -- and routinely drawing criticism for being too liberal in its decisions. Moreover, it carries out this essential work with only 1 percent of the staff national governments employ.

As with Mr. De Lorenzo's depiction of refugee camps, the notion that RSD would be better if UNHCR would only get out of the way displays a fundamental misunderstanding.

Lastly, his portrayal of UNHCR as a 'professional bureaucracy' doesn't correspond to the facts either. More than 80 percent of UNHCR's staff work in field locations in 115 countries, often separated from their families for long periods in some of the most difficult and dangerous places in the world.

And while UNHCR welcomes constructive dialogue which can improve the care and protection we provide, characterizing the agency and its dedicated staff as human rights abusers is unconscionable.

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