



REFUGEE TEENAGERS

ESCAPE AND PROTECTION FROM PERSECUTION AND WAR



UNHCR

UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES



UNHCR | R. LeMoyne

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In March 1999, during a short period of two weeks, more than 120,000 refugees crossed into Macedonia from Kosovo. Many were given only a few minutes' warning before they were forced to march away from their homes.

Five successive armies have fought in the streets of Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, resulting in the destruction of buildings and homes, and causing the residents to flee to the countryside or to neighbouring countries such as Pakistan and Iran.

REFUGEE TEENAGERS

WHERE DO THEY COME FROM?

- > Afghanistan
- > Algeria
- > Angola
- > Bosnia and Herzegovina
- > Burundi
- > Croatia
- > Eritrea
- > Iraq
- > Kosovo
- > Liberia
- > Rwanda
- > Sierra Leone
- > Somalia
- > Sri Lanka
- > Sudan

these are just some of the countries or provinces from which people have fled because they feared for their personal safety, in fact, for their very lives.

Refugees are people who flee their country because of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group. A refugee either cannot return home, or is afraid to do so.

UNHCR dictionary



UNHCR | L. Taylor

All that these Rwandan refugees had left were the bundles they were carrying. With these few things, they started their temporary homes in a refugee camp in Tanzania.

UNHCR | H.J. Davies

The flight from danger is often sudden, with little time to pack necessities such as warm clothing, food and water. These Kosovar refugees made it to safety in Macedonia, but they are dependent upon others for their food supplies.

WHY DO THEY FLEE?

Every day, somewhere on this planet, teenagers become refugees. These are young people who have fled their home countries to escape persecution or war. The persecution could be physical violence, harassment and wrongful arrest, or threats to their lives. They take with them only what they can carry, only what they have time to pack. Sometimes all they have left is their dreams, their hopes, their will to survive.

Exposed to danger if they remain in their own countries, refugee teenagers may have to face and survive mistreatment during their flight. Further danger may await them on arrival in the country of asylum. Because they are not yet grown up, refugee teenagers are among the most vulnerable in any refugee population to the effects of violence.

WHERE DO THEY GO?

Refugees cannot rely on their own governments to provide them legal and physical protection. They have to try to find safety in other countries.

Som'an

ESCAPE

Illustrations by P.-A. Bertola

For decades, there has been war in Cambodia. During the Indochina Wars in the 1970s, South Vietnamese troops supported by the United States fought North Vietnamese soldiers in Cambodia, while Communist guerrillas, known as the Khmer Rouge, battled against government soldiers. In 1975, the Khmer Rouge succeeded in their grab for power and ruled the country with terrible brutality until 1978, when the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and installed a new government. However, Khmer Rouge remnants, other guerrilla groups and Cambodian government forces continued to fight each other until a peace treaty was signed in 1991. Each new bout of fighting caused tens of thousands of Cambodians to flee their country to seek safety in Thailand. In 1993, most Cambodian refugees living in Thailand returned home. For four years, Cambodia was reasonably peaceful, although in certain parts of the country, there were still some Khmer Rouge soldiers who continued guerrilla warfare against government troops.

A VILLAGE NEAR SIEM REAP, CAMBODIA, 1997



PHNOM PENH
CAPITAL OF CAMBODIA
JULY 1997



The 1993 elections resulted in an unstable government with two leaders: the First Premier was Prince Norodom Ranariddh, whose political party was called FUNCINPEC. His Co-Premier was Hun Sen, leader of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP). Clashes and gunfights occurred between the supporters of both leaders until finally, in July 1997, Hun Sen deposed Ranariddh and became Cambodia's supreme leader.



We've found some more supporters of the opposition.



Good. Put them in the truck with the others.



Hurry up, girls. We need to head towards Samrong. We have to get far away from the fighting as quickly as we can.



I hope we have packed enough food.



As news of the fighting in the capital city spread, people began to pack what they could carry, and started to move to safer areas in the north. But the fighting spread north into the countryside.



As gun battles raged in the area around Siem Reap, Som'an and his family joined the increasing flow of refugees who were walking towards the Thai-Cambodian border.



Where can we go now?

If the fighting reaches us there, we can cross into Thailand.

We'll have to walk to O'Smach. It's just on this side of the border.



Get out of here!

If you come back, we'll shoot you!



Run! Run!

▲ Som'an and his family travelled for six days. They wanted to stop at Samrong but could not because the civil war had erupted around the town.



Som'an!

Dad! Mum!



I must get to the border somehow. I must find my family.



You can't cross. You must stay on your side of the border.

But we'll be killed here!

You heard what he said! Go back!

AT THE THAI-CAMBODIAN BORDER, NEAR O'SMACH

▲ The Thai Government closed the border to stop the refugees coming into Thailand.



◀ The fighting reached the area around O'Smach. 30,000 fleeing Cambodians stretched in lines over six kilometres long. Thai officials finally agreed to open the border.



All right. You can go ahead.

THE THAI-CAMBODIAN BORDER

THAT AFTERNOON, AT HUAY
CHERNG REFUGEE CAMP,
IN THAILAND'S SURIN PROVINCE



We have lost our son.
His name is Som'an.
Have you seen him?

Let's get your family
some food and medical
attention. If your son
is here, we'll help you
find him.



Dad! Mum!

Som'an!



We need more space.
This hospital is full.
We have over 3,000 sick
people in the camp.

What are they
suffering from?

Mostly diarrhoea
or malaria.

The war was never too far away.
The fighting came closer to the
border, only 10 kilometres from
the camp.



How long will we have to stay here, Dad?

As long as the fighting continues.
As long as we have to.



All children have the right to education. Refugee teenagers need to go to school, to learn to read, write and count, and to spend time with other young people. Attending classes can help them to adjust to the upheavals that have occurred in their lives. At school in a refugee camp in Ghana, these Liberian girls can also learn about their culture and the homeland that they left behind and to which they hope, some day, to return.

Protecting

Education



UNHCR | L. Taylor

Health

Refugees need shelter, food, water and medical care during emergency situations and during their stay in a country of asylum. While in Nepal, a Tibetan refugee boy receives a vaccination before he continues his journey to India.



UNHCR | H.J. Davies

Shelter

When possible, refugees are provided with building materials, but they often have to use whatever is nearby to construct their shelters. Thousands of Sudanese boys, unaccompanied by parents, trekked to Kenya to escape the civil war that ravaged their country. They settled in Kakuma camp which is situated in north-west Kenya, where their first task was to build a shelter, their new temporary home.

UNHCR | B. Press



UNHCR | H.J. Davies

Registration

Registration of refugee teenagers allows them to have identity papers with which they can claim assistance such as food and medical care. The identity papers can be used as a tool for tracing, and after their return to their own countries, the papers may be needed to prove their nationality or for enrolling in a school. These young people are refugees from Myanmar who have sought safety in Bangladesh.



Refugee teenagers

The work of UNHCR

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the organisation which has been given the task to protect and help the world's refugees. It is required to provide **international protection**. This means that UNHCR has to make sure that no refugees are **refouled**, that is, forced to return to a country where there may still be danger. It has to ensure the basic rights of refugees are respected by everyone, including the government of the country of asylum. UNHCR reminds governments of their obligations to protect refugees and people seeking asylum.

The 1951 *Convention relating to the Status of Refugees*

was drawn up at the time of the creation of UNHCR. It is a treaty that has been signed by governments and is now a part of international law. It relies on moral pressure and requires these governments to respect their commitments.

The *Convention* defines who is a refugee, and establishes the principle of **non-refoulement**, which means that no person may be returned against his or her will to a territory where he or she may be exposed to persecution. It sets standards for the fair and humane treatment of refugees, including their legal status, employment and welfare.

In recent years, in certain situations, UNHCR has also been asked to look after people who are not refugees but who are forced to live in refugee-like situations. This includes **internally displaced persons**, who are people who have fled their homes but have not crossed an international border, and so are still in their own home countries. More and more, these people are victims of civil war.

There are over 22 million people who are under the care of UNHCR, more than fifty percent of whom are children and teenagers.

UNHCR not only defends the rights of refugees, it also assists them with their basic survival needs. With partner organisations, it helps in the provision of shelter, food, water, sanitation and medical care, during emergency situations and throughout their stay in the country of asylum. UNHCR also assists refugees to rebuild their homes and lives when they return to their countries of origin.

UNHCR supports schools because all children have the **right** to education. Education helps meet the psychological needs of uprooted and often traumatised refugee children. School restores structure to a refugee child's life. It provides group activities and gives children hope for the future.

Refugee children and adolescents are a top priority for UNHCR because these young people are the future of their communities and countries.

A refugee girl from Kosovo weeps in anguish over the loss of her home and her country. Together with thousands of other Kosovars, she has arrived in neighbouring Macedonia, not knowing what the future holds for her.



UNHCR | R. LeMoyne

Refugee teenagers have the right to protection

Children and adolescents need care and protection if they are to grow up normally. This need has long been recognised by most nations, but it was only in 1989 that states agreed to a binding international treaty about the rights of children. This was called the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (sometimes called the CRC). It is very important for refugee children and teenagers because it stresses the rights of children and sets standards for governments to follow, to ensure that these rights are safeguarded. The rights of teenagers are included in the CRC because the Convention defines as a «child» any person who is below the age of eighteen.

The rights of children and adolescents are defined by the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child can be used as a blueprint for ways of protecting refugee children. UNHCR tries to build the principles of the CRC into its programme of care and protection of refugee children.

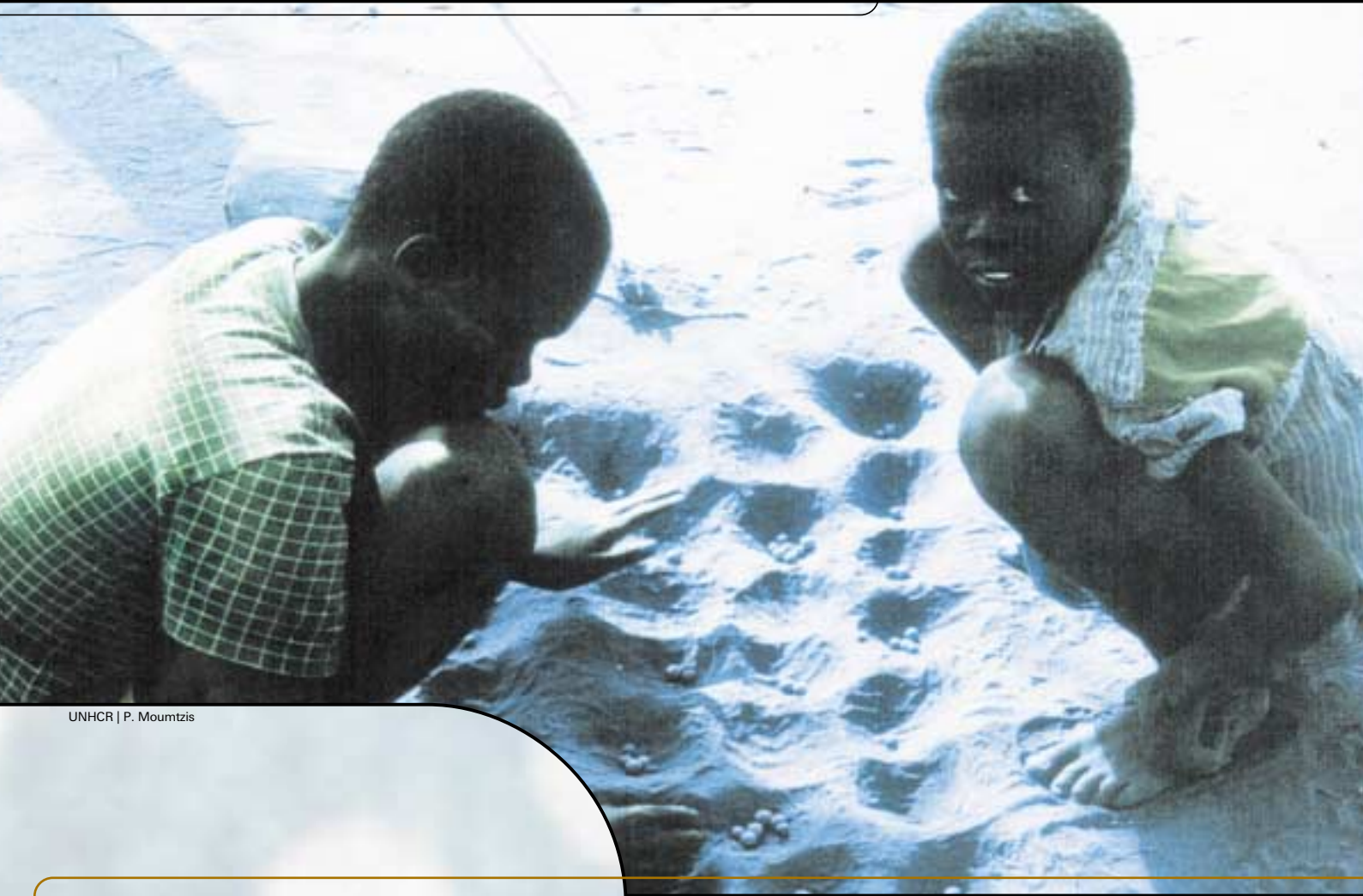
Families provide the best care for their children and UNHCR helps refugee parents to provide for their children. The organisation is also involved in:

- > finding the families or relatives of **unaccompanied minors** (children and teenagers who have been separated from their families), and bringing them together again
- > meeting the special needs of young victims of violence
- > identifying former child soldiers, and helping them to return to their families and communities
- > providing education and job-training to refugee children and adolescents
- > promoting peace-building projects for young people.

In 1996, Graça Machel (see box on opposite page) was in charge of a United Nations study on the effects of armed conflict on children. The report, sometimes referred to as the Machel Study, confirmed that children and teenagers are not only bystanders caught up in the cross-fire of armed conflict. Sometimes, they are directly targeted, forced into military service or child labour, even tortured and killed.

Sudan

These unaccompanied minors are from Sudan. They arrived at a transit camp in Kenya with almost nothing but the clothes they wore. However, with some pebbles, a few holes scratched in the dusty ground and a bit of imagination, they can relax for a short while with their made-up game.



UNHCR | P. Moutzis

The rights of children and adolescents are defined by the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child.



UNICEF | HQ.95 - 0994 | R. Grossman

< Graça Machel spends time with Liberian refugees, especially children in Kekema camp, in Sierra Leone.

Graża Machel: Advocate for Refugee Children

Mozambican humanitarian Graça Machel was awarded the 1995 Nansen Medal by UNHCR for her outstanding contributions on behalf of refugee children. The Nansen Medal is named after the Norwegian diplomat and explorer, Fridtjof Nansen who worked tirelessly for the welfare of refugees. He introduced the 'Nansen passport' in 1922, a travel document that enabled thousands of refugees to return home or settle in other countries. The medal was created to focus attention on refugees and to stimulate international support for the uprooted.

Machel was involved in Mozambique's liberation movement, and was appointed state secretary for education in the new independent government of Mozambique. Since 1986, Graça Machel has devoted her time and energy towards the development of her country. She has encouraged efforts to provide education for all Mozambican children, and promotes peace and reconciliation in her war-torn homeland.



UNHCR | L. LeMoigne

Millions of landmines have been laid in the various war zones around the world. After the wars have stopped, the landmines remain. They are lightly buried in fields, on roads, alongside rivers, waiting for someone to step on them to set off a tragedy. The main victims are women and children who are the ones who usually fetch water and firewood.

Landmines can turn any area into a nightmare realm of the maimed. An estimated 10 million landmines remain uncleared in Afghanistan. They can stay active for more than 50 years, claiming victims such as this boy from Kabul.



© G. Ulutunçok | Laif



The abuse of children's rights: Military recruitment

The U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child outlaws the participation of children and teenagers in military activity. Despite this, the armies of the world recruit young people far too often. The armed opponents of governments do the same.

During the last decade, at least 200,000 young people have participated in wars in different parts of the world. Sometimes children and teenagers are forced to become soldiers. They might be removed from their schools or abducted from their villages. Often children join up with a military group when their villages and homes have been destroyed, or when family members and friends are soldiers. It may seem better to become a soldier than to remain frightened and helpless. Some children join so that they will receive food, clothing and shelter. It is a tragedy that some children must learn to kill others in order to survive themselves.

Fighting has a terrible effect on children. They may be wounded or permanently disabled. Witnessing violence may also be deeply traumatic. Some child soldiers suffer permanent psychological damage and are unable to lead a normal life after the fighting stops.

Children and teenagers who are soldiers miss out on their education. This may prevent them finding work afterwards. Some child soldiers are also rejected by their families after a war and have to live alone.

Sometimes armed factions use refugee camps as recruitment grounds for teenage soldiers, and quite illegally, as training centres. UNHCR is responsible for the protection and welfare of these potential young recruits. The organisation works hard, within the limits of its capacity, to stop the military uses of refugee camps, including the immoral and illegal recruitment of children.

...No child below 15 shall be recruited into the armed forces. Governments shall also ensure the protection and care of children who are affected by armed conflict..

Article 38 of the **Convention on the Rights of the Child**

UNHCR | L. Taylor



This wounded child is an escaped survivor of the Lord's Resistance Army.

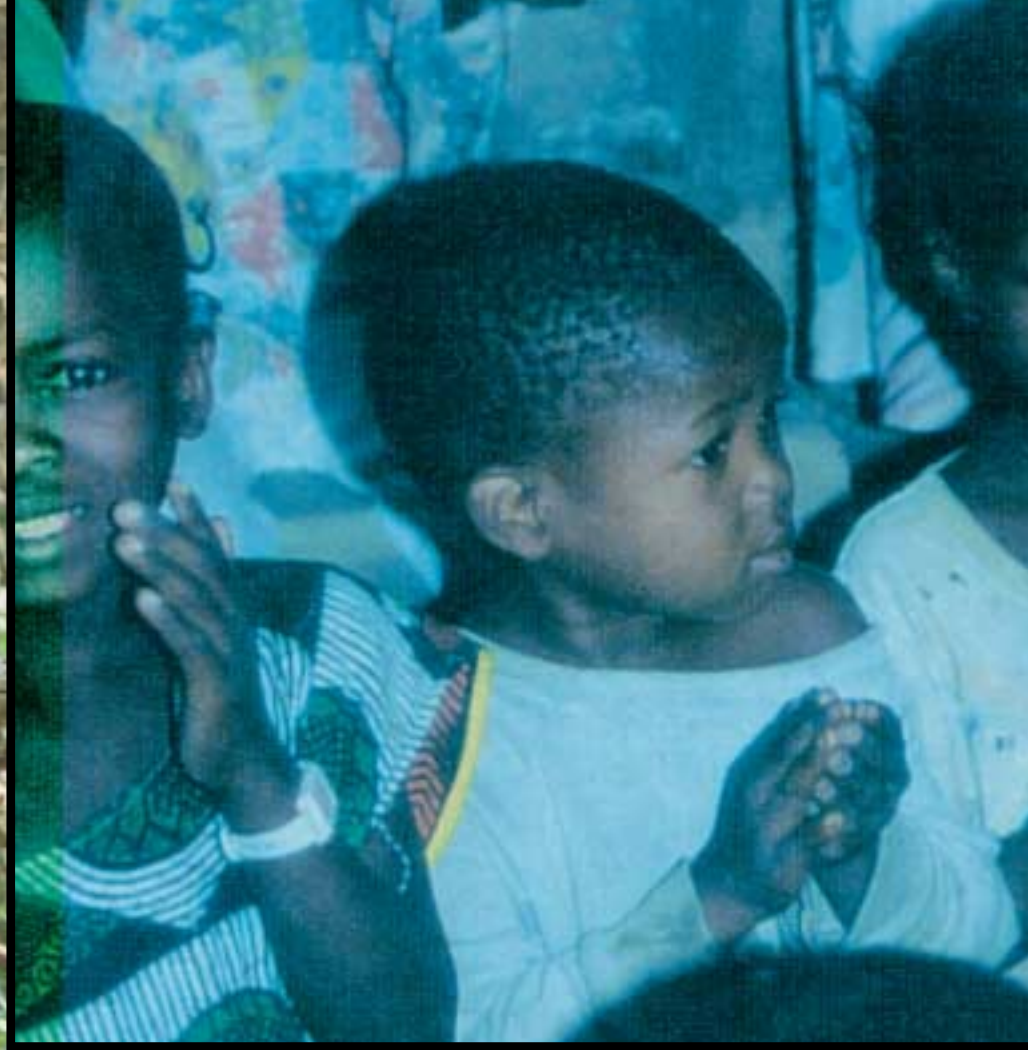
Child soldiers in Liberia.

Several ragtag guerrilla forces such as the **Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)**, as well as regular government armies, operate in the vast bushlands of central and eastern Africa.

For over a decade, the Lord's Resistance Army has terrorised north and central Uganda. Its soldiers have pillaged schools, villages and refugee camps. They have seized as many as 10,000 young people and marched them into southern Sudan. Here, the kidnapped children and teenagers are forced to work as beasts of burden, made to carry weapons, heavy shells and food. Eventually, they are compelled to fight as child soldiers. Newly abducted children are daubed with a local nut oil which is supposed to purify them and protect them from enemy bullets. They often have to undergo brutal initiation ceremonies where they are expected to maim and kill fellow child soldiers.

Children who have escaped describe a dangerous and depraved way of life in the bush. Girls are handed out as 'wives' or exchanged between senior fighters. There is often little food and the children are reduced to eating roots. There is almost no medicine and many of the kidnapped young people are probably infected with the HIV virus and other sexually-transmitted diseases. Ritual killings are routine and children, on occasions, have been forced to kill their own relatives.

The young people who have been able to escape are now trapped in a dangerous limbo. The teenagers are often traumatised, malnourished and disease-ridden. There are some facilities to help them, but there are not enough specialised services. They and their parents are often shunned by other members of their local communities, and can be threatened by either government troops or guerrilla military groups because of the children's military past.



UNHCR | T.J. Balde

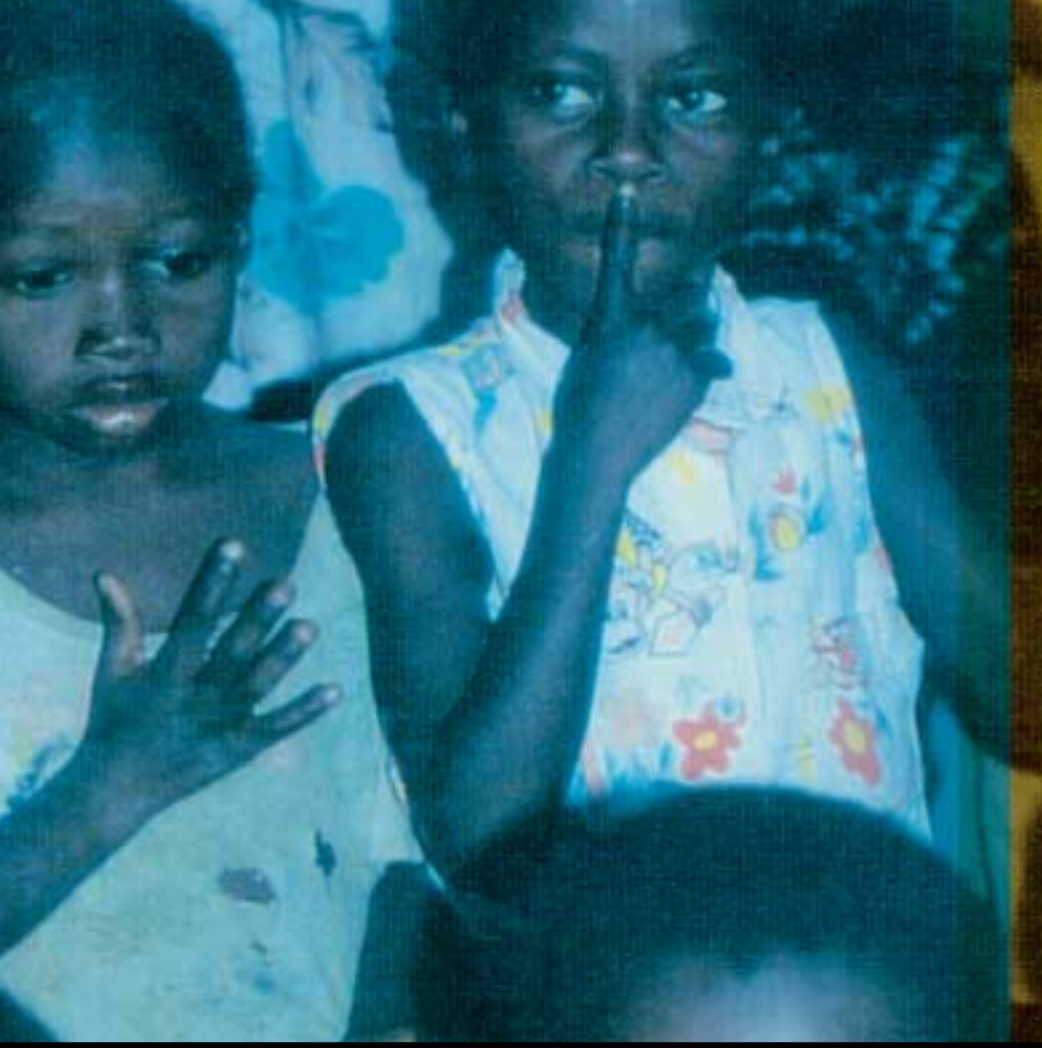
Feah

Feah is not her real name

Childhood's



Feah is from Sierra Leone. Her normal, happy family life was shattered on the day armed rebel soldiers suddenly arrived at her parents' cocoa plantation. Feah and the younger children of her family were collecting water from a nearby stream, when they saw the rebels approach the plantation. Terrified, the children hid from the armed men, but from their hiding place they heard their mother's agonised cries as she was tortured by the soldiers.



UNHCR | T.I. Balde



UNHCR | T.I. Balde

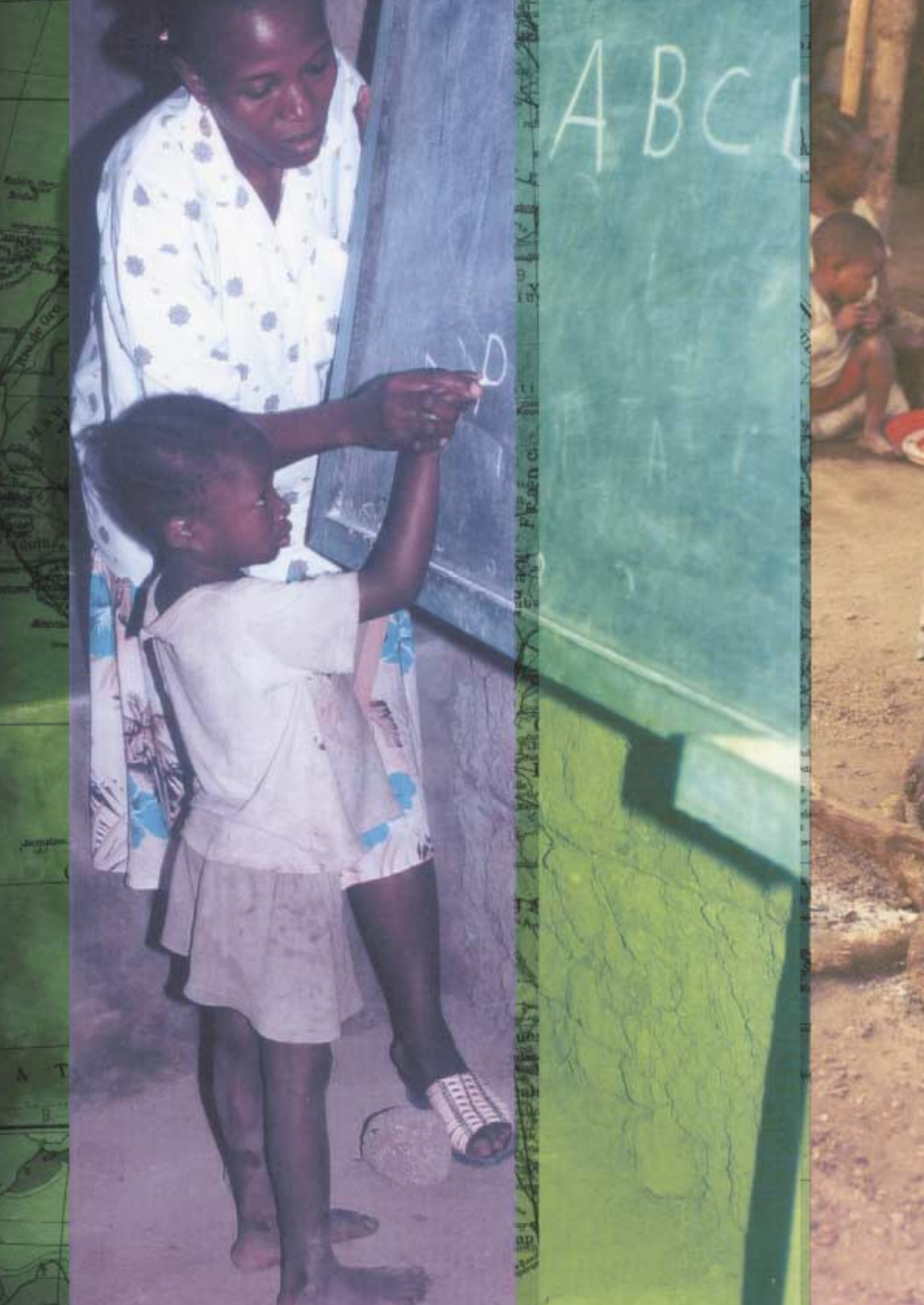
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The cries went on for many hours, and the horrified children could do nothing to help. They could only stay where they were, hoping the vicious soldiers would go away without discovering them. When it was safe to leave their hiding place, the children found their mother. She was dead and by her side was the machete with which the soldiers had assaulted her.

Feah and her brothers and sister searched for their father but could find no trace of him. Perhaps he was still alive, perhaps he had been abducted by the rebels. Whatever had happened to him, Feah, the eldest child, now had to take care of her young brothers and her sister. She had to take them somewhere safe. It was too dangerous to remain on the plantation, even to remain in the country, while government soldiers and rebels ruthlessly attacked civilians as well as each other.

As Feah and the children travelled on foot through the countryside, they avoided soldiers and others who would hurt or take advantage of five unaccompanied children. The journey to safety took them seven days and seven nights. At the end, they reached the neighbouring country of Guinea, and sought shelter and safety in a refugee camp.

That was a year ago. Feah has had to grow up quickly. Her childhood ended abruptly the day her mother died. Now aged 14, she is responsible for her sister, Kadiatu who is 4 years old, and her brothers, Aiah, 10 and Junior who is 2. A third brother, Komba, escaped with them; but during the flight from danger, Komba caught a chill which developed into pneumonia. He died in Feah's arms. He was only 5 years old.





Feah's daily life is hard. She has to walk long distances to local villages to earn money. She pounds newly-harvested coffee and husked rice for the Guinean farmers, receiving less than 50 cents for each sack of pounded coffee or husked rice. Sometimes the payment is just a small quantity of spilt rice grains. On market days, Feah helps traders to sell used clothing. For a full day's work she earns less than a dollar.

At home with their parents, the children used to eat well - three balanced meals a day, with good amounts of meat or fresh fish. Now, Feah can only provide her sister and brothers one meal a day. They eat the rice residue that Feah brings home from work, flavoured with salt and palm oil. For a change, Feah also prepares bananas with salt. Sometimes, but not very often, she may be able to buy a small quantity of green vegetables and ingredients for a simple sauce. These extras are not usually available, and when they are, Feah does not have much money with which to buy them. As well as providing food for her brothers and sister, Feah also feeds two old women, who have lost their families. They share the simple hut which Feah built.

Refugees need firewood to cook the simple and meagre daily meal. Four times a week, Feah goes into the bush or to Guinean farms to collect the wood. She leaves the camp very early and returns by midday to avoid capture by men who would either rape her or force her into a work gang. She walks a total of eight kilometres each time to collect firewood, and needs about five hours to find enough wood for her family's needs. The load that she carries back weighs between 8-10 kilograms.

Feah and her family need food, firewood, and of course, water. Each person is allowed just under 7 litres of water

a day, and this is collected three times a day in whatever containers Feah can borrow from other refugees in the camp. The family uses the water carefully and frugally, to drink, to wash in the morning, to prepare the family meal, and finally to bathe at night.

Aiah, her 10-year-old brother, is the only one strong enough to help Feah with her chores, but Feah prefers that he and the other children go to school. She herself cannot attend school as she does not have the time, but Feah hopes that one day, she will have the chance to learn a trade, and perhaps obtain a loan with which to start her own small business. She dreams of being able to provide a better life for her brothers and sister. She wants to see them well-fed, healthy and happily settled with some relatives. If she cannot trace her missing father or find any other relatives, Feah would like a kind and loving family to adopt her brothers and sister. However, she wants to be sure that they will not be used for child labour. Rather than run that risk, Feah prefers to keep her young brothers and sister with her, and work the long, tiring days to provide for them.

Unaccompanied refugee children like Feah seek shelter and safety in refugee camps. By the time they arrive in the camp, they are often too exhausted to realise what is happening and to find out clearly who can help them and what are their entitlements. UNHCR and partner organisations provide the basics such as food and medical aid, as well as benefits such as small loans and agricultural assistance to those people who have registered themselves as refugees. New arrivals need to be registered with UNHCR.

Soon after Feah told UNHCR personnel her story, she was registered. Now Feah and her brothers and sister receive benefits such as food. Most importantly, they receive protection as unaccompanied minors, and their relatives are being traced for them.



The majority of refugees return home when they hear that peace and stability have been restored to their country. They go back home by every possible means: on foot, by boat, and for these Afghan returnees, by truck convoy.

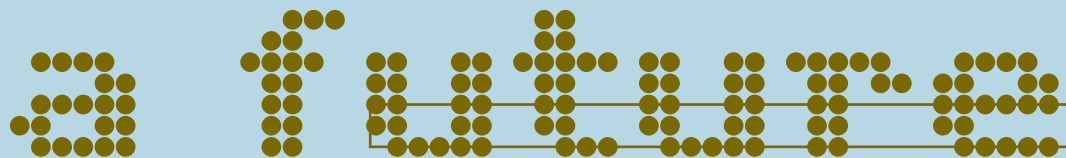


Returnees, such as these in Tajikistan, often go back home to devastation. They begin to repair and rebuild their properties. ▶



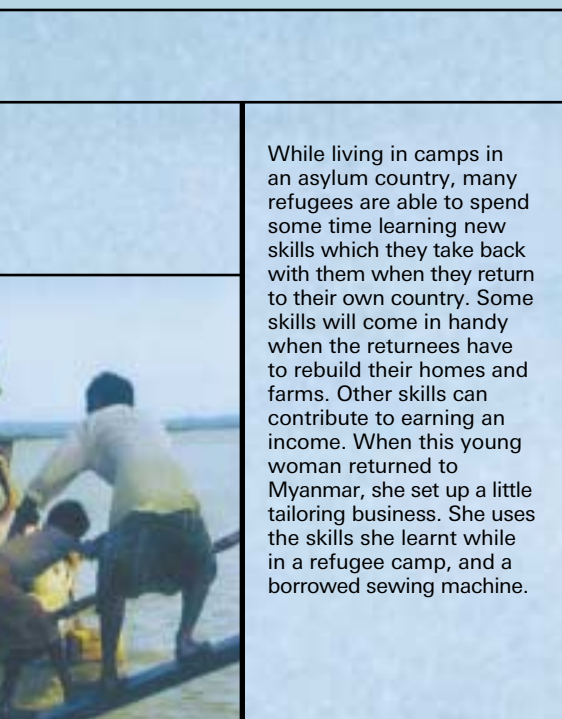
UNHCR | A. Hollmann

Rohingya refugees who have been living in Bangladesh are voluntarily repatriating to Myanmar. For them, the return journey is by ferry. ▼



Durable solutions are long-lasting solutions to the plight of refugees. There are three durable solutions: voluntary repatriation, local settlement and third country resettlement. UNHCR dictionary

Repatriation | When refugees go home



UNHCR | R. Benfatto

While living in camps in an asylum country, many refugees are able to spend some time learning new skills which they take back with them when they return to their own country. Some skills will come in handy when the returnees have to rebuild their homes and farms. Other skills can contribute to earning an income. When this young woman returned to Myanmar, she set up a little tailoring business. She uses the skills she learnt while in a refugee camp, and a borrowed sewing machine.



UNHCR | A. Hollmann

Before it can encourage refugees to return home, UNHCR must be sure that it is safe for them to do so. Repatriation must be voluntary. Refugees should not be forced to go home if they feel it is unsafe.

Repatriation often begins without much organisation. Some refugees simply take the plunge and make their own way home when they hear that peace and stability are returning to their home country.

Once such spontaneous repatriation has begun, UNHCR may help by transporting people and their few belongings. The returnees receive a small amount of assistance to set up their new lives. This might be in the form of food, tools, seeds or a little cash.

UNHCR's responsibility for returnees does not end when they cross the border back into their own country. The agency keeps a watchful eye on the way former refugees are treated, raising the alarm if persecution breaks out again.

Because refugees often return to areas which have been damaged by war, UNHCR helps their communities to help themselves. This may mean repairing or rebuilding essential facilities such as wells, schools, clinics, bridges and roads. UNHCR may also boost farming and livestock raising by providing seeds, fertilisers, irrigation systems, veterinary advice and transport to markets. Some returnees receive help to start small businesses, which create jobs for others and increase the quality of life for whole communities.

The goal of such activities is to make it easier for communities to accept and absorb returnees. Sometimes, especially when there has been civil war, reconciliation and peace-building are needed too. In all these matters, UNHCR works very closely with government ministries and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) based in the country.

somewhere

It is UNHCR's job to find long-term solutions to the problems of refugees. Many refugees return home when the situation in their country of origin stabilises. In the late 1990s, around 3,400,000 refugees returned to their homes in countries such as Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Liberia, Mozambique, Myanmar and Rwanda.

Some refugees integrate into their first country of asylum, settling permanently among the local people. They are able to support themselves and become productive members of society. UNHCR refers to this occurrence as **local settlement**. But there are other refugees who cannot stay in their country of asylum. They are helped to **resettle** permanently in another country. See pages 21-23, for the story of Aida, a Bosnian refugee girl who resettled in the USA.

However, the enormous number of people who have been forced by persecution and violent conflict from their homes and countries make local settlement and resettlement difficult to achieve.

A. ida



UNHCR | L. Wolf

A BRIGHT FUTURE

Aida is not her real name.



UNHCR | L. Wolf

Meet 14-year-old Aida. She is a member of the school orchestra, she acts with the local drama club and plays on the volleyball and basketball teams. Aida is a national honour student and has received a presidential citation for academic achievement. She plans to study law. At the moment, things are looking terrific for Aida but life was not always so rosy for her.

Aida comes from Bosnia and Herzegovina. War began in her home country, when Serbs, Croats and Muslim people who had lived side by side for years started to fight each other. Women, children and the elderly were forced to leave their homes. Aida, her mother and her sister left their home town of Kljuc and made their way to Zagreb, in neighbouring Croatia, where they stayed with Aida's grandmother.

Aida has happy memories of her early childhood in her home town of Kljuc. «I remember it was a small town with a big river running through it. Everyone used to go there and we always went there for picnics and to swim in it. We went bike riding a lot. There were lots of fruit trees and we used to climb the trees and throw plums and apples at people and then run away.»

When asked what she remembers best about living in Kljuc, Aida replied, «When we went to this really big fair. We had it every summer. The really cool thing is that the whole town goes there since it's a small town. All your friends go there. There's all this food and there are singers, and everyone sings and dances.»

She also has sad memories. «When war came to our part of Bosnia, the adults thought we should get out while we had time. Women, children and old people were being expelled, so Dad stayed behind to take care of things. We thought we would be back later but our house was plundered and the people took everything. Mom cried the most about our lost pictures and video tapes. We had taped my sister's first birthday. My dad hid the video tape somewhere and it somehow reached my grandfather who passed it on to a cousin. We got this video tape back last summer. We lost all the other valuable and memorable stuff like pictures of my mom and dad on lots of trips. Sentimental things.»





UNHCR | L. Wolf



UNHCR | A. Hollmann

The trip from Kljuc to Zagreb was made by bus convoy. The buses were crammed with elderly folk, women and children. The buses were stopped frequently by Serb soldiers who boarded and searched among the refugees' possessions for valuables such as money and jewellery. Aida remembers that although the soldiers were not especially mean, she and her sister were frightened because they carried guns. They harassed the passengers as they made sure that no men were hiding among the refugees.



UNHCR | L. Wolf



UNHCR | L. Wolf

Although Aida, her mother and younger sister left Kljuc, many of their friends and relatives remained. They did not expect atrocities to occur. Many of the women and children who did not leave were killed by soldiers. Their graves were later discovered in a big ravine nearby. The men, including Aida's father, were rounded up and held in a prison camp.

When Aida's mother received the news of her husband's fate, she began working to have him set free. Through the Red Cross, she was able to confirm that he was alive and to find him. She then gathered up all her savings

and through friends, was able to make an exchange: her savings for her husband.

It had been a year since Aida and her sister had last seen their father. She woke up early one morning, «And this old, well not old man, but weird man came. I didn't really remember that it was my dad, because he lost a lot of weight. It was sort of scary but I knew it was my dad. He had his ribs broken and part of his back too. My little sister started crying when she saw him because she was frightened. My dad was really sad but then my sister knew it was her dad, even though



he didn't look like himself. We were lucky that he came back. We stayed in Zagreb for another two years, and then we got papers and we came here.» Aida's family received help to resettle in the USA.

Life in the United States was different, and at times, difficult. For Aida, the first two months passed as she were in a dream, but she finally realised that her future no longer lay in Bosnia, but in the United States. She reminisces about her first few weeks in her new country, «The hardest thing was that I didn't know anyone. I think that's the worst

thing when you're put in a new situation, when you don't know anyone. I felt really stupid all the time. The first few days at school, during recess, everyone went off playing and I didn't know anyone. I felt really bad. But after a while, I made friends. It's nice knowing people. After I learned English, I didn't really have a hard time.»

When she first arrived at her new school, Aida says, «I was just treated like any other new kid. They didn't know I was a refugee from Bosnia or anything. They were pretty friendly, but they didn't become my friends

right away. You have to be with people for a while.»

Now, with her friends from school, Aida says, «I feel like an American because I'm talking English. I'm just one of the kids, eat the same stuff, dress the same way and listen to the same music.» However, she does sense a difference when she is at home. The culture of her family life is Bosnian. Aida hopes to be able to return to Bosnia one day, perhaps even to live there. But right now, Aida is looking forward to the volleyball challenge match against the teachers.

To find out more about refugee teenagers...

- > **Contact** your local UNHCR office. Look in the telephone directory of your capital city under the name United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.
- > **Check** out UNHCR's website for information about refugee children and refugee teenagers on www.unhcr.ch
- > **Read** the publications and watch the video which are available from your local UNHCR office, or from the Public Affairs Service, UNHCR, PO Box 2500, 1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland.

What you can do...

The most valuable thing you can do is to **be a friend to a refugee family** in your community. Your welcome and your friendship could go a long way in helping them feel at home.

Invite some refugees to your class or to a meeting of a community group to share their experiences. Listen to what they went through before coming to live in your community. Find out what their lives were like before they became refugees and what they dream of today. You might be surprised to learn how much you have in common.

Contact a refugee resettlement agency in your area. Your city government should be able to give you their names. Since many resettled refugees struggle to learn a new language, you might offer to tutor them in either their adopted language or in another subject.

Prepare a school display, either on a classroom bulletin board or in a large communal area, depicting various aspects of the world's refugee problem.

Write letters to your local and national elected officials. Urge them to support refugees in general, or solutions for a specific refugee crisis.

Organise a school fund-raising activity such as a car wash and donate the proceeds to UNHCR. You can tell us how you want your donation to be used - for medicines, clothing or school supplies.

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