

Statement by Manuel Jordao, UNHCR Representative at Reporting on Refugees booklet launch – 19 June 2009 (European Parliament Office)

Thank you for being here with us today. Tomorrow as many of you will know is World Refugee Day. Worldwide, there are 42 million uprooted people around the world who are waiting to go home when that becomes possible.

It's very important for UNHCR that their stories are told and that the public hears and understands their plight and supports them.

I have listened with great interest to the discussions we have just had. There are many points I will certainly take away from it informing my own approach to my work with the media. I would like to express my appreciation to Dr. Coulter for her erudition on these topics.

The issue of reporting on asylum is a very important one for UNHCR, for obvious reasons. Skewed, inaccurate or unbalanced reports on asylum can confuse public opinion, create false impressions, and definitely makes the work of agencies like ours much harder.

I have to look at media reports from a different perspective than the media itself. I need to consider the effects your articles and broadcasts have on the reception and integration prospects of refugees, because some refugees will never be able to go home. I have to consider the impact of your reports on public opinion and the development of asylum policies.

I can't appeal to you to be positive in your reporting of these issues, but I can ask you to be accurate and balanced. If there are contentious or controversial issues, they should be debated on the facts, with a balanced portrayal of differing viewpoints.

Asylum is certainly a complicated issue to report and I sympathize with any reporter who is coming fresh to this subject. After 20 years of work with UNHCR I am, of course, still learning. This issue demands of a journalist at least a basic legal understanding of the difference between an asylum-seeker, a migrant and a refugee.

Before the establishment of UNHCR in 1950 and the adoption of the Refugee Convention the following year, people of course used the word 'refugee' in many different contexts to describe people fleeing some form of evil or another. With the Convention, however, States regularized the status of refugees, so that the 'term' refugee now carries a legal meaning and can't

be used loosely if reporting an asylum-related story, not if the demands of journalistic accuracy are to be met.

These are just a few thoughts. Much thanks goes to Ronan Brady who a few years ago drafted the first reporting on refugees leaflet. I would like to thank Seamus Dooley also for voicing the strong principles of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) in support of refugees and asylum seekers.

I would like to thank the distinguished person of the Press Ombudsman, Professor Horgan, for his interest and support in launching this set of guidelines that the NUJ has worked on with UNHCR and the Irish Refugee Council.

I look forward to working with many of you. Thank you for your attention.