

Withyou

Ordinary people living through extraordinary times



What's Inside:

- Six Deadly Crises forcing millions of people to flee their homes
- Zamboanga City: Holding on to hope and home

The women in Sitio Layag-layag prepare the seaweed seedlings for cultivation. UNHCR has successfully advocated for their temporary return to these areas, and have been providing livelihood support to the returnees in the island sitios of Zamboanga City. - (©UNHCR/K.Trug)

Message from the Country Representative



“To the visionary statesman [President Elpidio Quirino] who welcomed refugees to this beautiful country during difficult times”.

UNHCR will mark World Refugee Day 2015 against a backdrop of multiple conflicts, growing numbers of forcibly displaced people and a rising tide of intolerance and xenophobia in many parts of the world.

It is against this context that I remind that the refugee phenomenon is not a novel concept in the Filipinos' consciousness. From receiving the 'white Russians' escaping persecution, to Jews fleeing the Holocaust, the arrival of Spaniards seeking asylum after a civil war, the last two decades' entry of 500,000 Indochinese refugees who either sought asylum or transited through the Philippines, and more recently the expression of accommodating the Rohingyas who are most persecuted minority group in the world — these stories of hope and courage have been left out from history books, and unknown to most Filipinos that their generous country once hosted a safe and dignified environment for these refugees. In fact, the Philippines was just two-year old republic under President Elpidio Quirino, barely independent and busy with setting up its own institutions nation with the reconstruction from the Second World War but spontaneously responded to a call for distress for the first batch of asylum seekers in the country.

The tolerance and hospitality in offering protection to people fleeing persecution is legitimized years even before it became a party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The Government passed the Philippine Immigration Act of 1940. Section 47 (b) thereof reads that the President for “humanitarian reasons, and when not opposed to public interest” may admit “aliens who are refugees for religious, political and racial reasons...”

This text in Philippine law is remarkable for two reasons. First, it was adopted by the Philippines at a time when Europe, which often boasts about being the “cradle of human rights”, was engulfed in one of the most tragic episodes of humankind in the 20th century, generating millions of victims including refugees. Second, the text is visionary as it was promulgated 11 years before the world agreed on the definitions of concepts including “humanitarian” and “persecution”. Credit goes to visionary Filipino lawmakers who drafted such a progressive and liberal text in 1940.

The argument here is: the Philippines has done it before, and it is capable of doing it again. While the country maybe a farther destination to reach, its citizens are willing to extend kindness in other forms. Over a month ago, we launched an appeal for humanitarian assistance for the survivors of the 7.8 magnitude earthquake in Nepal. Your urgent support has helped provide life-saving relief items to over 8000 families with temporary shelters and solar lamps. More than an expression of solidarity, the innate Pinoy trait of utang na loob (debt of gratitude) meant to pay forward the goodwill the world extended when it was our kababayans who were facing the tragedies of natural disasters.

Filipinos have exemplified tolerance and empathy for people forced to flee especially for those who are persecuted because of war or human rights abuses. Albeit having problems of its own, the Philippines embrace our common humanity. UNHCR is facing unprecedented challenges meeting the needs of millions of people fleeing conflict and human rights abuses across the globe. The Filipinos' continued committed support and generous contributions are vital for us to continue our work.

Bernard Kerblat
Country Representative, Philippines
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

News and Events

Ordinary people, forced to flee.

#WorldRefugeeDay | 20 June
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UNHCR will mark World Refugee Day 2015 against a backdrop of multiple conflicts, growing numbers of forcibly displaced people and a rising tide of intolerance and xenophobia in many parts of the world. UNHCR aims to close the gap between refugees and audiences—to show that these people also have a past; memories to hold on to and dreams to cling to that push them to look at a brighter future, far from the present they live in.

A Campaign microsite www.refugeeday.org features stories from refugees who describe in their own words their own passions and interests; cooking, music, poetry, or sports. Through their testimonials UNHCR aims to show that these are ordinary people living through extraordinary times. UNHCR urges others to look at people forced to flee and see that they are only ordinary people living in extraordinary circumstances. UNHCR takes a step forward and brings these people and their stories of survival closer to the public eye.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres' call to action for this year's commemoration, "All around the world we are seeing families fleeing violence. The numbers are massive—but we must not forget that these are mothers and fathers, daughters and sons. People who led ordinary lives before war forced them to flee. On this World Refugee Day, everyone should remember the things that connect all of us—our common humanity."

UNHCR AND IOM APPLAUD THE PHILIPPINE GOVERNMENT'S HUMANITARIAN STANCE TOWARD VULNERABLE PEOPLE STRANDED IN BAY OF BENGAL AND ANDAMAN SEA

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in the Philippines have welcomed the Philippine Government's statement of 18 and 19 May 2015 that the Philippines is open to support migrants and refugees from Bangladesh and Myanmar currently stranded in the Andaman Sea and the Straits of Malacca.

The Philippines is a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons. Secretary De Lima's statement is consistent with the spirit and letter of refugee law and the international humanitarian approach to the treatment of refugees and stateless people. The Philippines' Government has consistently offered protection to genuine asylum seekers since 1981.

Thousands of migrants and refugees are currently stranded on smugglers' boats in the Andaman Sea and Straits of Malacca. Some are being held captive by smugglers demanding ransoms from their families. Others have been abandoned by their crews with little food and water, following the Thai Government's crackdown on human trafficking.

Bernard Kerblat, Representative of UNHCR in the Philippines, said: "We welcome Secretary De Lima's declaration and are reassured that the right to asylum will be upheld. The Philippines has a strong humanitarian tradition of international protection in support of voiceless refugees. UNHCR is asking countries in Southeast Asia to approach this as a regional issue with real human consequences. It has been engaging governments in the region on the growing problem of irregular maritime movements."

IOM's Chief of Mission in the Philippines Marco Boasso also expressed his gratitude to the Government of the Philippines. "It is very clear that these people are in need of humanitarian assistance from the international community and governments in the region. IOM is ready to support the Government of the Philippines and our humanitarian partners in finding sustainable solutions for this group."

Five deadly conflicts, one mega disaster are forcing thousands of families to flee their homes each day

IRAQ

A NEW WAVE OF VIOLENCE HAS UPROOTED OVER A MILLION PEOPLE THIS YEAR

5.6 Million internally displaced people
180,000 Refugees in other countries

NEPAL

2.8 MILLION PEOPLE ARE LIVING IN THE OPEN IN NEED OF ASSISTANCE AND PROTECTION. TERRIFIED AND HOMELESS, FAMILIES ARE TOO AFRAID OF AFTERSHOCKS TO RETURN HOME.

Devastating earthquakes of April 25 and May 12 killed more than 8,700 people, injured some 22,000 and destroyed at least 500,000 homes

2.8 Million displaced

SYRIA

THE CONFLICT HAS ENTERED ITS FIFTH YEAR WITH MILLIONS OF REFUGEES FACING A BLEAK FUTURE. MOST SEE LITTLE CHANCE OF RETURNING HOME IN THE NEAR FUTURE AND HAVE LITTLE OPPORTUNITY TO RESTART THEIR LIVES IN EXILE.

11,000 Internally displaced people

3.9 Million Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt

NIGERIA

HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS FLEEING FOR THEIR LIFE, MANY WITNESSING BRUTAL VIOLENCE.

500,000 Internally displaced people

190,000 Refugees scattered in Cameroon, Chad, and Niger

SOUTH SUDAN

ARMED CONFLICT IN THE WORLD'S NEWEST COUNTRY HAS LEFT OVER A MILLION PEOPLE IN URGENT NEED OF ASSISTANCE

1.4 Million internally displaced people

636,000 Refugees in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan

YEMEN

PROTRACTED CONFLICT IN THE NORTH OF THE COUNTRY HAS ESCALATED OVER THE LAST DECADE WITH SUSTAINED UNREST WHILE SOUTHERN GOVERNORATES HAVE SEEN EMERGENCY DISPLACEMENT AS A RESULT OF EQUALLY VIOLENT BUT LESS LONG-TERM CONFLICT

Over 330,000 internally displaced persons have fled violence and insecurity at home to seek safety in neighboring districts and governorates in Yemen

250,000 Somali refugees in Yemen

29,000 of mixed nationalities fled to neighboring countries

42,210 People seeking protection in neighboring countries since the start of the conflict

UNHCR Responds

UNHCR is mounting an unprecedented response to help those in need. Providing fleeing civilians with emergency help is the first step towards their long-term protection and rehabilitation

NEPAL

UNHCR is calling for donors to support an appeal on USD 3.1 million, to be distributed between the delivery of emergency supplies, protection for families and community protection monitoring.

The UN refugee agency was able to help some 132,000 people affected by the earthquake.

Resources were also mobilized from Filipino donors who wanted to pay forward the goodwill received from the world during the typhoon Haiyan emergency.

UNHCR was the first agency to respond to a call from the government after 2.8 million were displaced. Within 24 hours, our staff on the ground had organized and delivered 11,000 plastic sheets, 19,000 tarpaulins, 4,000 solar lanterns and other basic supplies to meet the most urgent needs of survivors.

IRAQ

Together with partner non-government organizations, the United Nations launched a major humanitarian plan to help these people, asking donors for USD 497 million for the provision of food, shelter, water and other life-saving services in the next six months.

UNHCR is the lead coordinator for protection, emergency shelter and non-food items, as well as camp coordination and camp management.

SYRIA

UNHCR seeks USD 4.5 billion for the relief support to refugees.

UNHCR provides basic and necessary humanitarian aid for Syrian refugees and helps the most vulnerable refugees with urgently needed relief - cash for medicine and food, stoves and fuel for heating, insulation for tents, thermal blankets and winter clothing.

By helping refugees in the surrounding region, UNHCR hopes to reduce the number of desperate Syrians resorting to smugglers and falling prey to traffickers to reach safety elsewhere.

Thanks to the generous support of our donors in the past year alone, 1.7 million refugees received food aid, 350,000 children were enrolled in school, and shelter in camps was provided for more than 400,000 refugees.

SOUTH SUDAN

With financial and technical help from the UN refugee agency, the Government of Sudan started registering and issuing identity cards to South Sudanese refugees, giving them rights to employment and access to basic services. It also entails rights to buy property and the freedom to live anywhere in the country for the duration of their stay in Sudan.

UNHCR dispatched 117 trucks from the capital, Juba, to Unity and Upper Nile to stockpile enough relief supplies for 238,000 refugees before the start of the rainy season.

To date, over 54,000 South Sudanese have been registered and nearly 37,000 IDs have been produced.

UNHCR, together with the government and other partners are also developing a new refugee site near the Pugnido refugee camp in order to take in new arrivals.

YEMEN

UNHCR called a flash appeal for USD 273.7 million to reach 7.5 million people with life-saving assistance and protection in the next three months.

UNHCR was able to fly in six planes amounting to 150 tons of aid from Dubai to the capital of Sana'a and deliver ten trucks from Sana'a to Arden.

The UN refugee agency was also able to conduct rapid protection assessments in 40 districts across 11 previously inaccessible governorates and found traumatized people struggling to meet basic necessities.

NIGERIA

The UN refugee agency together with non-governmental organizations, have launched the Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRRP) which seeks USD 174.4 million from donors. The funds will be distributed between the 18,000 Nigerians in northern Cameroon, the 74,000 in south-western Chad, and the estimated 100,000 in Niger.

The funds will be distribute between the 18,000 Nigerians in northern Cameroon, the 74,000 in south-western Chad, and the estimated 100,000 in Niger.

UNHCR continuously works with Cameroonian authorities to quickly relocate refugees away from areas of conflict to a refugee camp in Minawao.

The UN refugee agency has also been giving support such as shelter and basic household items for the internally displaced.

UNHCR has also moved over 3,800 Nigerian refugees to the site of Dar es Salam from western Chad, out of 33,000 refugees.

Our Staff Speaks

Briefly introduce yourself

I'm Julius Velas. I've been working with UNHCR Philippines as Information Management (IM) since 2011. I was deployed and remotely provided IM support to four major displacements due to natural disaster and armed conflict in the Philippines and had the opportunity to share my knowledge and experience to assist UNHCR Nigeria operations due to Boko Haram insurgency.

What was your motivation in pursuing a career with UNHCR?

Everyone wants to help people in every possible way they can, and I'm a person with a passion for technology. Working with UNHCR does both— *'yung kagustuhan kong madagdagan pa ang nalalaman ko sa technology at gamitin 'yung nalalaman ko para sa kapakanan ng mga totoong nangangailangan.* That makes it more rewarding!

What were your impressions of the situation in Mindanao?

The word "Mindanao" is associated with the word "Terrorist" to some people who live outside of Mindanao or haven't been to the island. *Hindi na nakakagulat, kasi most of the media stories are about armed conflict, petty crimes and violence in the island.* But one just has to listen to and read the stories of the displaced to better grasp how these conflicts have affected generations of families forced to flee, and of children growing up with the sounds of gunshot.

What is the situation there like at present?

UNHCR's field office is located in Cotabato, a bustling city in central Mindanao populated with mixed religious groups. Our operation here is focused on the internally displaced people of Mindanao Island, either those who have been forced to flee their homes by natural disasters or those who have been driven from their homes

because of armed conflict. Just earlier this year, armed clashes between the government's security forces and non-state armed groups triggered a massive displacement in fifteen (15) towns in central Mindanao. Presently, UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies are supporting local authorities in the provision of emergency shelters for some of the displaced who lost their homes from the firefights and assisting the safe and dignified return of families in their villages of origin.

How has UNHCR responded to the crisis and what is your main role?

UNHCR provides broad protection interventions – advocacy, monitoring, and distribution of life-saving items to persons-of-concern (POCs) especially during emergency situations.

'Yung pinakamalaking role ng pagiging IM staff sa UNHCR ay 'yung pag-integrate ng protection with knowledge management. Kasama diyan 'yung development ng information products at pag-ensure ng timely dissemination to partners and stakeholders laio na sa mga emergency situations.

I also use geographic information system (GIS) and data visualization tools to process information and analyze the needs and gaps of the situation to be able to prioritize the assistance to the most vulnerable displaced population.

What are the challenges that you and your team have faced during an emergency response?

The lack of information especially during emergency phases and the pressure to release timely information products to provide stakeholders for decision making. *In a perfect world, madali lang ang buhay ng IM kapag may mga designated displacement sites – evacuation centers, transitional sites at tented camps.* POCs are easily located, numbers and maps breezily generated.

The challenge arises when you have home-based IDPs whose movements are difficult to trace at the outset of an emergency. The information management unit could not effectively work had it not been for our team of field workers and protection officers who come in to validate information with local partners and authorities, even penetrating remote areas to account each household. **That one displaced person unaccounted is too many.**

What is your most rewarding moment/experience as an Information Management Associate?

To see that the lives of IDPs and refugees [when I was in Nigeria] were somehow alleviated because IMs were able to assist the organization in strategically positioning its responses. After all, I am here for this job; not just for the sake of crunching data alone but to provide evidence-based information for the betterment of our POCs

What do you think are the most pressing/remaining needs of the populations-of-concern? Why do you think we still need the support from donors?

From an IM perspective, I think the most pressing need of our POCs that need paramount support is their need to attain permanent solution to their plight. The need to be able to return to their homes safely and with dignity. This way they will not be running for their lives again. *Hindi na rin ako magmo-monitor ng displacement. In the humanitarian industry, my job in the end is not to have a job anyway.*



Julius Velas has been UNHCR Cotabato Field Office's Information Management Associate for the past four years. His specialized task is to collect, process, and present temporal and geographic information on all displacement-related incidences in Mindanao in a standardized manner. His work is crucial in improving the ability of UNHCR and its partners to plan effective evidence-based protection interventions. From April-May 2015, Julius was deployed to Abuja, Nigeria to share his knowledge in geographic information system (GIS) and data visualization.

Feature Story



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Holding on to Home and Hope After Conflict

Zamboanga, Philippines - Nurhan Anuddin and his family were directly affected by the siege that occurred that fateful day of September 2013. The conflict brought destruction and displacement to both their lives and their livelihood.

Like most of the community members in Layag-Layag, Nurhan works as a seaweed farmer, and his daily wage is earned through planting, caring for, and harvesting seaweed in their area to sell. *"We thought that [the conflict] wouldn't last for long. On the third day our power lines died,"* Nurhan recounted. *"That was the time when we decided to evacuate."*

As many will relay, finding a new means of livelihood in the evacuation centers is often difficult. Unless there are a lot of donated goods being sent to the evacuation centers, the able-bodied displaced people must still look for a way to work and earn their keep.

"Before, we had just enough resources to get by with our livelihood. But in the aftermath of the conflict, most of them were stolen, lost, or damaged. Even our boats were gone," Nurhan lamented. For people who live day to day and cannot afford much else, the siege destroyed their biggest investment in work. On top of this, they had to contend with the distance of their settlement area to their place of livelihood. *"We couldn't farm on schedule. We were always late in coming back here to plant, cultivate, or even harvest the seaweeds. And we were always burdened with the thought that some people would steal our tools or damage our seaweed",* he adds.

Through the help of private donors and humanitarian actors on the ground, Nurhan and his community are gradually recovering twenty months after the conflict.

Zamboanga's displaced population are getting help with their return to island villages through a UNHCR-led livelihoods project, construction of solar still dryers. *"The solar dryer was a big help for us. Our livelihood improved. From just having a small income before, now our income will increase because of this."*

He explained that in their trade, dried seaweed fetches a higher price compared to fresh seaweed, which means their profit increases and makes a difference in their daily living. While this is a small start for their community, it is a positive one that will hopefully enable them to return to a normal life.

Nurhan remembers the feeling of hopelessness when they were forced to flee their homes. *"When we evacuated due to the conflict, we left our homes, our tools, our livelihood... we almost lost hope. We were in despair, because we felt as if we lost everything."*

Being in their hometown has made a big difference in their ability to cope with these challenges. *"Even though we have not completely recovered yet and our damaged properties were not yet repaired, at least we have finally returned,"* Nurhan said, grateful.



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#WorldRefugeeDay



“It was too dangerous to stay.”

—Yadira, 15 years old

**Yadira’s family
was frightened by armed groups.**



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