

Inquiring Minds topic – 11 January 2019

Roger Palms, Moderator

How to alleviate the refugee crisis

Maybe we can learn something about alleviating the worldwide refugee crisis not from politicians but from a movie actress turned activist.

Thought starters:

1. In the turning from globalism to nationalism that is happening in many countries, are we building walls that prevent us from helping others?
2. Should we be asking our politicians who seek our vote to explain their stance on helping refugees? Can we stand firm and not vote for those who simply want to erect walls to keep others out?
3. What has changed in our country since the Marshall Plan following World War II? Have we turned inward? How can we change that kind of thinking?
4. Most refugees don't want to leave their home and people. What can our country do to help remedy the situation "back home" that is driving people to run away for safety? How can we support their place of origin to make it economically safe and viable for them to stay in or return to?
5. Do we seniors still have a voice? Or can we only hope that younger citizens will see that America did have values in the past that announced: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free"?



How to alleviate the refugee crisis

“Our response will be the measure of our humanity,” writes Angelina Jolie, an actor and special envoy of the UNHCR

by ANGELINA JOLIE

The number of refugees worldwide has climbed for six consecutive years. Some 68m people are now displaced by violence and persecution—equal to a fifth of the population of America, nearly half that of Russia, and more than the entire population of the United Kingdom.

At the same time, humanitarian support is chronically underfunded. The United Nations refugee agency, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and its partners have received less than 17% of the funds they need this year to provide basic assistance to millions of Syrian refugees and displaced people. The same dire situation exists elsewhere too, with less than half the amount of humanitarian funds needed in the vast majority of conflict-affected countries. If nothing is done, this trend of growing numbers and scarce resources will continue with severe consequences in 2019.

This is not a sustainable situation. But the answer is not countries adopting harsh unilateral measures that target refugees, and run counter to our values and our responsibilities. That will only inflame the problem.

Instead, we must find ways to lower the number of displaced people worldwide, by preventing and solving the conflicts that drive them from their homes. We must try to rally people and nations to act together based on common interests and universal aspirations for security, dignity and equality. [We must] understand that this does not come at the expense of our safety and economic well-being at home, but is an essential requirement when facing problems of international dimensions.

It may not be popular to argue that we need to work with our allies to find lasting solutions to complex conflicts through diplomacy. But it happens to be true. The fact that there are huge challenges between us does not mean that it is not the right course to follow.

First, 85% of all refugees and displaced people live in low and middle-income countries. Most people who are displaced by violence remain within the borders of their own countries. Those who are forced out tend to stay in neighboring nations as close as they can to home. Only a tiny fraction of all refugees – less than 1% globally—are resettled, including in Western nations. The world’s poorer nations are bearing the brunt of the burden. We cannot simply assume that they will continue to do this irrespective of policies in wealthier nations.

Second, for all the generosity of taxpayers in the West and all the lives that are saved by this, the billions in humanitarian aid provided annually do not come close to meeting the needs of 68m displaced people and the communities hosting them now, let alone if the

numbers continue to grow. There is no solution that involves simply continuing the status quo, or doing less, or acting as if we can leave this as a problem for other countries to handle.

Third, as many as two-thirds of all the refugees under UNHCR's mandate come from just five countries: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar and Somalia. Peace in any one of those five countries, creating the conditions for people to return home, would bring the numbers of refugees worldwide down by millions. That is what we should be pressing our politicians on as voters, challenging them to answer how their policies address the root of the problem.

We've managed to bring numbers down before. When I first started working with the UN's refugee agency 18 years ago, the number of refugees worldwide was falling. One of my first missions with UNHCR was to accompany returning Cambodian refugees. I met some of the many refugees who returned to their homes after the end of the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. Look further back in history, and after the Second World War, millions of refugees were resettled.

This strategy will take vision and persistence and strength. Not the parody of strength involved in tough talk against refugees, but the resolve, will and diplomatic skill needed to negotiate peace settlements, stabilize insecure countries and uphold the rule of law. It is the practical, proactive course. It will require countries working together to share the burden more fairly, which is why the new Global Compact on Refugees currently being developed is so important.

A refugee is a man, woman or child at their most vulnerable: forced from their home, living without the protection of their state, and in many cases without the bare means of survival. It is the human condition that tests our belief that all human beings have equal rights and deserve protection.

We live in divisive times. But history also shows our ability to unite, overcome a global crisis, and renew our sense of purpose and community with other nations. That is the greatest strength of an open society. We should not leave the debate to those who would exploit public anxiety for political advantage. We are being tested today and our response will be the measure of our humanity.

Angelina Jolie is an Academy Award-winning actor, film director and a special envoy of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees. She has worked on refugee rights with the UNHCR since 2001 in Cambodia, Darfur, Jordan and the ex-Yugoslavia, among other places. In 2005 Ms Jolie received the Global Humanitarian Action Award from the United Nations Association of the USA.

