

Introduction on World Refugee Day 2016

Together with Christians around the world, in our service on a Sunday around or on 20 June we remember in particular migrants and refugees who are leaving their homes and are on their way into a new land, and we remember those who have died on their way to seek a life of human dignity. We look with shock and shame at the consequences of sealing off the external borders of the European Union.

There are no exact figures of the number of people who have died en route to Europe. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights there are at the moment 59 million forcibly displaced people in this world.

What I would like to do with us today is: share the stories of refugees, link them with very meaningful biblical texts... and give us all time to meditate and remember the lives of refugees near and far and our own lives, and which role the Bible and our Christian faith may play in all that.

There is often not much we can actually do to change the fate of many of the displaced people. But however bound our hands seem, however limited we see our options, here is one thing we can do: we can remember the refugees' stories and we can bring their destiny before God and pray for them. Ad that is what we are doing today.

Refugees are people like anyone else, like you and me... Sermon on World Refugee Day 2016

"Refugees are people like anyone else, like you and me. They led ordinary lives before becoming displaced, and their biggest dream is to be able to live normally again. On this World Refugee Day, let us recall our common humanity, celebrate tolerance and diversity and open our hearts to refugees everywhere."

Ban Ki-moon

Micah 6:8

**God has told you, what is good;
and that is what the Lord requires of you:
to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God.**

"I do not believe there is any group of refugees who are as systematically undesired, stigmatized and discriminated against as Somalis." UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres

GALKAYO, Somalia – Aisho Warsame is one of 1.4 million internally displaced people living in appalling conditions in Somalia, scene of one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. Another 700,000 Somali refugees are scattered across numerous other nations, mostly in Africa and the Middle East.

Aisho recently told how she woke up one morning in 2010 and realized she couldn't take the noise of the shelling and bombing any more. She had to leave Mogadishu or she would go crazy or, most probably, end up dead.

"The streets of Mogadishu are completely deserted, the few people who are left there are too scared to leave their houses," the 62-year-old grandmother said in the safety of Galkayo, a town 700 kms north of the Somali capital. "All you see in the streets are the bodies of people killed by bullets or mortars."

Aisho fled the city with her four children and six grandchildren after the death of her husband and the destruction of her home by mortar fire. The family made their way on foot and by bus to Galkayo, where Aisho found shelter in a camp hosting thousands of desperate people displaced by the seemingly endless fighting.

But although she has almost nothing in Galkayo, Aisho has no regrets about leaving Mogadishu. "Living without the fear of being killed is a luxury," she stressed. There are certainly no other luxuries for her here: she lives in a small makeshift shelter that offers almost no protection from the elements.

Despite the daily hardship of her life, Aisho clings to the hope that things will get better.

Many Somalis, however, have lost all hope for their homeland and have set out in a desperate search to find new lives elsewhere. Among them are some 170,000 Somali refugees in Yemen, many of whom made a perilous voyage across the Red Sea or the Gulf of Aden in flimsy boats operated by ruthless smugglers. Thousands have perished attempting the dangerous journey. From January to October 2010, some 43,000 people -- mainly Somalis and Ethiopians -- made the trip.

In a recent visit to the Kharaz refugee camp in Yemen, UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres met traumatized Somali refugees who had survived the sea crossing. Only days earlier, a rickety smugglers boat had capsized and 40 migrants and refugees drowned. "They suffer inside Somalia, during their escape, and then here," Guterres said at the bleak refugee camp. "I would not like to live here for so many years."

Unable to return to their war-torn country, refugees in Kharaz have little option other than to live in limbo -- at least for the time being. Many are looking beyond Yemen, including 24-year-old Ibrihim Mohamed Qalinle. "Our dream is to get somewhere better than here," he said.

Exodus 22, 21

You shall not wrong or oppress an immigrant, for you were immigrants in the land of Egypt.

Music

Matthäus 25, 40

Then the righteous will answer: "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick and in prison and visited you?" And the King will answer them: "Truly I tell you, just as you did to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Out in the cold

CALAIS, France – Sabir woke up soaked and chilled to the bone. His only protection against the freezing rain and cutting wind blowing off the English Channel had been a blanket donated by a French charity, but the rain poured all night and the blanket soon turned into a wet, spongy mass.

The 22-year-old from Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan and his friends had spent most of the night wandering through the deserted streets of this port city in northern France, carrying their meagre belongings and being chased by the police, who gave them the choice of either leaving Calais or being arrested.

Sabir had documents showing that he was awaiting a final decision on his asylum claim, so the police let him go. But some of his friends were taken away to a detention centre.

The local authorities allow migrants and asylum-seekers – from places like Afghanistan, Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Iran, Iraq and Sudan – to sleep in a local community hall with a cardboard box as bedding. But the facility is only opened up to them when the temperature falls below freezing point.

"I left my country almost a year ago because of serious problems," Sabir said through an interpreter. "I've spent seven months in France asking for protection. France hasn't given me any papers. They have given me no shelter and no money."

The young man said he had been forced to sleep under bridges and in the mud. "Not even dogs, or any other animals, would be able to live in these conditions. Every day, I'm trying to get papers and every night they [the police] don't let me sleep," he claimed. "I am sick and going out of my mind. I am exhausted."

Sabir said he left Afghanistan after his father and two older brothers were killed. His mother still lives in Afghanistan with his younger brother and sister. Another sister is in Pakistan. He has not heard from any of them.

People fleeing their countries because of a well-founded fear of political, religious or ethnic persecution are entitled to refugee status. According to the European Union's (EU) Dublin II regulation, however, asylum claims are normally handled by the country where the applicant first entered the EU. Sabir, like many of the other young men living rough in Calais, entered Europe through Greece, a country where asylum-seekers face serious difficulties in accessing an effective asylum procedure.

According to French law, asylum-seekers who are admitted into the normal asylum procedure are entitled to accommodation, but the authorities claim there are not enough places and priority should be given to families with small children. They also claim that some of the asylum-seekers in Calais refuse to be accommodated in other parts of France because their real intention is to cross the English Channel and work in the United Kingdom.

While the authorities' goal is to prevent illegal crossings, the lack of accommodation and the constant round-ups and police checks make life very hard for asylum-seekers like

Sabir. In 2009, around 20 per cent of asylum-seekers in Europe came from Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia.

An estimated one-quarter of all undocumented migrants in Calais are aged under 18. UNHCR staff have come across children as young as nine, usually travelling with an older sibling or relative. These young Afghans are trying to reach Europe for a variety of reasons, including the ongoing conflict in their home country and the eroding welcome in neighbouring states. Individual experiences of war and human rights violations, including forced labour and kidnapping, combined with insecurity, widespread poverty, political instability, poor educational prospects and dwindling hopes for a brighter future are all fuelling the flows, as are expanding smuggling networks.

Romans 15: 7

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Music

Revelations 21: 1a

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

Mahmoud is just a boy

He loves playing with friends, going to school and reading to his little sister. His mother and father, like any parents, simply want the best for him. But Mahmoud's story is far from ordinary.

His epic journey began on an autumn day in 2012, when the nine-year-old and his family fled their hometown of Aleppo, Syria. Seeking shelter from a war that has killed thousands, they settled in Egypt, renting a small, sparsely furnished apartment in a sand-swept suburb of Cairo. But daily life was far from easy and, with a change in government in June 2013, it was about to get much harder.

Public opinion soon turned against the 300,000 Syrians seeking refuge in Egypt. Local boys began bullying Mahmoud, at one point even physically attacking him. Afraid for his life and unable to attend school, he refused to leave the apartment, and instead chose to help his father, Mohamed, who was struggling to make ends meet by selling bread to neighbours.

“I wanted to leave because there is no school here and I don’t have friends,” Mahmoud told UN workers, tears running down his cheeks. “Here, they hit me all the time.”

Mohamed, too, saw no future for his son in Egypt. Eventually, he took the decision no father should ever have to consider: he put his son on an illegal boat bound for Italy – alone. “No one sends their son out into the world alone unless they live in real fear,” Mohamed explained. “Our lives are too difficult here.”

But escape proved difficult, too. The vessel Mahmoud boarded was fired upon at sea before it left Egyptian waters. The boy spent five traumatic days in a detention centre before he was able to see his family again.

Back in Cairo, the bullying resumed. When United Nations Refugee Agency interviewed Mahmoud, he was desperate. And with no future, no education and no friends to play with in Egypt, he told them he was not afraid to take the boat again. “I have a dream that one day we will have a new house in a better place,” he said, resolutely. “I will go to school and make new friends.”

All the boy wanted was the chance to live in peace. What happened next would turn his luck around.

The UN refugee workers presented Mahmoud’s case to the Swedish government, which had started accepting Syrian refugees as part of a resettlement programme. In December 2013, three months after Mahmoud boarded the boat, his family was accepted.

They were to live in the municipality of Torsby, a small town in central Sweden with a history of helping vulnerable refugees. Before they left, young Mahmoud was both excited and apprehensive. He wanted to know when he would start school? What their house would be like? Whether he’d have friends, and if his father would find work? At last, he was eager to restart his life.

After assessing Mahmoud’s case, the Swedish Migration Board accepted his family for resettlement. One night in January they disembarked at their final destination: the town of Torsby.

After registering with Swedish authorities in Karlstad, the family navigates a food court for their first meal out in their new country, courtesy of their refugee coordinator, Ronny Larsson.

Within days of arriving in Torsby, the family is settling into their new apartment. Eager for a fresh start, they are beginning to learn about their adopted home and the people who live there.

Mahmoud sits outside of a local school in Torsby. He will start classes at his new school in a week.

In January, the family flew to Sweden, touching down at a local airport and continuing on into Torsby by car. “When I first heard I was going to travel, I was so happy,” said Mahmoud, wrapped in a scarf, as the car sped through the freezing, Swedish landscape. “I have travelled twice before in my life, but the last two times we travelled we were escaping. And this time I am going to live a new life.”

Over the next few days, the family received their Swedish identity cards, met local social services and dealt with basic needs, like finding suitable clothing for the freezing

temperatures. Mahmoud, his eyes sparkling, took the transition in his stride. Finally, he was able to run outside and play without fear – even partaking in his first snowball fight. Not only that, but for the first time in two years he had the opportunity to learn.

“I was so happy when I saw the school,” he said, smiling, after his first day in class. “And I was happy I made some new friends.” Although he was shy to start, his eagerness to learn shone through and today he is able to introduce himself in simple Swedish.

Although he will never forget his past – in Syria, in Egypt and during his terrifying time at sea – Mahmoud exudes a new sense of confidence when he talks. “Now I just want to live a new life, far from violence, killing and war. If someone asks me about my life before, I will tell him that it was difficult, but it is better now.”

Hebrews 13: 2

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.