



Action by Christians Against Torture

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If a foreigner resides with you in your land, do not mistreat him: the foreigner residing among you shall be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.

Leviticus 19 vv 33-34

ACAT (Harrow Group) warmly invite you to a service of prayer for refugees to be held at 2.30pm on Sunday 20th November 2022 at St Alban's Church

The Ridgeway, Harrow HA2 7PF.

This year the theme of the service will be *Fleeing Persecution* and the focus will be on the experiences of young people.

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There is a small car park at the church and parking is also available in surrounding streets. St Alban's is within 5 minutes' walk of H9, H10 and H11 bus stops. Rayners Lane and North Harrow tube stations are each about 10 minutes' walk away.

## Refugees and other migrants

At the end of last September a boat leaving Lebanon for Europe sank with between 120 and 150 people on board and up to 94 people were drowned. This was just one example of the dangers faced by migrants desperate to escape persecution, war and poverty. The boats used in such journeys are frequently provided at an exorbitant cost by people traffickers and have totally inadequate safety measures. Other migrants flee by equally hazardous routes overland and are just as likely to be exploited by others.

Not all these migrants can legally be classified as refugees. In international law, refugees must be

people who have fled their own countries because they are at serious risk of human rights violations and persecution there, including violence by gangs and other criminal groups. The Refugee Convention of 1951 entitles such people to ask for asylum and when this is granted they are legally recognised as refugees. So, technically, the term "refugee" does not apply to a person fleeing poverty or natural disasters although in practice it is quite often used to describe people in that situation. It is also frequently used for people who are fleeing danger in their own country without crossing a border, the "internally displaced".

The majority of refugees are monitored by The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). (Palestinian refugees are the responsibility of a different UN agency, UNWRA, the UN Relief and Works Agency). Most refugees flee to nearby countries and most of those have in the past been low and middle-income countries. Up to the end of 2021, according to UNHCR's most recent official figures, there were 27.1 million refugees and 53.2 million internally displaced persons. The five countries which, between them, produced 69% of these refugees were Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Myanmar and the five major hosting countries were Turkey, Colombia, Uganda, Pakistan and Germany.

The war in Ukraine has no doubt changed the overall picture. Between February and September 2022 over seven and a half million people had crossed the Ukrainian border because of the war although some have certainly returned home. There are also Russians who have left their homeland, either because they were against the war and not free to protest or, more recently, because they did not want to join the army to fight in Ukraine. However it is

too soon to say how many of these people will be forced into permanent exile by the war and where they will all go.

Obviously the situation is fluid and there are probably many people who have fled from danger of some kind somewhere without being on anybody's list but some vast official refugee camps exist which are the size of substantial towns. For instance, the Daabab camp in Kenya had a population of 218,873 by the end of July. It was established in 1991 mainly as a reaction to an influx of Somalis because of political turmoil in Somalia itself and there are several generations of families living there now. Some inhabitants are returning home voluntarily but, with a new drought developing in Somalia and the risk of famine, they may well begin to come back.

Unfortunately once migrants seeking asylum have reached their destination their problems are usually far from over and different countries have different rules as to how to treat them. In UK the new Nationality and Borders Act has made life more difficult for people arriving in small boats to seek asylum as it will be assumed that they have travelled from somewhere safe which is where, according to British authorities, they should have claimed asylum. However the UNHCR says that the Refugee Convention of 1951, signed by UK, allows people to seek asylum anywhere they choose.

Within UK the actual process of applying for asylum can take years. Asylum seekers are not allowed to earn money until their cases are resolved and, although they do receive some support, it is barely adequate. They are supposed to receive basic accommodation but cannot choose where. Worryingly, it was announced recently that over 100 unaccompanied child migrants (ie individuals under 18) who had been placed in hotels had disappeared over a 14 month period. Sometimes people seeking asylum are put in detention centres and UK has no official time limit for detention although someone who has been detained in UK can apply for bail. Appeals for asylum are initially heard by the Home Office which has often been accused of having "a culture of disbelief". Although in fact the success rate of appeals has risen markedly in recent years, there have been numerous suicides among asylum seekers in UK.

Refugees who have been allowed to stay in a country still have problems and often feel insecure. Although refugees can often provide useful skills the relatively sudden arrival of large numbers of foreigners can be resented especially in difficult economic times. This autumn new governments in Italy and Sweden were elected partly on a promise to clamp down on "immigrants". In South Africa there has been an increase of vicious attacks on migrants by vigilante groups. Turkey has generously hosted large numbers of Syrian refugees but popular opinion there appears to be increasingly turning against refugees and plans have been announced to send up to one million refugees in Turkey back to Syria. Many Rohingya have fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh but here too repatriation is encouraged by the Bangladeshi government. However in neither Syria nor Myanmar has the human rights situation improved.

Yet, despite the vulnerability of refugees, it would be wrong to ignore the support given to them by organisations and by individuals everywhere. There is the worldwide work of UNHCR and the Red Cross for instance. There are also national organisations which help, such as, in UK, the Refugee Council and Freedom from Torture but there are also countless individuals in many countries assisting refugees and other migrants where they can – and perhaps making themselves unpopular in the process. For example there was a TV report of a Russian group in St Petersburg who helped Ukrainian refugees who had been taken into Russia but wanted to get to the EU. The group, which included a Russian Orthodox priest, bought them train tickets into the Baltic States and Finland. In the US volunteer groups leave water out for migrants trekking northwards from central America through the dry terrain of southern Texas. There are many aid workers who do their best to make refugees welcome and journalists who report on the difficult conditions faced by asylum seekers and other migrants. Finally let us not forget the sailors and lifeboatmen who risk their lives to rescue desperate migrants from the perils of the sea.

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