

Preventing Future Genocide and Protecting Refugees

by Sadako Ogata

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

At the Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C., 30 April 1997

Distinguished Guests,

I am honoured to join you this evening in this impressive monument to memory and to vigilance. Some years ago I went to Majdanek, an experience I shall never forget. The fields, dwellings, collected remnants of shoes and glasses - were the most sobering reminder of life lost. Today, I see again the haunting images of destruction and despair. They reinforce me in my task as United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to protect and assist those who manage to escape from persecution and war. This task is as rewarding as it is difficult. I therefore need the help of countries like the United States and of people like you.

My Office is responsible for over 26 million refugees and other uprooted victims of wars and persecution. I am fortunate to have a relatively small but superb staff of 5,400 committed to defending the rights and saving the lives of refugees in over 120 countries, from Armenia to Zaire, from Bosnia to Guatemala.

America is no stranger to refugees. Quakers, Puritans, Catholics from Ireland, Jews who fled the Inquisition, and in this century people from central Europe, Latin America and Southeast Asia. America has been and continues to be a life line for oppressed people from all over the world.

Today's system of international refugee protection was born out of the Holocaust. At the end of the Second World War, there were millions of refugees and displaced persons in Europe. One of the major challenges to the newly-created United Nations was finding homes for these survivors, who were traumatized and packed into crowded camps but could not return to their former homes. It soon became clear that a massive program of resettlement to new countries of asylum was the only answer. America was such a country. You opened your doors and received numerous victims of the Holocaust.

Despite their painful personal histories, these resettled refugees created successful new lives. Some of them or their children may be in this audience. Their success is an eloquent testimony to the resilience of the human spirit. I also salute the many voluntary agencies who helped the refugees of the past and are helping the refugees of today.

At the same time the immediate problem of European refugees was being addressed in the years after the war, it became apparent that a new international system had to be created to establish human rights and to protect refugees. One

lesson drawn from the Holocaust was that a government which starts out by terrorizing its own citizens will progress to threatening its neighbours. States recognized that human rights were a cornerstone of international peace and security and pledged to promote them. As part of this new commitment to human rights, the right to seek and enjoy asylum was included.

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which owes so much to Eleanor Roosevelt, proclaims that right. Refugee protection was reinforced by the Refugee Convention of 1951. It enshrines the principle that no one shall be returned to a country where his or her life or freedom is threatened. The World Jewish Congress played an important role in drafting the Convention, which today is subscribed to by 134 countries around the globe.

I have dwelt on the origins of my Office for some of the same reasons we remember the Holocaust: to commemorate the millions of lives lost, to celebrate the refugees that have been saved and to illuminate the choices we must make today. The main question is: have we learnt sufficiently from the past? First, are we doing enough to prevent new genocides? Second, are we doing enough to make sure at least that those escaping from genocidal situations find safety and protection? You may find my questions rhetorical. Indeed they are. Looking at the killing fields of Cambodia, the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and the genocide in Rwanda, I am afraid we have not done enough.

I could make this list much longer, but I have deliberately selected the worst cases of crimes against humanity, the consequences of which my Office is grappling with at the end of this century. As we all know, genocide, characterized by the intent to destroy national, ethnic or religious groups, is the most violent and pernicious form of human rights violations. Yet in the decades since the Holocaust, we have not been able to prevent or halt even the most brutal forms of violence against whole groups of people.

It is true that the international human rights movement and especially the end of the Cold War have brought progress. The allied intervention in northern Iraq protected the Kurds there. The humanitarian interventions in Somalia and Bosnia saved people from starvation. In many other conflicts United Nations peace keepers prevented new outbreaks of violence. Numerous life saving relief operations were mounted. All these attempts were unthinkable some decades ago. They are very positive, but not enough.

Why did it take until August 1995 before the people of Sarajevo and other besieged cities in Bosnia were saved by NATO and peace was pushed through? Is neutrality morally and practically viable in the face of widespread atrocities? Why was no country prepared to step into Rwanda at the height of the genocide in 1994? Why was the Multinational Force, that had been authorized to come to the rescue of

hundreds of thousands of refugees in eastern Zaire, canceled in December of last year? Thousands of people have perished in eastern Zaire since then. The answer to these questions seems clear. It is because the major powers perceived no strategic interests or because their interests did not converge. In that sense the situation does not fundamentally differ from the Cold War years when political interests, stemming from ideological confrontation, were a cause for not halting the killing fields of Cambodia.

In my view there can be no true globalization, if it is only economic, if we do not even reach out to halt genocidal situations. While respecting cultural diversity, true globalization means universal respect for human rights, of the positive side of man, of the responsibility to provide protection against evil. That lies at the heart of refugee protection. Now, we have to take it one step further and be prepared to halt the worst evil at its source. That is my hope at the threshold of the next millennium. We need determined political leadership. We need citizens like you who are prepared to look beyond the domestic horizon and who can spur reluctant politicians into action. I understand why they want to avoid risks involving soldiers in a faraway land. One of the reasons why we need an energetic and effective United Nations is to mitigate these risks through international burden-sharing. It is also why I advocate the establishment of an early and rapid deployment capability to intervene in the worst crisis situations. Such a capability would prevent escalation, would save money, and what is more important: would save lives.

All this makes little sense if we do not know of the crimes that are taking place or discover them too late. If there had been widespread knowledge about the gas chambers, would the Holocaust have been tolerated? Thanks to the work of human rights agencies and modern communications, public opinion is now a force to reckon with. Early warning and timely analysis are vital. In the case of Rwanda, most people were killed before the word 'genocide' was used.

Let us not miss opportunities for preventing the worst crimes. Rwanda was, I think, a missed opportunity, as UN troops were already in the country and could have quickly been reinforced. Bosnia is perhaps a more difficult case. Could the international community have prevented the debacle had it intervened in late 1991 when Yugoslav forces destroyed the city of Vukovar?

We need a strong United Nations human rights machinery to prevent but also expose violations of human rights. We also need an international criminal court. The potential Pol Pots of this world - yes, the planners and not just the perpetrators - must be deterred by the prospect of criminal justice. And is it fair and realistic to expect the survivors to forgive and to cooperate if there is no justice? In the absence of justice, private revenge may prevail which will spread fear and undermine the possibility for reconciliation. Every traumatized society has to find its own compromise between justice and reconciliation when these two compete.

Let me now turn to the second question I raised. If we do not or cannot prevent massive human rights abuses are we at least offering a safe haven to those escaping and knocking at our doors?

In looking back, the refugee issues of the 1930s and 1940s seem simple. While some desperate Jews were admitted to safety abroad, there were also many more who were stopped in their tracks. In light of the current debate in the United States about asylum-seekers without proper documents, I must note that those who managed to escape often did so by using fraudulent documents, issued and accepted by sympathetic officials. It may not be so widely known that the Japanese Consul in Estonia, Chitoshi Suhigara, issued hundreds of visas to allow Jews to leave Europe. Also Consul Ryoichi Manabe provided residence permits to Jewish refugees to protect their stay in Shanghai. You know of course about Raoul Wallenberg. These episodes of personal courage are important reminders that individuals can make a difference.

From our vantage point in the 1990s, this haunting memory of people trapped behind borders was simply part of the world's larger moral failure to confront persecution and genocide. Yet at the time, the issues seemed to be as complex as they appear today. High rates of unemployment, suspicion towards foreigners - especially those with unpopular religious beliefs or political views, exaggerated fears of the floodgates being opened, and foreign policy considerations had a higher priority than the lives of the persecuted. In our own time, these concerns are very similar.

The end of the Cold War has meant that refugee protection no longer dovetails so neatly with strategic imperatives. Nevertheless, the need for asylum has not diminished. On the contrary, the persecutors, torturers and warmongers of the world have flourished in the current state of flux. But the doors are closing around the world. Refugees are seen primarily as a political, economic and environmental burden. They also represent security hazards.

In the developed world, while we realize that there are some economic migrants who abuse the asylum system, we must insist that each asylum-seeker has his or her case duly considered and that the refugee definition is not stripped of its meaning by a restrictive interpretation. One month ago, a new expedited removal procedure was instituted at US ports of entry for those arriving without proper documents. Many refugees will have trouble articulating their claim under the conditions of detention and the short time frame that are now in place. The new fast-track procedure will be particularly difficult for survivors of torture and other extreme trauma. In the meantime, interdiction of boats at sea continues, bringing to mind the voyage of the St. Louis.

We should work to prevent the deportation of Bosnian refugees who cannot yet return to their own homes. It is wishful thinking to assume that my Office can make repatriation possible if political leaders in Bosnia are allowed to pursue their heinous policies of ethnic division and if shelter is not reconstructed more quickly. Premature returns will cause great human suffering and may de-stabilize a fragile peace.

Elsewhere it is vital that the civilian and humanitarian nature of refugee camps be maintained. The Rwandan refugee camps in Zaire and Tanzania were controlled by armed men, many of whom were probably guilty of genocide. We asked for international help in getting these people out of the camps. No country offered to get involved. My staff had to continue feeding criminals as the price for feeding hundreds of thousands of innocent women and children. We should not have been left in that position. Unarmed relief workers are expected to face increasing danger in many situations.

Why do we still care about asylum? Because, as in the past, it is the safest mechanism when all other human rights protections fail. I have three pleas. First, while managing immigration as a legitimate concern, do not shut out those fleeing for their lives and freedom. Unlike others, refugees do not have a choice. Second, I urge opinion leaders such as yourselves to de-dramatize and de-politicize the asylum debate. Do not let racists and xenophobes set the agenda. Asylum issues are manageable, particularly in western countries. The total number of asylum-seekers in the West has been falling. It is neither necessary nor helpful to invoke an atmosphere of crisis in setting refugee policy. Third, I would ask you to maintain perspective. Throughout the ages, many refugees have enriched societies. Einstein was a refugee. Madeleine Albright was one. And refugee problems can be solved. Millions of people do find refuge and millions eventually do go home. Most refugees want desperately to go home, and their return is the most gratifying sight I see as I travel the world.

I would like to take this opportunity to commend the United States for its leadership and generosity in accepting refugees for organized resettlement, and to express my hope that this proud tradition continues.

Before concluding let me stress that American leadership remains essential to protecting human rights, to preventing new genocides and to helping refugees worldwide. You can contribute. In fact, your role is vital. Speak up for human rights. Urge your government to support the war crimes tribunals for Rwanda and former Yugoslavia. Denounce repression. Counter international passivity and isolationism. Mobilize public opinion. Insist that the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers are respected. Work against the imprisonment of asylum-seekers. Maintain basic social services especially for elderly, sick or disabled refugees. Call upon your newspapers and television stations to offer in-depth reporting on human rights and

refugee issues - ask them to show the accomplishments of refugees and migrants. Their presence is a testament to the proud humanitarian tradition of American society.

I also ask you to support our work. Join with Father Ted Hesburgh, David Hamburg, Ambassador Dan Spiegel and other prominent Americans in building the United States Association for UNHCR, a private non-profit organization with offices in Washington, Chicago and Los Angeles. It provides speakers on refugee and asylum issues, offers educational programs in schools, sets up exhibits of refugee art, and promotes a message of tolerance and support for refugees. Financially, our annual budget of USD 1.2 billion depends entirely on voluntary contributions. I am immensely grateful for the 22 per cent funded by the United States. That contribution must be sustained.

Ladies and gentlemen, from my perspective this Museum bears witness to the failure of preventing repression and genocide. Today, we have an opportunity to learn from the past, and save lives that will be lost if we do not act. It is critical that you speak out. I welcome your attention and your concern. Victims are calling - no more genocide.

Thank you.