

“Global Refugee Crises: Opportunities and Challenges”

The Women’s International Forum held a briefing on November 23, 2015, at United Nations Headquarters in New York to discuss the current global refugee crisis, with Ms. Ninette Kelley, the Director of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee’s Liaison Office in New York, as the featured speaker. Ms. Kelley took on this position in 2015 “after serving five years as UNHCR’s Representative in Lebanon” and after having “served for 8 years with the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada.” She is a legal practitioner and has published on refugee issues and is a co-author of *The Making of the Mosaic: The History of Canadian Immigration Policy*.

The Women’s International Forum ([WIF](#)) was founded in 1975 and, according to its Web site, enjoys a close association with the United Nations:

WIF has a current membership of over 300 women and men. The UN Secretariat invites WIF to hold its briefings in a conference room in the UN Headquarters Building. The briefings are open not only to WIF members, but also to diplomats from the Permanent Missions to the UN and officials in the UN Secretariat.

Mrs. Ban Soon-Taek, wife of the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon, is the Patron of the WIF. Many of the women who serve as their countries’ permanent representatives or as high-ranking officials of the UN Secretariat serve on the WIF Honorary Board.

Its creation was seen “as a means of engaging in lectures and discussions related to the current agenda of the United Nations.”

If the numbers tell the story, the Syrian refugee crisis was the focal point of this briefing.

Ms. Kelley reported that the total refugee displacement from Iraq, Somalia, Syria, and Afghanistan is estimated at 60 million. The number of people being displaced in the world daily has quadrupled in the last 4 years from 11,000 in 2010 to 42,500 in 2014. It is the largest exodus of refugees since World War II. If the refugee population were a country, she said it would be the 24th largest in the world.

There were 1.7 million asylum applications filed in 2014—another highest in decades—with an estimated 105,200 refugees resettled in new countries.

Yet it is the recent explosion in numbers of refugees from Syria that has created alarm. The surge of Syrian refugees fleeing to neighboring countries over the last four years is estimated at 12 million. And in just the last 6 months, thousands are known to have died in desert and boat crossings. An estimated 13.9 million people in Syria have been forced to flee their homes and villages, and 50 percent of that number are said to be children (which is the highest number of refugee children in decades).

Here are some other startling statistics from the total estimated 60 million refugees in the world today:

- 86 percent are located in the developing world – forced from homes but still in country
- 70 percent live in serious poverty
- 82 percent are women and children
- Most have lived as refugees for more than 17 years

Ms. Kelley reported that the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) opened at a 67 percent budget deficit this year. Only a handful of countries (Turkey at 2.6 percent, Lebanon at 25 percent and Europe at 0.3 percent) have been willing to take in refugees. And the burden of the displaced is carried by states with the least resources. She noted that if all countries took in 2.6 percent of the refugees, the refugee problem would be solved.

Although the United States takes in about 80,000 refugees every year—more refugees than any other country—the Syrian refugee population is small in comparison to other countries, according to Ms. Kelley. Not addressed was the [current debate](#) in the U.S. concerning the terrorist threat from Syrian refugees. Ms. Kelley simply stated the UN's position that refugees are not the cause of terror, but are fleeing aggression, and Syrian refugees should not be “victimized” twice by calling them terrorists.

However, the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI)—the agency that oversees the intelligence community (Air Force, Army, Navy, Treasury, Coast Guard, FBI, CIA and others)—has confirmed “that indeed terrorists have tried to exploit Obama's Syrian refugee initiative.” It is an alert that needs to be heeded.

Both the State Department and the RAND Corporation's analyses show Syria to be “a hotbed of Hezbollah militants and Al Qaeda-linked jihadists.”

Through its own [investigation](#), Judicial Watch has found that “individuals with ties to terrorist groups in Syria have tried to infiltrate the United States through the Obama refugee program.” This was confirmed by both the ODNI and The National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC). Further, although the State Department provided its utmost assurances as to the viability of its “rigorous” screening process, that assurance was all but refuted during a congressional hearing in October through testimony given by the director of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), Matthew Emrich, who conceded that there are no systems in place to collect information to vet. This concession had earlier been confirmed by FBI Assistant Director Michael Steinbach who said there was no way to properly screen for terrorist ties because “You're talking about a country that is a failed state, that is — does not have any infrastructure, so to speak. So

all of the data sets — the police, the intel services — that normally you would go to seek information don't exist.”

Ms. Kelley closed the briefing by discussing ways in which civil society has and can make a difference, noting that both political and private intervention is needed to resolve the current refugee crisis.