

# **Take a Walk in Their Shoes**

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## **Introducing the IDCs -**

As we celebrate Children's Day in various schools in Singapore, let us all spare a thought for children who are not fortunate enough to be able to continue or even have an education. The UNHCR estimates there are around 25 million such children who are classified as refugees or internally displaced children.

At an age where they need stability and security in their lives, these children are forcibly uprooted from familiar surroundings and thrust into the vast unknown, as if the very ground they walk on has been pulled from under their feet. Whether due to natural disasters, wars or persecution, these children escape with very little.

## **The Bare Bones**

Refugee children are people without a country, living in families without a home. Sometimes they no longer have a family. They are children without a childhood. Some escape, carrying only their hopes and dreams. As they flee, they see and may even experience horrible sufferings. Sometimes they are abandoned in the panic, many get abused.

When they finally arrive somewhere safe they are scared, tired and hungry. There is often little food, little water and even more danger. These children risk catching diseases that prey on those who are thin and weak. So in those first frightening months, they wonder how their dreams of a happy home and a normal life turned into a nightmare. Most of them will face a future of poverty and face countless difficulties.

In 1995, Singapore ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which formally identify children as the bearer's of rights, establishes an internationally accepted framework for the treatment of all children and creates a stronger global commitment to safeguarding their rights. However, we find that children all over the world continue to face deprivations in their everyday lives.

## **Denial of their basic right to education**

Many refugee camps and camps for internally displaced people do not have the facilities and resources for education. For example, in Aceh, parents in the internally displaced camps spoke of difficulties in sending their children to school as the schools are far away from their camps. These parents have no means of transportation nor can they afford one to send their children to those schools.

The families, still living in tents a year after the tsunami, are not likely to move from their camps into permanent housing anytime soon because delayed aid money has scuttled re-building projects. With already one year of school missed, these children are likely to miss more if conditions do not improve, seriously affecting their ability to catch up with peers of the same age.

Securing an education for their children is one concrete way in which refugees can prepare for the future. The UNHCR has made education of refugee children one of its main priorities. It has sponsored schools in various refugee camps under its charge and worked with other agencies to provide education for refugee children elsewhere.

However, of the 27 million children uprooted from their homes, the UNHCR and its partners have only been able to reach out to 10 million of them, leaving more than half of the rest uncared for, their education and their future uncertain. Of those who do have access to formal education, most are only enrolled at primary levels.

The Foundation for Refugees Education Trust (RET) reported that only six percent of refugee students are enrolled in secondary education and for the internally displaced youths, the percentage is even lower. The girls, more than the boys, are likely to “drop out” of schools at higher levels, leaving a gender imbalance. Part of the reason for this is the families’ fear for their daughters’ safety as there have been reports of sexual exploitation of students by teachers.

### **The Value of Education**

Singaporeans know best the value of education in building futures and stabilizing communities. Research confirms that basic education is a cost-effective investment that helps stabilize economies by supporting the creation of literate, self-reliant societies. A UNESCO survey showed that countries with an adult literacy rate of about 40% averaged a \$210 GNP per capita while in countries with literacy rates of 80 %, the GNP per capita was \$1000 and above.

### **A Helping Hand**

“To reach out with one’s own hand to touch someone halfway across the world is as noble a cause as any worth doing,” said Dr. Muhammad Kabir, Chancellor of Gandhara University, Peshawar, Pakistan. This is precisely what we should do; to reach out a hand to these children who are in need of our help. There are ways for us to help support the effort of those organizations and individuals who are providing the means of education to these children.

For example, donations can be made to bodies such as the UNHCR and UNICEF who are helping these children. A more direct approach is also possible, for example the West

Coast CCC sponsored the building of schools recently in Aceh through their Coast2Coast project which was commended by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in his recent National Day Rally Speech. Youths and volunteers, such as teachers, can lend their services to such direct projects. Public education of our children on the plight of their peers should also be considered. In this area, UNHCR offers some materials to be presented in schools on their website. There are also schemes where our children can correspond with the refugee children through letter writing. This type of programmes will allow our children to understand and be sensitive to the situations their peers are in.

As we celebrate all the wonderful things we take for granted everyday on this special occasion dedicated to children, let us take a moment to walk in the shoes of the tsunami victims in Aceh, earthquake survivors in Balakot, Pakistan, war-weary youngsters in Lebanon and Afghanistan, stricken and malnourished children in strife-torn Sudan, and many others who need our help and deserve to be remembered in our prayers.