



The World Today

A CARIBBEAN REFUGE?

Ms. Tamara Brathwaite

Librarian , The UWI Graduate Institute of International Relations, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus.

Along with everything else transpiring in the region, a few international organizations are wielding their influence in a way that makes the Caribbean attractive not for the traditional fun-in-the-sun international visitor, but as a possible resettlement area for refugees.

A refugee flees his/her country of citizenship and crosses international borders because of environmental hazards, political persecution or civil unrest. They differ from economic immigrants – persons seeking employment - or even deportees, persons expelled by force for criminal infractions. There are 9 million refugees worldwide ... 9 million persons wanting to claim their own peace but are not afforded the opportunity to do so.

No person chooses to be a refugee, but for persons who are forced to become refugees, their rights are preserved in Article 14 (1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; *everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.* Additionally, the UN Convention on Refugees established in 1951, and its 1967 protocol define who is a refugee, states their rights and outlines the legal obligations of states with respect to the treatment of refugees. According to the Refugee Convention, a refugee is defined as someone who: *has a well founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; is outside of the country they belong or currently reside in, and; is unable or unwilling to return home for fear of persecution.*

International intervention

Within the last two years, the issue of migration and by extension legal and illegal migrants is being addressed. Several international organisations have realized that the legal framework within the Caribbean region is lacking and they have been engaged in strengthening the technical capacity with regard to entry, refugees and migration.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) established an office in Washington in 2001 and enhanced it in 2005 with a Caribbean Unit equipped with a Senior Legal Regional Officer. Along with other duties – like maintaining a network of UNHCR Honorary Liaisons, overseeing human rights violations and promoting refugee protection within this region – this office investigates the feasibility of the Caribbean region as an emerging resettlement area.

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Again in 2005, another international organisation, the International Organization of Migration (IOM) began talks with the government of Trinidad and Tobago with the aim of establishing an office with the mandate of upgrading ports of entry, engaging in institutional strengthening and supporting the legal and regulatory framework regarding migration. At the end of 2006 with an office established, the IOM offered training sessions to more than 100 immigration and law enforcement officers.

At the beginning of this month, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) signed a cooperation arrangement with CARICOM to ensure that member-states promote, ratify and implement major instruments in international humanitarian law. Refugee law applies to many Caribbean states which do not advertise that they are protectorates. Arguably, many countries in the Caribbean only became signatories to these legal documents within the past decade: all but four – Grenada, Guyana, Barbados and St Lucia - are yet to accede to the Convention. With the ICRC-CARICOM arrangement these four aforementioned states may not be on the list of non-signatories for much longer.

Global scenario

Since September 11 2001, there has been an increase in restrictive policies against asylum seekers in the developed world. For example, the US usually has a ceiling of 3500 from the region – mainly from Cuba – but in 2003 they only accepted 452. In addition, with the amalgamation of European States into the EU, refugee intake has collectively decreased and non-traditional refugee states are accepting or being prepared to accept asylum seekers. What then is to be done when conflict erupts in volatile areas around the world, where are innocent fleers to be placed?

Regional reality

Why not the Caribbean area? From inception, the region has been populated by ‘foreign’ nationals. We are a region characterized by cultural and linguistic diversity, considered to be a Zone of Peace. The climate is tolerable. Thus the opportunities for resettlement are probable. Caribbean States have comparatively high human development indices (Barbados, Bahamas, Cayman Islands), and relative economic stability (Trinidad and Tobago) and for some dwindling populations (Guyana, Montserrat) resettlement presents an opportunity to reframe a nation in a humanitarian way.

Some argue that resettling refugees impacts positively on a host community, increasing diversity, bringing aid from international organizations and a better standard of living for all spurred by refugee economic activity. Already there are several refugee communities in the region. The Hmong from South East Asia have been resettled and 2000 now live in French Guiana. Not to mention, 1000 refugees in Cuba and a quarter million stateless Haitians in the Dominican Republic; and those are the documented inhabitants. Certainly, for many countries in the Northern Caribbean, illegal immigration is problem: The Bahamas, The Cayman Islands, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Haiti, and Puerto Rico either as donors or recipients can attest to that.

All in all, one wonders what impact, if any, the combined efforts of UNHCR, IOM and ICRC would have on our fledgling states regarding resettlement of international refugees in the Caribbean region. Considering the foregoing and whatever historical evidence there is from previous migrant settlement, it's a question worth pondering.

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