

A *Race* to the BOTTOM

Which is worse—turning refugees away to face further persecution, violence, and possibly death or letting them enter a country and subjecting them to decades of deprivation and stultifying limbo? We could not decide either so we included both types of behavior in our Worst Places for Refugees list. In either case, countries across the globe are flouting international law and violating refugees' rights.

In 2007, we report that the total number of refugees in the world has increased to more than 14 million. Clearly, their mistreatment has not dissuaded refugees from fleeing horrors unimaginable to most of us. So why do countries adopt policies that are illegal, immoral, and ineffective? Perhaps their real purpose is to demonstrate that they will always treat refugees worse than their own people. Perhaps politicians and policy makers believe that their own hold on power will be more secure if their own population feels some privilege compared to refugees.

It is typically not productive to speculate about someone's motives so the *Survey* simply lays out the facts of refugees' plight and the facts are appalling.

*Police examine African migrants after they were intercepted at sea and brought to Los Cristianos, on Spain's Tenerife Island.
Credit: UNHCR/A.Rodriguez*

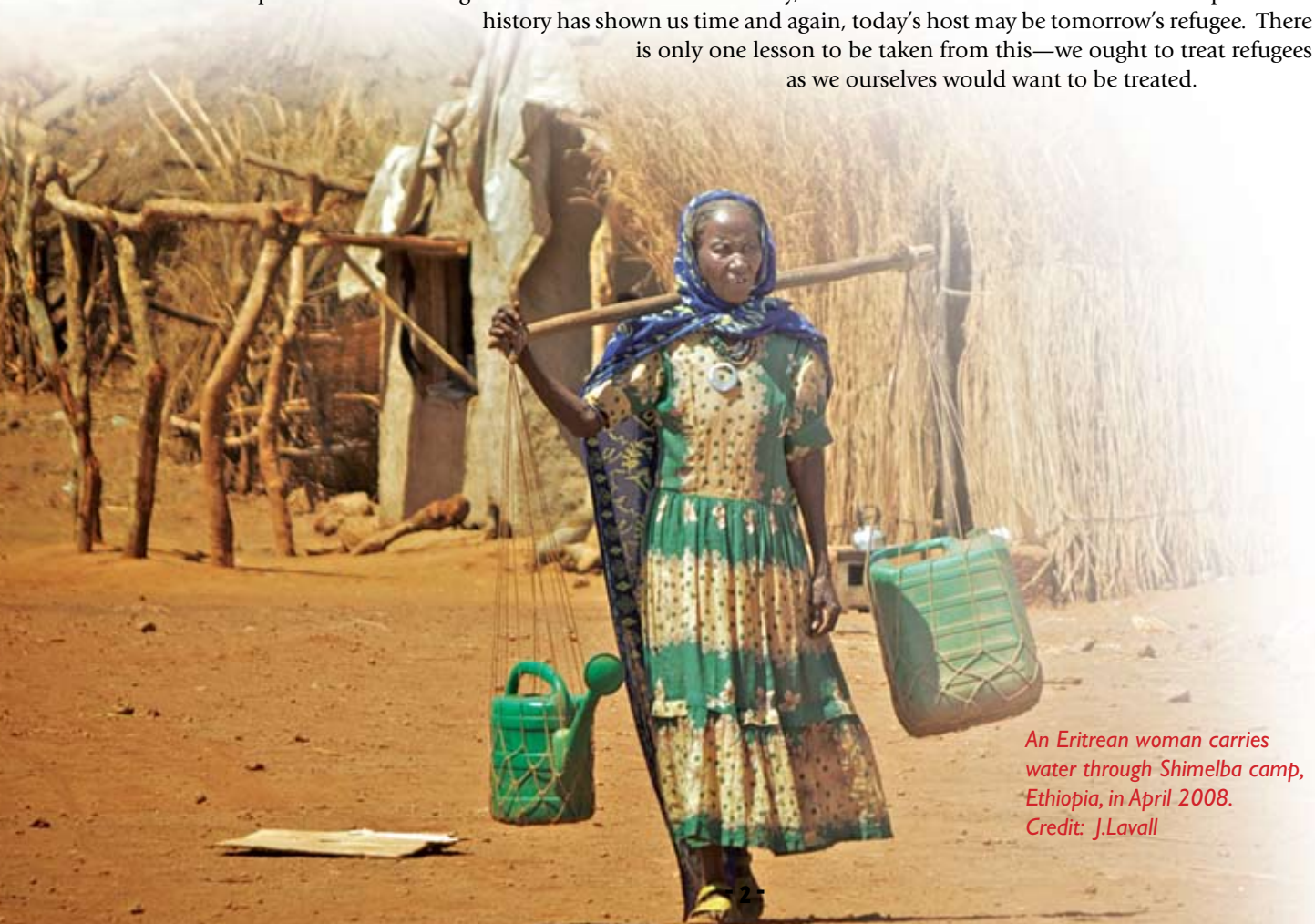


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The mistreatment of refugees is not limited to poor countries or undemocratic regimes. Wealthy industrial nations utilize policies designed to limit the number of refugees that enter their territory, explaining that they have limited resources, that refugees are unable to integrate, or that some other country had primary responsibility. Other countries claim national security reasons, ethnic and/or religious conflict, or a lack of tolerance from their own citizens. Clearly, some nations do not have the resources to care for refugees and must rely upon international assistance. Too often, this leads governments and international agencies to establish and maintain refugee camps that curtail refugees' freedom and self-reliance. No matter the rationale the result is the same—refugees are denied their rights under international law.

The largest refugee crisis of 2007 is the exodus of Iraqi refugees from the violence and instability of their homeland. To date, over 2 million refugees are scattered throughout Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, and many other countries in the region and beyond. Neither the Iraqi government nor the countries that comprise the coalition forces in Iraq have taken responsibility for the well-being of these refugees. While the Bush Administration and the United Kingdom are busy trying to win the war, they have provided no leadership toward ensuring the rights and well-being of the victims of this war. Europe, which for the most part warned of the dire humanitarian consequences of the war, has also done nothing to help the people they were so concerned about. Ironically, most of the refugees have found relative safety in Syria, a rogue nation according to this Administration, and Jordan, one of the United States' closest allies in the region. Of course, this is largely an accident of geography, but it also demonstrates that adoption of Western values or democracy does not determine the treatment of refugees.

Our analysis indicates that the treatment of refugees is usually based on geopolitical concerns and, possibly more importantly, on the perceived kinship between the refugees and the host communities. When refugees and their hosts look the same, speak the same language, share the same religion, or common cultural heritage, the hosts treat them more humanely and allow them to exercise more of their rights. When the refugees are historical enemies, have different racial characteristics, worship a different God, or come from very far away, the treatment becomes less and less humane. Perhaps this was understandable in years past, when foreigners were unusual. In today's shrinking world, where our very survival is dependent on our recognition of our common humanity, this behavior is anachronistic and unacceptable. As history has shown us time and again, today's host may be tomorrow's refugee. There is only one lesson to be taken from this—we ought to treat refugees as we ourselves would want to be treated.



An Eritrean woman carries water through Shimelba camp, Ethiopia, in April 2008. Credit: J.Lavall