

REPORT ON
THE WORKING GROUP ON REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT (WGRR)

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The Working Group on Refugee Resettlement (WGRR) was founded in 1985 to 'facilitate awareness of refugee needs, promote understanding of the impact of domestic law and practice on refugee relief, and to encourage direct services to refugees'.¹ WGRR works with Anglican and United Churches, as well private groups, in the Toronto area to achieve its objectives.

There are three main inter-related areas of activity through which WGRR seeks to accomplish its objectives: refugee sponsorship, advocacy, and resettlement.

Sponsorship

Many Canadian churches have signed 'Master Agreements' with the Federal Government, which enable them to sponsor refugees for resettlement in Canada. However, the process of determining which refugees are to be admitted into Canada rests ultimately in the hands of Canadian immigration authorities. They, and not the churches, have the power to decide which refugees are really in need of, and eligible for, resettlement in Canada. The churches only work to convince the appropriate immigration authorities (local and overseas) of the needs and eligibility of the refugees whom they wish to sponsor. Such work requires that the churches be adequately trained in understanding issues and problems about refugee sponsorship and resettlement in Canada.

WGRR coordinates the refugee works of the Anglican Diocese of

¹. From "The Working Group on Refugee Resettlement: New Partnerships" (Brochure).

Toronto and the Toronto Conference of the United Church of Canada. Many international humanitarian organizations such as Amnesty International, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and the International Red Cross often refer the most urgent cases of refugee resettlement problems to the WGRR. WGRR then determines the priority of the cases received, according to such criteria as the following:

- refugees who have exhausted all local protection and who are in immediate danger of being returned to their home countries where their lives are in jeopardy;
- refugees in the Political Prisoners and Oppressed Persons Designated Class (PPOPDC);
- refugees discriminated against, i. e. people with mental or physical disabilities, single parent families, families with many dependents or women at risk.²

Once priority cases are determined, WGRR forwards them to the participating congregations for sponsorship application. WGRR guides the churches throughout their sponsorship application processes.

Advocacy

The character of Canadian refugee policy and practice has a direct bearing on refugee relief efforts in Canada. For example, the enactment of the refugee backlog policy has had negative effects on domestic and international efforts in refugee resettlement in Canada. The WGRR advocates on behalf of churches and refugees by encouraging the adoption of just Canadian refugee laws and policies, and by seeking favourable changes in the

². From "Refugee Resettlement and the Canadian Churches" (WGRR's Information brochure), June 1991, p. 4.

existing ones. Furthermore, WGRR tries to effect a just and humane practice of Canadian refugee policies by educating and informing Canadian immigration authorities (local and overseas) about the real plight and situations confronting refugees. Usually, the Group organizes training and information sessions for Canadian visa officers around the world to enlighten them about the needs of refugees. Programs and speaking engagements are organized regularly to raise Canadian public awareness about refugee issues and problems.

Resettlement

The needs of refugees who are within Canadian borders must be addressed. The WGRR coordinates the resettlement works of the churches and other refugee service groups. With the enactment of the refugee backlog policy, refugee claimants who have come to Canada before 1989 have not yet had their cases heard, and this huge backlog refugee population is experiencing enormous economic, social, and psychological problems in Canada. Refugees in this category are not allowed to work in Canada, nor are they permitted to sponsor any of their relatives at home. WGRR is working with the churches in offering services to this class of refugees and the church-sponsored refugees in Canada.

Organizational

The WGRR is headed by an executive director assisted by one administrative assistant. There is one resource coordinator, a

board of ten volunteers, and fifteen non-Board volunteers. There are also three field placement students.

The Group is funded by the Anglican Diocese of Toronto and the Toronto Conference of the United Church of Canada. It also relies on grants and donations from concerned groups and individuals for funding.

Concluding Remarks

The task of catering to the needs of the world's most vulnerable population (refugees) requires patience, commitment, and resources. This is true especially when the political, economic, and natural conditions which generate this refugee phenomenon are continuously produced and reproduced within the context of unjust world and national systems. Whereas humanitarian organizations are making efforts to bring relief to refugees, the behaviour of nation-states in both the refugee-producing and receiving regions of the world is bent on negating these efforts. Ruthless dictatorships, openly and secretly armed by the "democratic" governments of the West, continue to abuse human rights in the "third world" and drive people out of their own geographic, social and cultural environments to seek asylum in other places.

The WGRR and other refugee relief organizations are confronting such a contradiction. For example, aggressive Canadian refugee policy and practice continues to frustrate much of the efforts of such organizations as the WGRR. Over the past seven

years of its operation, WGRR has seen many of its priority cases rejected by Canadian immigration authorities. The refugee backlog policy has led to an increment in the Group's workload in terms of the number of refugee claimants requesting for assistance. In spite of such constraints, however, WGRR has been able to achieve some success and remain active in refugee work over the years. A substantial number of its cases have been accepted, and the churches continue to provide sponsorships for these accepted refugees. If given the appropriate national environment of refugee policy, and the requisite resources, it seems that WGRR can achieve more.