

The persecuted should be protected

It is important to understand what forces people to flee from their countries of origin.

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In recent years, the subject of refugees has become a high profile political issue, one on which most people have a view. Unfortunately most of these views are based on misconceptions. I believe it is important to understand the reasons why people are forced to flee from their countries of origin before making judgements or assumptions.

After spending many years in exile, I understand what it means for those who are forced to flee from persecution and thus lose their land. But it's not only a piece of land they lose: they also lose their family, friends, relatives, society, culture and background.

My views on refugee issues are based on my personal experience, the experience of the people I work with and simple facts of life. To discuss these issues, it is important to understand international conflicts, civil wars, other forms of human rights violations and the political and economic problems facing those who flee from their country of origin. To understand the reasons why people flee, it is important to listen to people from different refugee-producing countries talking about their experiences. Only then will people realise how important the 1951 Geneva Convention is to those who are forced to flee their country.¹

The international community signed up to the Geneva Convention because of the crimes committed against so many innocent people during the Second World War. This Convention is as relevant today as it was then, because similar crimes are still being committed today against individuals and social, religious and political groups in many different countries just as they were more than 50 years ago. I strongly believe that as long as people are subjected to human rights abuses, this Convention is important and relevant because it is the only international framework that provides protection to those who are fleeing from persecution.

If we believe that the right to be free from persecution is a fundamental human right for every individual, then we should provide this right to everyone on this planet, regardless of his or her race, culture, religion or background.

If we want to stop or to slow the flow of refugees to the West, then we have to stop selling arms to countries with poor human rights records. More often than not, these weapons are used in internal oppression, burning villages and destroying people's lives and hopes for the future.

In Britain over the past decade, four different pieces of legislation governing asylum and immigration have been introduced.² Each time the government changes its policy, refugees are deprived still further of their liberty and dignity. Many of their rights and entitlements are either denied or restricted; these include their rights to legal advice and to appeals, provision of support, education, training and health care. In a civilised society, these rights are fundamental to human existence.

I believe that as long as we allow people to be persecuted, then we need an international law to protect them. If we can't protect people in their country of origin, then we need to provide them with protection and treat them with human dignity and respect in the country of refuge.

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¹ The 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention is the foundation of international protection of refugees. It defines a refugee as someone outside their own country unable or unwilling to return owing to a well founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. It sets out the kind of legal protection, other assistance and social rights a refugee should receive from the 141 states that are now party to the Convention. It was the first international agreement that spelled out a set of basic human rights that should be at least equivalent to freedoms enjoyed by foreign nationals living legally in a given country and, in many cases, those of citizens of that state. These include freedom of religion and movement, and the right to work, education and accessibility to travel documents. A key provision stipulates that refugees should not be returned to a country where they fear persecution. It also spells out people or groups of people who are not covered by the Convention. For more information, see www.unhcr.ch/1951convention/51qanda.html

² The 1993 Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act made provision for people claiming asylum in the UK and their dependants; amended the law concerning certain rights of appeal; and extended immigration legislation to transit passengers. The 1996 Asylum and Immigration Act removed benefit entitlement to in-country asylum applicants and restricted access to support. It introduced a special asylum detention regime, and the government began to disperse asylum seekers around the country. Under the 2002 Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act, anyone convicted of a crime carrying a sentence of more than two years can be excluded from refugee protection as a "danger to the community". It allowed the government to enact measures to segregate asylum seekers from the rest of society. Two other pieces of legislation affect asylum seekers and refugees. The 2000 Terrorism Act narrowed the definition of refugee and widened the exceptions to refugee status by reference to a broad definition of terrorism. The 2001 Anti-Terrorism Crime and Security Act granted the police and Home Office further powers of surveillance. It authorised the indefinite detention of non-UK citizens who are suspected to have "terrorist" links, but who cannot be safely returned to their own country.