

Refugees? Right to Communicate

The meeting: "Refugees and their Right to Communicate ? South Asian Perspectives" produced the following resolution:

1. The three-day Consultation, convened by WACC at United Theological College in Bangalore from 25 ? 27 October 2002, deliberated on the theme of "Refugees and their Right to Communicate ? South Asian Perspectives". The consultation discussed various experiences of protection of refugees in the region, their powerlessness and the absence of their right to communicate, and the torture, brutalities and indignities suffered by women refugees who form the majority of the refugee population. The consultation also took note of the bias in reporting of news related to refugees in the mainstream media, or the absence of any coverage there, the prison-like condition of many refugee camps. Further noted were and the general social, political and administrative tendencies to view the refugees either as a breeding ground for terrorism or as objects of pity, charity and welfare, who have to be taken care of and who are not supposed to have any voice in determining the framework intended to protect their human rights. A visit to the Hosur Sri Lankan refugee camp exposed participants to some of the constraints faced by refugees.

2. The consultation took note of the following major issues in the course of the discussion.

a) Refugee protection is both a humanitarian and human rights issue.

b) The ethics of care and the ethics of rights go together.

c) The right to communicate is a significant right of the refugee towards ensuring justice for them, and measures have to be taken by human rights, faith and humanitarian communities so that refugees gain the capacity to exercise their right to communicate.

d) Refugees have the right to inform and to be informed. This will also go a long way towards showing society that refugees are not reconciled to remaining victims but instead are demanding justice and becoming active to that end.

e) In the issue of right to communicate, the theme of access is important- such as access by the refugees to the judiciary, to the media and information resources.

f) A consistent programme of bringing to the notice of the media issues relating to refugees is necessary.

g) The human rights community, media practitioners and other concerned communities have to deliberate on alternate media and communication practices, given the fact that news relating to human rights violations reach the audience of the mainstream media only through several stages of filters. Such alternative practices call for programmes of training and awareness relating to issues of justice to the refugees, in particular women and other vulnerable people.

h) An alert mechanism that includes early warning reporting systems is necessary to strengthen the field of communication relating to the rights of the refugees.

i) A periodic media audit on refugees in South Asia will be a significant step.

3) On the basis of these discussions, the consultation proposes the following initiatives:

a) A short duration intensive research program on media coverage of select cases of massive displacements in acute conflict situations. Such a programme will help the spread of media literacy.

b) A media workshop for refugee activists, human rights activists working with refugees and media practitioners. Such a workshop will also familiarise them with similar communication practices by refugees elsewhere.

c) A legal literacy and assistance centre for refugees is needed. Such a centre can build a compendium of judicial decisions and case laws in South Asia, particularly India, where such decisions have been most in number.

4. The consultation urges the participants to find ways of realising these initiatives. It also urges WACC to send this resolution to all international and national humanitarian and human rights institutions including the UNHCR, and circulate it among members of the Human Rights and faith communities.

5. In the text of this resolution, "refugees" also means the victims of internal displacement.