

Governor-General's speech at UNHCR event

ADDRESS BY HER EXCELLENCY MS QUENTIN BRYCE AC

GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

ON THE OCCASION OF

THE WORLD REFUGEE DAY BREAKFAST & AUSTRALIA FOR UNHCR'S 10TH ANNIVERSARY (UNHCR, THE UN REFUGEE AGENCY)

THE WESTIN, SYDNEY

18 JUNE 2010

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm really delighted and honoured, as patron of Australia for UNHCR:

to join you here once again to share in the hopes and challenges of World Refugee Day,

to be a voice and presence with you in a worldwide movement that places human dignity, safety, freedom and rights at its centre,

and to celebrate your 10th birthday!

a decade of outstanding contribution by Australians to UNHCR's global humanitarian operations.

You are a fine and shining example of world citizenship at work.

You understand the universal resonance and influence of grassroots, local action.

You are teachers and leaders to me, to all Australians.

You show us how human fellowship, compassion and support can transform the lives of those who have been displaced from their homeland:

dispossessed of their sense of self and belonging through fear of persecution

victims of conflict and intolerance.

And you remind us of those millions who continue to suffer, and who need us to outstretch our arms, put up our hands for them.

I have been thinking a lot recently about the world's progress towards the 2015 Millennium Development Goals.

Yesterday I spoke with representatives of Care Australia about the huge amount of work to be done in developing nations to reverse the rates of maternal mortality – currently the goal with the poorest achievements.

And earlier in the week I spoke with conference delegates working on innovative solutions in the Asia-Pacific region that will ensure that Australian aid addresses the MDGs and sustains development.

While the MDGs don't explicitly deal with refugees, the extent to which they are achieved has a direct impact on refugees' plight:

while they are torn between two lives,

and on their capacity thereafter to recover and rebuild.

The programs to tackle:

poverty and hunger
malaria, HIV and AIDs
primary education
gender equity and women's empowerment
maternal and child health
environmental sustainability
and global partnerships for development

are each a reflection on a country's commitment to securing the fundamental elements of human life for its citizens.

And of course during conflict and unrest:

these are the very things that are often sacrificed, put on hold, or dispensed with,

individuals are denied their most basic human rights,

citizens become refugees,

they belong and then they don't.

For me, this is the heart of the story we're here to listen to.

The UNHCR has reported that there are more than 15 million refugees in the world today.

That's 15 million human stories of devastation, hardship, grief, and, for some, even triumph.

But in every one of them there is a single story we all understand – our universal human need:

to be part of a family and a community

to share meals around a table

to go to school

to have a job

to feel healthy, happy, safe and affirmed in what we do

and to have a future – to plan for and look forward to.

There are many experiences of refugees that wealth and stability and advantage almost preclude us from comprehending.

But I know that Australians understand the common human story, and can readily feel the desperation and loss when it unravels for another.

Your national theme this year is “Australians making a difference worldwide”.

It is what Australians do with their empathy – they make a difference in pragmatic, lasting ways.

I’ve seen it in East Timor, in Africa, in Afghanistan, and at home – fellow Australians working among the most marginalised and disadvantaged peoples, many of whom are refugees or newly settled Australians.

I note also that this year’s global theme for World Refugee Day is “Home” – indeed, “They took my Home but they can’t take my Future”.

Home and Future are concepts we all understand well, though we each have our own unique idea of what they look like and what they mean to us.

Their essence however is universal and it is what binds us – it allows us to reach out across borders and speak in one voice no matter our tongue.

Having lived and worked in a few different places over the last near seven decades, the idea of home calls up a range of images for me.

But there is a poem I know with the same title that describes them all:

May this house be a home
Where moods are mellow
Where laughter refreshes
Where friendships are nurtured
Where forbearance tempers anger
Where wisdom balances wit...
A dreaming place
A place of plenty
A haven of peace
A repository of memories
A maker of moments
A cocoon of contentment

A sanctuary.

Friends, no matter where we are on the planet, this is what we must strive for home to be – for ourselves and our fellow citizens.

Australians, today we remember our nation's place as a founding member of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

We remember our pledge to uphold the human rights of our world's displaced people.

Thank you, Australia for UNHCR, for your magnificent efforts in helping refugees in making their way to their new homes.

And thank you for mobilising support, awareness, and generosity in our communities.

You have been strong, consistent and effective advocates.

Happy Birthday Australia for UNHCR – a day to share with our world's refugees this Sunday – World Refugee Day.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your hospitality this morning.