



Expert Perspective: Lavinia Limón, President of USCRI, discusses refugee resettlement in the US



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In honor of World Refugee Day, observed annually on June 20th, Zunia talks to USCRI (U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants) about refugee resettlement in the United States, as well as the USCRI campaign against refugee warehousing. Lavinia Limón, USCRI President, offers solutions for international coordination of refugees' rights and talks about how recent unrest in the Middle East has caused states to reevaluate the methods they use to accommodate refugees.

Since 1911, the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) has been serving uprooted people, regardless of their nationality, race, ideology, or social group. They continue to provide tools and opportunities for self-sufficiency to refugees and immigrants nationwide, fight refugee warehousing around the world, and protect the rights of migrating children.

USCRI has been mobilizing people and communities across the country to support, volunteer, and donate on behalf of the refugees and immigrants in their neighborhoods.

Each year, thousands of refugees and immigrants rely on the support and cooperation of their communities to adjust to life in America, learn new skills, and eventually give back. USCRI's national network of field offices and partner agencies boasts a multi-lingual, multi-cultural staff and volunteers dedicated to offering language, housing, and career assistance to help newly arrived individuals and families.

Zunia: How can refugee resettlement in the United States be a smoother process? What are the obstacles that face refugees in the US today?

Limón: The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program provides refugees fleeing persecution in their homelands a chance to rebuild their lives in safety. Only a small portion of all refugees worldwide (less than half of one percent) will have the opportunity to be resettled. When refugees come to the United States, they are provided short-term financial assistance and expected to become economically self-sufficient within months of their arrival. This process could be made smoother by providing for a longer term of adjustment that would include more English classes, more orientation, more intensive case management, and more assistance in finding the appropriate job.

However, this would necessitate greater expenditures during the recession and is not likely to be a priority for lawmakers. But even with inadequate assistance, refugees contribute immeasurably to the communities in which they are resettled. They revive and energize their new neighborhoods. They start businesses, join churches, provide services and labor, buy homes, and are integral members of communities across the country. Some refugees face initial struggles with mastering the English language, learning how to navigate a new city, and overcoming past traumatic experiences. But within months, and with the support of resettlement agencies such as USCRI, most refugees are working, using public transportation, paying taxes, and otherwise contributing to their local communities.

Zunia: How can there be an internationally coordinated response to refugee rights? How does state sovereignty interfere with this coordination? What are solutions to creating a just response to refugees and asylum seekers?

Limón: Fundamentally, the international community must prioritize refugee rights to the point of doing everything in its power to not build refugee camps when a crisis arises and to encourage host countries to provide the legal protections refugees have under international law. USCRI believes that the U.S. government, as a world leader in refugee protection, could devote a substantial portion of refugee assistance funding to promote rights-based alternatives to forced encampment. These include offering community-hosting alternatives and reimbursing local educational, medical, and other institutions that serve both refugees and nationals in countries that respect refugee rights.

For example, Ethiopia has recently instituted an "Out of Camp" program that allows refugees to pursue education and move out of the camp and still be eligible for resettlement, if available. We were also heartened by Turkey's recent support of refugees by stating that "Turkey would not close its doors" to those fleeing the crisis in Syria. It has allowed Syrian refugees to cross to safety and provided medical treatment and other life-saving services. We are hoping that, if the crisis continues, the refugees will be allowed to work and move away from the border region where they are still in danger.

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Additionally, it is important for the international community, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), and governments to endorse the work of locally based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to strengthen civil society support for refugee rights in host countries through joint advocacy efforts with host and donor governments.

Zunia: How has the recent unrest in the Middle East changed the face of refugee relations in the region? How can this situation be ameliorated?

Limón: When millions of Iraqi refugees began fleeing into Jordan and Syria, it necessitated a rethinking of the traditional methods of responding to a refugee crisis. The humanitarian community was accustomed to providing services to refugees confined to one place, such as a refugee camp. However, Iraqis fled to more urban environments, seeking refuge in big cities in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. They were considered and treated as temporary neighbors because of the cultural norm of Arab hospitality. But, the UNHCR and other donor nations had to institute new ways of providing basic assistance, education, and medical treatment so they began providing cash through electronic debit cards and reimbursed the host governments for educational and medical expenditures. This is a good example of helping refugees without forcing them into camps.

However, none of the host countries (Syria, Jordan, or Lebanon) were required to allow Iraqi refugees the right to work in return for international assistance. This was particularly shortsighted, given the high educational level of the Iraqi refugees. Many are doctors, nurses, teachers, and professors and could be contributing to the host country's people and economy. Now, with the unrest in the Middle East, not only do we fear for the safety of the new wave of refugees but also for the already traumatized Iraqis who may have to flee once again. Furthermore, we are concerned that the international community is losing its ability to protect refugees in the region.

But, we are heartened by the actions of Tunisia, a shining example of welcoming Libyan refugees and providing the international community with access to these uprooted individuals and families.

Zunia: The USCRI has been leading efforts to end refugee warehousing for the past few years. Can you explain this issue in depth a little and describe the approach the USCRI has taken?

Limón: USCRI began the Refugee Warehousing Campaign in 2004 as a way to refocus the international community on refugee rights. Instead of viewing refugees as passive victims and recipients of humanitarian aid, we stood up to remind our friends and colleagues of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which guarantees the following fundamental rights to refugees: freedom of movement, the right to work, protection from refoulement (meaning forced repatriation), and access to education and healthcare. We want all refugees to be free to exercise their rights rather than warehoused in camps for 5, 10, and 20 years, or longer. These rights should be provided to refugees while they are in exile and not be contingent upon finding a "durable solution." Our campaign led to a greater focus on long-standing refugee crises, which our colleagues call "protracted" situations, and a push to enhance livelihoods initiatives and services to urban (non-encamped) refugees.

USCRI is also trying to highlight countries throughout the world that provide refugees their rights, like Ecuador, which includes refugee rights in its constitution, or Ethiopia, where last year Eritrean refugees were given the right to education in Ethiopian universities and freedom to live outside refugee camps. In addition, we opened an office in Thailand, staffed entirely by Thai nationals, to develop and implement a civil society campaign designed to encourage the government to respect the rights of refugees. We engaged business, labor, faith, government and student leaders to begin the discourse on Thai policy towards refugees. After several years the office "spun out" from USCRI and continues their work within Thai society.

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Lavinia Limón has more than 30 years of experience working on behalf of refugees and immigrants. Prior to joining USCRI in August of 2001, Ms. Limón was Director of the Center for the New American Community, a project of the National Immigration Forum. During the Clinton Administration, Ms. Limón served as the Director of the Office of Refugee Resettlement, Department of Health and Human Services, designing and implementing programs to assist newly arriving refugees in achieving economic and social self-sufficiency. She served simultaneously as the Director of the Office of Family Assistance for four years, helping to devise policies and strategies for implementing national welfare reform. Ms. Limón was previously the Executive Director of the International Institute of Los Angeles.

Added by [Purvi Sarup](#) on June 16, 2011

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