

to be a refugee

Yes, it certainly does take courage to be a refugee. It takes courage not to give up hope. Courage to make the most of the hand that has been dealt. Courage to start a new life against daunting odds, eventually to become contributing and enriching members of society once more.

There is no typical refugee. Every story is different, every loss is a personal one. But around the world different crises affect different groups. Some are almost settled. Other conflicts are new, with fresh refugee problems. And still others are shadowy, long-running guerrilla wars whose victims are often the ordinary people the revolutionaries claim to represent.

Portraits in courage

In this year's World Refugee Day awareness campaign, out of the roughly 17 million refugees under our protection, we profile five individuals from five different regions. Naturally, their names are not real. But the courage they typify most definitely is.

Ibrahim. Afghanistan

It seems that Ibrahim's family has always been suffering the fallout of war – the Soviet occupation, the Taliban excesses, the US-led intervention. Several years ago, the family fled their home in Kabul to escape the brutality of the Taliban, and after a horrendous winter journey, mostly on foot, across snow-covered passes and icy rivers, they arrived, starving, at a UNHCR camp in Pakistan. Several long years later, always dreaming of their home in Kabul, the family finally managed to return – to a house that's nothing more than a bombed-out shell. But though no longer young, Ibrahim is determined to rebuild the family home. With typical courage, determination, and the help of a UNHCR construction kit, this proud, now ex-refugee, no doubt will do just that.



A celebration of courage

World Refugee Day is a salute to the indomitable spirit and courage of the world's refugees, not just in enduring the dangers and violence of the crises that made them refugees, but also in the courage they show in rebuilding their lives and contributing to society in difficult or unfamiliar circumstances.

If you'd like to celebrate World Refugee Day, get in touch with your national, regional or community organization working to help refugees. And if you want to support the efforts of UNHCR workers, and show the refugees you care, log on to:

www.unhcr.ch/wrd

**World Refugee
Day**



20 June

courage

Attacked with machetes. Escape, barefoot, across the stony desert.

Surviving on roots and insects. Then, help. Water. Protection.

Now home is a tent. A daily handful of maize. And unquenchable hope.



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

World Refugee
Day



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It takes courage

Courage *n.* Mental or moral strength to venture, persevere and withstand danger, fear or difficulty. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary.*

As ordinary people living peaceful lives, we rarely have to put our courage to the test. Refugees are ordinary people, too, except that through no fault of their own, they find themselves in extraordinary circumstances. As such, they are often required to dig deep into their own inner sources of strength in order, as another dictionary puts it, to find “the ability to overcome fear.”

Initially, that fear may be the immediate one of trying to escape the horrors of war and persecution, the pain of losing homes and loved ones, and the ordeal of flight. Later comes the deeper anxiety of uncertainty—the worry of how to rebuild their lives, either in completely new circumstances, or back home where they now may not be welcome.

Maria. Colombia

Maria is seventeen, and already a widow. Last year members of an armed group rampaged through her remote village in Colombia, shot the men and torched the huts. Terrified, Maria ran into the dense forest, where she walked and hid for days. Exhausted and bleeding, with no identification papers, she stumbled into a friendly village and, eventually, found herself in the care of UNHCR at a facility in Bogotá. With their help, she was provided with proper documentation. Now, with her ordeal behind her, and armed with renewed hope and a basic education, Maria plans to start her young life all over again.

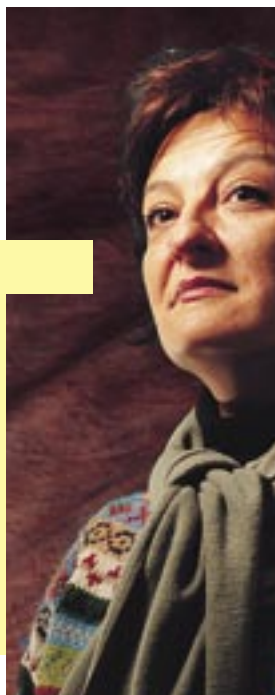


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Dr. Phu Hong. Vietnam

As a French-trained physician, Phu came under government suspicion. Fearing for his life, Phu decided the only way out was to flee by boat to Malaysia. In 1989, he joined a dozen other escapees in an open fishing boat. Twenty parched, sun-blistered days later, he and seven fellow survivors found themselves in the Sungei Besi camp near Kuala Lumpur. Eventually, with the help of UNHCR, Phu was resettled in Canada where, to re-qualify as a paediatrician, he first had to learn a new language, English. Phu also had to get used to the frigid Calgary winters, which to a Vietnamese brought up in the tropics, is no small matter.



Hana. Sarajevo

Still today, from the safety of her Gothenberg flat, Hana looks back at those terrible days with disbelief: how could the people next door, friends for generations, so suddenly and violently hate her? Why, after centuries of neighbourly cooperation, did the unspeakable evil of ethnic cleansing suddenly explode? Bombed out of her home during the siege of Sarajevo, Hana made her escape by sneaking through the enemy lines at night. After weeks of walking, she eventually became one of the 700,000 Balkan refugees in Western Europe. Accepted for asylum in Sweden in 1995, Hana today is a proud mother of two, a successful businesswoman, and deputy mayor of her district.



Gloria. Darfur, Sudan

Only six months ago Gloria was eking out a sparse but adequate living in the dusty Darfur region of western Sudan. Now she's managing on a handful of maize a day in a windblown tent in a UNHCR refugee camp on the Chadian border, waiting patiently for the day when she can return. It all started when militants rode into her village, shooting firearms and slashing with machetes. Feigning death, Gloria waited until nightfall before escaping into the desert. Walking for days, eating only insects and roots, stung by the incessant wind-blown sand, she was finally found by a UNHCR field team. Her ordeal was over at last. Now the horrors are behind her. But so is her old life, and she misses it. She lives in hope. One day, she will return. One day.

It takes courage to work for refugees too

In every crisis that involves refugees you'll find UNHCR staff right there on the ground. More often than not, their lives are in just as much danger, and sometimes those lives are lost. This is the story of Vincent Cochetel, then head of UNHCR's north Caucasus region, who for almost a year was threatened daily with death – and was lucky enough to survive.

It began one evening when Vincent opened his apartment door to three masked, heavily-armed gunmen, who burst in and forced him to his knees: "I was just waiting for the shot in the back of the neck," he recalls. Stuffed into a car boot for the next three days, it was the start of a horrendous 317-day kidnap nightmare. Throughout the ordeal he was regularly beaten, faced several mock executions, and was kept, manacled, in dark cellars – seeing daylight only once. An escape attempt backfired, and for the next nine months Vincent was kept handcuffed and chained to his bed by a meter-long cable, which allowed him exactly four steps: "I always dreamed of making that fifth step" he later recalled.

Four days before he was dramatically rescued in a blizzard of gunfire by Russian special forces, four other hostages were brutally murdered. "Why," he wonders, "did I survive when others like me didn't?" But survive he did, and although his life was in terrorists' hands for over ten months, Vincent Cochetel returned to his humanitarian duties with UNHCR. His is indeed an extraordinary story of courage.