

Refugee Week

People like us

Juliet Morton writes about World Refugee Day and the UN International Day in Support of the Victims of Torture

The United Nations International Day in Support of the Victims of Torture is on 26 June. What is known is that there is a significant relationship between being a refugee and the likelihood of having been tortured. A high proportion of refugees and asylum seekers have been tortured and are left coping with lifelong physical and mental scars, no matter where they finally end up living. The US Center for Victims of Torture has estimated that, of the refugees reaching the US, at least forty-four per cent had been tortured. In the UK the Freedom from Torture charity stresses that many Syrian refugees in this country may be survivors of torture.

The number of people fleeing homes and country seeking safety from war and violence is so large it is hard to imagine. Statistics from the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) indicate that in 2015 sixty-five million people were displaced, mostly from Syria, although a significant number come from Africa. One of their graphs tries to indicate the scale of this by using minutes as one measure. In 2014 for each minute that passed between twenty-five and thirty people were leaving behind the familiar to try to escape an appalling situation. Another estimate suggests that one person in every 113 was on the move, hoping to find safety. Meanwhile, the wars and the persecution rage on.

The suffering is immeasurable. Their journeys are long and arduous, and even as they trek some refugees are raped, beaten, drowned or sold into slavery by those they are relying on to lead them to a safe haven. In 2015 the UK admitted 3.1 per cent of the first-time asylum applications made to EU countries. Between the start of October 2015 and the end of June 2016 2,646 Syrians had been resettled in the UK, mostly in the North, the West Midlands, Humberside, Yorkshire and Scotland. Home Office figures indicate that

refugees and asylum seekers are disproportionately sent to areas of poverty, putting great strain on those councils that have to provide for them. Admittance of children who are on their own has been derisory. State provision is woefully inadequate. Charities are stretched.

Refugees are people like us. They too have ties of love; they grieve for the loss of many who were close to them, and they grieve for their country. They want to find a 'new normality' and have a future. In UK towns and cities they often stand out because of their skin colour or clothing, which may draw unwanted, unfriendly attention to them. But they are just trying to build a meaningful life in a strange land. We can choose to extend a hospitable hand or we can ignore them.

What might Friends or a Meeting do? People who have been victims of torture are protected from being held in indefinite detention for immigration purposes by 'Rule 35' of the Home Office's detention centre rules. However, this is not rigorously applied. You could contact your MP and ask them to hold the Home Office to account regarding appropriate treatment of these people. The Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network (QARN) have useful information about this.

What can you do? What about finding out if there are any asylum seekers near you and inviting them for lunch at your Meeting house? What about inviting local churches and people of other faiths to a shared bread and cheese lunch with a collection for Freedom from Torture? What about a silent vigil? This is a time to be inventive!

Juliet is convenor to the Quaker Concern for the Abolition of Torture trustees.

Further information: www.qarn.org.uk