



CANADA'S PERIODICAL ON REFUGEES
REFUGEE

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RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION AND BEYOND

Religious Freedom On The Run

Kathryn Graham

According to Amnesty International "a new refugee is created every 21 seconds." Many of the world's 15 million asylum seekers flee their homes and countries to escape persecution because of their religious beliefs and practices. "It is estimated that over 75% of the world's population claim adherence to a religion and yet, 2.6 billion people are denied freedom of religion including one million religious prisoners."¹ These facts alone should draw particular attention to 'religious

freedom' as a human rights issue in need of greater public address.

Often, the question of 'religious persecution' is complex in terms of making a significant distinction between persons persecuted based on religion and other types of asylum seekers since the violence may be intertwined with issues of ethnicity race, nationality, political views and/or membership in a specific social group. Nonetheless, it is essential that human rights organizations

and foreign affairs departments not discriminate between groups of refugees based on their religious beliefs. The focus must be on confronting the problem itself. By campaigning against religious rights violations, issuing reports of abuse inflicted on explicit individuals and/or groups and helping to ensure protection for such displaced and vulnerable persons, the democratic mandate of moral and social responsibility is being fulfilled.

CONTENTS

Religious Persecution and Beyond: Religious Freedom On The Run Kathryn Graham.....	1
A Psychotherapist's Perspective on Victims of Religious Persecution:	
An Interview with Dr. Fern Waterman Kathryn Graham.....	3
The Bahá'ís Of Iran Margaret Bremner.....	6
The Importance Of Prioritizing The Issue of Religious Freedom Elizabeth Batha.....	11
Religious Persecution and Mass Displacements Pedro C. Moreno.....	13
Case Study: Mr. Gabriel Marshal Nylowa Yak James A. Rice.....	15
Restitution of Property and Religious Discrimination in Eastern Europe	
<i>Maria Riegger</i>	20
Security Issues and Refugees: Dilemmas, Crises, and Debates Frances T. Pilch	25
Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Britain: U.K. Immigration & Asylum Act, 1999	
<i>Anthony H. Richmond</i>	35

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The refugees based on religious persecution around the world are being forced to suffer unspeakable cruelties: displacement and disease, torture, rape, starvation and even death. Alexander Solzhenitsyn (a former target of Soviet persecution for practising freedom of expression and belief) wrote, "though it is impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, it is possible to constrain it within each person."² Whether academician or artist, religious cleric or laity, student or teacher, entrepreneur or politician, activism is the universal call to which we must all respond if we are to help those whose lives are being shattered and forced into exile. One refugee

named Renata (who fled the carnage in former Yugoslavia) made the sobering comment. "People are not chairs that can be moved around constantly."³ Lest we forget. Remember the persecuted! ■

NOTES

1. Figures taken from David B. Barrett, ed., *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Study of Churches and Religions in the Modern World AD 1900-2000* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1982).
2. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956. An Experiment in Literary Investigation* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), Vol. III, Part 5, Chapter 5, 105.
3. Quote taken from Amnesty International web site on *Refugee Issues*. □

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