

Keynote Address by Lavinia Limon:  
Inter-University Forced Migration Conference  
The Fletcher School, Tufts University  
February 11, 2005

Dean Steven Bosworth:

Thank you and welcome to the Fletcher school. I am pleased to participate in this event at this conference. As many of you know this is a cross-disciplinary institution and there is no better demonstration of that than this conference. This conference is an interdisciplinary attempt to approach these problems. It is very fitting that the Fletcher school host this conference. They have assembled a very blue ribbon group of individuals for this balance. As the ambassador of Kenya has already mentioned to me that you are a tough audience, and I would not expect any less from you. It is my pleasure to introduce Lavinia Limon. In the short time that we have had together, we have discovered a number of common experiences and common friends. She is quite clearly someone who has spent her life engaged in the topics and issues that you are addressing in this conference.

Lavinia Limon:

I appreciate the short introduction. I would like to thank Dr. Karen Jacobsen for inviting me. I would also like to thank Westy Egmont, for calling me last week.

In April of 2004 we published our annual report. The entire version is online at [www.refugees.org](http://www.refugees.org) and the survey is online as well as opportunities to donate, serve and volunteer in refugee work. Unlike the previous forty-two years we decided to dedicate the survey to a particular theme. In about an hour and a half we had fifty different themes—one of them was warehousing. We knew that people were spending much more time in camps, and that using the term warehousing will be offensive. We decided that the practice was more offensive than the term. Thirty years ago I started working on behalf of refugees, and we used to work for six month contracts. We never thought it was going to be a career. We never thought that there would be a body of academic work to talk about our career. Fortunately for me, and unfortunately for refugees, it has become a career.

We found that out of the 12 million refugees in the world 7 million are in camps for ten years or more. If you think about five years it's a long time and if you use the ten years it's even longer. Or if you don't believe us go to UNHCR, they say that there are thirty-eight protracted refugee situations and UNHCR estimates the average duration of camp stay has increased and 6-7 million people have been left without hope for ten years. Or more. The search for durable solutions for refugees has been a failure over the last years. You know that a "durable solution" describes the 3 options available to them: going home, resettlement in a third country, or being settled in a camp.

When we conducted a word search of the entire 1951 convention we found something surprising: the 1951 convention does not contain the word "camps." Who put people in camps? What was in your mind in 1951? Maybe it was Hitler, maybe Stalin. But certainly no civilized country would put people in camps. So then we searched for durable solutions. That wasn't there either. The 1951 convention states that people have the right to live a normal life: without restrictions. The right to work, education,

intellectual rights... These are rights while they are in exile. So what happened between 1951 and today?

And looking back is the struggle to give people their rights worth it? I hope so. Now two aspects of the convention have become customary international law: the right to first asylum and the right not to be returned to your home country against your will. And this is a great achievement and we should not forget this achievement even as we push for the next level of rights. Furthermore, international aid is admirable and is provided by compassionate caring individuals. But despite medical treatment, schooling, refugees in camps have no rights and no future.

In refugee camps there is little protection from attacks, disease, many do not have proper shelter. Trading your rights for protection is a bad bargain. So those refugees who chose not to avail themselves of protection become migrant workers, urban refugees, or constant movers they open themselves to further exploitation because they do not have protection. Since discussing these problems we have received support from other experts and notable authorities who join us in condemning warehousing. Even the UNHCR, if in the hallways and not in the official meetings, agree with us. So everyone agrees that this is a bad thing and that is where it stands. We are trying to push this to the next level. But people say, could it be that you are a little naïve? You need to come up with the nuts and bolts answers. What about host countries? How should they shoulder the burden of refugees? What about security? If refugees get all these rights there will be more refugees, a pull factor that will bring more refugees in? How will you protect refugees if you just allow them into the general population?

We are talking about rights. By this we mean that should an approach fail we cannot just give up and say “well refugees don’t get their rights.” How do we create a policy environment conducive to refugees and their rights? Why should host countries shoulder the burden? We know that donor countries provide millions of dollars to warehouse refugees. What if they reimbursed host-countries for sheltering refugees? If the refugees leave, host-countries won’t get any money. So, everyone has agreed that refugee protection is an international responsibility and should not fall just on those nations that border countries with refugee populations. The basic idea is not to make per capita donation for refugees but a per rata for host countries so that they can provide for refugees as well as their own citizens. In a given country you establish the cost for daily attendance of refugee children at school and then pay them a rate per child. This would be the minimum commitment from donor community, because other supports are necessary and desirable.

However, we cannot simply assume that refugees exercising their rights will have negative economic impacts. Refugees can work. They are consumers, and part of the economy—they generate costs and benefits just like you and I. We know that these are not magic bullets that will solve all of our problems: money will not solve all of our problems. The vastly larger cost of keeping people dependent on aid for generations, if not decades, in camps must be compared to the costs of refugees enjoying their rights in their host country. In addition, we must consider the lost potential of refugees who are prohibited from engaging in their host society.

Let us turn to security. Even before 9/11 security often trumped the well being of refugees. We know that it’s real. The first step for both refugee assistance and host country is to identify and register and monitor refugee flows and screen dangerous

elements. With secure identity cards, refugees like other citizens would be accountable and if they were stopped for committing a crime they would be arrested. We are not convinced that keeping refugees in camp is really the safe thing to do. We believe that refugees can be allowed to move about like regular citizens.

So what about pull factor? Will thousands of refugees come flooding over the border? No one has ever tried this. No one has ever given the refugee their rights to the extent that other refugees have decided to go to the host country. Clearly treating people badly in order to keep them from arriving—does not work. In fact it amounts to a form of persecution. We have an example of this in the United States. We treat Haitians really badly. Then we send them home to get the message across. But it doesn't have much effect. What about relations in the host country? We know that the most favorable examples of host community relations have occurred when people share a similar religion and culture but where they don't share similar cultures there are some things to consider. Parallel aid streams can often jeopardize the relations between refugees and local communities.

[Story about Fort Dix in Southern New Jersey and free ice cream.]

When we look at this fear of exacerbating we think that politicians might be examining this as a pretext for not giving refugees their full rights. In most of these situations when we do public polling we find that public opinion is much broader than we might think. But the animosity is real. We know that public education, appeals to compassion and mercy can make a difference. As well as political leadership. Is there political leadership there to help shape public opinion? Often we find that it is the opposite.

Finally, the question of how to protect refugees if they are dispersed willy-nilly? No group requires that people are put in camps in order to see if their rights are being protected. We feel that UNHCR could adopt these kinds of mechanisms to protect refugees without putting them in camps. We know that the best solution is when refugees have their rights, and host and donor nations work to ensure those rights and their protection. We know that warehousing of refugees is illegal, and immoral and contributes to the lack of human rights and the lack of economic opportunities. We ask that you examine current politics and practice so that we can address the warehousing of refugees. Thank you.