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"Still knocking, as the doors close" in The
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August Roundtable: Introduction

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August Roundtable: Introduction

Abstract

An annotation of:

"Still knocking, as the doors close." The Economist. June 19, 2008.

Keywords

Human rights, Refugees, Responsibility, Displaced people

"Still knocking, as the doors close." *The Economist*. June 19, 2008.

An annotation

The plight of refugees remains one of the most pressing and contentious facing the international community today. Despite passage of international legal standards on the treatment and protection of refugees, many of those fleeing harm and persecution are increasingly greeted with hostility and discrimination upon arrival in "safe" foreign lands.

"After a welcome decline between 2001 and 2005, the number of refugees—in the classic sense of people forced to leave their countries because of war or persecution—rose in 2007 for the second straight year."

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) the increase in refugees is due in large part to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As stated in the 1951 Convention Relating the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, "refugees are those individuals fleeing from their home country due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership of a certain social group or political opinion." However, this definition does not account for individuals displaced by mounting international problems of natural disaster, economic instability, and food shortage. The UNHCR comments that if statistics on refugees were expanded to include these individuals, the numbers of fugitives would increase drastically. Here, questions arise over the established UNHCR definition of refugees, and the possible need for expansion of international norms.

"Many of the rich countries which might be able to help [refugees] are hardening their hearts, often under electoral pressure."

With growing numbers of refugees crossing their borders, wealthy and prosperous receiving states are often left with the unpopular task of sheltering and caring for these fugitives. Amid growing public unrest and hostility towards refugees, rights groups call for a shift in the perception and treatment of those fleeing their homelands. However, this raises important questions regarding the responsibility of the state to provide for and protect refugees. Also at issue for rights groups is the fact that in many instances, based on their country of origin, some refugees are detained under harsh conditions or even turned away. Thus, with the livelihoods of millions of fugitives at stake, it is essential for states to re-examine not only the plight of refugees, but more importantly their treatment upon arrival in another country.

These issues and others are considered in this month's Roundtable.