

THE SALVATION ARMY

INTERNATIONAL POSITIONAL STATEMENT

REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

STATEMENT OF POSITION

The Salvation Army is gravely concerned for the needs of the millions of people who are refugees and asylum seekers. People are fleeing their homes and countries because of a well-founded fear of persecution. Many of these people have experienced significant grief and trauma, which have potential long-term consequences for their health and well-being.¹

The Salvation Army recognises that the ability to seek asylum is a basic human right², with all people having the right to life, liberty and security of person. The Salvation Army supports international efforts to eliminate persecution and displacement through the promotion of peace, tolerance, understanding and respect for human life and dignity.

God's hospitable loving concern for the stranger and foreigner are evident in Scripture and therefore, The Salvation Army contends that individuals and governments should act compassionately and humanely towards persons seeking asylum.

The Salvation Army condemns the actions of people smugglers, human traffickers and others who would seek to gain from the plight of refugees and asylum seekers. The Salvation Army recognises the responsibilities of sovereign nations to control their borders but believes there is also a duty to care for refugees and asylum seekers. Therefore, nations working together to address the dire needs of asylum seekers is critical.

The Salvation Army holds that both asylum seekers and refugees should be offered assistance to settle and become contributing members of society as quickly as possible.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Throughout history, humankind has experienced people fleeing their country and seeking asylum internationally. Globally, there are now millions of refugees and asylum seekers.³ In some nations, war has resulted in a mass exit of people fearing for their lives. Many refugees have experienced threats to their lives, violence and/or other forms of persecution relating to their ethnicity, religion, gender,

¹ The Salvation Army acknowledges the global issue of mass migration for many other reasons – for example, economic reasons. This statement focuses on concerns for refugees and asylum seekers.

² Asylum seekers are often distinguished from refugees, the term 'refugee' being reserved for those whose applications for asylum have been considered and granted (see the United Nations 1951 Convention on Refugees and 1967 Protocol).

³ The number of refugees of concern to UNHCR reached an estimated 14.4 million refugees at the end of 2014. There were more than 1.8 million asylum seekers (<http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c137.html>).

sexuality or social status. In this global environment, persecuted people are vulnerable to people smuggling, human trafficking and dangerous risk-taking.

Nations feel the pressure of meeting the immediate needs of people seeking asylum, particularly when persecution or war leads to their arrival in large numbers. Some in the host nations may be hostile towards refugees. Legitimising asylum seekers' claims for refugee status and settling them permanently is a complex but vital process.

People who arrive in countries that are signatory to the 1951 Convention, regardless of their method of arrival, are entitled to seek refugee protection. Refugee status applications are processed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or a government that is a signatory to the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention. Asylum seekers are people whose claims for refugee status have not yet been determined. Asylum seekers must be outside their country of origin in order to lodge an application for protection.

The 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (and its 1967 Protocol) defines a refugee as: 'Any person who, ... owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.' The protections granted to refugees include the right not to be expelled, and the rights to work, housing, education, public assistance, freedom of movement and freedom of religion.

There is a particular plight for people who are stranded in transit countries. This is especially the case when the transit countries are not signatories to the 1951 convention.

GROUNDINGS FOR THE POSITION OF THE SALVATION ARMY

The Salvation Army believes human life is created in the image of God and is a gift to be cherished, nurtured and redeemed.⁴ The sanctity of human life means we treat all people with dignity. Dignity is neither conferred nor withheld by citizenship, human choice or plight; it is inherent in every person.

In Scripture, God is revealed as love and compassion – a love and compassion that extends to all people and includes special provision for the foreigner and those whose circumstances leave them in need of the care of strangers.⁵

God who was refuge, shelter, provider and comforter for the people of ancient Israel, makes it clear that his people are to remember their flight to freedom and safety and extend a welcome to others in their time of need: '[God] defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing

⁴ Genesis 1:27.

⁵ Exodus 23:9, Leviticus 19:9-10, Numbers 35:15, Psalm 146:9, Matthew 22:34-40, Matthew 25:31-46, Luke 10:30-37, Hebrews 13:1-3. The Bible describes God himself as a refuge: Ruth 2:12, 2 Samuel 22:3 and 31, Psalm 5:11, Psalm 16:1, Psalm 17:7, Psalm 31:1-4, Psalm 34:8, Psalm 36:7, Psalm 46:1, Psalm 62:8, Psalm 91:2, Psalm 144:2, Nahum 1:7.

among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.⁶

Not only are foreigners to be the subject of compassion and special provision, they are to be welcomed as neighbours. The ancient nation of Israel was left in no doubt that divine law required them to love their neighbour as one of their own, even if their neighbour happened to come from a different background, culture or religion.⁷ Jesus Christ taught we should love God and love our neighbour.⁸ The infant Jesus was a refugee fleeing a violent tyrant and throughout his life he sought to love and welcome all. He commended those who welcome strangers.⁹ Obedient to the example and teaching of Jesus, the Church has called Christians to generous hospitality.¹⁰ It is a foundational principle of our shared life.

PRACTICAL RESPONSES

1. Inspired by the love of God for all humanity, The Salvation Army calls Salvationists to respond to the needs of asylum seekers and refugees. Acceptance, assistance and advocacy should be offered without discrimination.
2. Since its founding, The Salvation Army has sought to alleviate human suffering without discrimination. The Salvation Army works internationally to meet the needs of displaced persons by providing food, shelter and counselling, and attending to many other basic needs. The Salvation Army will intentionally organise and implement appropriate responses to refugees and asylum seekers.
3. The Salvation Army advocates for the development of proactive and compassionate policies in relation to all asylum seekers and refugees. It is imperative that domestic legislation ensures humane standards of treatment and conditions for asylum seekers and refugees in line with relevant international conventions.
4. The Salvation Army is concerned about delays in assessing the claims of asylum seekers for refugee protection. The claims of asylum seekers should be processed expeditiously; access to legal assistance, health care, education and recreational facilities should be available, the integrity of family units maintained, and special protection and schooling provided for children.
5. The Salvation Army opposes the detention of people seeking asylum, and calls for the use of alternatives wherever possible. Where detention is unavoidable, asylum seekers should not be detained for any longer than the shortest required period necessary to carry out identity, health and security checks.
6. The Salvation Army will engage asylum seekers and refugees without judgement, oppose their stigmatisation and encourage its people, as well as members of society at large, to welcome them.
7. The Salvation Army will take an active role in meeting with members of government and international organisations as a form of peaceful advocacy for refugees. It will seek to influence government to ensure the relevant international conventions are upheld. It will proactively advocate for the development of legislation that ensures that those who seek asylum are met with compassion and given a high level of human security.

⁶ Deuteronomy 10:18-19 (NIV).

⁷ See Leviticus 19:33-34.

⁸ See Matthew 22:34-40.

⁹ Matthew 25:35-36.

¹⁰ For instance, Hebrews 13:2 (NIV): 'Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers.'

8. The Salvation Army will take an active role in the development of proactive, compassionate and human rights-focused policy and strategy that advocates for asylum seekers and refugees.
9. The Salvation Army aims to provide safe environments for those seeking asylum. Wherever possible, The Salvation Army will meet their immediate physical, emotional and spiritual needs. It will work with refugees to integrate them into society and its own fellowship.

REFERENCES

United Nations Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees:
<http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.html>

UNHCR Asylum-Seekers : <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c137.html>

UNHCR Figures at a Glance: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c11.html>

The Salvation Army International Positional Statement on Human Trafficking:
<http://www.salvationarmy.org/isjc/ipstrafficking>

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The views expressed in this international positional statement constitute the official position of The Salvation Army on the issue addressed, and they may not be modified or adapted in any way without the express written permission of International Headquarters.