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A Call for Change on World Refugee Day

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Over the past few years, in my role as national director at a papal agency that works with the Churches and People of the East, I have met many refugees and internally displaced people who made the hard decision to leave their country.

When I ask why they left their homes, their responses are varied. A Syrian mother explained to me how she didn't want her daughters to be raped. A woman in northern Ethiopia expressed how water had been scarce for a decade in her town due to environmental changes. A Ukrainian national shared with me their despair and expressed their resignation in these words: "Russia will never leave Ukraine alone." And from Iraq, I heard a Christian explain how their people had previously lived peacefully with Muslims, but now the fanatics have taken over, and their communities aren't welcome anymore.

Some of the people I have met now live in Canada. Most, however, have been forced out of their homes and are trying their best to survive the long journey to a better life. Sadly, some won't make it. They will die in the process: by boat, trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea, escaping the desert from central Africa, and some will be shot cold for leaving their country.

Making the decision to leave one's country to improve their lives or their children's lives is a big step. People everywhere have the same ambition: to have work and to contribute to the society in which they live. But when it becomes impossible, most feel compelled to leave. In the past 18 years, there are more migrants on the move each year. Statistics from the United Nations suggest there were 150 million migrants worldwide in 2000. In 2018, it has now reached an unprecedented 258 million with more than 22.5 million of them refugees.

As Pope Francis stated in his message on January 1, 2018:

"In order to find that peace, they [migrants] are willing to risk their lives on a journey that is often long and perilous, to endure hardships and suffering, and to encounter fences and walls built to keep them far from their goal. In a spirit of compassion, let us embrace all those fleeing from war and hunger, or forced by discrimination, persecution, poverty and environmental degradation to leave their homelands."

The migrant phenomenon has become one of the most pressing issues in the 21st century. Many countries are imploding, such as Syria, which is creating sudden massive movements. There is also a rise

in natural disasters, such as flooding or extreme drought, as well as an increase in poverty and ongoing violence with fanatical movements from the Middle East, India, Nigeria and so many more countries.

At CNEWA, we have been working tirelessly with the various Churches of the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and North East Africa to do our best to improve the lives of local people and to respond to the various movements of refugees. It is true that we are changing the lives of many and giving them a measure of hope, but the situation is so fragile that any economic recession or internal conflict can undo the progress we've made to date. Pope Francis is right. Peace is the only way forward to ensure that we care for the health of our planet and the people living on it. The migrants question won't be going away any time soon and countries like Canada will need to build a solid strategy on how to welcome, protect and integrate newcomers, and then we can share our example with the rest of the world.