

Addressing the Displacement Crisis

An Interview with Eric Schwartz, President, Refugees International

EDITORS' NOTE Eric Schwartz became President of Refugees International in June 2017, after serving a six-year term as Dean of the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota. He has had a three-decade career focused on international refugee, humanitarian, and human rights issues. Between 2009 and 2011, he served as U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration. In the 1990s, he was the senior human rights and humanitarian official at the National Security Council, managing humanitarian responses to crises in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. He also served as the UN Deputy Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery after the 2004 Asian Tsunami; as Washington Director of Asia Watch (now the Asia Division of Human Rights Watch) between 1986 and 1989; and Staff Consultant to the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs



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Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs (between 1989 and 1993), among other positions in the U.S. government, at the UN and in the nonprofit sector. He also served on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom between 2013 and 2016, ultimately in the position of Commissioner Vice Chair. Schwartz holds a BA degree with honors from the State University of New York at Binghamton, a Master of Public Affairs degree from the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs, and

a law degree from New York University School of Law.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF Refugees International (refugeesinternational.org) advocates for life-saving assistance, human rights, and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises. The organization does not accept any government or UN funding, ensuring

the independence and credibility of its work. Refugees International was started in 1979 as a citizens' movement to protect people fleeing Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Since then, it has expanded to become a globally focused advocacy organization and a leading voice for the rights of displaced people worldwide.

You joined Refugees International five years ago. What excited you about the opportunity and has it been what you expected?

I was excited about the opportunity to steward an organization deeply committed to support the more than 80 million people who are forcibly displaced from their homes around the world due to persecution and conflict, as well as millions more displaced each year by natural disasters exacerbated by climate change. These numbers include those who are forced to flee beyond the borders of their own countries, as well as those who are displaced internally. In a world in which governments are increasingly closing their borders to the former group – that is, refugees – the work has been very challenging, but also exciting and the challenges make our efforts more important than ever.

How do you define Refugees International's mission and purpose?

As reflected in our mission statement, "Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance, human rights, and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises." Through public reporting on country situations and advocacy with the media, and with public officials in the United States and around the world, we help to secure practices, funding and policies that improve the well-being and protect the rights of those forced to flee their countries of origin as well as others who are internally displaced within their countries. Our special role is based on the fact that we are the only globally oriented refugee and humanitarian organization that is exclusively focused on field reporting and advocacy on behalf of the well-being and the rights of forcibly displaced persons.

How has the work of Refugees International evolved and will you provide an overview of Refugees International's initiatives?

Over the past 2-3 years, RI has reported on a broad array of country conditions, from Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen in the Middle East, to Ethiopia and the countries of the Sahel in Africa,



Refugees International's Sabar Atrache (left) speaking with a Syrian activist in Turkey

to the crisis involving the millions of Venezuelans who have fled their country of origin and now are in other countries of South America and throughout the region and the world. We also have special programs on refugee women and girls and climate change and migration.

Will you discuss the impact of Refugees International's work and the keys to driving lasting change in these efforts?

The keys to driving change involve information and expertise, reflected in our reporting, combined with perseverance in effective advocacy on behalf of refugees. Effective advocacy involves both high-level engagement with senior government and UN officials, as well as efforts to build broader public support. To cite just one success: the United States is a critical provider of international refugee and humanitarian assistance worldwide, with annual support in recent years of about \$9 billion. Despite proposals in recent years to dramatically cut this assistance by one-third, RI's efforts, in conjunction with other groups, helped to ensure that U.S. overseas assistance during this critical period was sustained.

How did Refugees International adapt the way it works to address the challenges caused by the pandemic?

Even as we had to suspend travel (which now has recommenced), our reporting and advocacy continued pretty much at pre-pandemic levels, benefitting from the expertise of our team as well as their contacts and connections with counterparts around the world who provided us with critical information about conditions in their countries. In addition, we have been deeply involved in seeking to ensure that the tens of



RI Director of Government Relations and Policy Advisor Ann Hollingsworth talks with IDPs in Ethiopia

millions of displaced persons around the world are not deprived of the COVID-19 vaccine. We issued one of the first, if not the first, comprehensive reports on COVID-19 and the displaced, and our work on these issues continues. Moreover, we have sought to strengthen our relationships with locally-based groups in countries where we work.

What do you see as the keys to effective leadership and how do you describe your leadership style?

I think that expertise and good judgment, informed by knowledge and experience, are necessary conditions of effective leadership, but they are not sufficient. I also seek to model integrity – consistency of high purpose – as well as kindness and compassion in my dealings with my staff and with counterparts in the policy world. Finally, a capacity to clearly convey organizational and mission imperatives is also critically important. My style is informal and collaborative, perhaps with a thinly veiled sense of urgency about what we need to be achieving.

Did you always know that you were attracted to this type of work and that this was your passion?

I was always headed for a career in public life. In other words, I knew I'd be trying, in some way, shape, manner, or form, to make the world a better place. But I did not make this particular career choice – international humanitarian affairs, broadly speaking – until graduate school. I have been very fortunate in my career to have opportunities to work on these issues at the UN, in the U.S. Congress, at the White House and State Department, and in the NGO community.

How do you measure success of Refugees International's work and how important is it for the organization to take moments to celebrate the wins?

We measure success in many ways – legislation enacted, funds committed, programs established, successful diplomacy – resulting in enhanced rights and well-being for refugees and other forcibly displaced people, and occurring to some degree as a result of our efforts – often in coordination with other advocates. It is certainly appropriate to celebrate the wins, but with keen appreciation of the fact that there is always so much more to do. ●



RI's Daniel Sullivan (right) talking to a man in Malakal, South Sudan

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