Presentation to UU Service Committee Forum

By Roy Gutman

The statistics from UNCHR are staggering. 68 million refugees and internally displaced, and it’s growing by the hour. But please remember: each is a real person. Each could be you or me. Each has a story.

As a journalist I’ve long been drawn to refugees. It began in the 1990s, with the wars over the breakup of Yugoslavia. Journalists were not allowed at the scene. Serb authorities were conducting a campaign of terror, murder, rape, mass destruction, leading to population expulsion. What do you do when you hit a wall in covering a conflict? Find a way around it. Talking to refugees was my workaround. Their stories were dramatic: after all, who would flee their home, possessions, job, neighbors, even relatives except someone fleeing for his or her life.

The war in Bosnia had just begun when I met my first refugee in 1992.I was in a village on the Serbian side of the Drina river. The Bosnian state was under attack by the Serbian government, militias and Bosnian Serb militias. I wanted to find out what was happening on the ground. An elderly lady named Hasjnya Pevahad fled the town of Visegrad, crossed the Drina river into Serbia in her escape. She had witnessed the murder of her husband. Masked men had seized him as he returned from his overnight shift at a local factory. They shot him at the riverbank and threw his body into the river. She fled with hundreds who fled on buses thoughtfully arranged by the Serbian Red Cross. -- to be deported to Macedonia. She was in tears. “I didn’t bury him,” she said of her husband. “The river took him away.” How many others had been killed? She didn’t know. “If the river Drina could only speak, it would say how many dead were taken away.”

Her words summed up what really is behind the euphemism ethnic cleansing. Her expression was almost poetic.

Refugees told me the story of being pushed into cattle cars and deported from their homes in northern Bosnia. It was a journey of three or four days. It was from refugees that I learned of systematic rape as well.

In August 1992, I broke the story of a chain of concentrations camp in northern Bosnia, where men were taken, starved and killed. Refugees made that story possible. Here’s what Alija Lujinovic, a traffic engineer, told me about the Brcko camp: the preferred method of killing prisoners was to slit their throats and throw the bodies into the river. They would say they are feeding the fish, he said. In Omarska camp, a witness who called himself Meho spoke of similar killings. Guards would take 10 or 15 prisoners at a time to a nearby lake. “You’d hear a volley of rifles,” he said. “and they’d never come back.”

The story of the camps generated an international outcry. It had a result: in the glare of publicity and a precisely trained spotlight, the Serb authorities closed all the camps. Thousands of prisoners were freed.

Fast forward 20 years to 2012, I was in Turkey, covering the Middle East. My focus was on Syria. Why? It reminded me of Bosnia. Bosnia’s war was a case of war crimes nonstop, acts of terror that drove out the majority population. It was one immense, overarching war crime, masquerading as a war. And the same applies to Syria.

Journalists weren’t welcome in Syria. Indeed, in February 2012, the Syrian government deliberately targeted one of my colleagues, Marie Colvin, in Baba Amr, Homs. In August 2012, Austin Tice, a stringer with McClatchy newspapers was kidnaped, most probably by the regime, and has never been seen since. November 2012, freelancer Jim Foley was abducted in northern Syria; 20 months later, he was executed by ISIS. So journalists stopped going into Syria.

My first trip in Syria was in Feb 2013. I saw hospitals and mosques destroyed by government. bombing. And on the border with Turkey, I visited two immense IDP camps. These were tent cities.

When you go into tha camp for refugees or internally displaced, as so many of you know, it is an overwhelming, even bewildering experience. You look around for people to talk to. Sometimes people come looking for you. I’ll never forget the elderly man who stopped me on the main road into the Atma camp, it was at tent 13A. His name was Mohammad Abdullah Ramadan, age 90, farmed wheat and potatoes in nearby Taftanaz. He fled his home after a bombing raid in mid-January. “Airplanes destroyed our house,” he said. “I was at home. I had to be rescued from under the rubble.” He and his extended family of 30 arrived without any possessions.

He had a clear idea who was responsible for his plight: the Syrian government. “Bashar Assad does not have a government. He has a gang,” he told me. “They have killed people, raped women. They are a gang. They are making a war against us.”

He had stopped me was that he had a message for Americans. “God told the followers of Abraham that if two sides are fighting, a third should try to reconcile them,” he said. “As long as America has the greatest power on earth, it is the duty of America to stop the oppressors and help the oppressed. Until now we have seen nothing of America.” He said he couldn’t understand American inaction. “Russia is not stronger than America, but Russia is helping Assad.”

This is not just a story, but the story of a war crime, of countless war crimes, and the embitterment of the population. In a way he spoke for every one of the 20,000 people in this ill-equipped camp. Second, he had a sense of morality, of what had to be done. Finally, he had his geopolitics right. It was up to the United States to lead the world in stopping the travesty. And successive American administrations didn’t. But there’s more to the story.

I researched further. The Atma camp, with 20,000 IDPS in it, was an informal camp, funded by a charity started by a Syrian businessman. These were IDPs, so UNHCR saw no role. Nor did the U.N.’s special rapporteur for IDPs who hadn’t traveled to the regionbecause he was waiting for a Syrian government invitation. IDPs were thrown into the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, OCHA, a bureaucratic innovation that seemed incapable of doing anything but asking for money

When I asked, OCHA said the responsibility for the IDP camps was not the UN’s but either the Syrian government or its opposition. But when a government deliberately drives out its own population, and neighboring countries close their borders, doesn’t anyone in the UN take note and come up with a response? Who speaks for the IDPs? I asked. Here’s the answer from OCHA: “There is no spokesman for IDP issues as such.” “We will not comment on a situation we simply do not have direct access to or our own verified information.”

In other words, a shrug of the shoulders. “Not my responsibility”

But the UN’s avoidance of responsibility was much worse. The Assad regime blocked all humanitarian deliveries to places under siege – and there were at least 800,000 people under siege. But the UN was allowing the regime to edit its reports on humanitarian need, adjust the UN’s figures on those under siege; and the UN refused to disclose its methodology. Take Madaya, a town near the Lebanese border, where there was starvation; the UN didn’t even rate it as besieged.. Two quick point: the UN bureaucrats in Damascus played a role in this corruption of reporting, but the major powers who oversee UN agencies let it happen. It starts with the United States. Did anyone ever investigate what went on? Well they should and draw the lessons for the future. Second point; things have improved drastically with the appointment of Jan Egeland of Norway as special adviser to the UN special envoy.

Let me make a number of points now rather than continue with anecdotes.

1. First is to compare the situation in Bosnia and Syria. Syria has 10 times the population of Bosnia. It’s easily had 10 times the destruction, the expulsions, at least five times the number killed. But it’s getting 1/10 the attention of Bosnia. The war crimes that I wrote about in BH helped attract world attention, starting with the United States. Eventually, NATO intervened. In Syria, everyone seems to turn away. Unless Assad is using gas on his people, there’s no response. In Bosnia the U.S. agreed that the people have the right of self-defense and allowed Iran and others to send in arms. But in Syria, that self-defense has been denied to civilian and the rebels who defend them. In Syria, a major power, Russia, regularly bombs hospitals, schools, shelters, open defiance of international law. No one calls them on it, except, on occasion, Niki Haley and her colleagues here at the UN. The Bosnia war lasted 3-1/2 years; this one is double and there’s no end in sight.
2. Moreover, based on seven years of the regime’s assault on its own people, forcing 12 million people out of their homes, five million abroad, seven million internally displaced, we can say this is no accident. Assad and his allies, Russia and Iran, continued resorting to tactics the resulted in a mass expulsion. Look at the results: the outflow of refugees put enormous pressure on the European Union; it helped provoke Brexit. It helped lead to the rise of intolerant, nationalist polulist leaders in Eastern Europe – and the United States. The people who are suffering are primarily Sunni Arabs, who constitute 70 per cent of the population. The NATO commander Gen. Breedlove put this way way: Assad has weaponized refugees in an attempt to overwhelm Europe and severely strain the EU.
3. But it’s worse than that. Assad not only drove half his population from their homes but he stigmatized them in the process, so that countries taking in refugees would fear them as terrorists. I’ve been researching a documentary film for Frontline, and here is what I found. First, the Syrian uprising in 2011 was spontaneous and disorganized, but the people driving it sought to end dictatorial rule and move towards democracy. Assad labelled his political opponents terrorists. Then he linked up with three groups on the international terror lists: Hezbollah, the Kurdish PKK that have been fighting Turkey, and Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, the IRGC. He launched a war of terror against his own people. He released Islamic extremists from his political prisons, and when ISIS appeared on the scene, he did nothing to stop their expansion in Syria but in fact handed over cities, regions and weapons arsenals to them without a fight.
4. The reaction of western countries, starting with the U.S., has added to the disaster on the ground. The U.S. decided it would fight ISIS and ignore the fact it was getting active and passive support from the Assad regime. Syrian refugees, some of the most intelligent, educated and talented refugees I’ve ever met, were shunned by the U.S. out of fear they had a connection with terrorism. Twelve million Syrians were forced from their home. In the six months ending March 31, the United States has taken in 44 – less than one per cent of those admitted in the same period one year ago.
5. The journalism of covering wars and humanitarian catastrophes has declined. True, we’re not wanted. But few journalists searched for a workaround. look at the paucity of coverage of the expulsion of hundreds of thousands from Eastern Ghouta. That expulsion is a war crime. This alone makes it deserving of coverage.

If all of this is not bad enough, I have to tell you this is not over; indeed things can very possibly get worse. This quote from a report of the Holocaust Museum of March 15. “At a moment when we see an unprecedented risk of further atrocities, a moment when the world has turned away and that the crisis may be ending, we believe the worst might yet be to come for civilians in Syria.”

“Until now, Assad has won the narrative, casting millions of Syrians as terrorists and has and will continue to target them with atrocity crimes. There are few heroes but the Syrian people, who persevere. They are asking the world to please not abandon them.”

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-- April 6, 2018