

World Refugee Day – A Time to Reflect on Åland as Both a Host Society for Refugees and a Model for Preventing Displacement

On June 20th, World Refugee Day is observed around the world. On this day, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) draws attention to the plight of the 42 million people worldwide who have been forced to flee their homes and are now in need of protection. In 2008, Finland received 4035 asylum seekers as compared to 1505 in 2007, according to the Finnish Immigration Service. Of these 706 were unaccompanied children. Although more than two thirds of uprooted people in the world remain in developing countries, the global crisis of displacement is relevant to Åland and the work of the Åland Islands Peace Institute at a number of levels.

Perhaps most obviously, Åland has become a new home for some NUMBER refugees, most notably from Iran. The Peace Institute has been active in exploring the challenges and opportunities presented by the integration of refugees and other immigrants in the context of the established minority protection regime protecting the Swedish language and culture on Åland. The results of this research should be of interest not only locally but also in Helsinki and Brussels, where important decisions are now being taken related to the reception and treatment of asylum seekers throughout Europe. Finally, Åland is also an example of the type of conflict prevention and minority protection measures that can serve to preserve peace and avoid the vulnerability suffered by those uprooted from their homes and prevented from returning.

This year, UNHCR is asking us to look at the needs of displaced people in a time of economic uncertainty and to be mindful of our moral and legal duty towards those fleeing persecution who arrive at our shores. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres has noted that eighty percent of the world's refugees and the vast majority of other displaced persons are in developing nations that are now near the breaking point. International help is more crucial than ever, in the form of contributions to humanitarian agencies, burden-sharing by European countries, and development assistance that seeks to address the root causes of displacement. The Åland Islands Peace Institute welcomes this opportunity to reflect on the needs of the most vulnerable people among us, based on its insights at all levels - global, European and local.

Guest Researcher Rhodri C. Williams brings a global perspective to the issue of refugees through his work on so-called "internally displaced persons" (IDPs). IDPs are people who have been uprooted from their own homes by conflict and disasters but remain within their countries, unlike refugees, who seek shelter abroad. Internal displacement remains a severe problem in many parts of Europe where the Peace Institute has been engaged, and particularly those that experienced conflict at the end of the Cold War such as the Balkans and the South Caucasus. A vital question for the Peace Institute is the extent to which minority protection mechanisms such as that enjoyed by Åland within Finland can help to prevent and address such displacement.

More and more, asylum seekers arriving in Europe are detained in closed reception centres or other places of detention. As part of a team of researchers working for the Jesuit Refugee Service Europe, Researcher Alice Kennedy is analysing hundreds of interviews with refugees and asylum seekers in 23 European countries. The results, due to come out later this year, will be startling, with men, women and children across Europe being detained in prison like conditions with no idea of when they might be released.

Closer to home, Researcher Petra Granholm has investigated the legal framework for integration of immigrants on the Åland Islands. The special protection afforded to Åland's traditional Swedish-speaking minority can complicate integration on Åland, since it requires integrating new minorities into a well-protected old one. The issue is complex not only because Åland has special arrangements such as the right to domicile, but also because integration spans many fields. Within these fields, competence is often divided between the Finnish and the Ålandic parliaments. The Peace Institute is interested in exploring how to develop self-governance in a globalised world, where the international and local spheres are often deeply interdependent. Petra's overview is going to be released in the very

near future. This study is complemented by the work of sociologist Bogdan State who has spent several periods as guest researcher at the Åland Islands Peace Institute. He has previously examined the experiences and attitudes of migrants and refugees living on Åland and is currently finalizing a study on the attitudes and views of Ålanders with regard to migration and integration issues. This second study is due to be published in the autumn of 2009.

The Åland Islands Peace Institute is engaged in multiple ways in conflict prevention and management. The effect of conflicts, open or dormant, on voluntary or forced migration and the plight of refugees are well known since long ago. Such effects are particularly harsh on ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples and other marginalized groups. Their conditions should therefore form part of all efforts to engage in conflict situations.

The publications of and news from the Åland Islands Peace Institute are available at the website: www.peace.ax