

Review Essay

Unpacking World Refugee Day: Humanitarian Governance and Human Rights Practice?

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Summary: This review provides a contextual and critical account of World Refugee Day as it is staged by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Through a process of homogenizing and de-politicizing experiences, UNHCR's World Refugee Day celebrations recast refugee agency as an extension of the organizations humanitarian efforts. At the same time, these celebrations reflect UNHCR's struggle to navigate the tension between the ideal of global community and its own role in governing the increasingly strict spatial divisions between regions, nations and groups.

Keywords: Displacement, Global Governance, Humanitarianism, UNHCR, World Refugee Day

Introduction

For World Refugee Day, 20 June 2009, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) published the following news story written by UNHCR web editor Leo Dobbs on its homepage: “*World Refugee Day: The world pays tribute to refugees with a rich mix of events*” (Dobbs, 2009). Since 2001, World Refugee Day (WRD) has been celebrated on 20 June in refugee producing areas, receiving countries and resettlement countries across the globe. As a day of celebration for people “outside the national order of things” (Malkki, 1995), WRD is used by UNHCR both as a community-building effort, and as part of the organizations strategy to manage and re-territorialize the governance of displaced populations. “Refugee Day” has been observed in Africa since 20 June 1975 under the supervision of the Organization of African Unity (UNHCR 2009a). In solidarity with Africa, WRD was formally established by a UN resolution from December 2000 which determined that “from 2001, 20 June will be celebrated as World Refugee Day.”¹

So far, little academic attention has been directed at this event and the questions it raises about representation, legitimacy and governance. This review, which includes a paragraph-by-paragraph reading of *the World Pays Tribute*, has a dual objective: First, it seeks to provide a contextual account of WRD. Second, it takes *the World Pays Tribute* news story as a starting point for unpacking WRD as a governance discourse, using insights from the refugee studies literature. I suggest that as represented in *The World Pays Tribute*, WRD equals as a “national day” for displaced individuals inhabiting a UNHCR “surrogate state” with UNHCR’s “supra-citizens” at the helm. Through a process of homogenizing and de-politicizing experiences, WRD recasts refugee agency as an extension of UNHCR’s humanitarian efforts. Hence, I think there is a need to critically examine for whom it is that UNHCR attempts to imagine a global community.

¹ Resolution adopted by the General Assembly [on the report of the Third Committee (A/55/597)] 55/76. Fiftieth anniversary of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and World Refugee Day

Finally, I argue that a tension remains between the promise of WRD and the extra-democratic practices of UNHCR on the ground.

The Context

The emergence of WRD must be situated within the broader transformation of international humanitarian organizations. As international organizations have become ever more powerful actors in global governance ([Karns & Mingst, 2004](#)), the “thin legitimacy” of this governance (Peters et al., 2009), and attendant questions of accountability and democratic participation ([Alvarez, 2006](#)) have emerged as important topics. In what Ferguson (2006) aptly labels “the humanitarian emergency zone”, a global regulatory system now operates parallel to and across domestic state structures to respond to and administer a permanent condition of “crisis”. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the bureaucracies of humanitarian international organizations have grown enormously in numbers, size and scope. Initially by means of emergency relief operations and subsequently through long-term ‘care and maintenance’ programmes” organizations such as UNHCR have been transformed from humanitarian organizations to ones that share certain features of a state (Slaughter & Crisp, 2009).

Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s (and continuing into the present) serious questions were raised about the legitimacy, accountability and efficiency of these expanding bureaucracies ([Barnett & Finnemore, 2004](#)). Attempting to address these issues, Western governments, the UN and humanitarian organizations have worked towards institutional reform and ideological renewal emphasizing human rights, legalization, standardization, training, financing and coordination. During this period of renewal and reform, UNHCR has continued to grow exponentially: In 2009, UNHCR’s annual budget reached a record US\$2 billion, up from to US\$1.8 billion in 2008 (UNHCR, 2009b).

It is with this evolving form of global governance as backdrop we must understand the emergence of WRD. National days of celebration and commemoration are usually features of

states. Through its specific focus on “people of concern to UNHCR”, WRD differs from UN “holidays” focusing on institutions (United Nations Day, October 24)², sector issues such as public health (World Aids Day, December 1)³ or norms (Celebration of the Universal Declaration of Human Right, December 10). As one of the few academics having given this topic attention, in her recent analysis of the celebratory aspects of WRD in Malaysia Hedman examines the representation of UNHCR as the “solution” to the problem of displacement: She argues that WRD assumes significance for UNHCR as it struggles to (re)define and defend its international humanitarian role and mandate at a “critical juncture in world historical time.”(Hedman, 2009:287) Following Hedman, I use *The World Pays Tribute* as a prism for illuminating more general aspects of WRD as a governance discourse and a legitimacy building exercise.

WRD as Imagined Community

The World Pays Tribute depicts WRD as a global week-long festival encompassing activities such as photography exhibitions, film festivals, lectures, panel discussions, puppet shows, food bazaars, tree planting, fashion shows, concerts, sports competitions, quizzes, drawing and essay writing competitions, seminars, workshops, speeches, public awareness campaigns and poetry recitals. As noted in *The World Pays Tribute*, while UNHCR is the central protagonist, WRD festivities also include the participation of INGOs, NGOs, politicians, international celebrities and local dignitaries, as well as “[t]he refugees themselves”.

The first paragraph of *The World Pays Tribute* contains a snapshot of a breakfast for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, and local politicians, hosted by resettled refugees at an Ethiopian restaurant in Chicago. According to the storyline, the breakfast takes

² The entry into force of the United Nations Charter on 24 October 1945 has been celebrated as United Nations Day since 1948.

³ World AIDS day has been celebrated since 1988 as a day when “the world comes together to commemorate those who have died and to bring attention to the global AIDS epidemic.” (General Assembly resolution 43/15)

place “while millions of others also paid tribute this Saturday to the 42 million forcibly displaced people around the globe”. Guterres is quoted declaring that “World Refugee Day is about giving a wider audience a better understanding of what it means to be a refugee”. In addition to UNHCR’s stated intention to use WRD to raise awareness about displacement, I propose that WRD also serve an additional purpose: As noted by commentators, imageries of refugees frequently function as a site where Western ways of knowing are reproduced ([Malkki, 1996](#); [Hyndman, 2000](#); [Rajaram, 2002](#)). In the following, I argue that UNHCR’s own coverage attributes meaning to WRD by way of references to citizenship, community and history. At the same time, these references reinforce the imagery of UNHCR as a surrogate state.

Hyndman puts forward the idea that the international refugee regime is premised on a division between sub-citizens and supra-citizens ([Hyndman, 2000](#)). As sub-citizens, refugees and migrants must occupy certain subject positions in order to be heard or to gain legal status. This includes following scripts for eliciting compassion or admiration (as joyous grateful subjects). The drive towards homogenizing “victim” experiences of displacement during WRD is part of a general trend in international humanitarianism whereby universalized and standardized identities of suffering are established through personal testimony about international human rights violations ([Segall, 2002](#); [Colvin, 2004](#); [Sandvik, 2010](#)). In the quest to make gender and age visible, particular emphasis is given to the vulnerability - and by extension the innocence - of women and children ([Clark-Kazak, 2009](#)). Conversely, Hyndman’s “supra-citizens”, move effortlessly across countries and continents with their blue UN Laissez Faire passports. These supra-citizens belong to the larger group De Waal (1997) labels “the humanitarian international”, consisting of the staff of international relief agencies, academics, consultants, specialist journalists, lobbyists, “conflict resolution” specialists and human rights workers.

At the top of the page, *The World Pays Tribute* is hyperlinked to a You Tube broadcast, “*RefugeeDayLive: Aspirations of Refugee Students in Chad*” from Djabal refugee camp in Eastern Chad. *RefugeeDayLive* features two (Caucasian) UNHCR workers, male and female,

interviewing students at the *Obama School for coeducation* about their everyday life and future aspirations: Rahman, a tall teenager wearing a white t-shirt with the slogan “humanity before politics”, talks about his desire to learn English and to become president of the Sudan. Zam-Zam, a refugee girl donning a bright orange hijab, is then asked about the difficulties she faces in getting enough time for her homework; the expectation being that girls primary obligations are their domestic duties.⁴

As indicated by the introduction to *The World Pays Tribute*, António Guterres is a supra-citizen by the virtue of his office. The visit of the high commissioner to a refugee hosting country, frequently in the developing world, is usually one of the highlights of UNHCR’s global WRD celebrations: Verdirame & Harrell-Bond describe camp-visits by the high commissioners as “carefully staged events, which resembles visits of heads of states”, complete with music, speeches and gifts ([Verdirame & Harrell-Bond, 2005](#)). Next, *The World Pays Tribute* shifts the attention to one of the two individuals omnipresent to UNHCR’s WRD coverage since its inception: “[a]ward-winning American actress Angelina Jolie”. *The World Pays Tribute* quotes Jolie’s special public service announcement where she calls on people to remember refugees: “They deserve our respect. Please do not forget them.”

The symbiotic relationship between UNHCR and Jolie – one party lending humanitarian credibility, the other star power - began in 2001, when Jolie became a goodwill ambassador. Jolie’s ubiquitous presence in *all* of UNHCR’s WRD celebrations, both as participant and as a mainstay of global media coverage of WRD engender interesting questions about how UNHCR imagines its “global” audience. I suggest that her proven commitment notwithstanding, much of Jolie’s appeal as a humanitarian rests on her personal trajectory from a younger actress infamous for her outspokenness about a turbulent private life and sexual preferences, to her idolization as partner of Brad Pitt, the glamorous mother of six and a fêted Academy Award Winner. Jolie’s

⁴ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxLVrhChXDA&feature=player_embedded , last visited 18 February 2010.

personal and highly publicized transformation is a redemption narrative which mirrors the salvation motif of international humanitarianism, as a “transnational concern to help persons in exceptional distress” (Forsythe, 2006:234). While as a celebrity cult “Brangelina” has global name recognition, the imagined community (Anderson, 1983) UNHCR targets through the Jolie-WRD linkage is distinctly smaller. Bargaining for its own identity, the affiliation with Jolie provides UNHCR staff in the field and at the Geneva headquarters with a hint of glamour beneficial to the *esprit de corps*. Bargaining for donor funds and political support, UNHCR uses this WRD imagery to entice the policy makers, the private capital and the publics for whom redemption and salvation narratives carry particular cultural resonance.

The prose of *The World Pays Tribute* emphasizes the globalized, even cosmopolitan nature of WRD celebrations. According to the article, through advanced communication technology and social media, people and places are both participating and being interconnected. WRD 2010 has an entry on Wikipedia (with a photo of Angelina Jolie), and is listed as a cause on Facebook, where you can donate to the NGO *Refugees International*.⁵ UNHCR transmits WRD events using YouTube, Twitter, Flickr and MySpace. In 2009, for the first time, UNHCR arranged a live webcast from overseas operations, “linking refugees in Eastern Chad, internally displaced people in Colombia and UNHCR staff in Pakistan and Syria to the world.” Neatly parroting the transnational management of displaced bodies, refugees and global audiences engaged in transnationally mediated conversations, as “[v]iewers were able to put their questions to field staff and refugees through moderators in the United States.” Technology is, of course, deeply social, and the idea of deterritorialized cosmopolitanism signaled here obscures the unequal positioning of sub-citizens and supra-citizens. Criticizing the misleading notion of cosmopolitanism as universal accessibility, Calhoun (2008) points to the need to “take seriously the people whose lives are constituted and constrained by their ties to particular settings.” In the

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Refugee_Day (last visited April 6, 2010)

classification of migrants as forced (Rahman and Zam-Zam) or voluntary (Gutierrez and Jolie), the ability to move also signifies access to resources in globalized world.

Supplementing the imagery of an interconnected global community, *The World Pays Tribute* weaves the past into the narrative by explaining that “[i]t has become an annual tradition in some cities to light up historic buildings or monuments.”. The continuous work of inventing the “official” history of humanitarianism is not only premised on written text; the past is also encoded through visual images of humanitarian interventions which follow particular codes of representation based on de-politicization of context (Rajaram, 2002). According to *The World Pays Tribute*, the buildings that are lit up include the Colosseum in Rome, Canberra's old Parliament Building and the Jet d'Eau fountain in Geneva”. Drawing on the symbolism of UNHCR blue-colored emergency relief items, such as the omnipresent blue UNHCR plastic sheets, *The World Pays Tribute* notes that these buildings “were all bathed in UN blue”. In commemoration of the Russia-Georgia war that took place in August 2008, “[t]his year they were joined by the Monument of Mother Georgia in Tbilisi.” “Invented tradition” is a set of practices attempting to establish continuity with a suitable historic past (Hobsbawm, 1983) *The World Pays Tribute* forges a connection between the concept of “annual tradition”, the UN blue and the physical manifestations of a collective democratic heritage, new and old. By historicizing WRD, the storyline locates WRD in time beyond its 2001 inauguration and equips UNHCR’s governance project with a collective memory, real-time.

Hedman (2009) argues that in the Malaya context, WRD seems like a celebration of those concerned with humanitarian solutions, those already “converted”. In fact, the Malaysian celebration of the converted appears to be a universal feature of WRD celebrations as we learn from how *The World Pays Tribute* describes the global flow of events: “The annual tribute to refugees and other forcibly displaced people began in the Pacific Ocean on Saturday. As the sun wended its way westwards, more and more people and countries joined in the celebrations.” In Tokyo, UNHCR events at the United Nations University Building included a presentation about

the making of a popular TV series about a fictional UNHCR worker. Outside the building, a UNHCR family tent had been erected and UNHCR partners, including the government and humanitarian aid groups, helped spread awareness about refugee issues.

WRD as Imaginations of the Real

Every year, UNHCR selects an aspirational sounding global theme for WRD: In 2001, the theme was “respect”, in 2002 “refugee women”, in 2003 “refuge youth - building the future”, in 2004 “protection - A Place to Call Home Rebuilding Lives in Safety and Dignity”, in 2005 “Courage”. 2006: “Keeping the Flame of Hope Alive”; 2007: A new home and new life; 2008: “Protecting Refugees: Rebuilding Lives in Safety and Dignity”. The theme for 2009 was "Real People, Real Needs,", as UNHCR emphasized on the main WRD website that “refugees are individuals with real needs, just like you and me” (UNHCR, 2009c).

In selecting the annual WRD theme, UNHCR seeks to put a positive spin on refugee management by forging a linkage between its own humanitarian efforts and the agency of displaced individuals. This priority is reflected in the wording of *The World Pays Tribute*, particularly in the description of WRD-celebrations in current or recent conflict zones. Scholars have brought attention to how refugees are transformed into mute victims through “dehistoricizing universalism” (Malkki, 1996): War-affected societies become pathological (Pupavac, 2001), and refugees are placed in an eternal “sick-role” (Pupavac, 2006). While constituting an effort to move the text away from the “bare life” imagery so often found in depictions of refugees, *The World Pays Tribute* creates a fundamental slippage between displacement as construed through WRD-activities and the everyday lives of refugees, particularly in the Global South. Capturing this discrepancy, [Verdirame & Harrell-Bond \(2005\)](#) label as “utopian representations” the staging of refugee camps as “particularly joyful places” during events like WRD.

In *The World Pays Tribute* story, a photo of young female refugees from Burundi getting ready to dance at a WRD event in Nairobi is placed next to descriptions of a “Refugee Run” in Hong Kong. According to the text, “[t]he run gives those taking part a simulation of life as a refugee.” Here, running is construed as integral to the refugee experience, while simulation is seen as the key to unlock what it means to “be” a refugee. In the subsequent section, the use of simulation imbues the reader with a sense of hyper-reality: Observing that “[r]unning seemed to be a popular WRD event in South Asia”, the focus is shifted to a 10-kilometre mini marathon on the Jaffna Peninsula at the tip of northern Sri Lanka. After a decades-long civil war, the Tamil Tigers were defeated in mid-May 2009, with thousands of casualties. In June 2009, hundreds of thousands of internally displaced Tamils continued to languish in closed government camps under horrendous conditions. *The World Pays Tribute* duly observes that “[n]ot so long ago this was a war zone”, but during WRD, “locals and foreigners came to enjoy themselves and remember the displaced in a country with an estimated 550,000 internally displaced people...Locals gave runners water and cheered them on...Laughter filled the air after years of sorrow”.

In turning to Africa, *The World Pays Tribute* focuses on events in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. At an event organized in Goma, North Kivu, refugees and internally displaced people took part in traditional dances, outdoor theatre, poetry reading and speeches. The description of events is accompanied by a photo of a smiling dancing woman in traditional garb, with the caption “Groovin: A group of Rwandan refugee women get into the mood and dance at the World Refugee Day in Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo.” While UNHCR’s WRD coverage seems to tell a different kind of story about empowered refugees, there is something unsettling about the manner in which individuals in arguably desperate or dangerous situations are attributed agency: Not as agents in their own emancipation (the message is that UNHCR takes care of that) but as token participants performing for a world audience.

The Promise of WRD Seen from Below

The final paragraphs of *The World Pays Tribute* hints at some of the underlying tensions between UNHCR's governance project, and how the organizations refugee management practices play out on the ground. *The World Pays Tribute* lists activities in the Middle East as "dancing, football matches, a handicraft exhibition and a photo exhibition". It succinctly informs the reader that "[a] big tent was set up at the Al Waleed camp, where many Palestinians live. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis are internally displaced. UNHCR staff in Syria talked on the live webcast about their work helping some of the many Iraqi refugees in that country". Wrapping up its sweeping global account with a whirlwind tour of events in the wealthy part of the world, *The World Pays Tribute* reports that "[o]ver in Europe", there was football, art exhibitions visit by Princess Stephanie of Monaco and film festivals, as well as an online exhibition of cartoons dedicated to refugees, posted by 20 Belgian newspapers and magazines. Moving West, "[c]ountries in the Americas were just beginning to wake up when this article went to press." The planned itinerary included a football tournament in São Paulo, Brazil, featuring "three refugees (a Colombian, a Palestinian and a Congolese)", and more simulation, as WRD-participants in Toronto, Canada, were offered a "big programme of entertainment", including the option to "Walk a Mile in a Refugee's Shoes".

As global citizens, we are *all* assumed to be spectators, participants and rights holders. Pupavac (2006) suggests that the rights and well-being of refugees have best been realized when refugees are regarded as political subjects, and greeted as members of a political community. In its description of WRD-activities in the Middle East and in the Global North, *The World Pays Tribute* captures the unequal and hierarchical distribution of these competencies. By focusing on the "big tent" made available for WRD instead of asking why many Palestinians had nowhere else to go than the makeshift Al Waleed camp when forced to leave Bagdad in 2006, this local event can be seamlessly appropriated into the global humanitarian narrative of which WRD is an increasingly visible part. In the final paragraphs of this review, I want consider the rise of human

rights-based approaches and the move towards de-politicization in international refugee management, trends that seemingly pull in opposite directions.

Over the past decade, a vigorous debate about UNHCR's success or failure to take a genuine rights-based approach to refugee management has played out between academics, refugee activists and the UNHCR ([Kagan, 2006](#)). In her speech to the 50th session of the UN Commission on Human Rights in 1994, the high commissioner Sadako Ogata stated that "UNHCR today is very much an operational human rights organization, albeit for certain categories of people" (Kenny, 2000). Critics have suggested that assuming the mantle of a human rights actor has allowed UNHCR a more invasive role ([Chandler, 2001](#)). It has also been argued that the nature and organization of some of UNHCR's activities squares poorly with the material and procedural guarantees of the human rights framework: for example, in their analysis of refugee management in Kenya and Uganda, Verdirame & Harrell Bond (2005) claim that UNHCR imposed forced labor and supported gender-discriminatory dispute resolution mechanisms.

A way of prodding the correlation between refugee governance and human rights protection as it is conveyed by UNHCR's WRD message, is by considering the controversy surrounding UNHCR's refugee status determination (RSD) and encampment, or so-called "warehousing". UNHCR undertakes RSD operations where the state has not signed the 1951 convention and the protocol, or where it is unable to carry out RSD-procedures. For the past decade, academics and activists have been critical of the significant procedural gaps concerning UNHCR's RSD procedures, as well as the lack of *availability* of guidelines. Importantly, these operations *doubled* between 1997 and 2001. In 2007, UNHCR received applications from 75,088 individual asylum-seekers making it the largest refugee status decision-maker in the world (Kagan, 2007). Substantial criticism has also been directed at the warehousing of refugees, whereby refugees are confined to camps or segregated settlements where they are dependent on humanitarian assistance and are denied free movement, their rights to work, practice professions,

run businesses, and own property. Commenting on the celebration of WRD in Ugandan settlements, [Hovil](#) (2007) suggests that there is a “growing realization that the happy dancing refugees displayed to outsiders on World Refugee Day do not portray the full story...such images represents a chronic perversion of the truth.”

The apolitical thrust of events outlined here contrast with the intensely politicized and increasingly harsh migration management strategies undertaken by countries in the Global North. The way in which *The World Pays Tribute* maneuver the relationship between refugees, other main protagonists and a global audience points to the underlying tension between UNHCR’s self-ascription as a human rights organization and the nature of UNHCR’ refugee governance practices. Fundamentally, *The World Pays Tribute* can be read as a testament to UNHCR’s struggle to navigate the tension between celebrating the ideal of global community and its own role in governing the increasingly strict spatial divisions between regions, nations and groups.

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