

The Convention on Refugees at 70: A Conversation with Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield

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Lise Grande: The United States Institute of Peace is very pleased to welcome you to this special discussion on the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugees. We are honored to have with us the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, to reflect on the convention and its future. When it was adopted in the early 1950s, the convention was both ambitious and necessary. It defined a clear set of rights for people who had been forced to flee their countries because of well-founded fear of persecution — most importantly, the right not to be expelled, except under strictly defined conditions. The convention also established a set of responsibilities and obligations for the countries which host refugees, including the obligation to protect them.

It's hard to overstate the historic significance of the convention. The convention set clear universal norms, it established binding obligations on states, and it required a level of international cooperation that was unprecedented and remains so today. The convention turns 70 this year. Many of us believe that in a world where there are now more than 26 million refugees, it's as relevant as it's ever been before. But there are others of us who wonder whether the convention can continue to be effective in the face of global disruption, pandemics, climate change — which alone could displace a billion people in the next 30 years — violent extremism, illicit transport or criminal networks, and interstate violence.

We're very fortunate that Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield is here to discuss these issues. Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield is a distinguished diplomat with 35 years of experience in the U.S. Foreign Service, including serving as ambassador to Liberia, and postings in Switzerland, Pakistan, Kenya, the Gambia, Nigeria and Jamaica. In Washington, Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield has served as assistant secretary in the Bureau of African Affairs and as deputy assistant secretary in the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration. Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield, thank you for joining us. Before we begin our conversation, please allow us to turn the floor over to you for opening comments.

Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield: Well, let me just start by thanking you so much for having me here today and hosting this important event. I think recognizing the 70th year of the convention and its protocols is an important event for us to celebrate. This protocol, this convention has survived 70 years, and for 70 years, it has provided protection and rights for people who are the most vulnerable around the world. And I think it deserves our recognition. It deserves a celebration, and we deserve to recognize the important role that countries who have played host to many millions of refugees, have provided them hospitality, provided them protection, that we give those countries the recognition that they deserve after 70 years of the convention. So, thank you.

Lise Grande: Ambassador, with your permission, we would like to ask you a series of questions and we would like to start with a question about the pressure that the convention is under. So, when the convention was adopted, there were roughly 2.5 million stateless people in the world, but there are now 26 million refugees and if you add up all the people who are displaced, including people displaced in their own countries, it is well over 80 million. I think what many of us observe is that there are worrying signs that a number of countries — and you spoke about the ones that have supported and continue to support the convention — but there are warning signs that there are others who are not upholding their obligations. It's also, I think, disturbing that year-in and year-out for the last 15 years, we've fallen short of the financial costs of supporting refugee operations. For 15 years we've been [un]able, globally, to mobilize the resources that are necessary. So, the question that we'd like to ask you is: why aren't governments around the world upholding their end of the bargain? And what can the United States do in its privileged role to encourage more compliance?

Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield: Well, thank you for that question, and let me just start out by saying the convention was a watershed moment in 1951 when it actually defined what a refugee is. And it also provided protections for those refugees and it provided for commitments of countries who signed on to the convention to protect those individuals who had been defined as a refugee. And that hasn't changed in 71 years. And, the fact that it hasn't changed does not mean that commitments for protection have diminished. I think if we look at countries, and I'll start with our own, with the United States, our commitment to refugees, is as strong as it ever was. We've had moments in previous years where there have been questions about our commitments. But we have continued to reaffirm our commitment, and, as you know, President Biden is in the process right now of reaffirming our commitment to refugees and immigrants. The United States is one of the largest contributors to humanitarian and refugee programs and we, as part of our responsibilities, and I've worked on refugee issues most of my career, we work on encouraging other countries to recommit and to re-establish and reaffirm their commitments to refugees. And while sometimes it wanes, and it flows, in most cases, those protections have continued. And I particularly want to give a shout out to refugee-hosting countries, where there are some countries where they are hosting more refugees than they have in their own populations. And we need to support those countries and encourage them to continue with their hospitality.

Lise Grande: Ambassador, the forces that are driving migration, that are driving refugee flows, have changed over time. Many of the forces that are now the main factors behind a person's decision, or being forced, to leave are different than they were 70 years ago. And just to name a few: hunger, conflict, economic deprivation, and now, climate change. I think many of us are concerned that we address those factors in the countries where people come from, so they're not forced to flee. And in that regard, what can the U.S. do to help address those kinds of issues in countries, so people don't feel that their only choice is to leave everything behind?

Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield: I mean, absolutely, it is important that we focus on root causes. And as you know, the Biden administration, when we look at climate change, made that decision on the first day of the administration to rejoin the climate convention. And part of that decision is about looking for solutions to dealing with issues of climate change — those issues that might have the effect of pushing people away from

their own countries. And it is important that we address those root causes. We have huge development programs. We're working with the United Nations, with UNHCR, UNICEF, and other organizations to support people in their place of refuge, whether as IDPs in their own country or if they have made the decision to cross the border into a neighboring country, and those programs look to assist them. But we're also trying to find solutions for them, permanent solutions for them, that will help them either return back to their country or return back to their homes if they have not crossed the border. And if we don't deal with root causes, we will continue to have people making the tough decision. And I say the word "tough" very deliberately because it is a tough decision for people to make to leave their homes and leave what they're familiar with to cross into another country where they are totally dependent on others for assistance.

Lise Grande: Now one of the critiques of the convention is that it only focuses on refugees, people who have been forced to flee their country and seek refuge or asylum in another place. What it doesn't do is to provide a framework for the protection and support to people who are displaced within their country and who don't flee: internally displaced persons. In your view, and having worked in this domain for so many years, what more can the international community, and what more can the U.S. do, to protect internally displaced persons? And if you look proportionally at the numbers of people this question is not without relevance. There are literally double the number of displaced people globally than there are refugees.

Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield: Certainly, the convention was developed to support refugees because that was the crisis of the time. And we do have new crises where we have larger populations of internally displaced people. And there are protections that are being provided to those people inside their country, including assistance being provided to them. And an example that I can share with you is inside of Syria. Just a few weeks ago, in New York, we were working on ensuring that the last border crossing from Turkey into Syria remained open to support IDPs inside of Syria, whose lifeline was being provided to them through this border crossing, and the entire international community worked on this issue. And I'm very proud that the Security Council had a unanimous vote to support keeping this border crossing open for IDPs. So, I think the message here is that we're not forgetting people who are displaced inside of their countries. We're always looking for solutions, and sometimes those solutions are very difficult to achieve, but we're looking for solutions so that we can give people a lifeline of hope.

Lise Grande: One of the historic features of the convention was the fact that in order for it to succeed, there had to be unprecedented levels of international cooperation. And for many of the last 70 years, we've had that. There are uncomfortable questions about whether we continue to have the same level and degree and depth and breadth of that kind of cooperation, the kind that you just described for the border crossing from Turkey into Syria. May we ask, Ambassador, in light of the current tensions in the international community, do you still hold out hope that the kind of cooperation that's necessary to protect refugees we can count on in the future? And if we can't count on it, what will replace it?

Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield: You know, I guess this is sort of a character flaw that I have. And that character flaw is, I am always hopeful. It is never, there's never a time when we give up hope. And we work to find means to get around obstacles. So, for the Syria border crossing, the international community, the Security Council, was not unified initially. We expected that Russia was going to veto that resolution. But we found a way to work together to cooperate to get a unanimous vote. And I don't think anyone thought that that was achievable. I actually always thought it was achievable. And my goals, actually, were not reached, because had I been completely successful, we would have not only kept that one border crossing open, we would have reopened the ones that closed.

But I always had hope that we could achieve something. Because ultimately what this is about is people. It's about, it's life and death. It's about hope. It's about providing for the basic needs of people who are in a position of not being able to provide for their own needs. And I think that simple equation is enough to get the international community, eventually, to come to a place of providing the assistance and the protection that vulnerable people require. And so, you always have a measure of hope and then another dose of extremely hard work, and you can always be assured that you will get something out of those efforts.

Lise Grande: If you allow a gentle response. If you call that a character flaw, everyone else would call that the hallmark of a great diplomat. Ambassador, I know that you have recently been, you mentioned, to Syria and to other countries where you've had a chance to talk with refugees. Can you share with us some of the stories from them that touched you the most?

Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield: You know, I was, as I mentioned, I was at the Syria border, and I saw the extraordinary work that was being done by humanitarian workers, NGOs, United Nations, as well as local organizations to support people who were in need. And I asked the question, and I've repeated this several times, so people have heard it over and over again, but it really had an impact on me. I said, "How are people coping with COVID, in light of everything else that is happening?" And one of the organizations said, they were told by a refugee woman, that COVID was just another reason to die. And that struck me, it was like a stab in the heart, that people are not necessarily so worried about COVID because there's so many other reasons for them to die that COVID is just another one on top of everything else that they have to deal with. And I think that is really a message for the international community that we absolutely need to continue to support these populations in need.

Lise Grande: Very well said, Ambassador.

Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield: And I will share with you, also, I was just across the border in Maryland yesterday. I went to visit an organization called Casa de Maryland. And it's a refugee organization that supports immigrants and refugees who are coming to the United States. And I actually got to hear the stories of some of the refugees who had crossed the border into the United States, and then hear the stories of the volunteers in

Prince George's County who are supporting people who have come across the border. And all of the stories were moving. It was moving to hear what the refugees themselves had gone through and what their hopes and dreams were, but also as moving to hear from volunteers, many of them who had been refugees themselves, tell what they were doing to give back to the refugee community. So, we have stories right here in the United States that I think are worthy of being repeated.

Lise Grande: Ambassador, you mentioned that the United States, for many years, has been one of the most generous donors to refugee operations. And it's, I think, a milestone in our international diplomacy that that has been the case. It's very clear now, when you start talking about 26 million refugees, that the costs of supporting them the way they deserve, and are entitled, to be supported is very expensive. How do you see the international community working better to make sure that the burden of protecting and assisting refugees is shared more equally?

Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield: Well, first and foremost, we all have to honor our commitments, and many countries make commitments to support refugees. And we have to ensure that those countries honor those commitments that they've made and the U.S. is a country where we have honored our commitment. The United States has been the largest recipient of refugee resettlement. We've resettled more than 3.2 million refugees in the United States since about the 1980s. And we continue to be a beacon of hope for those refugees who are seeking asylum in the United States. We are also the largest contributor to refugee programs across the world. We provide a significant portion of the budgets for the UN High Commission for Refugees, for the International Committee for Red Cross, International Organization for Migration, as well as a large number of nongovernmental organizations working in the refugee space. And there was a period, I have to admit, over the past four years where people began to question whether the U.S. commitment would continue, but I'm proud to say that we have reasserted ourselves, and we're rebuilding the infrastructure that provides support for refugee programs. And we continue to be that beacon of hope.

Lise Grande: Ambassador, that leads us to our final question. I think it's very obvious to everyone that the Biden administration, that the U.S. government, has made humanitarian issues and human rights a major priority in our international and multilateral engagement. As a representative of the United States in the world's most important multilateral forum, the United Nations, what are your plans for carrying that vision, that commitment, that engagement forward?

Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield: I do it every single day. It is at the forefront of everything I do. Whether it is making sure that the Security Council discusses in an open meeting, the situation that's happening in Ethiopia as it relates to Tigray, and pushing every member of the Security Council to agree to having that open meeting; or using my platform, to go to Syria, to go to Turkey, sorry, to the Syrian border, to raise the profile of that issue internationally; or as recently as my visit to Haiti on Friday, where I led a delegation that really had two purposes in mind: one, to say to the people of Haiti that the United States has not forgotten you, but the

second, to also message to the leadership of Haiti that they had a responsibility to stabilize the situation in that country.

And while ultimately, we're going to require many more visits like that to achieve what we need to achieve, I work every day to keep this on the front burner. And I think that my more than 35-year career in the Foreign Service in which I focused on refugee and humanitarian issues about half of that career, I think, shows that I am committed to this. And it's been a lifetime commitment for me, and I'll continue until my last breath.

Lise Grande: Ambassador, thank you. Thank you to our virtual audience for tuning in. You can find a recording of this event and other important conversations on our website at USIP. We encourage everyone to share this event on Twitter using the hashtag #RefugeeConventionat70. Ambassador, we're honored that you were with us and we want to thank you for your candid and very inspiring reflections on one of the most important cornerstones of international humanitarian and human rights law: the 1951 Convention on Refugees.

Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield: Well, thank you so much for allowing me to celebrate the 70th year of the convention with you.