



# BOSTON COLLEGE

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## **SCHOLARS, PRACTITIONERS AT BC GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS CONFERENCE CALL FOR CHANGES IN INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS OF WORLD-WIDE REFUGEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS**

CHESTNUT HILL, MA (November 26, 2008) -- Change on an international level is needed to address the severe plight of the world's 45 million forced migrants, refugees and displaced persons, according to two leading authorities whose keynote addresses launched a global human rights conclave at Boston College last week.

The international community's response to the displaced, expressed in the mandate given to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, needs to be revised and expanded, contended Susan Martin, president of the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration, and one of the world's leading scholars on refugee issues.



In her remarks at the three-day conference, which focused on the deeper causes of forced migration and the identification of systemic response, Martin, who is Herzberg Professor of International Migration at Georgetown University, executive director of the Institute for the Study of International Migration and a member of the Academic Advisory Board of the International Organization for Migration, focused on rethinking the international refugee regime in light of human rights and the global common good.

**Susan F. Martin**

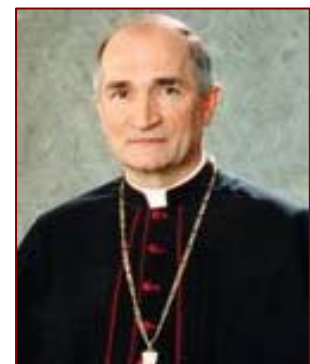
It is not enough for the international community, including the United States as a member of it, simply to respond to the needs of those who are being persecuted, she said, referring to the current definition of who counts as a refugee -- someone who flees home because of persecution.

Rather, Martin argued, we need to add the obligation to respond to others among the 40 to 50 million displaced persons who are not persecuted, but who face displacement by war and conflict, by environmental forces causing floods and expanding deserts -- a problem that is becoming increasingly serious -- and by major economic crises, if their own states are unable or unwilling to come to their aid.

This approach, she said, would provide vital assistance to a great many more people than those who are now being aided.

**Archbishop Silvano Tomasi**

Offering the Catholic Church's perspective on human rights as a framework for advocacy on behalf of the displaced, Archbishop



Silvano Tomasi, the Vatican's representative to the U.N. High Commission for Refugees, called for an international cooperation that aims to foster political stability and to eliminate underdevelopment.

"The present economic and social imbalance, which to a large extent encourages forced migration, should not be seen as something inevitable, but as a challenge to the human race's sense of responsibility," he said. "An international regime should be established to better manage all forced human displacement, a social phenomenon that is trans-national by its nature."

Archbishop Tomasi also stressed that there are basic rights that all human beings should have the freedom to enjoy, including the right to live a decent life in one's own country, to move to escape violence, hunger or persecution and to be treated with dignity in a host country. The identity of displaced people in a new environment has to be respected, "especially their religion, but also their cultural traditions and expressions and always within the common good of the entire hosting society."

While illegal immigration should be prevented, "it is also essential to combat vigorously the criminal activities which exploit illegal immigrants," he said. "His irregular legal status cannot allow the migrant to lose his dignity, since he is endowed with inalienable rights, which can neither be violated nor ignored."

Organized by the Boston College Center for Human Rights and International Justice, in conjunction with the Jesuit Refugee Service and Catholic Relief Services, the three-day conference brought together leading scholars and practitioners from agencies and universities around the world, including BC, Georgetown, Harvard, Notre Dame, McGill, Oxford and Australian National Catholic universities and Hekima College in Nairobi, Kenya; the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc.; the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Office of Migration and Refugee Policy; Oxfam America; and practitioners from South Africa, Southeast Asia and Jamaica, among others.

Two days of seminars followed the keynote addresses, focusing on topics such as the ethical and religious grounds for advocacy on behalf of forcibly displaced people; human rights of forced migrants in light of culture and gender; the causes of growing resistance to respect for the right to asylum in the developed world, including U.S. detention and deportation of asylum seekers; war as a cause of forced migration, and the plight of Iraqi refugees.

"Advocacy is something that you cannot do when you are spending all of your time responding to the immediate needs in a refugee center in a camp or in an urban setting where people are hungry and need help," said Rev. David Hollenbach, SJ, director of the Boston College Center for Human Rights. "We are trying to provide assistance at a more analytical level about how to respond. We had a broad range of people from different backgrounds, both academics and practitioners – people who are both on the ground working with displaced people and those who are operating in a more policy-oriented direction."



David Hollenbach, SJ

The task is a formidable one, said Fr. Hollenbach. "Of the huge number of people displaced in the world today, a sizeable number of them are children. A disproportionate number of displaced people are women with their children. Many refugees wind up in protracted refugee situations – more than five years, and more than half must live in refugee-like situations for over 15 years. This is a very grim situation."

The conference presentations will be the basis for a book, tentatively titled "Driven from Home: The Causes of Forced Migration and Systemic Responses," Fr. Hollenbach said. The book would be the second to emerge from a conference co-sponsored by the three groups. The first, "Refugee Rights: Ethics, Advocacy, and Africa" (Georgetown University Press) resulted from a 2006 conference in Nairobi, Kenya.

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