

Red Cross highlights work with young refugees



The British Red Cross celebrated Refugee Week 2008 by highlighting the work it does with young people and unaccompanied children. The UK-wide programme of arts, cultural and educational events, which encourage a better understanding of refugees, takes place from 16 to 22 June.

The Red Cross' CHUMS (Canterbury Helping Unaccompanied Minors Scheme) project is an excellent example of how the organisation supports young asylum-seekers.

Najeeb Mirzada fled persecution in Afghanistan three years ago when he was just 16 years old. "I didn't know a word of English when I arrived in the UK... but the people at the Red Cross' CHUMS took me in and helped teach me the language," he said.

"Now I volunteer for the CHUMS project... it's my favourite. Just as I was helped, now I translate for young people in the group, show them around and help them get used to living in this country."

The CHUMS project offers peer support to young refugees who arrive in the UK feeling alone and lost without their families.

"I really miss my family... my mother, sister and younger brother," Najeeb said. "I call them regularly on the phone but I cannot go to see them. It would not be safe."

Nick Scott-Flynn, head of refugee services at the British Red Cross, said: "We believe unaccompanied asylum-seeking children should be treated as children first, and migrants second. Some asylum-seeking children who come to the UK have been through truly harrowing experiences, and need additional assistance such as emotional support or mental health services.

"They may have a real fear of return and feelings of alienation, frustration and uncertainty at a time of change. During this year's Refugee Week, we are helping them tell their stories."

For more information go to redcross.org.uk/refugeeweek

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Vulnerable communities prepare for climate change

More than 200 million people were affected by natural disasters in 2007 – a 40 per cent increase from 2006. To mark World Red Cross Day on 8 May, the birthday of founder Henry Dunant, the Red Cross highlighted the importance of working together to help people affected by a rising number of disasters related to climate change. There were 414 natural disasters recorded in 2007 – slightly higher than the yearly average of 395 disasters between 2000 and 2006.

The people who will bear the brunt of increasing weather-related disasters are those whose lives, health and livelihoods are already vulnerable. Climate change will have far more significant impacts in the tropics than in other parts of the world. People who live near river basins, in arid areas or around low-lying coasts or who have limited access to clean water, health services and sturdy shelters will be particularly affected. The people who are already less able to cope and adapt – usually women, children, the elderly and people with disabilities – will be worst hit.

In Nepal, the British Red Cross is working with communities to build resilience against flooding. In Ilam and Panchthar, our technical assistants have worked with communities to construct flood-retaining walls. In order to protect the houses and agricultural land, grass and

saplings have been planted in vulnerable areas, small wooden bridges have been constructed and gully maintenance has been carried out.

These communities constructed safe evacuation shelters in 2006, and are storing rescue and relief materials there. The Red Cross is helping construct community resource centres as a common place for sharing information, teaching best practice and as a base for emergency operations in the event of major disasters.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies is increasing its Disaster Relief Emergency Fund from 10 million Swiss francs (£4.9m) to 25 million (£12m), and training more international and regional disaster response staff.

“The Copenhagen conference on climate change is still a year and a half away – it is crucial resources reach those most vulnerable to the impact of climate change,” said David Peppiatt, head of humanitarian policy at the British Red Cross. “Together, Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, along with key partners, can help many more people prepare for future disasters, but it is vital people are helped in advance. Once an emergency strikes, it may be too late.”



Photo © Jon Björnsson/IFRC

Red Cross reunites brothers

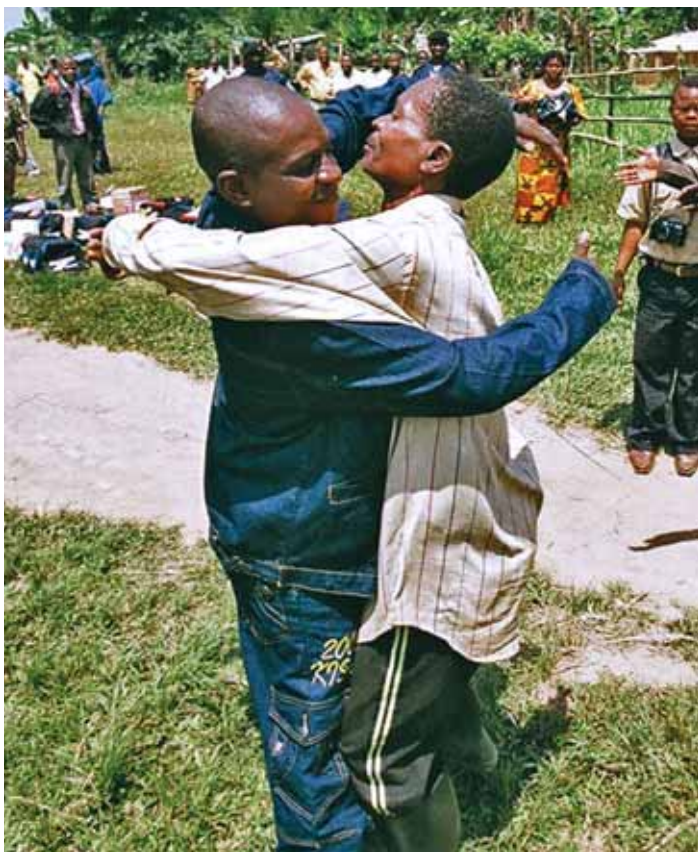


Photo © Annon Guinan/BRC

A young man was put back in touch with his brothers in the Democratic Republic of Congo, thanks to the British Red Cross international tracing and message service (ITMS).

Eugene Kavira (17) was separated from his twin Job and 14-year-old Akabo several years ago. Rebels held him captive in a cave before he managed to flee the country. Finding himself alone in Glasgow, he contacted his local Red Cross office and asked them to find his brothers.

Frank Higgins, ITMS manager in Glasgow, said: "Our tracing service took six months to find Job and Akabo. I telephoned Eugene and asked him to come in and see me. For the first time ever Eugene asked to get out of school early and was here at the speed of light. We got him a telephone number for his brothers. Since then he's never stopped smiling."

Eugene said: "They couldn't believe it was me and I couldn't believe it was them. We spent five minutes crying."

The Red Cross ITMS service works worldwide to find family members who have been separated by conflict or disaster. Individuals contact their local Red Cross office and volunteers interview them about their missing loved one. The service is free, confidential and has no time limit. Some families have been reunited after 60 years apart. The service can also send a Red Cross message to family members overseas when normal means of communication have broken down due to war or disaster.

News in brief

Bomb survivor runs marathon

A young athlete, who survived the Egypt bombings in 2006, raised money for the British Red Cross Relief Fund for UK Victims of Terrorism Abroad by running the London Marathon.

Sam Still (26) was caught up in a bomb blast while on holiday in Dahab in April 2006. Twenty-three people were killed and Sam suffered terrible injuries to his legs, which left him unable to walk for three months.

The fund provides financial assistance to people who have been seriously injured or bereaved following acts of terrorism overseas.

"I was very fortunate to have the support of my family. Others may not be so lucky and will need help to pay for things like hospital bills, travel and accommodation," Sam (pictured below) said. "That is why the British Red Cross fund is vital."



Photo © Lloyd Sturdy/BRC

Refuge for Iraqi evacuees

The Red Cross supported the Home Office, Ministry of Defence and Migrant Helpline following the evacuation of families of Iraqi nationals who worked for the British armed forces in Iraq.

The families – six adults and 12 children – were flown out of Basra on 7 April to a military airfield in Oxfordshire. The Red Cross was on hand to greet the Iraqis at the airfield and travelled with them to their temporary accommodation in Slough.

Martin Annis, head of emergency response, said: "We have been providing practical and emotional support for the families, and will do so until they are moved to more permanent accommodation."

Our trained volunteers provide support to thousands of vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees every year, helping them adjust to life in a new country.

Help for firefighters at Worcester warehouse blaze



Photo © R Booker/BHC

Peter Gray, from the Red Cross' fire and emergency support service (FESS), said: "Around 100 firefighters responded during the three days – crews were drafted in from nearby Droitwich, Malvern, Evesham and Pershore. Our volunteers provided food and light refreshments for the crews, making sure they could work effectively."

Three teams of four Red Cross volunteers worked until midnight, sometimes feeding three shifts as they made sure the firefighters had enough food to sustain them before, during and after their work.

Peter said: "It was very hard work. Thankfully, all 12 staff at the site had been safely evacuated and no one was injured, but the warehouse was used to store very flammable plastic bags that were packed into tight blocks.

"When the plastic melted, it hardened immediately and formed a protective shell so the fire would continue to blaze inside."

The British Red Cross' FESS service helps people cope in the aftermath of a fire or other emergency such as flooding or road traffic collisions. Trained volunteers provide practical help, advice and comfort.

Red Cross volunteers supported firefighters for an exhausting three days in April as they struggled to contain a massive warehouse fire in Worcester.

The blaze, which occurred at Warndon, stretched fire crews to the limit as they struggled to contain the flames. The fire occurred at a packaging warehouse filled with tightly packed – and highly flammable – plastic bags.

Prevention is better than cure in China

With more than 1.3 billion people, China has a lot at stake if HIV takes a grip on the country. The British Red Cross is therefore supporting the Red Cross Society of China to raise awareness of this devastating virus among high risk groups, like injecting drug users, and prevent its spread.

In March, the Chinese launched a nationwide HIV programme which the British Red Cross is supporting with financial assistance to four of the country's 31 provinces: Xinjiang, Yunnan, Guangxi and Guizhou.

Zhang Ran, project co-ordinator, said: "There is not enough general awareness of HIV and although we have a low prevalence rate compared to other countries, the risk of more cases in the future is very serious."

UNAIDS and the Chinese Ministry of Health estimate that there are at least 700,000 people living with HIV in China but with testing not yet widespread it is difficult to gauge the full extent of the epidemic.

Yuan Feng Qing, (pictured) from Yunnan province, was just 15 when she began injecting heroin. "Back then I used to share needles but I don't anymore," she said.

Now 23, she has been arrested three times and taken to Lijiang drug rehabilitation centre. The Red Cross has provided HIV training to staff at the detention centre who educate inmates about how the virus is transmitted.

"I am afraid of getting HIV but I have learned at the centre how to protect myself," she said.



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