

AN INTERVIEW WITH BOB MONTGOMERY OF THE INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE (IRC)

By WardheerNews

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Editor's note: March 2, 2015 marks the day that a good friend of WardheerNews, Mr. Bob Montgomery, the Executive Director of the IRC in San Diego retires, after 38 years of service and dedication. Mr. Bob shared on these pages, many insights on refugee issues, dissecting the gamut from coming to America to the daily challenges and opportunities of a refugee. WardheerNews wanted to mark the occasion with an extensive interview with Mr. Montgomery. Although Bob's experience and service to the refugee community in San Diego is not limited to the interview, we thought, it was a great way to dip into the mind of a man who has dedicated his professional life to lending a helping hand to refugees, particularly his wide knowledge of the Somali culture has always been helpful to new comers. Abdelkarim A. Hassan conducted this interview for WDN.

WardheerNews (WDN): Mr. Montgomery, we are delighted to welcome you to WardheerNews.com before we delve into the bulk of the interview, could you please share with us a brief background history about yourself?

Bob Montgomery: Thank you for this opportunity to share with your readers my experiences in working for refugees in my 38 year career with the International Rescue Committee (IRC). I came into refugee work for two main reasons. First at the same time I was graduating from San Diego State University (SDSU) with a BA in Social Welfare Saigon fell to the communists in May of 1975. Soon after Saigon fell the US Government airlifted more than 140,000 refugees to the United States with approximately 30,000 arriving to Camp Pendleton. Second I had served in the US Army in Vietnam and because of that experience I decided to volunteer with the IRC and assist the Vietnamese refugees that were being temporarily housed at Pendleton.

After about six weeks of volunteering I left California to go to Temple University in Philadelphia to obtain my Master's Degree in Social Work (MSW). Upon graduation in May of 1976 I was contacted by my former SDSU classmate, who founded the IRC office in San Diego

and she offered me a job. Originally the job was only to be for the summer but it turned into a long term career is helping refugees.

WDN: IRC was established during the WWII with the mission to assist and support refugees fleeing the Nazis in Germany, as well as to provide emergency relief to the victims of the war. There were also resettlement programs for East Europeans who have lost their loved ones and their lives to the Nazis. At the time, the victims were mostly Jews who were targeted for their ethnicity. How the IRC of that era in the 40s is different from today's IRC in terms of people served by the IRC?

Bob: It is true that when it was founded the IRC focused mainly on European refugees fleeing persecution by the Nazis. The majority of the refugees at that time were Jewish. In later years the IRC assisted other refugee groups that were fleeing Communist oppression including: Hungarians in 1956, Cubans in the 1960s and Czechs after Prague Spring in 1968.

Then in the spring of 1975 the IRC responded to the plight of more than 140,000 Southeast Asian refugees, mostly Vietnamese who were fleeing the invasion by the Communist regime from North Vietnam. This started a new era for refugee resettlement. It was also at this time when I joined the IRC in 1976.

At that time resettlement could be characterized as an emergency response program. The IRC and other resettlement agencies would expand to meet the immediate needs of the current crisis and just as quickly contract after the emergency was addressed. However, this emergency continued on for many years and the U.S. Government (USG) realized that a more institutionalized response was required to meet the needs of the growing flow of refugees from SE Asia. The USG response was the passing of the 1980 Refugee Act.

With the passing of the Act we began to see a growing diversity in the refugees that the IRC resettled including refugees from: Eastern Europe, Africa, South Asia and the Former Soviet Union. With this diversity came other resettlement challenges. Many refugees arrived with fewer transferrable job skills than their predecessors, poor education and limited English ability.

Thus IRC's response was to develop a broader array of services and look to serve refugees for a longer period of time. Further because resettlement was no longer deemed merely a short-term emergency response we now develop programs that serve the needs of the newly arriving refugees but also of other community members as well. We also look for ways to invest in the communities we work in, hence the development of programs like urban agriculture,

microenterprise and other economic development activities. By doing this IRC is able to facilitate the integration of refugees as well as to temper the impact that resettlement can have on a community.

So in summary the IRC today has built on our humanitarian history and we now serve a diverse caseload through a broad array of programs that are open to refugees and non-refugees alike.

WDN: Although the core programs of IRC still focuses on refugees, mainly resettlement, there are however, as you noted a plethora of other programs designed to help the refugees to become financially independent, such as the micro-financing. So, who is eligible for the micro-financing programs and can you share with us a success story or stories of such micro-enterprise program (s)?

Bob: Because the majority of our microenterprise financial support comes from refugee specific funding from the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) we mainly serve our refugee clients in the program. In recent years we have successfully diversified our funding for the program so we can serve some non-refugee clients as well, especially non-refugee women.

Since the program's inception in late 2000 we have assisted more than 250 refugee owned businesses to get started. Further we have also strengthened another 250 refugee owned businesses by providing them with business technical support in: marketing, website design and developing sound financial management practices.

One recent success was a refugee man from Iraq. First through our Career Development Program we assisted him to obtain his commercial truck driver's license. Then through an IRC microenterprise loan he was able to purchase his first truck. Since then he has purchased several additional trucks and expanded his business. He currently has eight trucks and employs 20 people.

Another major success of our microenterprise program is assisting refugee woman, including many Somali women, to get licensed and launch their own in-home childcare businesses. In many instances the IRC provided small loans to help them start their business. We have enjoyed other small business successes in the food and transportation industries.

WDN: You have been working with refugees from Africa, Middle East and Asia for quite some time, some of your staff also hail from the same countries as the refugees you help and then of course the bulk of your work involves resettling new refugees. How has your experience been

impacted by working with staff who are from the affected areas as well as directly being the first people the new comers encounter with when they step foot in America?

Bob: Approximately 50% of the IRC staff in San Diego are former refugees. Their knowledge of culture and language are invaluable to the IRC in working with newly arriving refugees. Their insights help us to better develop effective services and deliver them in a sensitive manner. Further because they share the traumatic refugee experience our former refugee staff possess the ability to empathize with the new arrivals, which enhances IRC's ability to facilitate the new arrivals integration into their new communities.

Because the IRC staff are the first people that refugees come into contact with when they arrive to America refugees will always remember how we initially treated them. That first impression is indelible so it is incumbent upon us to ensure that this first experience is a positive one that helps form a solid foundation for building a long-term trusting relationship.

WDN: How do you as an organization prepare for the newcomers? As far as cultural competency is concerned, is there a set of planned steps you follow to make sure their first few days in the new country are smooth and do you imbed cultural competency in your programs so that cultural issues are taken into consideration?

Bob: As previously mentioned IRC hires linguistically appropriate and culturally competent staff, which is critical to meeting the initial needs of newly arriving refugees. Prior to new refugee groups arriving to the U.S. the IRC reviews cultural information materials. Staff are briefed on the background and culture of each new refugee group so that we can engage with them more effectively and with sensitivity. IRC also reaches out to existing populations to gather critical information, which helps us better prepare for each unique refugee group.

WDN: What are your most memorable encounter(s) with refugees, particularly Somalis, during your tenure with the IRC?

Bob: One of my most memorable early encounters was when I was visited by a Somali woman who was trying to reunite with her husband and several of her children that she become separated from during her flight from Somalia. I began to complete the necessary paperwork and I asked her if she had a copy of her Marriage Certificate. She clearly seemed agitated by my request and responded through an interpreter that she had borne eight children with this man and that everyone in her neighborhood knew that he was her husband so she didn't need any paper to prove it. So I gently moved on and upon completion of the paperwork I requested from her a

small \$5 fee for the service, whereupon she threw a five dollar bill across the desk at me. I feared that I had offended her so after she left I immediately discussed the incident with one of my Somali caseworkers. He casually assured me that it seemed like a fairly normal interaction to him.

My dealings with this Somali mother did not end there as she regularly stopped by to check on the progress of her application. When I informed her that these cases can often take a considerable amount of time, she became animated and spoke to me loudly in Somali and although I didn't understand a word she said, it was clear to me by her actions and the determined expression on her face that she would remain persistent in her quest to reunite her with her family, which fortunately for me I was eventually able to do.

I learned a couple of lessons from this encounter. First, that family is extremely important to Somalis and second, they are relentless in their efforts to reunite with their loved ones, especially the Somali mothers.

WDN: IRC, San Diego Urban Farming Program (New Roots), has been featured in the media as a success story, especially when The First Lady Michele Obama paid a visit on April 2010. What can you tell us about this program and the accomplishment that led to Mrs. Obama's visit?

Bob: Actually the First Lady's visit to the New Roots Community Farm was an event arranged by the California Endowment. Initially the plan was the First Lady to only drive by the farm and then have her speak at an event at a nearby school. However, after the White House advance team visited the farm they decided to have Mrs. Obama make her remarks at the farm because they were so impressed with how quickly the farm had become productive and the diversity among the farmers.

The event both championed the First Lady's "Let's Move" campaign as well as helped launch The California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities Initiative. During her remarks that day the First Lady was quoted as saying "The world is watching what is going on on this plot of land. You are truly doing phenomenal work".

Currently the farm has 80 plots with farmers from Burma, Cambodia, Mexico and Somalia among other countries. Although most farmers grow their vegetables for their own personal use some are able to sell a portion of their produce with the help of the IRC to local restaurants, at neighborhood farmers' markets or through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs.

WDN: Some argue the work of NGOs in developing countries rather hinders developments than enhancing it by creating a culture of aid dependency, and most funding goes to overhead to administer the programs, instead of the programs themselves, what are your thoughts on this criticism?

Bob: The IRC along with other NGOs recognized this concern and are currently addressing them. For example for the last several years the IRC is experimenting with issuing rechargeable debit cards to refugees overseas so that they maintain decision making power and a measure of control of their lives. Further in some instances IRC is providing Vouchers so that refugees can make choices among a variety of options on what they want to buy for their family.

With regards to administrative overhead the IRC is proud of the fact that we are efficient with our financial resources with 92% going to programs and approximately 8% going towards fundraising and administrative costs.

IRC is committed to the goal of refugees restoring their lives with dignity and we will continue to seek approaches that will assist us to meet that goal both effectively and efficiently.

WDN: In your tenure as the head of the IRC, San Diego office, can you highlight the progress San Diego IRC office made during your time and some of the challenges encountered that you may be leaving behind, that needs to be addressed?

Bob: During my 38 years with the IRC I have seen the San Diego office transform from an international organization that was also resettling refugees to an international refugee relief and resettlement organization that is investing in the communities where we resettle refugees. We invest by developing programs that serve the needs of all community members including refugees, other immigrants and non-immigrant community residents. Some of these programs include: community farms/gardens, farmers' markets, free tax programs, microenterprise programs, youth services and other economic development programs.

Moving forward the IRC in San Diego will focus on meeting the unique needs of refugee women and girls. We will meet the challenges of affordable housing and living wage jobs for the clients we serve. We will work to expand programming to meet the emotion needs of refugees. Finally as the number of refugees worldwide continues to increase the IRC will continue to advocate for a robust refugee resettlement program.

WDN: What is your take on the lives of refugees coming to the US, joining new country and culture? How are these newly-arriving refugees affected by the new country and the expectation of the people, language, systems, etc., and how does leaving so much of themselves behind (family, culture, food etc.) affect their new lives?

Bob: Although refugees are forced to flee their native countries they also make a conscious decision to seek resettlement in a new country like the United States so they can rebuild their lives for themselves and their families in a safe and secure environment. It is quite a challenge to learn a new language, especially for older refugees, adapt to a new life styles, which includes strange foods and new customs but because refugees are resilient they are able to quickly integrate into their new home. Further they are motivated to provide their children with a future and for themselves to become productive again. Refugees have been forced to endure great hardships including losing their homes, their country and often their loved ones. But they arrive with the courage and commitment to address the cultural obstacles that they know they will face.

WDN: What is the trend of international NGOs concerning refugees and the focus of the IRC in the coming years?

Bob: IRC is committed to assisting those displaced by war or violent conflict an opportunity to rebuild their lives with dignity. To accomplish our mission the IRC is committed to establishing programming that help refugees achieve self-reliance, whether in an overseas refugee camp or rebuilding their lives here in the U.S. We will work to accomplish this mission by implementing innovative, effective and efficient programming. We will seek out ways to better serve the unique needs of women and girls as well as continue to seek approaches for refugees to maintain a sense of control over their lives.

WDN: Thanks for sharing your precious time with us.

Bob: Thank you Abdelkarim. It has been a pleasure and a privilege for me to have made a small contribution to helping refugees restore their lives here in San Diego.

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