



# Refugee Voices

---

*Editors' Note: This is the first issue of Refugee Voices, a journal of writing by refugees of the International Rescue Committee in New York who are studying in its English language programs. Refugee Voices is interested in new work that expresses any aspect of the refugee experience, and encourages submissions in every form: story, essay, poem, play, or reporting. Art, photographs and cartoons are welcome. For more information, please contact: [Natasa.Milasinovic@rescue.org](mailto:Natasa.Milasinovic@rescue.org) and [Erika.Munk@rescue.org](mailto:Erika.Munk@rescue.org).*



RAI Novosti

## Leaving my Country

by Natalie H.

When I was a teenager I lived in a city in Russia 200 km. from Moscow. I was very active. I studied in school, worked, met with my friends, swam in the river, enjoyed myself, and took part in political actions, because I disagreed with the politics of the government

and the president. This was the best time in my life. The situation in Russia for freedom of words, opinions and demonstrations wasn't so awful as it is now. My friends and I could speak our minds about politics by legal methods. We weren't afraid to go to prison for this. But now it is impossible.

I finished school, started to study at the University in Tula, and continued to take part and to organize the actions of the opposition. Then the political situation got a lot worse and I received information that to stay in Russia would be unsafe and I needed to leave immediately.

My last day in my country was March 8, 2008, a holiday – Women's Day. The evening before, I said goodbye to my best friends and at night I started to pack my most important things (documents, papers, some clothes). I left my home and went to a village in Bryansk district, where there was the only Ukrainian crossing post on the Russian-Ukrainian border. When I went through, the Ukrainian border guards congratulated me on my holiday. They were in a very good mood and almost didn't check up on my documents. After I crossed, I started walking to the railway station, where there were trains to Kiev, the capital of Ukraine. When I had almost reached the station, I fell in a hole I hadn't seen, because it was dark and there were no lanterns on the way. I got out of the hole and came to the station, where I bought a ticket. In Ukraine, I met my husband. I have never been in Russia again.

---

# New York: First Impressions

## Discovering Snow

by Angela

We arrived in New York in January, the first month of the year, at JFK airport. We waited for the taxi. I stood in a big snow storm and saw pieces of snow like goose feathers. I enjoyed them landing on my face, anywhere on me. I was very happy, because I lived in a city that didn't have snow. For seasons, we had only rain and dry. The second day I got up very early. I asked my husband to bring me out to see the snow. He brought me out to a park. I saw the sky still snowing. I trampled on snow. The snow emitted a sound, it likes singing. I am dancing that day. I saw the park wear white clothes and the trees, too. We walked in the park three hours until the snow stopped.

## Amazing in New York City

by David Dashi

I am amazed that I am in New York City. I am amazed that people are dancing with Latin music near the park. I am amazed that some people sing and play drums, guitars, and accordion on the train, beside the road. I am amazed that somebody shouted and shared the gospel of Christ bravely. I am amazed how very black children and very white children are playing together. I am amazed how disabled people travel by the electric wheel-chair on their own. I am amazed where the stream of crowded people come from and where they are heading on the street all day. I am amazed why the whole city is so bright and beautiful at night. I am amazed that a policeman caught two young boys trying to enter from EXIT way at the subway station. I am amazed that everybody has mobile phones on the street. I am amazed that somebody cursed so and

shouted on the subway train. I am amazed how can liberty statue stand firmly under all weather for a long time. I am amazed why people wanted to destroy and attack such a beautiful city.

---

## People in a Rush

by Mawi

When I first saw people in New York I was really surprised, because the way they lived was very different from the people in Burma. One thing that really surprised me was how they talked and the way they walked. Everyone spoke very fast and walked very quickly.

One day, one of the IRC staff, her name was Monica, came to my apartment and picked up me and my husband to go to IRC. We needed to take four trains, so we three were walking to four train stations. The last station was Woodlawn, and my husband and I walked behind her. I grew very tired. We went out of breath. She walked too fast, for me it was not walking, it was running.

And another day I went to apply for a job as a Home Health Aide. We had a test. The test was not hard for me, I passed it, but after the test we had an orientation class and our teacher spoke fast and I couldn't catch what she taught us. I was really upset that day.

But I encouraged myself. New Yorkers had a mind to help people who don't know enough. I will learn more English and more things, and I will be able to speak like NY people.

# The Subway

by Luma

Every day, millions of people catch the subway train, some to go to work, others for appointments, and some to wander through this big city just for fun.

All the people I see in the stations and in the trains appear and look the same although they seem to act different. They are in many kinds of mood – active people speaking in loud voices with their or someone else's mate, people who are so quiet that you don't even feel they are sitting next to you, others so tired they either keep yawning or are in deep sleep, and some who dance while they put headphones on.

All the people behave as they want and react as they like, except one figure which is very important. Without it most of the millions couldn't go to their work or anywhere else they want to go. *It is the train and his mother the station*, who never complain or object to the mess thrown in the station, in the train and even under it when he comes back to his mother. He keeps on working and serving day and night.

People are very accustomed to the subways but they seem unaware of them. Is there any way to wake them up and make them appreciate that precious property?

Time is the most important thing we ever have, and one of the ways the government established to keep our time from being wasted is that subway. What I think about is a recovery campaign to clean our trains and their mums the stations, get rid of the dirt here and there, and help people who are responsible for cleaning them. Let us start now.

---

# Afghanistan: Two Pieces

by Gulchera



Kipp Efinger, [www.efingerphoto.com](http://www.efingerphoto.com)

## 1. A story about the Taliban

My home was in Shah Shahid, Kabul. One day I was walking home, I saw a young man in the hands of the Taliban. The young man's name was Mirves and he was my brother's friend. They were beating him with their guns on his shoulders and his head. When I saw that, I became very scared. I screamed at them and asked: "Why are you doing this? What has he done?" The Taliban shouted at me and said: "It is not your business!"

I ran inside my home and told my mother. I told her to go outside and ask the Taliban about Mirves. I thought that because my mother was old, maybe the Taliban would not hurt her.

I also saw my brother at home. He looked very worried. He told me that his friend Mirves and he were outside in the

neighborhood. My brother was playing the flute and Mirves was listening. Suddenly, they heard the Taliban coming. My brother told Mirves: "We should run away." Unfortunately, Mirves could not run because he got very scared. The Taliban arrested him. My mother was ready to go and rescue Mirves, but we did not know which Taliban post they took him to.

At least I was happy that I saw this. When I screamed, I wanted to tell the Taliban that I saw them beating my brother's friend. I screamed because I wanted to tell them that this young man has relatives. Mirves was living alone in Kabul because his whole family was in Pakistan. I was scared that they would sexually abuse Mirves because the Taliban had a history of taking innocent people and especially abusing young boys.

Several days later, Mirves came back and told us that the Taliban were beating him. They wanted to know the name and address of the young man who was playing the flute. My brother was the one playing the flute, but Mirves told them: "I don't know that boy. He is from another neighborhood." Finally, Mirves asked my brother to buy five flutes. Mirves took the flutes to the Taliban so they would leave him alone. Mirves also asked them why they wanted to know about the young man who was playing the flute. The Taliban told him: "We wanted him to play the flute and dance for us."

## 2. Teaching in Kabul

I taught world history at a middle school in Kabul before the Taliban came to power. In Afghanistan boys and girls go to the same class until 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, and then they attend classes separately at separate schools. I taught at an all-boys school for 25 years. I had 45 students in my class. I taught 26 hours every week. When the Taliban came in 1996 women and girls had to stay at home. Five persons from the Taliban came to the school and said to the female teachers that they could not teach anymore. The teachers were angry and crying. It was hard for me to lose my job because I was a single mother who had a

daughter to take care of. I went to live with my father's family, and I was knitting sweaters to make money. My family was very nice to me and helped me out a lot. When Hamid Karzai came to power in 2001, I was able to teach again. There were advertisements on television where Karzai spoke and asked the female teachers to come back to the schools to teach. I was very happy to go back to teaching middle school students after five years of being at home. When I arrived in New York in 2010, my teacher in an IRC class mentioned that there is another woman who just arrived from Afghanistan. She introduced us. We began talking, where we are from, what part of the city, what neighborhood, what family. As this young woman was talking, I realized I knew her and her family. I realized that 23 years ago she was my student while I was still teaching in Afghanistan. She was seven years old.

---

## Learning

by Narqis Yusufi

Lovely things in my life are travel and study. I like to go every place and learn about all things that there are there.

I want to learn about culture, religion, situations, environment, knowledge, and every thing in the earth.

Another way is to study to get information, but I prefer travel, because study isn't very interesting and exciting.

We can travel with airplane, car and train, and ship. And travel with bicycle, what do you think about that?

But study is cheaper than travel. If we don't have money we can study a lot of books. It is better than nothing.

I am going to go to nice places one time.



Peter Biro/IRC

## **My Baghdad story: before and after the war in 2003**

by Reem

I'm from Iraq. I was born in Baghdad in 1976. When I was one year old, my mom and I joined my father, who worked as a civil engineer and was living in Paris. We lived in Europe until I was 5 years old.

One day in 1981, my mom, my younger sister and I visited her family in Baghdad and she couldn't go back to my father, who was then in Prague, as they closed all airports in Iraq because the war between Iraq and Iran started. After one year my father returned to Baghdad as he couldn't leave his wife with the two kids alone in this situation.

That year, we bought a very big house in the centre of Baghdad and my father spent all his money which he had saved for 22 years in buying this house, but unfortunately the government took our house by force from us because of our origins in Iran, where my grandmother and grandfather were born.

Luckily my father got a contract to work with a French company as the chief of engineers to build the biggest tourist village in Iraq, called al-Habania, 300 miles from Baghdad, and we escaped the city and moved there to live. We had to stay there where it was safe, otherwise the government would force my mom, my sister and I (like all woman and children) to leave Iraq for Iran and would arrest my father. But they took our Baghdad house and our properties.

We returned to Baghdad in 1984. After the first war with America in 1991 my father got many reconstruction contracts. By 2003, we had our new house and my father was established again and I had already graduated from Engineering College, Baghdad University. We lived a quiet life without any problems. I was working in a foreign company with a very high salary and my sister also was working as a civil engineer in the Ministry of Information, the engineering project department. Everything was ok with us until the war.

On the news, we heard that a war will start on March 17, 2003, between our country and the USA. We lived in Al-Karkh, the most dangerous part of Baghdad as the government buildings and all Saddam's palaces were there near our house. On March 16, my aunt came and took us to her house in Al-Resaffa, which was safer.

We were waiting there and watching TV to know the latest news. We didn't hear anything on March 17 and 18, nothing happened, and we thought that there is no war. Then on March 19 when we were taking our dinner with my aunt and family, suddenly we heard bombs and explosions, very loud sounds, and it was a really scary night, the sky was like morning because of the fire and bombs. The TV stopped giving news and after



that the electricity cut off, but we were feeling safer with my auntie's family. My father kept listening to the radio and he heard the updated news of the war.

After a few days we heard that the Americans entered Baghdad and they were already in Al-Yarmouk city (west of Baghdad) and they kept coming closer toward Baghdad. We stayed inside about one week and we couldn't go out to buy food or anything as American soldiers were shooting anybody outside. They were very nice especially with women, but very dangerous when they felt there was something wrong or when the people came near by them.

After that, the Americans allowed us to leave my aunt's house so we went to my friend's house which was close to ours but more safe. One day we heard voices outside shouting, excited that the war ended and the soldiers allowed them to leave their houses and buy stuff they needed. I and my mom wanted to go and check our house because we heard that most of the houses in our neighborhood had been robbed. No cars were allowed and we went by walking. It's not so far, 10 minutes by car, but we had to choose the safest way to reach our home and this took about two hours walking, four hours return.

It was an amazing thing, nobody was outside, only us, and once we reached our house we were really scared as we saw Iraqi soldiers' bodies lying in our apartment complex and blood was everywhere. American and Iraqi soldiers had been fighting there because our complex was very close to the Republican Palace. I never forgot this night. I couldn't sleep, thinking only about the people who died and nobody could take their bodies to the hospital or send them to their family and the blood everywhere and our damaged and

burned complex which was the nicest apartment complex in Baghdad.

My family is still in Baghdad. The situation remains bad and not stable yet. We repaired our windows five times and the ceiling twice, and my car also was damaged twice because of bombs and explosions. For us, it is still war.



Fred Abrahams

---

## Hello

by Eynes Abdulqader

Hello, o friend  
Hello melody, my friend that plays in a  
returning hello.  
Hello my friend yesterday and tomorrow  
Hello, my friend sun and moon  
Hello my guitar that plays so beautifully.  
I shall see the riverbank, good friend, and will  
continue to the river  
Hello, o friend of the ages, time and song  
honors creativity

---

Copyright 2011 International Rescue Committee, Inc. Copyright for "Refugee Voices" belongs to the International Rescue Committee, Inc. and all rights conferred by the law of copyright are reserved to the owner. Copyright gives the owner exclusive rights to reproduce, distribute, perform, display or license a given work.



Refugee camp, Thai-Burmese border

Buh Meh/IRC

## My Village

by Pobleh

Though I lived in a Karen refugee camp on the Thai-Burma border for twelve years, I didn't forget the beautiful, tiny village where I was born and grew up. Though it was a small village, many people liked to live there because it was situated on a hill and safe. There were thirty houses, and the population was a hundred and fifty.

Actually, my village was on a hill, but not at the peak. It was a half square mile of flat land on the hillside, surrounded by natural rocks on one side and on the other a deep valley. Across the valley were range after range of mountains and in the dawn, I could see the Sun rise between the beautiful mountains from the east. At night, the moon shone on the leaves of big bamboos. Especially on unclouded nights, the whole village was lit even though there was no electricity. Many households planted bamboo fences, so they made the village cold through their shadows. Sometime, the bamboo created musical sounds when the wind blew. Very close to my village on the west, there was a clean and natural fountain which provided enough water for everyone.

The weather in my tiny village was usually nice. It wasn't too cold in the winter, or too hot in the summer. We children played around the whole day in the summer holiday when our parents went to their farms and worked. Eighty percent of the villagers were miners who inherited this job from generation to generation after the British colonized Burma. The rest of the villagers worked in their own farms. I remember that everyone in the village was happy all the time. However, their happiness didn't last long.

Unexpectedly, a States and Peace Development Council (SPDC) troop from Burma's brutal junta – still the current government -- came to my village in early 1996 and arrested some villagers and the chief. They took them to their military base five miles far away from my village. After a week, they released the villagers, and when they and the chief came back, they called a meeting of the whole village where they announced to all the villagers that everyone had to go to a relocation camp (really a concentration camp) within a month.

I still hear the unhappy and hard speech of the village chief in my ears: "This is the order from the authority of the country," even though it was fourteen years ago. All the villagers were sad, hopeless, and desperate when they heard the chief's speech and some were angry. However, there wasn't any choice for a single one to live in the village. We moved in June, a time of heavy rain, to the relocation camp and it took almost a month, because we had to bring cooking stuffs, firewood, and building materials. They were needed for every household, because we had to build our own houses at the relocation camp, and we could only build with bamboo. The whole house – support poles, floor, wall, and roof -- was built with bamboo. In fact they should have been called huts, not houses, because they could last only a year. Moreover, they were very close to each other, like long bamboo barracks. However, I unhappily lived there, by no choice, for a year and a half, then I escaped

from under the control of the military to a Karen refugee camp.

A month after we left, the Burmese military went to my village, looted, destroyed, and burned down all the houses. The purpose of moving all the villagers and burning the houses was to apply their “four cut strategy”: cutting the information lines between rebels and ethnic civilians, cutting personal relationships between rebel and ethnic, cutting the support civilians gave rebels, and cutting off the heads of civilians who had committed any of these things. I found out this purpose of SPDC, which resulted in destroying my village, when I was in the refugee camp.

---

## One Time, A Story

by Intesar Aljabani

Life was so simple, and this is a simple dream from that time. I was trying to comb my hair, dress, and prepare my hair, getting ready to go to school. My mother never let me go until I ate breakfast, and then I could leave.

On my way to school I met my best friend, and on the way we talked as we walked. In our neighborhood there was a house that belonged to some kind of freaky man, and he owned a dog. Such a big dog, black, with a big head, wide mouth, and very big teeth. So in those days when we reached that house we felt that we would die if he appeared.

One day on my way home I was alone, because my friend was ill and she couldn't come. Suddenly, that dog was outside. When I saw it, at that moment I couldn't move my legs. It was just like someone caught me, and I couldn't even take a breath, I just stared like a doll, and every piece of my body was shaking. But my mind had many thoughts -- he will attack me, he will bite me, he will kill me. I couldn't even let my eyelashes move. At the end the guy who owned the dog came outside and shouted to the dog. Then the dog turned to his owner and went back to him. I still couldn't make a move.

When the man saw me he realized I was terrified of his dog. And he told me, he is a nice dog, don't be afraid of him. And he took my hand and tried to get me to touch the back of the dog. First of all I couldn't, but the man gave me a pat on my back and told me, don't be afraid. Then I touched him, just with my finger not my whole hand, and then I put my hand on him and felt how smooth he was. I liked this touch and he was calm and didn't do anything, he was so clever. Then all my thoughts about him changed. I began to like him, and since that time I have not been afraid of any dog.

---



Drawing by Eynes Abdulqader

## Toffee

by Eynes Abdulqader

This is my story about pets. I have experience with animals, all animals. Animals have feelings. They can feel anger and love, and when somebody does not like them. I have experience with dogs and cats. I have many dogs and cats while growing up. I had a small dog named Toffee who loved to play with cats and would get into fights with big dogs. I don't know why I liked Toffee the most - maybe because I caught him when he was born, or because he had beautiful long hair. I was my dogs' barber. In the summer I would cut their hair because it was hot. I loved doing that.

---