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UNHCR Special Envoy Angelina Jolie in Nairobi, appeals for child refugees

UNHCR Special Envoy Angelina Jolie marked World Refugee Day 2017 visiting adolescent refugee girls in Nairobi.

Ms. Jolie met around 20 refugee girls, who are unaccompanied or separated from their parents and are now living in the Heshima Kenya Safe House and participating in a Girls' Empowerment Programme.

The girls have fled extreme violence or persecution in Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), South Sudan, Somalia, Burundi, and Rwanda. Almost all have suffered sexual and gender-based violence, robbing them of their childhoods. Many have given birth after being raped, or are pregnant. They told the Special Envoy about their personal stories and their lives today.

Angelina Jolie said:

"Over half of all refugees and displaced people worldwide are women and children. How we treat them is a measure of our humanity as nations. On World Refugee day my only ask is that people consider the pain and suffering of young girls like these. Not only have they had to flee extreme violence or persecution, lost everything and witnessed the death of family members, but they have also had to face so much abuse and intolerance and hardship. They are doing their best to carry on, with minimal support trying to live lives on dignity against impossible odds. It was an honour to spend the day with them."

It was Angelina Jolie's third visit to Kenya, home to nearly 491,000 refugees from neighbouring Somalia, South Sudan, DRC, Burundi and other countries in the region. Most of the 67,000 urban refugees in Kenya struggle to survive on handouts from UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations, and many are struggling to recover from horrifying abuse and terror endured before or during their flight.

Among the refugees in Kenya are 101,713 from South Sudan, which has now become the biggest new factor in global forced displacement after the disastrous break-up of peace efforts in July 2016 contributed to an outflow of 737,400 people by the end of the year.

The Special Envoy said: *"Kenya hosts close to half a million refugees and we at UNHCR are very grateful to the people and government of Kenya for that."*

In all, Heshima Kenya's Girls' Empowerment Programme helps some 200 refugee girls, including those in the Safe House. They are provided with education, and training in a variety of skills to enable them to become self-reliant.

Benedict, who oversees the Heshima Kenya programme, described his motivation in helping the refugees: *"When I see them, I don't see refugees, I see human beings who are suffering not out of choice but because of circumstances beyond their control."*

With the option of resettlement scarce, Heshima Kenya focuses on helping the refugees to fully integrate within the Kenyan community. This approach is also being championed by UNHCR and its partners in international talks that aim to forge a new Global Compact on Refugees next year.

"When you empower them, you bring them dignity," Benedict said. *"They don't need to rely on anyone. The Kenyan government can also start to appreciate them – as taxpayers, employers and consumers with purchasing power."*