



2004 World Citizen Essay Contest

First Place Winners

"It is the duty of every citizen according to his best capacities to give validity to his convictions in political affairs." – Albert Einstein

Each year the World Affairs Council hosts the World Citizen Essay Contest for Washington State students in second through twelfth grades. The goal of the World Citizen Essay Contest is to promote discussion among students, teachers, families, and community members about the ways that individuals can effect positive change in the global community. The question for 2004 was, "According to Refugees International, there are 30 million refugees and internally displaced people worldwide. Washington State is home to the fifth largest refugee population in the United States. Tell us the story of one group of people on the move: Describe what caused them to leave their home & propose a solution that might return them there." Thank you to the over 150 students who submitted essays and the 50 judges who spent the time reading them all.

Returning the Lost Boys of the Sudan

By Mackenzie Wilson, Fourth Grade
Island View Elementary School, Anacortes

Sudan is the largest country in Africa, but it is one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. The civil wars that have been going on since the mid 1950's in Sudan have led to a tragic and violent country. There have been many political issues keeping the country divided.

Sudan is home to many culturally diverse people. Two main groups are the Arab dominated northern group and the southern black African group. Sudan has experienced civil war between the government troops of the north and the Southern People's Liberation Army (SPLA). Both groups are fighting over power and freedom.

The current fighting began in 1983 when the government declared Shariah law, which meant that throughout the country every citizen, regardless of their religion, had to follow the laws of Islam. This angered the non-Muslim people in the south and they started fighting once more. In Sudan this civil war has created a group of refugees called "The Lost Boys Of the Sudan." Twenty-six thousand Sudanese boys were forced from their southern villages in the late 1980's. These were mostly boys between the ages of 7-17 who were separated from their families. After walking hundreds of miles for over four years in search of peace, they spent 9 years in a Kenyan

refugee camp. Refugee camps in central and southern Sudan are filled with Sudanese people displaced by the war, as well as refugees from Chad, Uganda, and other African countries.

Some of the "Lost Boys" are still in refugee camps and some were allowed into other countries to live permanently. The U.S. has taken in over 3,000 Lost Boys and has settled them in various cities around the country. Many of these Lost Boys are home sick and depressed, but can only go home if there is peace. "We just want to be able to speak our language, practice our religion, and be independent in Southern Sudan." This is a quote from James Major Machot, one of the Lost Boys currently living in the U.S.

In order for the situation in Sudan to change, I feel that two things need to happen. First, we need to help establish peace in Sudan by dividing the north and the south into two separate countries. The best way for the country to be divided is for their Arab and African neighbors to help them make a plan and support the division. Since the country gained its independence from Britain in the early 1950's there has been constant fighting which is hurting all the people of Sudan. The south has large reserves of oil, minerals and massive areas of land that could be

irrigated to produce crops. Many foreign countries have been willing to invest in exploration and development projects, but the civil war has brought most projects to a standstill. Peace and the division of land would open these opportunities again.

The second thing that should happen, is that we should offer the over 3,000 Lost Boys here in the U.S. a free education and help getting back home, should they want to go. When these educated boys returned home, they could help build a better agricultural system and start their countries economic growth. Only 45% of men and 18% of women can read in Sudan. The government provides six years of free education from the age of 7-13, but most rural and displaced children have no schools to attend. By the age of 13, only 13% of children attend school, and only 2% are educated beyond the age of 18. Peace and

education would give the many foreign countries that might be interested in helping, a way to reinvest in Sudan. It all starts with Peace and a realistic way of getting there. Education will be the key to their rebuilding.

A USCR report pointed out that Sudanese people have suffered more war related deaths during the past 16 years than any single population in the world. (Information from the World Refugee Survey 2000) The combination of war, famine, and disease has killed more than 2 million people and displaced another 4 million. This has got to change. Until both sides can live peacefully the vast country of Sudan and its people will suffer the pain and hardship of war and famine. §

Citizen of the World

Atanas Stanimirov Kirilov, Sixth Grade
Einstein Elementary School, Redmond

To be a citizen of the world is not just living somewhere on it. It is realizing that you are one with this astonishing world in which we live, with all its manifestations and forms, which are the manifestation of the greatest mystery we call life.

My name is Atanas. I [was] born in Bulgaria, but I live in the United States with my parents as many other Bulgarian families do. My homeland is a small country--a mere fleck on the map of Europe, but it is very beautiful. It has an ancient history and culture, a rich and diverse nature. Endless folds of emerald-green mountains follow colorful fields, white cliffs illuminated by the sun, dark and cool valleys, and the sapphire-blue sea bordered by its golden sandy shores. There are four seasons, each with its own beauty. The people are very friendly and open.

Why do so many people leave Bulgaria and go to different parts of the world? The answer lies not within its beauty, but within its standards of living, politics, economy, and laws. I wish to mark the border between two periods—before and after 1990.

Until 1990, Bulgaria was under communist dictation. The lack of human rights and freedom, repression, countless restrictions toward realizations of people's dreams, corruption of all levels in the society and country, poverty, lack of basic goods, and the low standard of life forced part of the population to seek asylum in more democratic western countries. Very

few decided to leave the country and fewer succeeded. The government repressed their families. The emigrants could not return and visit their country because they would be tried for high treason.

After 1990, a democratic republic replaced the communist regime. The borders opened up and many Bulgarians left for different parts of the world, mainly in Western Europe, U.S., and South Africa. This is still going on today. The reasons are mostly economic. Even now, Bulgaria is still not a great place to live. The democracy resembles anarchy. People have more freedom but not more rights. The corruption level is high. There is a small upper class, where few have actually gained their wealth through work or are famous worldwide. Most of the rich people have acquired their ranking through crimes. They greatly influence the politics and the economy to satisfy their interests.

Most of the population is very poor. There are still many people looking for food in the trashcans. In Bulgaria, the graduated professionals often cannot work at their occupation due to the lack of jobs as well as discrimination against their gender, age, and looks, especially women. Others manage to find a job, but the salaries are low. High-level specialists are the main group of people seeking a job in foreign countries. Sometimes, they can't practice their profession abroad,

but at least, whatever they do there for a living allows them to lead a better life.

The medium and small businesses in Bulgaria don't develop well. The reason is lack of lawmaking, preferences on one side, racket on the other, and the monopoly of large companies and criminal organizations. The agriculture and light industry--the main means of living in the country are ruined. From a major exporter of agricultural products Bulgaria became an importer of such goods. The very few people selling agricultural goods receive unjust prices. These people have to work like Middle Age peasants. They use a horse with a plow, plant their crops by hand, and use old farming tools.

The leaders bankrupted the light and heavy industry and tourist facilities, so that they can buy them cheaply. Very few people manage to open restaurants and hotels, due to the lack of good infrastructure and to the high crime rate. The people are defenseless. The lack of laws has caused the crime rates to go up—from robberies and murders to heavy financial crimes. There are criminals in the judicial branch as well. The political parties transfer the power from one to another, promising to change for the better, but they do absolutely nothing.

All of this makes Bulgarians look for better opportunities abroad. A preferred choice is the United States. Americans are tolerant and friendly to immigrants, even after the tragic 9/11. Here, millions of people from different nations and races can find a better place for education, creativity, work and life. Many of the immigrants are graduated specialists, but

not many work at their specialized professions. Information Technology professionals best realize their potential because there are many job openings for them. The rest usually graduate again or work in different areas--administrative or service. Some are not happy because they cannot practice their profession or because they cannot adjust to the new way of life. They often miss their friends and relatives on the other side of the earth.

Many of these people would return to Bulgaria if the situation changes and they could have more choices and a better life. They would return if Bulgaria becomes a truly democratic and lawful country. They would also return if intelligent people were recognized, and if Bulgaria gives them a chance for development and creativity.

Wherever we live, we are citizens of the world, our planet Earth. Our job, as humans, is to make every day and moment in our lives better and the world in which we live more beautiful. Everyone has the potential to do that: from the baker who will bake the best bread, to the lawmaker who will legislate the best laws; from the shoemaker who will make the best shoes, to the scientist who will invent the most useful things; from the salesman, to the artist or composer; we are all citizens of the world.

I don't know if I will return to Bulgaria or stay in the U.S. Wherever I go, I will remember that I made the choice to be a citizen of the world and make it a better place with everything I do. §

All We Want Is a Meal: The Story of North Korean Refugees

**By Joy Chan, Tenth Grade
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They are of the same culture, language, and peninsula, but North Korea couldn't be any more different from its neighbor, South Korea. North Korea faces poverty, famine, political oppression, and a highly centralized government that has little regard for human rights, leading many people to flee from their country and become refugees. Numbers show that there are about 100,000 to 300,000 North Korean refugees seeking asylum in China, and several thousand have escaped to South Korea. The iron-fist of the North Korean government is formidable in suppressing and ultimately controlling the lives of its people, but with careful negotiations between world

powers like the United States, North Korea can become economically powerful enough so that the refugees can finally return home.

North Korea's economy is run by its government [and] dominated by the communist Korean Worker's Party (KWP). Established in 1948 after Korea's independence from the Japanese, the KWP had as its first premier Kim II Sung, who is credited as the founder of North Korea. Problems for North Korea arose as its ally, the Soviet Union, experiences increased tensions with the ally of South Korea, the United States. The U.S., fearful of the spread of communism, sought to protect those

countries that were vulnerable to communist influences. Pressure from the Soviets eventually led North Korea to invade South Korea in 1950, causing the start of the Korean War. After three years of fighting, both sides were exhausted, their resources depleted. North Korea needed to rebuild itself, with which to this there were no possible means to. Natural resources were limited, while its industrial economy had been held up by foreign aid and the Soviet Union. The collapse of the latter at the end of the Cold War and reluctance of the former because North Korea was communist proved almost fatal for the North Koreans. Today, industrial capital stock is poor from decades of under investment, and industrial and power output has declined, with chronic shortages of fertilizer and fuel. Job creation and private investment is difficult with the lack of capital. The currency has been devalued, resulting in high prices for the number one human need—food.

Poor harvests, not enough arable lands, and the KWP's policies of food distribution caused a famine in the mid 1990's. Continuing into the present, it has killed two million North Koreans with hunger and famine-related diseases; half of the remaining population is suffering from malnutrition. Refugees flee, risking capture at the borders for a chance to fill their empty stomachs. Stories from refugees in China tell of only having corn gruel to eat, and when corn is no longer available—blades of edible grass. The government is trying to solve the problem of famine, but to no avail. The current president, Kim Jong Il, distributes food according to one's usefulness and loyalty to his regime, such as the government officials, soldiers and members of the upper class. In places where there are rebellions or political oppression, he has strategically cut off food sources. Money that Kim Jong Il could use in putting his people out of desperate hunger is used for the military; increasing the army and developing nuclear and biological weapons to 1) pressure the U.S. into negotiations that could result in the removal of U.S. troops from South Korea and/or 2) to not be labeled as a terrorist country and therefore become eligible for international financial support.

One of the most repressive governments in the world, the KWP has little consideration for the human rights and implants its own ideas into society. There are around 100,000 internally displaced people (those who flee from one part of the country to another), most re-locating for government reasons. According to figures from non-governmental organizations, as many as 200,000 people (most of them sent back after fleeing and being caught in

China) are put into high-security labor camps. In these camps, slave-like labor is present, along with forced abortions and public executions. To keep the population in check, the KWP uses police terror to scare and force people into compliance. Internal migration is limited, and any woman found outside her resident town without proper documents can be taken into prison. Those who give birth in prison have their babies killed, and if they cry, they are executed. The newspaper, radio, and television are controlled by the state, while religious groups are state sponsored.

Refugees would like to return to their homeland to safely re-establish their cultural, familial, and national ties, and world powers could use their power as the basis to act. Negotiations between North Korea and powers like the U.S. could provide economic aid to North Korea, turning it into an Asian economic power; in return, North Korea could agree in granting human rights to its people. An example of the U.S.' former aid was after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The U.S. had helped rebuild Japan's economy by providing money, resources, and opening new markets. Today, Japan has the second-most technologically powerful economy and the third largest economy in the world. Overall, the Asian economy is expanding with increased production, output, market shares, and growth potential, and having North Korea as another player in the markets will not only benefit it, but everyone.

North Korean refugee problems can be attributed to their government's impoverished economy failing to supply enough food for its people, creating a famine that has killed millions and will likely cause more deaths. Violations of human rights and the fear of execution prevent refugees from returning to re-establish ties, but that can be changed if world powers lend a helping hand to the North Korean government to set up a new economy that could prove to be another power in international markets. With the cooperation, time, and responsibility of the North Korean government will refugees be able to return, receiving a meal not in foreign lands, but in their place of unbreakable familial and cultural bonds—home in motherland North Korea. §