

Webster University Geneva Holds Refugee Camp Simulation

GENEVA (20 June 2009) - There's an old expression which says you can't understand someone unless you walk a mile in their shoes. So, in an effort to gain a better understanding about the plight of refugees, eight Webster University students will spend three days simulating life in a refugee camp.

The refugee simulation is an initiative of the student run Webster Humanitarian Association (WHA), supported by UNHCR (the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) in an effort to raise awareness for World Refugee Day and the "Gimme Shelter Campaign".

As a part of the initiative, the students will experienced a small part of what life is like for the millions of people forcibly uprooted from their homes by persecution, warfare or natural disaster.

"We want to draw a sharp contrast between the students' own lifestyles and those of refugees living in the camps," said Clare Cook, WHA spokesperson. "Restrictions will be placed on their water and food, they'll be living in a situation that none of them have ever experienced before."

The simulation will begin on 16 June, when students will be given a limited time to pack anything they think they will need into one bag. They will then meet at UNHCR HQ in Geneva where they will have to walk ten kilometres to Webster University in Bellevue where the camp will be located. Before being allowed to pitch their UNHCR emergency tent, the students will have to register and receive ration cards.

Over the course of the three day simulation, the students will face limited bathroom facilities, collecting firewood, cooking their food on an open fire, and sleeping in an overcrowded emergency tent.

Diana Kutcha, a master's student participating in the simulation said that she feels passionately about participating, but also very anxious. "We're going into the unknown," she said, "the organisers have deliberately not told us what's going to happen because uncertainty is part of the experience- refugees don't know what will happen, where they will end up- and I'm feeling that. I don't know what food we'll get, or whether there'll be food. I don't know where we'll sleep."

Claudia Gonzalez-Gisiger, responsible for public relations at UNHCR said she thought the initiative was a great idea. "It's wonderful to see people taking steps to raise awareness about the very real issues refugees in the world face every day."

.../...

About The Webster Humanitarian Association

The Webster Humanitarian Association (WHA) is a non-profit organization supporting students, faculty and the wider university community in academic research and learning. The WHA help students build skills and gain practical experience in the field of global humanitarian affairs. Through the activities of the organization, students and others are challenged to become internationally aware, active and responsible defenders of human rights.

About Webster University Geneva

Established in 1915, Webster is a Non-Profit, American-Accredited University, with campuses in Europe, the USA & Asia. The Geneva campus offers Graduate & Undergraduate degrees taught in English, and hosts nearly 600 students from over 90 nationalities.

About UNHCR

Founded in 1950, twice Nobel Peace Prize winner, UNHCR, leads and co-ordinates international action to protect refugees, and ensure that everyone can exercise the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another State. In more than five decades, the agency has helped an estimated 50 million people restart their lives. Today, a staff of around 6,300 people in more than 110 countries continues to help 32.9 million people. To learn more about UNHCR, visit www.unhcr.org.

About Gimme Shelter

The "Gimme Shelter" campaign is a collaborative effort to raise awareness about the world's refugees and their need for protection, particularly refugees in Afghanistan, Chad/Darfur, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The centrepiece of the campaign is a short film directed by Ben Affleck, filmed by John Toll and set to the Rolling Stones classic track Gimme Shelter. The goal of the 'Gimme Shelter' campaign is to raise funds in 2009, to pay for critical UNHCR operations. To learn more about Gimme Shelter, visit www.unhcrshelter.org.

About World Refugee Day

The United Nations General Assembly designated June 20 as World Refugee Day (WRD) to recognize and celebrate the contribution of refugees throughout the world. Since then, World Refugee Day has become an annual commemoration marked by a variety of themed events in over a hundred countries. The theme of 2009's WRD is 'Real People, Real Needs'.

For further information please contact the Webster Humanitarian Association:

Clare Cook (english): wha@webster.ch **0794851355**

Armelle Armstrong (française): armelle.armstrong@bluewin.ch **078 671 92 80**

Keep updated about the simulation via Twitter: www.twitter.com/thewha