

Administration of Barack Obama, 2015

Remarks at the Dignity for Children Foundation in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
November 21, 2015

The President. Well, it is a privilege to be here at the Dignity for Children Foundation.

[At this point, the President coughed.]

Excuse me. I want to thank Pastor Satvinder and his wife Petrina, who've run this foundation for years with the support of private donors and the United Nations. And I want to acknowledge the Malaysian Government for its efforts to welcome and support refugees from around the world. Today, Malaysia hosts some 150,000 refugees and asylum seekers from countries as varied as Sudan, Somalia, and Myanmar.

One of the reasons that I wanted to come visit here is because globally, we're seeing an unprecedented number of refugees. The world is rightly focused on the humanitarian tragedy taking place in Syria, but we can't forget that there are millions of other refugees from war-torn parts of the world. In fact, 60 million people are displaced all around the world.

And today, as you saw, I had a chance to visit with some incredible young people, those children upstairs, many of them have gone through extraordinary hardships. They've taken really tough journeys. Most of the children that we saw in the classroom there were Rohingya, who had fled discrimination and oftentimes ethnic violence in Myanmar. And we're hopeful that with the transition in the politics of Myanmar, that the Rohingya people will begin to get treated fairly and justly in their own country. But in the meantime, the refugees from Myanmar—again, mostly Rohingya, mostly Muslim—those young children up there, they're deserving of the world's protection and the world's support.

And anybody who had a chance to see those kids, hopefully, you understood the degree to which they're just like our kids, and they deserve love and protection and stability and an education. They are lucky that they're here at this wonderful center and getting that kind of support, but there are a lot of children just like them who are not. That's the face of not only refugees from Myanmar, that's the face of Syrian children and Iraqi children and children from war-torn regions of Sudan.

And when I sat there and talked to them, and they were drawing and doing their math problems, they were indistinguishable from any child in America. And the notion that somehow we would be fearful of them, that our politics would somehow leave us to turn our sights away from their plight is not representative of the best of who we are.

I just had an incredible conversation with the young men and women around this table who represent refugees from Myanmar and Sudan and from Somalia. These are some of the bravest, hardest working individuals that you'll ever meet. They recently completed steps to settle in the United States, and each of them described how incredibly grateful they were to have this opportunity to be part of a country that accepts people from around the world with all their diversity.

This young lady here is 16 years old, fled Myanmar on her own when she was 8 and was subject to human trafficking until the United Nations was able to help her resettle. She's now 16 and intends to be an advocate on behalf of fellow refugees in the future after she gets an education in the United States.

This is who we want to help.

Young lady. Thank you so much.

The President. This is the face of people all around the world who still look to the United States as a beacon of hope. When we talk about American leadership, American leadership is us caring about people who have been forgotten or who have been discriminated against or who have been tortured or who have been subject to unspeakable violence or have been separated from families at very young ages. That's American leadership. That's when we're the shining light on the hill. Not when we respond on the basis of fear.

And if people have a chance to hear the individual stories here, you will see the degree to which they represent the opposite of terrorism and the opposite of the kind of despicable violence that we saw in Mali and in Paris. We should lift them up and give them a hand. Because the more that we are spreading our concern and our values and our hopes and dreams with young individuals like this—some of whom, even though they look very young, already have children themselves—then we're creating more and more space for good people around the world to come together and to fight the darker, more violent forces in our world.

So the good news is, is that in the face of this global crisis, more and more countries are recognizing that they need to do more. The United States is currently the world's largest donor for humanitarian aid. We have shown that we can welcome refugees and ensure our security, that there's no contradiction. And as long as I'm President, we're going to keep on stepping up and making sure that America remains, as it has always been, a place where people who, in other parts of the world, are subject to discrimination or violence, that they have in America a friend and a place of refuge.

And I'm very excited to see what the individuals sitting around this table end up doing in the United States of America, because my suspicion is, is that they're going to do great things.

Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:57 a.m. In his remarks, he referred to Elisha and Petrina Satvinder, founders, Dignity for Children Foundation.

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