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Right to Refuge, Right to Move

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Panel: Right to Remove, Right to Refuge

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Ukamaka OLISAKWE

Right to Refuge, Right to Move

In August 2014, my parents packed their things and left Kano, the city in northern Nigeria where I was born. A bomb had exploded the previous week mere blocks from their home.

My father often recounts how it all happened: he had just returned early from his shop and my mother was preparing to go to church when the earth trembled and a sickening sound rent the air. The walls shook. They both ran out of their flat in fear. Loud cries filled the air. People ran in haphazard directions. Later they would learn that a bomb had detonated at the car park nearby and left many people dead.

For my father, it brought back memories of surviving the bloody Nigeria-Biafra war of 1967-70, an experience he rarely talked about.

My father arrived in Kano almost a decade after the war because Kano was the new business frontier. He learned trading, married my mother, and had five children. Growing up, we learned to navigate the uneasiness of the north. And after my siblings and I left home, my parents began a new, enjoyable phase in their marriage. But the explosion set an imbalance they weren't prepared for. A bomb blast was a horror they did not know how to deal with.

Boko Haram had become the new terror, spreading fear in Nigeria. In April 2014, the group, acting on its condemnation of westernization, kidnapped over two hundred girls, many of whom still remain unaccounted for, and initiated a reign of terror that has left at least eight thousand people dead.

My parents moved down to Onitsha, in southeastern Nigeria. Starting all over again was like learning to use the left hand in old age: difficult. But my father and mother had a home to return to, and an opportunity many Nigerians are not lucky enough to have.

As of December 2015, the IDP Figure Analysis conducted by the Internal Displaced Monitoring Centre estimated that there are almost 2,152,000 internally displaced people in Nigeria. Many of them originally from the northern part of the country, all of them displaced by Boko Haram attacks. Families are uprooted from their homes, children's education is cut short, and some are crammed into camps where they sleep in tents or in the open, and cannot be absorbed fully into the system.

With the global immigrant crisis, people who lose their homes are reduced to just terms: refugees, their humanities stripped. They are talked about in hushes, and accorded a distant sympathy that only arises when they make the news.

Many of the internally displaced people in Nigeria are relegated to camps where diseases fester. Some families have left their designated camps and taken to the streets, begging, because they can no longer watch their children go hungry, they can no longer wait on the government to fulfil promises, they can no longer hope.

I agree that it is impossible to absorb the over sixty-five million people all over the world who have fled violence, who are now reduced to that term—refugees—but we can begin to see people as not just things. We can begin to see them as human beings, people whose lives were disrupted by wars not of their own making.

There is a phrase in Igbo that came to mind when I was writing on this topic: *nwanne di na mba*, which is loosely translated to mean “a brother in foreign lands.” *Nwanne di na mba* reminds us to show kindness, to give, and to shelter. *Nwanne di na mba* teaches us how to restore our faith in humanity.

When my father arrived in Kano clutching a bag, he was taken in by brothers, kindred spirits who gave him shelter. If my father did not find that hospitality as a stranger, he may never have met my mother, and my siblings and I may never have been.

If we began to look at the displaced more kindly, we would begin to push for policies that restore hope, because we would remember that they, too, have a right to live, a right to be.