



Anders Lago: Tal i den amerikanska kongressen

Talare

Anders Lago
Kommunalråd

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Chairman Hastings, Members of the Congressional Commission, Distinguished Speakers and Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, First and foremost – I would like to thank the Commission for your invitation. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you about the difficult situation regarding the people now fleeing from Iraq.

Allow me to be totally frank. I am not the President, a Cabinet Minister, an Ambassador or even a Member of the Swedish Parliament. I am the Mayor of Södertälje, a small town with slightly more than eighty thousand inhabitants. I am here today as the representative from a small country on the northern edge of the European Union, but I can say with both pride and disappointment, that when it comes to refugees, I come from a great nation. The United States is the country in the western world that accepts the largest number of refugees. Directly thereafter comes Sweden, and according to census statistics, it is my hometown that receives most refugees in Sweden.

Many Iraqi refugees have sought shelter in Södertälje since the start of the war in Iraq. Almost all belong to the Christian minority. Södertälje accepts approximately five percent of all the Iraqi refugees who come to Europe. To illustrate this even more dramatically, my little town alone, receives more Iraqi refugees than the United States and Canada together.

We did not start the war in Iraq, however we assume a huge responsibility for those people who are affected.

Last week I met with seven Iraqi pupils at a local school. Meena, a girl in fifth grade, had a tear in her eye when she said ” It is nice here in Sweden, – but I miss my father.” Her father is still in Iraq. Another little girl, Meryem, said with an edge to her voice, ” If the war continues, the doors must be open for the refugees.” All the children I met have relatives left in Iraq. And those children

live in homes tormented with fear.

When I asked these children what they wanted to be when they are older, they brightened up – and competed with one another to tell me. Renza wanted to become an artist. Steve wanted to become a policeman. Meena said shyly that she wanted to be a doctor. These children, in spite of all they have been through, have not let circumstances diminish their ability to dream of the future.

In Södertälje we face three problems. Firstly our schools and pre-schools are full; of the town's eight thousand pupils, five hundred are enrolled in the special preparation classes we have for newly arrived refugees. We can not hire teachers or build schools fast enough to give all these, often highly motivated pupils a good start in their new country.

Secondly, there is a lack of living accommodation. A great many of the refugees lodge with relatives or friends. We know of cases of fifteen people sleeping on mattresses in a two room apartment.

And last but not least we have a shortage of job opportunities. A small town can not possibly produce jobs for a thousand refugees each year. Here the United States could really help Södertälje. American companies looking to set up businesses or expand in Europe, are most welcome to visit my home town. We need all the job opportunities we can get. I am in awe of the refugees' ambition and will to make new lives for themselves. Many of those who come to our town are well educated and motivated to start a new life in a new country. We need immigrants if we are to manage the demographic challenges we face, as the number of aging citizens in the western world rises.

Despite the fact that we need immigrants, Södertälje has become a town that must now say STOP, STOP, STOP! Do not misunderstand me. We will always help others when we can. We must act when the lives of our brothers and sisters are in danger. It is imperative that we have a humane refugee policy world wide. Our common agreement, that all people are equal, no matter what colour, religion or gender must become a reality.

The millions of refugees in the world must be a concern for us all, not just for those areas bordering on the breeding grounds of war, or for a small number of

countries and cities such as Södertälje.

Södertälje works hard – to spread the reception of refugees equally over the whole of Sweden, to all cities and towns. Internationally, we must find a model for an equal and more responsible reception of refugees. We must also have special support for the refugees on site in Iraq, in Jordan and in Syria. Most of all, we must put an end to this and other on-going wars.

The children I met last week have cousins and friends who are left behind in Iraq. Those children are trying to lead a normal childhood in a land where uneasiness and fear are always present.

I am not a President; I am not an Ambassador; but I know that we must create a new future for the children fleeing from war.

And I know there is no time to lose.

Thank you for your attention.

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