

Refugee camp in the heart of the city

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Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) held an exhibit called “The Refugee Camp in the Heart of the City” in downtown Ottawa, Ontario, from May 13–16 to raise awareness about the living conditions of the world’s 42 million refugees. The following photographs were taken at the 740 square-metre mock refugee camp on May 13. — Roger Collier, *CMAJ*

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Roger Collier

A doll representing an infant refugee was displayed in the health clinic. In actual refugee camps, children under age five are at the greatest risk for malnutrition. Children are initially screened for malnutrition using a mid-upper arm circumference bracelet, and are placed in one of four categories, ranging from “normal” to “severe malnutrition and threat of death.” MSF uses ready-to-use therapeutic foods, designed to meet immediate nutritional needs, to combat malnutrition in children.



Roger Collier

Emily Russell guided visitors around the mock refugee camp, which contained a vaccination tent, a shelter area, a latrine, a food distribution tent, a health clinic, a water supply area, a nutrition centre and a cholera treatment centre. Russell, who is from the United Kingdom and has worked in India, Sudan and Bangladesh, is a logistician with MSF, responsible for technical and operational support of medical activities. At the start of a morning tour on May 13, Russell asked a group of visitors what they would take from their homes if, like many refugees, they had only three minutes to leave. A young girl in a flowered dress replied, “My teddy bear.”



Roger Collier

Water from nearby rivers, lakes or wells is kept in large plastic bladders that can store up to 10 000 litres. If there are no sources of water near a camp, it will be trucked in. At the start of a crisis, refugees may only get about five litres a day to meet their cooking, cleaning and consumption needs. The average Canadian, by contrast, uses an estimated 335 litres of water a day.



Roger Collier

During the early stages of a refugee crisis, as many as 10 000 people can pour into a camp in a short period. Shelters are made quickly, using whatever materials are on hand: bed sheets, sticks, even mud. Waterproof plastic sheeting is particularly coveted.



Roger Collier

During the early days of a refugee crisis, food can be a scarce commodity. By the time they reach a refugee camp, some people have already gone a week without food. Emergency aid from other countries is often delayed due to internal conflicts or politics. Some people get so desperate that they sneak back to their villages for food, even if the conflict that led them to abandon their homes is still ongoing.

Roger Collier



Outside a shelter in a refugee camp, you may find cooking utensils, makeshift stoves and hand-made toy cars.

Roger Collier



There are no toy stores in refugee camps, but there are many children. Toys are made from leftover materials. Soccer balls are made from scraps of fabric and tape. The drum set for this doll is made from old tin cans.

Roger Collier



In a real refugee camp, the background would most likely not contain a Marriott hotel or a construction project near a shopping centre with 180 stores.