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Treat the children as refugees, not immigrants

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Recently, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees called on the United States to treat the influx of children from Central America who are crossing our border as refugees fleeing armed conflict, not as immigrants or asylum seekers. I hope the Obama administration gives this serious consideration. These children, after all, are fleeing gang violence in countries like Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. Many were duped into coming here by human smugglers (known as "coyotes") who make a bundle from travelers headed north, even though the journey is extremely hazardous.

Some children who have family in the United States will most likely be able to stay. But many could be returned to a violent situation, not unlike the conflict zones in other nations. This would be heartless and cruel. Children deserve special humanitarian consideration in the immigration debate.

That view was reinforced in my mind on Tuesday, when I saw some of the endless photos of refugee camps that populate large parts of the Middle East: Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and elsewhere. Many of those refugees are, of course, women and children. I began to think about something we rarely ponder here: What would we do if there were a serious war near our border and war refugees were streaming toward the United States? What if we had to set up "tent cities" in parts of Texas, Arizona or New Mexico? What if we had a major influx of beggars in the streets of our major cities, as is the case now in Beirut, Lebanon? Would we be as flexible as some of those refugee countries in the Middle East and elsewhere? Or would we see anti-immigrant demonstrations like the one that took place recently in California?

This is something to think about. But today, we are clearly called as a nation to shelter children from violence, hopefully giving them the chance for a bright future. Three cheers for groups like Catholic Charities that are already doing that.

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