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FACT SHEET

REFUGEES

DEFINITIONS

Refugee: a person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country..."¹

Asylum seeker: Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that, "Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution." Asylum seekers are people who claim to have suffered persecution in their country of origin, and are looking for refuge in another country.

Internally Displaced Person (IDP): "persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence; in particular as a result of, or in order to, avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border."²

HOW MANY REFUGEES AND FROM WHERE?

Refugee numbers and countries of origin change constantly in response to global events, such as conflict, famine, and changes in government. From 2000 to 2005, the number of refugees fell steadily, to just over nine million people. Among the most significant repatriation movements during that time were the four million Afghans who returned home since 2002. Yet, the UNHCR's 2006 Global Trend's report indicated that the numbers of refugees had risen for the first time in five years to ten million: primarily due to the Iraq crisis. Today, internal conflict and civil war is more common than inter-state conflict, resulting in fewer refugees but more internal displacement. For example, civil conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan accounted for an estimated seven and a half million internally displaced people in 2005.

Determining the exact number of refugees can be difficult. This is due to many countries keeping incomplete or inaccurate records; to refugees returning home, or moving on to other countries, during the course of a year; and to births and deaths among refugees. Furthermore, as internally displaced people are not included in statistics relating to refugees, it can be difficult to obtain an accurate picture of how many people have been displaced by a conflict or other catalyst.

Total Population of concern to UNHCR by region of asylum and category January 2005

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A REFUGEE AND A MIGRANT?

Migrants choose to leave their homeland and they settle in a country of their choice. They usually have time to plan ahead, are well-prepared, and emigrate with their families. They take their possessions and important documentation with them. Migrants leave knowing that they can return to their homeland for visits, or permanently if they wish. Refugees do not choose to leave their homeland, but flee in response to a crisis. They have little choice about where they go or how they will travel. Refugees must often leave family members and personal possessions behind. They arrive in their new country ill prepared and often traumatised. They have few possessions, financial resources, or official documentation. Furthermore, refugees are more likely than migrants to experience stigma and prejudice in their resettlement country; and are unlikely to be able to return to their home country.

- 1 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951.
- 2 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, www.reliefweb.int/ocha_ol/pub/idp_gp/idp.html.
- 3 The State of the World's Refugees 2006, UNHCR, www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/template?page=publ&src=static/sowr2006/toceng.htm.



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DIVERSITY

Refugees come from a wide range of countries, cultures, and circumstances. Refugees may have experienced years of warfare; internal displacement or repression; siege conditions in their home town or cities; or many other forms of chaos and violence. All refugees have experienced persecution; and many have experienced eviction from their homes, aerial bombardment, arrest and killing of family members, imprisonment or detention (often without reasonable cause and for long periods of time), or separation from family members. Many refugees have also survived physical violence, rape, torture, starvation, and dangerous journeys to asylum countries.

WHO CAN'T BECOME A REFUGEE?

A refugee is a civilian; so cannot be a soldier. A person who continues to engage in armed action against his or her country of origin from the country of asylum cannot be considered a refugee. In addition, people who have participated in war crimes and violations of international humanitarian and human rights law are excluded from the protection accorded to refugees. However, in practice, especially during a mass exodus, it is sometimes difficult to separate people suspected of serious human rights violations from actual refugees. For example, in the 1990s, known human rights violators lived in the huge refugee camps for Rwandans established in surrounding countries.¹

REFUGEE CAMPS

"No matter how well refugee camps have been organised, they all lead to demoralisation, and usually become total institutions, often unsafe, and are usually totally desolate alienating places," Sue Elliot, independent development practitioner.

Refugees arriving en masse and by land (that is by walking over an international border) either concentrate on an unoccupied site and create a camp, or take residence in a camp that has been created for them by the host country, an NGO such as the Red Cross, or the UNHCR (or a combination of these). Depending on the conditions, refugee camps may be well-organised; or huge, haphazard collections of makeshift shelters. A badly planned refugee camp can lead to overcrowding, poor hygiene, and the rapid spread of diseases such as measles, meningitis, and cholera. Lack of adequate shelter may mean that the population is deprived of privacy and exposed to the elements. Refugee camps are usually comprised of between a few thousand to a few hundred thousand people, although the refugee camps in Zaire that developed as a result of genocide in Rwanda in 1994 were home to around a million refugees.²

Refugee camps are usually designed to be a temporary home; as it is intended that refugees will either return to their country of origin when it becomes safe to do so, settle in the country of asylum, or resettle in a third country. However, according to the UNHCR, the average duration of a major refugee situation increased from nine years in 1993 to 17 years in 2003. The UNHCR describes the consequences of protracted refugee situations as "wasted lives, squandered resources and future problems, in terms of potential security risks".³

- 1 Protecting Refugees: Questions and Answers, www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/basics/opendoc.htm?tbl=BA&SICS&id=3b0280294#draft.
- 2 Medecins Sans Frontieres, 2003, www.refugeecamp.org/degrade/shelter/.
- 3 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, www.irinnews.org/webspecials/RR/default.asp.



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SEPARATED CHILDREN

Separated children (sometimes referred to as 'unaccompanied minors') are people below 18 years of age who are outside their country of origin and separated from both parents, or from previous legal or customary caregiver. Some children are totally alone, while others may be living with extended family members or other adults. As such, some may appear to be 'accompanied' but the accompanying adults are not necessarily able or suitable to assume responsibility for their care. Policies that prioritise separated children recognise that children suffer physically, socially and psychologically as a result of being without the care and protection of their parents or previous primary care giver.

Separated children may seek asylum because of fear of persecution or lack of protection due to human rights violations, armed conflict or disturbances in their home country. They may be victims of trafficking for sexual or other exploitation, or they may have left their home country to escape conditions of serious deprivation. Many of them have experienced terrifying events or conditions of severe hardship. The number of separated child refugees often comprises two to five percent of a refugee population.

Dolma (12) escaped from Tibet over the mountains. *"It was really scary and I was afraid the whole time. There were many times I thought I would die. The mountains were full of Chinese soldiers who were looking for refugees. Every time the guides heard the sound of a car or people, they tied us children tightly in rope and lowered us down the mountainside. The guides were Nepalese and pretend they were hiking. Sometimes we hung there for a long time, high above the ground and sometimes in the middle of the night. But I wasn't afraid of falling. I was just terrified of being discovered and going to prison. I was also scared of what would happen to my parents if I got caught."*¹

WOMEN

Around 50% of the world's refugees are women. Refugee women are disproportionately affected by physical and sexual violence and abuse, have unequal access to asylum procedures and humanitarian assistance and often do not receive individual identity documents. In addition, refugee services and programmes are more often designed to meet the needs of men than women. The main protection concerns facing refugee women are safety and security; gaining equal access to humanitarian assistance, and registration and documentation; ensuring gender-sensitive application of refugee law and procedures; and trafficking in women and girls. Women who are unable to feed, clothe, or shelter themselves or their children are often forced into prostitution or subject to other kinds of abuse.²

*"While I stayed in the refugee camp for years, they gave me not enough food for my four children and me. Always it was the men who got the best of everything. If someone gave me anything, because the men were stronger, they would push me and fight me and take it from me, so I was afraid to take anything, even for my children. That is how it is for a woman who has no husband."*³

RESETTLEMENT

The UNHCR promotes three solutions for refugees. The first preference is voluntary repatriation (where refugees choose to return to their country of origin), where it is safe to do so. If it is not possible for refugees to return to their home country, the UNHCR attempts to integrate refugees in the country of first asylum. The last solution is third country resettlement. This is considered to be the most expensive option and one that can help the least number of people, and so is the least often applied of the three solutions. It is promoted for especially vulnerable individuals and groups (such as women, separated children, and people suffering from urgent medical conditions). Less than 1% of refugees and displaced people worldwide ever resettle in a third country.

- 1 The New Life Begins, The Globe, #42, Children's World, Sweden, 2006.
- 2 Refugee Women, Global Consultants on International Protection, 2002. www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/protect/opendoc.pdf?tbl=PROTECTIO&id=3cd154b64.
- 3 Refugees: Who they are and where they come from, Ministry of Health, New Zealand, [www.moh.govt.nz/moh.nsf/0/85ce7cd090faaa4cc256b050007d7cb/\\$FILE/Section1.pdf](http://www.moh.govt.nz/moh.nsf/0/85ce7cd090faaa4cc256b050007d7cb/$FILE/Section1.pdf).



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RESETTLEMENT QUOTAS

Only ten countries operate a regular refugee quota programme for third country resettlement of refugees. These are Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Aotearoa NZ, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the USA. In addition, Argentina, Benin, Burkina Faso, Brazil, Chile, Iceland, Spain, and the UK have recently started resettlement programmes. Other countries accept refugees on a case by case basis. Of the countries which have quota programmes, the USA and Canada accept the most refugees. However, Aotearoa NZ has one of the highest rates of acceptance in the world, proportionate to population.

INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS *(see definition at the beginning of this factsheet)*

The United Nations estimates there are as many as 25 million IDPs in 50 countries. While refugees normally receive food, shelter and a place of safety in the host country and are protected by a well-defined body of international laws and conventions, IDPs are often not as fortunate. They may be trapped in an ongoing internal conflict and the domestic government, which may view the IDPs as enemies of the state, retains control of their lives. There are no specific international legal instruments covering IDPs, and general agreements such as the Geneva Conventions are often difficult to apply. Furthermore, aid organisations are sometimes reluctant to intervene in internal conflicts or offer sustained assistance, although the International Committee of the Red Cross has been active in this field for a long time.

HIV/AIDS

A variety of complex factors within refugee camps or displacement settlements make the people living there vulnerable to acquiring human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Women and girls are vulnerable to sexual violence and rape, and drug and alcohol abuse are often rife. In addition, health care services are often minimal or non-existent.

Sub-Saharan Africa has just over 10% of the world's population, but is home to more than 60% of all people living with HIV (25.8 million).¹ It is also the region with the largest number of conflicts during the past decade – resulting in large numbers of refugees and IDPs – many of whom are HIV positive.²

Many countries of first asylum are already overburdened by the impact of HIV/AIDS, and are often unable or unwilling to provide refugee populations with the HIV-related services they require. Failure to provide HIV prevention and care to refugees not only undermines effective HIV prevention and care efforts, it also hinders effective HIV prevention and care for host country populations.³

MENTAL HEALTH

Many refugees experiencing the effects of trauma, cultural dislocation, and uncertainty may suffer from anxiety, depression, eating disorders, grief and loss, psychosomatic disorders, or a range of other mental health issues.

REFUGEE RETURNEES

Many refugees choose to voluntarily repatriate; and the UNHCR promotes voluntary repatriation, where it is safe for refugees to do so. When the peace process is not assured, but refugees are returning on their own anyway, the UNHCR often assists the return process.

It can be dangerous for refugees to return to their homes. There are numerous instances worldwide of refugee returnees being attacked, discriminated against, injured or killed by landmines left over from previous conflicts, or becoming the victims of crime due to continuing civil unrest. In 2003, over a two-week period, eight people were killed and one wounded in a string of incidents involving people returning to their pre-war homes in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁴

- 1 Sub-Saharan Africa, www.unaids.org/en/Regions_Countries/Regions/SubSaharanAfrica.asp.
- 2 Community Conversations in response to HIV/AIDS, UNHCR, 2005. www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/protect/opendoc.pdf?tbl=PROTECTION&id=43a938162.
- 3 Strategies to support the HIV-related needs of refugees and host populations, UNAIDS & UNHCR, 2005. www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/protect/opendoc.pdf?tbl=PROTECTION&id=438ad15d2.
- 4 www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/news/opendoc.htm?tbl=NEWS&page=home&id=3e71eea79.



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On the other hand, there are numerous instances where refugee returnees are not only welcomed back in to their communities but go on to make valuable contributions of skills they may have gained while in other countries. In one example, an Afghan refugee family that had lived in Iran for 19 years returned to their hometown and set up a school – providing the only education for girls in the area. “We left because of war. We returned because of peace,” said 18-year-old Parween.¹

UNHCR

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established in 1950, in an attempt by the international community to provide protection and assistance to refugees in the wake of World War II (WWII). As a humanitarian, non-political organisation, UNHCR aims to protect refugees and to seek ways to help them restart their lives in a normal environment. UNHCR helps refugees repatriate to their homeland if possible, to integrate in their countries of asylum, or to resettle in third countries. UNHCR also coordinates the provision and delivery of shelter, food, water, sanitation and medical care to refugee populations.

UNHCR is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions, principally from governments but also from intergovernmental organisations, corporations and individuals. It receives a limited subsidy from the United Nations regular budget for administrative costs and accepts ‘in-kind’ contributions of items such as tents, medicine, trucks and air transportation.

EMERGING ISSUES FOR REFUGEES

In public opinion, particularly since the 2001 attacks on the USA, there has been a blurring of illegal migration and security problems with asylum and refugee issues. The idea that refugees and asylum seekers are the agents of insecurity rather than its victims is increasingly evident in governmental policies relating to refugees.² Countries that once had generous refugee policies now consider the costs of asylum to outweigh the benefits. State security concerns have become the dominant concern in the migration debate, at times overshadowing the legitimate protection needs of individuals. As governments have revisited their asylum systems from a security angle, they have introduced more restrictive policies and procedures. Furthermore, in the view of governments aiming to minimise migration, asylum is an exemption that allows too many people through. These developments have taken place against a background of greater collaboration between the asylum and immigration authorities and intelligence and law enforcement agencies. While recognising that states have legitimate concerns in the areas of security, uncontrolled migration and the costs of providing asylum, UNHCR maintains that the fundamental principles of the Convention remain as valid and necessary as ever.

- 1 Tim Irwin, Afghan Family Brings With Them Love of Learning, 4 July 2005, www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/news/opendoc.htm?tbl=NEWS&page=home&id=42c90a014.
- 2 Foreword by the UNHCR, p2, The State of the World's Refugees 2006, UNHCR [unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/publ/opendoc.pdf?id=4444afd111&tbl=PUBL](http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/publ/opendoc.pdf?id=4444afd111&tbl=PUBL).