

# Refugees and displaced people



It is impossible to imagine what it is like to be a refugee unless you have experienced it.

War, civil unrest, or political, religious or racial persecution make you fear for your life, you feel forced to leave your home and all that you know.

Days or weeks of hiding and travelling make you feel very uncertain of ever finding a safe place to stay. Separation from your family causes great suffering.

Waiting, for months or even years for a resolution of the situation; staying in a crowded place, dependent on others for basic needs leads to loss of self esteem and confidence.

Rebuilding your life either in your own country or as a foreigner in a new country causes further pain.



## Who are refugees?

According to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol:

A **refugee** is a person outside their country of nationality who is unable or unwilling to return because of "a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion."

An **internally displaced person (IDP)** is a person who has had to flee to another part of their country to seek safety but has not crossed an international border. As they are still within their country, international treaties are unable to protect them.

An **asylum seeker** is a person who has left their own country and applied for recognition as a refugee in another country.

**According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR), there are over 20 million people 'of concern' around the world. This means that there are five times as many people who are refugees, asylum seekers, returned refugees, internally displaced or stateless than the entire population of New Zealand. (UNCHR 2003)**

## Origin of the 10 largest refugee populations 2002 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) 2003)

Country of origin	Main countries of asylum	Refugees
Afghanistan	Iran / Pakistan	2,481,000
Burundi	Tanzania / D.R.Congo	574,000
Sudan	Uganda / Ethiopia / D.R. Congo / Kenya / Central African Republic	505,200
Angola	Zambia / D.R. Congo / Namibia / Congo	433,000
Somalia	Kenya / Yemen / Ethiopia / UK / USA / Djibouti	429,000
D.R. Congo	Tanzania / Congo / Zambia / Burundi / Rwanda	415,000
Iraq	Iran / Germany / Netherlands / Sweden	401,000
Bosnia-Herzegovina	Serbia-Montenegro / USA / Sweden / Denmark / Netherlands	372,000
Viet Nam	China / USA	348,000
Eritrea	Sudan / Ethiopia	316,000



## How has the refugee situation changed?

In 1951 there were roughly one million refugees, mainly from countries in Europe. In 2003 there were over 10 million refugees, most of whom have fled from one poor country to another, 5.7 million internally displaced people and over 1 million asylum seekers, mostly living in industrialised countries (UNHCR 2003). Women and children make up the majority of these populations as men are often involved in fighting or killed.

## How are refugees assisted?

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) leads and co-ordinates international action for the world-wide protection of refugees and the resolution of refugee problems.

UNHCR:

- safeguards the well-being of refugees; assists with shelter, food, medical needs, education and work opportunities
- ensures the rights of refugees: to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another state; to return home voluntarily; to settle in another country
- seeks lasting solutions to the plight of refugees, encouraging protection of human rights and the peaceful resolution of disputes.

In all of its activities, UNHCR pays particular attention to the needs of children and seeks to promote the equal rights of women and girls. It discourages dependency by consulting refugees on decisions that affect their lives. UNHCR works in partnership with governments, regional organisations, international and non-governmental organisations.

Non-government organisations (NGOs) play a major role in supporting the work of the UNHCR. Standards for the delivery of assistance are set out in an NGO Code of Conduct, to which over 100 NGOs, including World Vision, are signatories. Its principal points emphasise that



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the humanitarian imperative comes first, regardless of race, creed or nationality; that aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint; that aid organisations will endeavour not to act as instruments of government foreign policy and will respect culture and custom and attempt to build their response on local capacities.

The media play a significant role in highlighting refugee situations throughout the world. Unfortunately, geographical proximity and political interests mean that the level of media attention for different countries varies. For example, emergencies in Iraq and Afghanistan have attracted more attention than the countries in West Africa.

## Phases of refugee operations

There are three main phases in which refugees need assistance:

### 1. Forced to flee

Armed conflict and political and social unrest make normal life impossible. Lives are threatened, children kidnapped, women raped, crops and forests burned, houses, schools and health clinics destroyed, landmines laid and wells fouled so that people flee in fear to escape further pain. Weak governments may selectively deliver scarce services or fail to protect vulnerable groups from abuse. Natural differences between groups—religious, social or ethnic—are exploited through discrimination or violence and become divisive.

### 2. Living in limbo

Some refugees reach temporary accommodation in camps or centres set up by the government of the host country, UNHCR and aid agencies on land or in buildings acquired for the purpose. Providing for large populations of traumatised people is a major logistical undertaking.

Issues include:

#### Shelter

- How does the weather affect needs?
- What materials are available?

#### Food

- Which foods are usually eaten?
- What food is available?
- How will it be transported? distributed? prepared?
- Are there malnourished children needing supplementary feeding?

#### Water and sanitation

- Will clean water be available locally or need to be transported?
- Can adequate sanitation be provided without negatively impacting the environment?



#### Physical and emotional health

- How will medical needs be met?
- What counselling will be available?
- How will families be reunited?
- How will refugees spend their time?

#### Education

- Are there teachers and school materials available?

#### Environment

- How will food, fuel and building needs be met without damaging the environment?

#### Women and children

- How will women and children be provided with a fair share of resources?
- How will they be consulted and take an active part in decision making?
- How will they be protected against further violence?

#### Children and Young People

Children and young people under the age of 18 make up 45% of refugee populations worldwide. The percentage of refugee children ranges from 57% in Central Africa to only 20% in Central and Eastern Europe.

Compared with other groups, young people are the most psychologically affected by war and displacement. They are old enough to understand the dangers of war and displacement but don't yet have the maturity to cope with the stress and are less receptive to family support. Many risk recruitment into the armed forces.

Young people are also vulnerable to sexual exploitation and violence. They are particularly at risk of being sexually enslaved, compelled into prostitution or forced into early marriages.

(UNHCR -World Refugee Day 2003)

### 3. Finding a new home

The ideal solution for those who have been forced to flee would be for the situation which caused their flight to be resolved and for them to be able to return home without fear. Unfortunately this is not often the case. Refugees may be forced to return as refugee camps are closed, as the demands are too great for the host government, or security issues arise. Refugees may not be convinced that life will be better if they return and may want to remain or be resettled elsewhere.

#### a) Repatriation

To return home voluntarily, in safety and with dignity is what most refugees most desire but returnees face a range of problems. In 2002, 2.4 million refugees returned home to places such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda and Afghanistan (UNHCR 2003). They face a long road of recovery as they rebuild their homes and livelihoods, overcoming difficulties such as landmines, disputes over land ownership, as well as the trauma of war and loss. They need reconciliation with those who have stayed behind.

#### b) Integration

When it is not possible to return home the country of asylum may be able to absorb and integrate the refugees into their country. The refugees need assistance to earn a living and resume their lives. This is most likely in areas where there are similar cultures and language.

#### c) Resettlement

Sometimes resettlement in a third country may be the only way to guarantee international protection of a refugee. Refugees are usually granted entry by governments on a case-by-case basis although only 41,000 people were resettled in 2002 (UNHCR 2003). Decreasing budgets for aid and negative public opinion about issues of immigration mean the numbers of refugees resettled in developed countries does not keep pace with the demand.

Resettlement requires close liaison between UNHCR, with central and local authorities, NGOs and religious and social welfare groups. It is often through the efforts of NGOs that the public in resettlement countries is made aware of the plight of needy refugees. Women at risk, disabled people, children separated from family and the elderly have greater needs and are harder to find places for resettlement.



## New Zealand and refugees

In 2003 the New Zealand government contributed US\$1,278,370.00 to the UNHCR budget, as well as contributing to emergency appeals relating to humanitarian crises. As part of its overseas aid programme, NZ government is working on a policy on conflict prevention and peace building which will guide its overseas development programmes in countries seen as at risk. Around 40% of the aid budget is currently spent on programmes to strengthen good governance in the Pacific. Better government means more security and stability, and less likelihood of people being forced to become refugees or displaced people.

The NZ government's immigration policy allows 27,000 migrants to enter the country each year. This figure includes the annual quota of 750 refugees which NZ accepts as a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees. These are selected and interviewed overseas and brought to NZ for resettlement. NZ immigration policy also allows some refugees' relatives to join them. Asylum seekers, who claim refugee status at the border or after entering NZ, are interviewed by a representative of the NZ Immigration Service. If their claims are considered valid they are allowed to stay. If refugee status is declined, the asylum seeker may lodge a claim with the Refugee Status Appeals Authority. If the claim is unsuccessful, the asylum seeker has to leave the country.



## Action You Can Take

**EDUCATE** others about the plight of refugees and find out more about New Zealand's obligations and policies using some of the suggested websites listed at the end of this sheet.

**URGE** the New Zealand government to take seriously its responsibility to provide asylum for refugees, including those with special needs, to maintain support for refugee related assistance and for development programs which alleviate poverty and conflict.

**SUPPORT** World Vision to provide emergency relief and support for refugees and displaced people in developing countries.

**JOIN** a community organisation which assists refugees settle into New Zealand. You may help with locating community services such as transport, food, employment agencies and in practising English.

## Useful websites

**United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR):** <http://www.unhcr.ch>

**NZAID** is New Zealand's agency responsible for international assistance to developing countries: <http://www.nzaid.govt.nz/>

**ReliefWeb** provides information about relief and humanitarian issues around the world: <http://www.reliefweb.int>

**The Refugee Council of New Zealand** is national organisation which assists refugees and asylum seekers in New Zealand. It also campaigns to ensure New Zealand meets its obligations under the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees: <http://www.supportfind.com/rcnz/>

### Sources:

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