



UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

The **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)** provides protection and assistance to the world's refugees. Based in Geneva, Switzerland, the agency was created by the United Nations General Assembly and began work in 1951, initially aiding more than one million European refugees in the aftermath of World War II.

Over the following decades, as the number of uprooted people grew around the globe, its mandate was extended every five years. In December 2003, the UN General Assembly decided to remove the time limitation on UNHCR's mandate. At the beginning of 2007, the number of people 'of concern' to UNHCR was 32.9 million worldwide, an increase of 58 percent over the previous year's 20.8 million. This increase was due mainly to a rise in the number of internally displaced and stateless people helped by the agency.

People of concern to UNHCR include not only refugees, but related groups such as asylum seekers, refugees who have returned home, stateless people and some (but not all) of the estimated 26 million people who are displaced within their own countries – usually referred to as internally displaced persons (IDPs).

During its lifetime, UNHCR has helped well over 50 million people successfully restart their lives, earning two Nobel Peace Prizes in the process – in 1954 and 1981.

The current High Commissioner for Refugees is António Guterres, a former Portuguese prime minister who assumed his post on 15 June 2005. He is the organization's tenth High Commissioner. He reports verbally to the Economic and Social Council on coordination aspects of the agency's work, and submits a written report annually to the UN General Assembly on the overall work of UNHCR. The High Commissioner's programmes are approved and supervised by UNHCR's Executive Committee, currently composed of 76 member countries.

The 1951 UN Refugee Convention – closely echoed by UNHCR's founding statute – defines a refugee as a person who "owing to 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 [or her] nationality, and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself [or herself] of the protection of that country." Regional instruments such as the 1969 Organization of African Unity Refugee Convention and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration in Latin America expanded the definition to explicitly include people who have fled because of war or civil conflict.

UNHCR's most important responsibility, known as "international protection," is to ensure respect for the basic human rights of these refugees, including the possibility for them to seek asylum and to ensure that no one is returned involuntarily to a country where he or she has reason to fear persecution. The organization promotes international refugee agreements, monitors government compliance with international law and provides material assistance such as food, water, shelter and medical care to fleeing civilians.

UNHCR also seeks one of three durable solutions for refugees. Voluntary repatriation to their original homes is the preferred solution for most of them. But this is not always possible, and in such cases UNHCR helps people to try to rebuild their lives elsewhere – either in the countries where they first sought asylum or in a third country willing to accept them for resettlement.

UNHCR has been asked periodically by the UN Secretary-General to help some groups of internally displaced people, whose numbers have risen dramatically since the end of the Cold War because of the increase in the number of civil wars taking place around the world.

The internally displaced have not crossed international frontiers and are not protected by the same international conventions as refugees. But the plight of the two groups often overlap and a single coordinated operation is sometimes the most obvious and sensible approach. This is especially true during repatriation operations when the internally displaced are often in the same geographical locations as returning refugees and face many of the same needs. In 2005, UN and other specialized agencies agreed to a more coordinated and cohesive approach to tackle the problem of internally displaced civilians. Under this new ‘collaborative approach,’ UNHCR takes a lead role in overseeing the protection and emergency shelter needs of IDPs as well as in the coordination and management of camps. UNHCR has participated in more than 30 operations to help internally displaced people since the 1970s, including Timor, Sri Lanka, Uganda, DRC, Colombia, Afghanistan and more recently in the Sudanese region of Darfur. The agency currently helps an estimated 12.8 million internally displaced worldwide.

UNHCR’s programmes are financed by voluntary contributions, mainly from governments, but also from other groups, including private citizens and organizations. It receives a limited contribution from the United Nations regular budget to cover some of its administrative costs.

As of April 2008, UNHCR’s annual budget, including supplementary programmes, amounts \$1.64 billion. In 2007, major contributors were the United States (\$367 million), Japan (\$89 million), Sweden (\$85 million), the European Commission (\$84 million) and the Netherlands (\$74 million).

As of April 2008, UNHCR had a total of 6,351 staff members – regular as well as temporary – in 268 offices located in 117 countries. More than 86.8 percent of them work in the field, often in remote and dangerous locations. Among UNHCR’s major regular assistance programmes in 2008 are projects in Iraq; Democratic Republic of the Congo; Central African Republic/Chad/Darfur; Colombia; Somalia; Sri Lanka; Afghanistan; Liberia; Southern Sudan; and Uganda. UNHCR is also involved in issues related to mixed movements of refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants, some of them across land borders, but also across the Atlantic Ocean, the Gulf of Aden, the Mediterranean Sea and other stretches of water.

As humanitarian crises have become more complex, UNHCR has expanded both the number and types of organizations it works with, including United Nations sister agencies and more than 600 non-governmental organizations.

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