

# Refugees: the Past, Present, and Future

On the formation of UNHCR and its applicability to the needs of today

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*"It is the obligation of every person born in a safer room to open the door when someone in danger knocks." - Dina Nayeri*

## Abstract

The United Nations was founded in the context of World War II with a mission of promoting peace amongst the nations of the world. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) came to be in this environment, with a goal of providing aid to the many individuals who were forcibly displaced in Europe in the aftermath of the war. Its scope was later expanded to include people forcibly displaced at any time in any part of the world. Since then, UNHCR has helped millions of displaced persons in various countries. Three major crises of today that have produced a large number of refugees include the Syrian conflict, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the prolonged instability in Afghanistan. Climate change has played an increasingly important role in the mass displacement of people today and there are differing opinions on the need to formally address this population. UNHCR's current position is one of acknowledgement while maintaining that the current provisions in place for displaced populations are adequate for supporting individuals that may be displaced, in part, due to climate change. Criticism exists towards this position, finding it to inadequately address the needs of the displaced of today.

## Historical Background

Reviewing the definition of refugees as set by the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is incomplete without first understanding the context within which this office was created. The United Nations officially came to be in late 1945, at the end of World War II, with the aim of promoting peace amongst the nations of the world, although the acknowledgement that its conception was

necessary was there from the beginning of the war.<sup>1</sup> Preceded by the League of Nations, which was deemed ineffective, the United Nations aimed to utilize more tangible and multifaceted methods for international cooperation. The United Nations has the ability to deploy a military force, for example. It also addressed issues that more indirectly contributed to peacekeeping amongst the world, such as economic policies and human rights issues.<sup>2</sup>

One of the issues that was tackled by the United Nations was the large number of displaced populations that emerged from WWII. Approximately 40 million people were displaced by the time the war ended, many of whom resided in Eastern Europe. It became abundantly clear that a system would be necessary to address the redistribution of refugees, many of whom were in need of shelter and medical attention.<sup>3</sup> The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was established in 1943, prior to the end of the war and the founding of the UN, at a 44 nation conference held in the United States, to provide economic aid and repatriation services to affected European nations.<sup>3</sup> Once the United Nations was established, it became the parent organization for UNRRA. Within a few years, UNRRA established hundreds of refugee camps and resettled hundreds of thousands of people, before it was replaced in 1947 by the International Refugee Organization and then by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees shortly thereafter.<sup>3</sup> The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees was held in 1951, culminating in a multilateral treaty which defined the scope of UNCHR, and also set out a definition of a refugee as:

***“someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.”<sup>4</sup>***

Only one amendment has been made to the treaty since its conception, removing the temporal and geographical limits of the original agreement. The Convention, with a goal of addressing post war displacement, was initially limited to people within Europe that were fleeing from events that occurred before January 1951. The amendment passed in 1967 allowed for the document to provide indefinite, universal coverage.<sup>3</sup>

It is also worth noting that the goal of UNHCR is rooted in and given validity by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a foundational document that was created through a meticulous and collaborative process to define human rights that are considered fundamental to all. It was adopted by the United Nations in 1948. Article 14 of the Declaration states that “Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.”<sup>5</sup>

## **The Refugees of Today**

Since its conception, UNHCR has tackled crises around the world that have led to displacement. As of the end of 2021, there were estimated to be 89.3 million forcibly displaced persons around the world, including 27.1 million refugees, 53.2 million internally displaced persons, and 4.6 million asylum seekers.<sup>6</sup> Currently UNHCR is combating emergencies in Afghanistan, Burundi, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Central America, Ethiopia, Iraq, Nigeria, Myanmar, Sahel, South Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Venezuela, and Yemen, among others. Of these, Syria, Ukraine, and Afghanistan are the largest crises of today.<sup>6</sup>

### *Syria*

In the midst of the Arab spring, young civilians took to the streets in the southern city of Daraa in Syria in March of 2011, protesting against the government and seeking reformation. What started off as non-violent protests was met with government crackdowns and eventually transformed into a devastating civil war.<sup>7</sup> The conflict between Bashar al-Assad's regime and various other forces in Syria over the past ten years has led to the death of over 300,000 people,<sup>8</sup> and the displacement of over 13 million Syrians both within the country and to various other

countries around the world.<sup>9,10</sup> Turkey hosts the greatest number of Syrian refugees, with Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt also hosting large numbers of displaced people from the country.<sup>9,10</sup>

### *Ukraine*

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine began in 2014 around Crimea and Donbas.<sup>11</sup> The ongoing difficulties culminated with Russia launching a large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.<sup>11</sup> The consequences have been vast, with thousands of Ukrainians losing their lives, and millions fleeing the country for their safety. As of October 2022, almost 8 million Ukrainian refugees have been recorded throughout Europe, and a similar number are thought to be displaced internally.<sup>12</sup> This is considered to be the largest refugee emergency that has occurred since World War II. Poland, Hungary, and Romania are a few of the countries that have received the most Ukrainians over the past few months.<sup>13</sup>

### *Afghanistan*

Afghanistan has faced various challenges over the years making it one of the biggest refugee producing countries in the world. The Soviet invasion of the country in 1979; the Afghan civil war in the 1990s; the U.S. war on Afghanistan post 9/11; and 2021

withdrawal of U.S. troops and subsequent takeover by the Taliban have all contributed to the displacement of Afghans both within and out of the country. There are estimated to be over 2 million refugees from Afghanistan in the world today, with the majority residing in Pakistan and Iran, as well as over 3 million Afghans displaced internally.<sup>14</sup>

### **Climate Change & Displacement**

There is an increasing understanding and awareness of the role climate change is playing in the mass displacement of people throughout the world. Changes in climate contribute to drought, heat, storms, and elevation in sea-level, all of which can cause locations to become uninhabitable and push residents elsewhere in search of more feasible living conditions. Drought can render land non-arable and leave farming communities vulnerable to food insecurity. Heat can also contribute to this, as well as, at high enough temperatures, prove unbearable for human habitation. Rising sea-levels lead to flooding of low-level land, and force individuals to seek refuge inland or in the case of islands, to other contiguous regions. Storms can contribute both to flooding and to the destruction of crops. Areas that are deemed to be particularly vulnerable include the Sahel, Middle East and North Africa,

Central America, and South Asia. The questions of climate change and displacement are not if, but rather when and at what rate, as well as, most importantly, whether there are adequate supports in place to address this inevitable phenomenon.<sup>15</sup>

UNHCR does acknowledge the role that climate change plays in displacement. In its Global Trends 2021 Report,<sup>16</sup> there is a chapter dedicated to the various routes through which climate change affects human mobility and includes the various mechanisms discussed above, as well as conflict that is spurred by the resource limitations that climate change contributes to. However, the chapter argues that due to confounding factors making it difficult to ascertain causality between climate change and displacement, there are limitations on available data on the subject, as well as our ability to predict how exactly one will impact the other. Nevertheless, many individuals displaced in part by climate change would likely have been displaced due to other factors such as conflict or political instability. Given this, the report asserts that there is no need to form a new legal category to provide the relevant protection for these displaced individuals.<sup>16</sup>

Criticism exists towards this stance, based largely on the comparison of ideals set in place by international law versus the reality of the displacement crises of today. Individuals impacted by climate change are largely located in poorly resourced regions that are already overstretched and do not have the infrastructure necessary to accommodate an influx of people. These countries contribute very little to climate change but are disproportionately impacted by it, while high-income countries like the United States and Australia are major polluters, but maintain very strict criteria and quotas on accepting displaced people. People impacted by climate change are not given any formal security measures and if not otherwise fleeing from persecution, will not be considered “refugees” and given the protection outlined for them in international law, leaving them and their host countries without support or aid.<sup>17</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Throughout time, the human race has proven to be reactive, generally more willing to tackle crises as they become glaringly apparent, rather than proactive in nature. UNHCR was created in the midst of a world war to take care of individuals that had been uprooted throughout the conflicts in Europe. While UNHCR has expanded its scope since

its conception to provide services for refugees from around the world that have been impacted by various conflicts, it has not expanded its definition of a refugee to include people migrating due to the effects of climate change on their habitat. They argue that people affected by climate change are also generally fleeing from conflict and receive “refugee” status regardless; trying to carve out a separate status for people affected by climate change is difficult given the various confounding factors leading to their displacement and limited data to track the situation. However, the reality is that more and more people are getting displaced throughout the world, for a variety of reasons, including climate change, and there is not enough support in place to handle the displacement. The majority of the burden is being carried by low and middle income countries who are already stretched thin and higher income countries are generally very firm in the caps they place on the number of displaced persons they host. Human migration is very much a reality of today’s globalized, climate impacted, conflict-torn world, and while the expansion of the definition of a refugee may not be the solution, it is essential to develop an equitable and human-centered method for redistributing displaced people throughout the world, sooner rather than later.

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