

FACTS AND FIGURES

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), created in December 1950 by Resolution 428 (V) of the United Nations General Assembly, began operations on 1 January 1951. Initially established as a temporary office, with a projected life span of three years, UNHCR's mandate has since then been extended every five years. Today, there are some 22.3 million refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR. It is one of the world's principal humanitarian agencies, with 274 offices in 120 countries and has twice been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its work.

THE MANDATE

UNHCR's mandate is to provide international protection to refugees and seek durable solutions to their plight. The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees 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 nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." Over the years, several General Assembly resolutions, endorsed by the international community, have requested UNHCR's involvement with persons who are outside their country of origin because of persecution, armed conflict, generalised violence, foreign aggression or other circumstances leading to flight. UNHCR has provided these persons with international protection and humanitarian assistance, especially when host governments have been unable to do so.

THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

The High Commissioner is nominated by the UN Secretary-General and elected by the General Assembly. The current High Commissioner for Refugees is Sadako Ogata, a former Japanese diplomat and academic. Mrs. Ogata assumed

The Office's work is guided by its Statute, the 1951 Convention, the General Assembly, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the decisions and conclusions adopted by the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's programme. Of the durable solutions it seeks to promote, the preferred one is voluntary repatriation, whereby refugees return home and resume their lives. When repatriation is impossible, UNHCR tries to help refugees settle locally in the country of asylum. When neither of these solutions is possible, the possibility of resettlement in a third country is explored. Although resettlement remains an important instrument of international protection, the number of refugees to have resettled in a third country has declined since the late 1980s.

office on 18 February 1991 after being elected for a three-year term by the UN General Assembly on 21 December 1990. Since then, Mrs. Ogata has been re-elected twice.

THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

UNHCR's Executive Committee (EXCOM) was created by ECOSOC in 1958, following a request from the General Assembly. Its main tasks are to approve the High Commissioner's assistance programmes, advise the High Commissioner in the exercise of his/her functions (mainly on protection issues), and scrutinise all financial and

administrative aspects of the agency. The 54 EXCOM members – all of them governments, listed in the annexes at the end of this document – meet once a year (every October, in Geneva) but EXCOM's Standing Committee meets every three or four months. UNHCR reports annually to the General Assembly through the ECOSOC.

PART OF THE UN SYSTEM

UNHCR was created by a resolution of the General Assembly and is one of a network of UN Funds and programmes, specialised agencies and commissions. Of these, UNHCR works most close-

ly with WFP, UNICEF, WHO, and UNDP. UNHCR also liaises closely with Bretton Woods institutions such as the World Bank.

WORKING WITH PARTNERS

Protecting refugees requires the cooperation of many international actors. UNHCR fosters good working relationships among host governments, other UN agencies, intergovernmental and regional organisations as well as national and international NGOs.

Governments work with UNHCR by granting asylum to refugees and permitting them to stay in their countries. Many governments also help refugees settle in their countries by providing financial assistance. UNHCR receives most of the funding for its operations through government contributions.

Partnerships among UNHCR and NGOs have been strengthened thanks to the Partnership in Action (PARinAC) process. This process, which

began in 1994, defines structures and mechanisms for cooperation and identifies areas where existing partnerships can be reinforced. After a thorough review of the process in 1999, a draft Plan of Action was submitted for review to participating NGOs in early October. The most important contribution of the PARinAC process so far has been to create increased awareness of the potential resources offered by national and local NGOs. Among the recommendations of the new plan are: regional meetings; training of NGO coordinators; a review of partnership criteria; the development of policy, briefing packages and a handbook for capacity-building; the publication of an annual report on achievements; and the setting up of an interactive web-site. In 1999, UNHCR is working with 513 NGOs as implementing partners.

PERSONS OF CONCERN

The total number of people of concern to UNHCR has decreased from a record 27 million in 1995 to 22.3 million as of January 1999. They include the following:

Refugees (11.5 million)

Persons outside their country of origin and recognised as refugees by governments which have signed the various UN or regional instruments relating to the legal status of refugees; or recognised by UNHCR, according to the definition contained in the High Commissioner's Statute. The latter are known as 'mandate refugees'. This category includes persons who have been granted temporary protection on a group basis.

Asylum-Seekers (1.3 million)

Persons who have left their countries of origin and have applied for recognition as refugees in other countries, and whose applications are still pending decision by the appropriate government or UNHCR. The largest group of asylum-seekers lives in industrialised nations in Europe and North America.

Returnees (1.9 million)

Persons who were of concern to UNHCR when outside their country of origin and who remain so for

a limited period after their return while UNHCR assists in their reintegration and monitors their well-being. The agency's activities in the country of origin help make the return sustainable.

Internally Displaced Persons and Others of Concern (7.5 million)

UNHCR extends protection and assistance to certain groups who were not included in the Office's original mandate, but whom the United Nations Secretary-General or the General Assembly has asked UNHCR to assist. Like refugees, these persons may have been forced to flee their homes because their lives and/or liberty were at risk; but unlike refugees, they either could not or did not wish to cross an international border. Legally, they remain under the sovereignty of their own government, even though that government may be unable or unwilling to protect them. Given its expertise with mass movements of people in crisis situations, UNHCR has in recent years been called upon to protect and assist certain groups of internally displaced persons. Other persons of concern to the organisation include those living in a refugee-like situation outside their countries of origin, but who have not been formally recognised as refugees, such as victims of war in South-Eastern Europe and various groups in the Commonwealth of Independent States.