

# Facts and Figures

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), commonly known as the “UN refugee agency”, was created in December 1950 by Resolution 428 (V) of the United Nations General Assembly. It 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 to respond to the world’s growing refugee problems. Today, there are some 22.5 million refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR. It is one of the world’s principal humanitarian organisations, with 277 offices in 120 countries, and has twice been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

## 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.” In addition to the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol, the 1969 Refugee Convention of the Organisation of African Unity and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration, applied in Africa and Central America respectively, adapt the 1951 definition of a refugee to circumstances in those regions.

Over the years, a succession of General Assembly resolutions 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’s involvement has also been requested with respect to internally displaced persons who have been obliged to flee their homes for similar reasons but remain within their own borders. UNHCR provides refugees with international protection and humanitarian assistance, especially when host governments are unable to do so.

UNHCR’s work is guided by its Statute, the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol, 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 various durable solutions it seeks to achieve, the preferred one is voluntary repatriation, whereby refugees return to their homes 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, resettlement in third countries is explored for persons meeting specific criteria. Although resettlement remains an important instrument of international protection, the number of refugees resettled in a third country has declined since the late 1980s.

## THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

The High Commissioner is nominated by the UN Secretary-General and elected by the General Assembly for a term of five years. On 25 October 2000, the General Assembly elected Mr. Ruud Lubbers of the Netherlands as the new UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Mr. Lubbers formerly served as Prime Minister of the Netherlands from 1981 to 1994, following an earlier stint as Minister of Economic Affairs and work in the private sector. Since leaving government, Professor Lubbers has taught at Tilburg University in the Netherlands and the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Long interested in globalisation and environmental conservation, he is currently the chair of Globus; the Institute for



Globalisation and Development based in Tilburg. Professor Lubbers also presently serves as International President of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).

Mr. Lubbers, who is scheduled to take office in January 2001, succeeds Sadako Ogata, a former Japanese diplomat and academic, who was the first woman elected to the post and who served as High Commissioner from 1991 to 2000.

## THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

UNHCR's governing body – the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme (ExCom) – was created in 1958, pursuant to a request by 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 oversee the

agency's finances and administration. The 56 ExCom members – all of them governments listed in the annexes at the end of this appeal – meet in a plenary session once a year (every October, in Geneva). To maintain a dialogue with UNHCR throughout the year on protection, administration and finance, ExCom's Standing Committee meets every three or four months in Geneva. UNHCR reports annually to the General Assembly through ECOSOC.

## PART OF THE UN SYSTEM

UNHCR was created by a resolution of the General Assembly and is part of a broad network of UN Funds and programmes, specialised agencies and commissions. UNHCR works most closely with WFP, UNICEF, WHO, UNOCHA and UNDP. UNHCR also liaises closely with Bretton Woods institutions such as the World Bank, particularly in helping refugees to rebuild their lives and communities once they have returned home.

## WORKING WITH PARTNERS

In today's complex world, protecting and assisting refugees and others of concern to the agency requires co-operation with many national and international actors. To carry out its work effectively, UNHCR must foster good working relationships among host governments, other UN agencies, intergovernmental and regional organisations, as well as national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Governments work with UNHCR by granting asylum to refugees and permitting them to stay in their countries. Many governments also help refugees settle permanently in their countries, by facilitating their naturalisation, and providing land, permitting their legal employment or providing financial assistance. UNHCR receives the lion's share of its funding from governments, although contributions from the private sector are growing.

NGOs are vital partners in UNHCR's day-to-day work. UNHCR's partnership with NGOs has been strengthened thanks to the Partnership in Action (PARinAC) process, which was launched in 1994. The process is an ongoing dialogue with NGOs that has helped to define mechanisms for co-operation and identified areas where existing partnerships can be reinforced. PARinAC has also served as a means of developing and strengthening national NGOs, both in regions without an established tradition of non-governmental involvement in humanitarian matters, such as Central and Eastern Europe, and elsewhere.

In recognition of the need to revitalise the PARinAC process, UNHCR commissioned a study, followed up by consultations on the study's recommendations. These led to the formulation and adoption of the PARinAC Plan of Action 2000. Its main objectives are to: strengthen NGO input to the deliberations of UNHCR's Executive Committee; improve co-operation on emerging protection issues, under the aegis of the Department of International Protection; further strengthen NGO-UNHCR co-operation mechanisms and address related issues within the PARinAC framework; maintain an interactive PARinAC website; and regularly convene NGO-UNHCR PARinAC meetings in all regions. The Plan of Action also recognised the need to strengthen the PARinAC structure in Africa, Asia and Latin America and stressed the importance of strengthening local NGO capacity in these regions. In 2000, UNHCR worked with 473 NGO implementing partners. Of these, more than three-quarters were national NGOs. Scores of others co-ordinated closely with the agency using other sources of funding.

## PERSONS OF CONCERN

The total number of persons of concern to UNHCR has decreased from a peak of 27 million in 1995 to 22.3 million recorded in January 2000 (up from 21.5 million in January 1999). They include the following:

### Refugees: 11.7 million

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

### Asylum-seekers: 1.2 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 a decision by the appropriate government body or UNHCR. The largest group of asylum-seekers lives in Europe and North America.

### Returnees: 2.5 million

Persons who were of concern to UNHCR when outside their country of origin and who remain so for a limited period (usually two years) after their return while UNHCR assists in their reintegration and monitors their well-being. The agency's activities in the country of origin are intended to make return sustainable and, in some cases, help preclude new refugee outflows or promote reconciliation.

### Internally Displaced Persons and others of Concern: 6.9 million

UNHCR extends protection or assistance to certain groups not included in the Office's original mandate, but which the UN Secretary-General or the General Assembly has requested 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 were either unable to or did not wish to cross an international border. According to international law, 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, and the fact that internally displaced persons (IDPs) are often in "a refugee-like situation" (in a plight akin to that of refugees), UNHCR has in recent years been called upon to protect and assist certain groups of IDPs. In 2000, UNHCR adopted a policy on IDPs to clarify the conditions under which it could protect and assist them. Other persons of concern to the agency 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.