

Facts and figures

UNHCR was established by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 319 A (IV) and began operations on 1 January 1951. Initially established as a temporary office, with a projected life span of three years, UNHCR's mandate was then extended every five years to respond to the world's growing refugee problems until 2003, when the General Assembly adopted a resolution that allowed for the continuation of the Office "until the refugee problem is solved". UNHCR is one of the world's principal humanitarian organizations, with 262 offices in 116 countries and a staff of 6,885 persons – 85 per cent of whom work in field locations. At the beginning of 2005 there were 19.1 million refugees and others of concern who fell under the mandate of the Office, which has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize twice.

The Mandate

UNHCR's mandate is to ensure that international protection is provided to refugees and that durable solutions are found to ease their plight. 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. Resettlement in third countries as a durable solution is explored for persons who meet specific criteria when neither of the other solutions is possible.

UNHCR's work is guided by its Statute, contained in General Assembly Resolution 428 (v) of December 1950. It is also guided by the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, the United Nations General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and the decisions and conclusions of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme (ExCom). In addition to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, the 1969 Convention governing the specific aspects of refugee problems relevant to Africa and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees,

which is applied in Latin America, adapt the 1951 definition of a refugee to circumstances in those regions.

Under the provisions of its Statute, UNHCR can carry out additional activities upon the request of the General Assembly and the United Nations Secretary-General. In 1974, the General Assembly asked UNHCR to provide legal assistance to stateless persons and in 1996 mandated the agency to broaden its role by promoting the avoidance and reduction of statelessness on a global scale. More recently, ExCom expressed concern that some situations of statelessness are of a protracted nature and called on UNHCR to pay specific attention to them. In addition, both the General Assembly and the Secretary-General have frequently called upon UNHCR to protect or assist other groups of persons not included in the Office's original mandate, such as war-affected populations or internally displaced persons (IDPs).

With regard to the latter, in recent years, the UN and its humanitarian partners in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) have adopted a "collaborative approach" to respond to crises of internal displacement. Given its expertise with mass movements of people in crisis situations, and the fact that the internally displaced are often in a "refugee-like situation", UNHCR has often provided protection and assistance, including return and reintegration when possible, to certain groups of IDPs. Following a review of the UN humanitarian response in 2005, UNHCR will assume responsibility for protection (including return), camp coordination and emergency shelter under a UN system-wide response mechanism led by the Emergency Relief Coordinator.

The High Commissioner

The High Commissioner is nominated by the United Nations Secretary-General and elected by the General Assembly for a term of five years. The

current High Commissioner, Mr. António Guterres, assumed office on 15 June 2005 as the Office's 10th High Commissioner. Mr. Guterres spent more than 20 years in government and public service in Portugal and served as Prime Minister from 1996 to 2002, during which he was instrumental in the international efforts to stop atrocities in East Timor. As president of the European Union Council in early 2000, he co-chaired the first EU-Africa summit and led the Union to the adoption of the so-called Lisbon Agenda. He also founded the Portuguese Refugee Council in 1991, and was a member of the Council of State of Portugal from 1991 to 2002. From 1981 to 1983, Mr. Guterres was a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, as well as chairman of the Committee on Demography, Migrations and Refugees.

Since taking up office, the High Commissioner has identified three main areas as immediate priorities for the Office: ensuring that protection, as the core mandate of the Office, is fully integrated in all operations; developing policy, to ensure better protection and to provide clear responses to issues that affect UNHCR's work, such as terrorism and security, and, thirdly, making transparency and accountability the cornerstones of UNHCR's action. To address these issues, the High Commissioner has launched a number of reforms, with the aim of making UNHCR more efficient, more effective and ready to respond to the challenges lying ahead.

The Executive Committee (ExCom)

UNHCR's governing body 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 Office's finances and administration. ExCom member States – currently 68, as listed in Annex I at the end of this document – meet in Geneva in plenary session for one week in October of each year. To maintain a dialogue with UNHCR throughout the year, there are a number of

inter-sessional Standing Committee meetings on protection, administration and finance every three or four months.

Persons of Concern

At the beginning of 2005, the total number of persons of concern to UNHCR was 19.1 million.

Refugees: 9.2 million

The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as a "person who, owing to a 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." At the beginning of 2005, there were 9.2 million people recognized as refugees by UNHCR or the Governments that have signed the various UN or regional instruments relating to the status of refugees. The former are known as "mandate refugees". This category includes persons who have been granted temporary protection on a group basis.

Asylum-seekers: 840,000

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 by UNHCR.

Returnees: 1.5 million

Persons (e.g. refugees) who were of concern to UNHCR when outside their country of origin and who remain so for a limited period (usually two years) after they return home. UNHCR also assists in the reintegration of returnee IDPs and monitors their well-being. The agency's activities in the country of origin are intended to make return sustainable and help preclude new refugee outflows.

Stateless persons (or those with unresolved nationality): 1.5 million

Persons who are not considered as nationals by any State under the operation of its law. In carrying out its mandate, UNHCR continues to encourage States to accede to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. By September 2005, 57 States had acceded to the former and 29 to the latter instrument. The Office also provides technical support and advice to States on issues related to statelessness.

Internally displaced persons: 5.4 million

Like refugees, IDPs 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 State, which is therefore responsible for protecting them, even if that State's government is unable or unwilling to do so. While the number of IDPs throughout the world is estimated to be at least four or five times as high (around 25 million), UNHCR is currently assisting some 5.4 million.

Others of concern: 590,000

Examples of other persons of concern that UNHCR has been asked to protect include forced migrants and Afghan asylum-seekers in the Russian Federation, local residents-at-risk in Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegro, rejected Eritrean asylum-seekers in Sudan following the application of cessation clauses and Sahrawis in Mauritania.