

# THE YEAR IN REVIEW

## INTRODUCTION

1999 was one of the most challenging years in UNHCR's history. Conflicts in Kosovo, East Timor and Chechnya dominated the daily headlines and many of UNHCR's resources, but there were other "forgotten" humanitarian crises around the world, especially in Africa. These disparate situations posed moral dilemmas and difficult decisions, not only for the UN refugee agency but for the humanitarian community at large: how could they more effectively help increasing numbers of people being displaced within their own countries and who currently had little international protection? Did the victims of long-term or "forgotten" emergencies receive the same kind of care and atten-

## "HIGH-PROFILE" EMERGENCIES

In South-Eastern Europe, the Kosovo refugee emergency erupted in late March, following the breakdown of the Rambouillet peace talks and the start of the NATO air campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Well over 800,000 people flooded into neighbouring Albania and The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, while others found refuge in countries in the immediate region, in Western Europe or elsewhere. Just ten weeks later, Kosovo witnessed one of the most spectacular reverse population movements in contemporary history, obliging humanitarian agencies to shift gears from a large-scale emergency operation to one supporting return and reintegration. The subsequent expulsion by ethnic Albanian returnees of non-Albanians (Serbs and Roma) was in stark contrast to one of the declared purposes of international action: to preserve a multi-ethnic society in Kosovo.

In East Timor, following the overwhelming vote in August 1999 for independence from Indonesia, violence unleashed by anti-independence groups displaced more than 75 per cent of the population to West Timor and other parts of Indonesia and caused massive destruction in East Timor. Following the deployment of a multinational force in October, thousands of refugees began to return home. However, continued intimidation by violent groups in the refugee camps in West Timor hampered efforts to achieve an early solution and

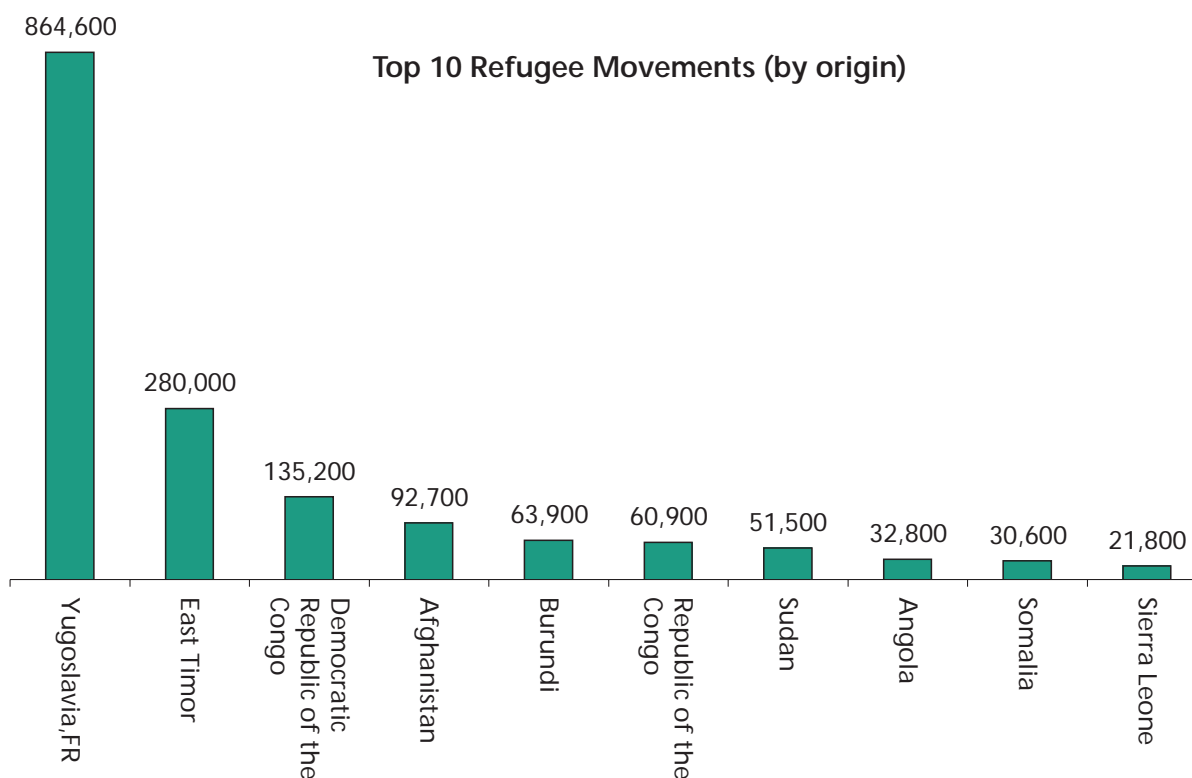
tion as Kosovar or Timorese refugees? When and where should aid officials work with military units to help civilian victims?

Overall, the number of people of concern to UNHCR rose slightly during the year to 22.3 million from 21.5 million in 1998. The number of people seeking asylum also increased. An estimated 530,000 people lodged applications in 29 leading industrial countries, a 21 per cent increase compared with 1998. In contrast, more than 1.6 million refugees repatriated, a 50 per cent jump in the number of people going home over the previous year.

necessitated the continuation of humanitarian assistance into 2000.

The situation around Chechnya deteriorated sharply in the second half of 1999. After fighting broke out in neighbouring Dagestan between Chechen armed groups and Russian forces in the summer, approximately 30,000 people were displaced. With the arrival of Russian troops in Chechnya in October, over 200,000 people fled into neighbouring republics, and several thousand more escaped into Georgia and further a field to Kazakhstan.





### “SILENT” REFUGEE EMERGENCIES

Yet other refugee movements occurred away from the glare of the media, where international response, particularly in support of peace, was much slower, timid and piecemeal. In the Great Lakes region, worsening military conflict had disastrous consequences for innocent civilians. Despite the signature of the Lusaka cease-fire agreement by six nations in July, continued fighting between Government and rebel forces in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) made over 136,000 people flee into neighbouring countries. Zambia (which already hosted 12,000 DRC refugees) received an additional 25,100 refugees from that country between March and May. Tanzania - a country shouldering a heavy refugee burden - also saw the arrival of 40,000 new refugees from the DRC. Heightened rebel activity in Burundi (where nine humanitarian workers were killed in October) made 64,000 new refugees flee into Tanzania over a period of three months. This brought the total number of Burundi refugees there to nearly half a million. Although the situation in the Republic of the Congo improved slightly, a further 49,000 Congolese fled to neighbouring DRC. Gabon, a stable country with no major refugee problems, was confronted with the sudden arrival of more than 12,000 refugees from the Republic of the Congo during the summer.

The humanitarian crisis in Angola – one of the worst in Africa – deteriorated, as a Government offensive

against UNITA spurred the movement of over 16,000 Angolans into the DRC and over 13,000 into Zambia, and caused renewed internal displacement. In Angola, more than 1.8 million people were deprived of the most basic human necessities, including food, shelter and clean water.

In West Africa, more than 15,000 Sierra Leoneans and 8,000 Liberians fled to Guinea during the year. In Sierra Leone, the situation remained tense despite the May 1999 cease-fire agreement. More than 2.5 million people (half the country's population) were in desperate need of humanitarian assistance. The signature of the Lomé Agreement in July raised hopes for larger-scale voluntary repatriation to Sierra Leone, but the slow disarmament and demobilisation of rebel forces and the almost total lack of access by humanitarian agencies to areas of potential return, made this impossible. In neighbouring Guinea and Liberia, close to 450,000 refugees from Sierra Leone remained dependent on international assistance. A security incident in northern Liberia in August (involving hostage-taking and looting of UN assets) triggered the flight of 11,000 Sierra Leonean refugees living there to areas further south.

The political situation in the Horn of Africa remained volatile as countries in the region continued to experience both domestic crises and external pressures. By

the end of the year, the Eritrea-Ethiopia border conflict had displaced hundreds of thousands of people. At the same time, however, relations improved both between Sudan and Eritrea and between Sudan and Ethiopia. The establishment of diplomatic relations between Eritrea and Sudan was expected to pave the way for the repatriation of some 160,000 Eritrean refugees in Sudan. In contrast to the relative stability of the northern parts of Somalia, conflict in the south showed no sign of abating. Localised fighting severely hampered reintegration efforts and made 30,000 new refugees flee to Kenya, Yemen, Eritrea and Mali. More than 50,000 Sudanese fled fighting and famine in the south, into Chad, Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda.

Continued fighting between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance in some parts of Afghanistan caused over 90,000 refugees, many belonging to ethnic minorities, to flee into Pakistan. The almost total lack of social infrastructure and economic opportunities, together

### “FORGOTTEN” REFUGEES

The disparity in resources attracted to the Kosovo refugee emergency led to concern, particularly among African states, that the plight of refugees in Africa was drawing insufficient attention and support. The world’s attention span is increasingly short. Even the most extreme images of human suffering and violence fade in the collective memory once they have disappeared from the morning papers or the evening news. Worse still, when conflict resolution processes take time to

with serious restrictions imposed on women, made many refugees in asylum countries hesitate to return. Humanitarian assistance programmes there therefore had to continue.

In Sri Lanka, new displacement occurred in the northern Vanni region, where some 600,000 people were estimated to be affected by the ongoing conflict between Government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and in need of humanitarian assistance. The situation was therefore not conducive to the repatriation of some 70,000 Sri Lankan refugees in southern India.

In Colombia, the humanitarian situation of IDPs - thought to number about 800,000 - deteriorated throughout the year. The influx of 4,000 Colombians into Venezuela and Panama raised concerns in the region about the potential for future cross-border movements.

bear fruit, or when peace processes are protracted for years, international attention is diverted to other situations drawing the media spotlight. With the shift in attention, funding declines. Lack of funding exacerbates asylum fatigue, particularly in developing countries hosting large numbers of refugees. For UNHCR and the humanitarian community, there are no forgotten people, no groups less deserving of its attention.

### Top 10 Refugee-Hosting Countries

Country of Asylum	Total Population in Country of Asylum (000)	Total Refugee Population (000)	Refugees per 1,000 Inhabitants
Armenia	3,520	296	84
Guinea	7,430	502	68
Yugoslavia, Federal Rep. of	10,640	501	47
Islamic Rep. of Iran	67,702	1,836	27
Tanzania	33,517	622	19
Sudan	29,490	391	13
Germany	82,220	976	12
Pakistan	156,483	1,202	8
United States of America	278,357	513	2
China	1,277,558	293	0.2

### MOVING TOWARDS SOLUTIONS

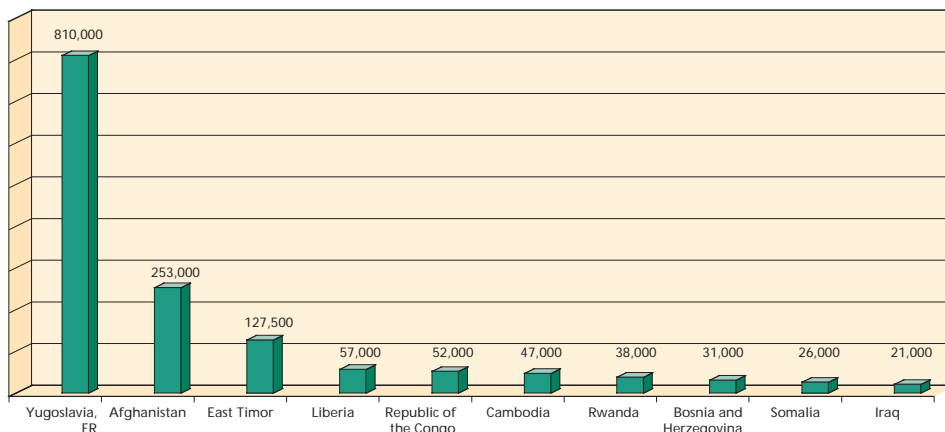
During 1999, over 1.6 million refugees repatriated to their country of origin, over 50 per cent more than during 1998. Repatriation to Kosovo accounted for close to half of the total. Other major movements included that of Afghan refugees from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan, East Timorese returning from West Timor and other parts of Indonesia, Liberians repatriating after a decade in exile in neighbouring countries in West Africa, and Congolese refugees returning to relative stability after the restoration of peace in July.

Some long-standing refugee situations drew to a close: organised voluntary repatriation of Cambodian refugees from camps in Thailand was completed in June, as was organised repatriation of Guatemalan refugees from Mexico. While some Guatemalan refugees chose to

repatriate, some became naturalised citizens and others chose to remain in Mexico as immigrants. In Mali, the reintegration programme for 132,000 Touaregs was consolidated and activities handed over to development agencies. A fairly large number of refugees returned to Rwanda, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Somalia and Iraq.

Although UNHCR advocates for voluntary repatriation as the preferred solution for most refugees, some refugees repatriated under less than ideal conditions, giving rise to concern regarding their security and prospects for lasting reintegration in their home country. As a further step towards durable solutions, another 45,000 refugees were resettled from first asylum countries, the majority in industrialised countries.

Top 10 Repatriation Movements (by origin)

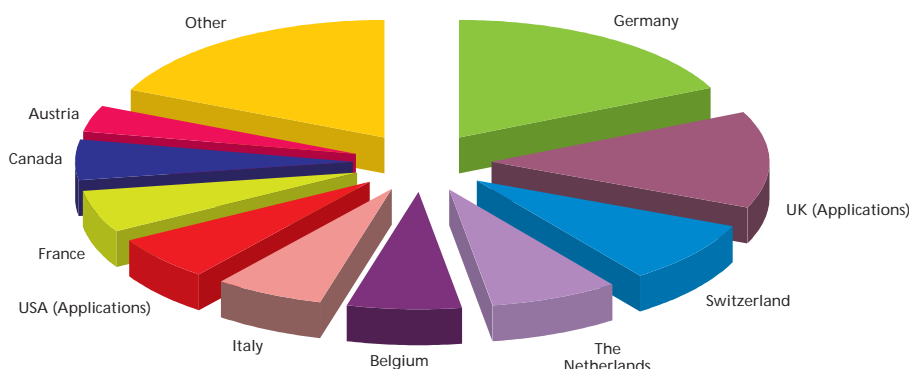


### ASYLUM FLOWS

As in past years, substantial numbers of people applied for asylum in Europe and North America. Some 530,000 new asylum applications were lodged in the 29 main industrialised countries in 1999, an increase of 21 per cent compared to 1998. In 1999, Germany, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Belgium received the largest number of applicants

(see chart below). Citizens from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, mostly ethnic Albanians from Kosovo province, accounted for the highest number of applications (23 per cent), followed by Iraq (6.6 per cent), Afghanistan (4.5 per cent), Turkey (3.8 per cent) and Somalia (3.4 per cent).

Asylum Applications: Main Industrialised Countries (Total: 530,000)







## CHALLENGES AND DILEMMAS

### Addressing the Special Plight of IDPs

While there are no reliable estimates, a growing number of people sought refuge in safer parts of their own country. In Angola and Sierra Leone, for example, millions of people were displaced within national borders. In Sri Lanka, as frontlines continually shifted, many IDPs were once again on the move. Prior to the exodus from Kosovo province of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in March, some 280,000 IDPs depended on international assistance for survival. More than 200,000 IDPs from Chechnya were also assisted within national borders.

Experience in 1999 again showed that meeting the protection and assistance needs of IDPs is more arduous than meeting those of refugees who cross borders. The difficulty of securing access to large numbers of people in insecure and isolated areas is compounded by the complexity of assisting civilians in their own country – especially where State authorities or rebel forces are the very cause of their predicament. There is a growing trend of humanitarian agencies being denied access to war-affected areas for long periods, exacerbating the suffering of civilian victims.

### Security

Refugee issues can no longer be discussed without reference to security: the protection of refugees and refugee operations; the safety of states, jeopardised by mass population movements of a mixed nature; and the well-being of humanitarian staff. Massive forced displacement has caused population movements in which people of concern to UNHCR are mixed with armed and other elements. Widespread insecurity and banditry, combined with the presence of armed elements exposed both refugees and humanitarian workers to grave risks: UNHCR registered over 50 serious incidents involving its staff in 1999 alone.

During 1999, the High Commissioner made a number of proposals to UNHCR's Standing Committee, as well as to the Third Committee of the General Assembly and the Security Council, to address security-related issues comprehensively in the context of conflict resolution. The proposal consists of a "ladder" of options, ranging from ensuring the presence of UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies in refugee camps and settlements, to providing training and support to build national law enforcement capacity and

deploying international civilian or police monitors. UNHCR believes that the focus should not be restricted to security inside refugee camps, but also encompass the wider context of refugee- and returnee-populated areas. During 1999, UNHCR supported local police in refugee camps in Tanzania and deployed a number of international monitors to refugee camps in The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

### **Coexistence of Divided Communities**

In recent conflicts, civilians have moved from the periphery to the centre stage. Forcing people to abandon their homes has become one of the principal objectives of many belligerents, with the aim of redrawing the ethnic map of entire areas. Such displacement makes peace-making and peace-building more complex, since it serves long-term political objectives even after conflicts have ended. It also makes UNHCR's protection role more difficult.

The question of how to protect threatened minorities, without contributing to the objectives of the aggressor is indeed complex. At the same time, coexistence and reconciliation of divided communities pose a new challenge in refugee work. When peace is negotiated, more attention must be paid to creating conditions for the coexistence of divided communities. If further refugee flows are to be prevented, communities that have been torn apart must be brought together again. Coexistence is the first step towards reconciliation. In future, more creative thinking will be needed to design and implement projects aimed at reconciling divided communities.

### **New Partnerships**

To meet today's humanitarian challenges, partnerships among humanitarian agencies, civil society, the private sector and, increasingly, with the military are essential to raise awareness of refugee problems, preserve the institution of asylum and improve the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Already in 1994, UNHCR relied on the support of the military to help with logistics and basic humanitarian assistance after the influx of more than one million Rwandans into south Kivu (eastern DRC). In 1999, the size and complexity of the Kosovo refugee emergency again obliged UNHCR to request military assistance with air traffic management, camp construction and transportation. But this co-operation raised concerns in some quarters that it could compromise the purely humanitarian and non-political nature of UNHCR's work.

UNHCR is convinced that in complex emergencies, military organisations can make a valuable contribution to relief efforts. To strengthen humanitarian co-ordination and avoid the risk of politicising humanitarian aid efforts, governments must help humanitarian agencies organise the humanitarian space in which to operate and define the precise role of the military when their help is needed.

### **Development in Support of Peace**

If refugee problems are to be resolved in the long-term, the international community must become more actively involved in supporting, building and keeping the peace. Peace-building in the post-conflict period is a weak link in the chain of international co-operation. Fragile peace accords could quickly unravel without sustained international support, giving rise to new displacement.

In situations where peace has been achieved in political terms, poverty, inequality, ethnic tensions and violations of human rights often persist. The international community is quick to furnish items needed for immediate survival after peace has been restored, but is slow to make investments in the reconstruction of homes and social infrastructure, and job creation. The gap between humanitarian assistance and long-term reconstruction is often immense.

This situation led UNHCR to launch consultations with the Brookings Institution (USA) – referred to as the Brookings Process – aimed at addressing the relief-to-development gap by forging closer co-operation among a broad range of humanitarian and development actors. UNHCR worked together with the World Bank, UNDP and a number of concerned governments to discuss how to set up co-ordinating and funding mechanisms to facilitate the transitional period. In late 1999, Sierra Leone was selected to test "partnership initiatives", which aim to forge closer co-operation with national authorities and elements of civil society to address the needs of a country emerging from many years of conflict.



## UNHCR'S 50TH ANNIVERSARY

UNHCR will begin to commemorate its 50th anniversary in the year 2000. UNHCR was founded by the General Assembly in the aftermath of the Second World War to help Europe resolve its huge refugee problem. Created for an initial three-year term, its mission evolved considerably over the next five decades, as a multiplicity of emergencies led to human displacement across national boundaries or within home countries.

UNHCR's longevity is, in itself, no cause for celebration. The Office therefore wishes to focus commemoration activities on refugees: to celebrate their courage, resilience and determination, while highlighting UNHCR's mission to protect them and offer them hope, opportunities and the means to seize them. UNHCR will celebrate the positive contribution refugees have made to society, and are able to make, whether in their host country or, upon return, in their country of origin. Public awareness-raising activities will focus on this contribution, and encourage continued support for their efforts to rebuild their lives.

Preparations began in 1999, co-ordinated by a unit at UNHCR Headquarters working with UNHCR offices worldwide and numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The UNHCR-50 Foundation was set up to help organise commemorative activities. An important legacy of the 50th anniversary will be the Refugee Education Trust, launched to fund post-primary education for refugees. Other activities and events will continue until 28 July 2001, the 50th anniversary of the 1951 Convention on refugee status. These include:

- Numerous exhibits and media events worldwide, including concerts, sporting events, contests, refugee film weeks and TV specials. A commemorative concert will be held in Geneva on 14 December 2000.
- Public awareness campaigns stressing the contribution refugees have made and could make to host societies.
- The launch of a "A Gallery of Prominent Refugees" on a public website.
- A special 50th anniversary edition of *The State of the World's Refugees*.
- Commemorative postage stamps issued by the UN and a number of national postal administrations.
- Photo books on refugee children over the past five decades.

