

The Year in Review

The 50th Anniversary, in 2000, of UNHCR's creation was followed by celebrations of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. Though drafted and signed in a very different geo-political context, this instrument together with its 1967 Protocol, has been and remains, the steadfast bedrock of the international refugee protection regime.

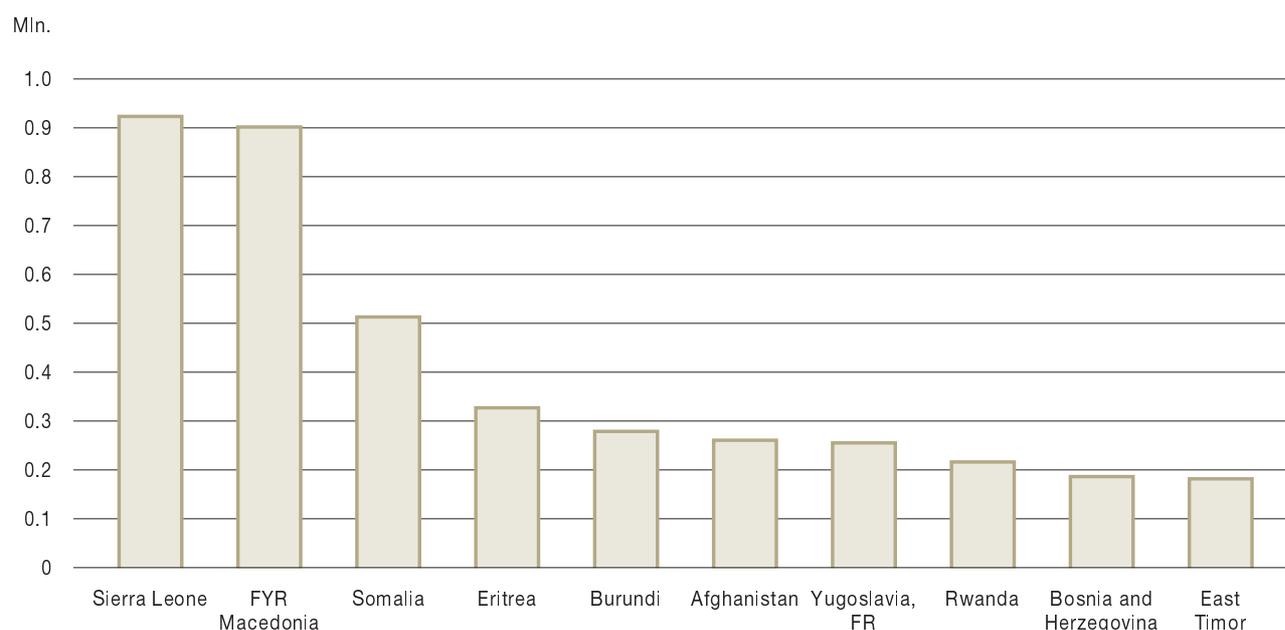
Soon after taking up his duties on 1 January 2001, the High Commissioner became aware of the budgetary constraints faced by the office and the resulting impact on refugees. He initiated an internal review to define the optimum profile and size of the organisation based on its mandate and its funding base. This prioritisation exercise was completed in May 2001 and the implementation of "Actions 1, 2 and 3", as it came to be called, saw some painful adjustments both among the personnel and the operations.

The Global Consultations on International Protection, launched late in 2000, gave rise in 2001 to a series of events of which the most important was the Ministerial Meeting of States' Parties to the 1951

Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol, held in Geneva in December 2001. The Global Consultations has proved a unique process that has involved representatives of States from all regions, inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations, academics and refugees. The process gave UNHCR renewed impetus to pursue its efforts to ensure that refugees and asylum-seekers alike enjoy the international protection that they deserve. It is scheduled to conclude in 2002 and will result in an Agenda for Protection for the years to come.

The rekindled interest in principles underlying international protection that has been sparked by the Global Consultations has been all the more significant at a time of major protection challenges. It is against this background that UNHCR faced a major protection challenge in the context of an assessment carried out jointly with Save the Children (UK) in the autumn, which revealed sexual exploitation and abuse of refugee children – the most vulnerable of the vulnerable – in some countries of West Africa. Peacekeepers and humanitarian workers were also among those alleged to be

Top 10 Repatriation Movements in 2001 (by origin)



perpetrators of such unspeakable acts. Another major protection challenge arose in September 2001: the world witnessed a major incident of rescue at sea in the South Pacific, followed by lengthy negotiations for the disembarkation of several hundred asylum-seekers.

The quest for finding durable solutions has remained a guiding policy of the Office throughout the year. Some 700,000 refugees and internally displaced returned in 2001. There were several encouraging developments in Africa, South-East Europe, South-East Asia and more recently in Afghanistan, which hold prospects for more and larger returns in the foreseeable future. Increased efforts have also been made to address protracted refugee situations, notably in Africa, with sharper focus on measures to encourage self-reliance as a means towards local integration or reintegration upon return. In December 2001, UNHCR organised an informal ministerial meeting to discuss the refugee problems in Africa and to identify ways and means to put an end to some of Africa's protracted refugee situations. It was made clear at the meeting that the time is ripe to seize the opportunities that are arising to find durable solutions for refugees, many of whom have been languishing in camps for years.

The impact of the events of September 11 on the work of the Office has been considerable, and has yet to be fully measured. The military action that followed these events, leading to the collapse of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, opened unexpected opportunities for the return of thousands of refugees, particularly from Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran where many have been leading a precarious existence for many years. On the negative side, however, the fear of terrorism has fuelled intolerance and distrust towards foreigners. In such a context, asylum-seekers and refugees have tended to become prime suspects. This poses considerable challenges to UNHCR to ensure that refugees are afforded international protection.



Ethiopia: Somali refugees return home to their villages in Northwest Somalia.
UNHCR / M. Maasho

Major Population Displacements

In terms of global numbers of persons of concern to UNHCR, 2001 has witnessed a slight decline: 19.8 million as compared to 21.1 million in 2000. Persistent instability and strife continued to cause population movements, particularly in countries of Africa, the Caucasus regions and parts of South America, but there were no major refugee emergencies comparable to the scale of those that occurred in the 1990s. UNHCR's emergency response capacity was nevertheless tested on several occasions in the course of the year, notably in West Africa early in 2001, in South-East Europe in the summer with prospects of major movements from The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and in countries bordering Afghanistan in the autumn. In each case, interventions at a political level caused events to take another course and the threat of large-scale outflows was averted.

Moving Toward Solutions

During the last year, UNHCR recorded a number of achievements in several regions. In Africa, some of these included the repatriation of some 100,000 Sierra Leonean refugees from the

neighbouring countries. UNHCR, alone, cannot take all the credit for this. The successful completion of the disarmament process by UNAMSIL, coupled with the Government's official declaration of the end of the war and the Presidential elections all contributed to stability in the country. In Eritrea, after many years in exile, some 36,000 refugees returned to their homes from Sudan. Another successful repatriation was the return of over 50,000 refugees from Ethiopia to North-western and North-eastern regions of Somalia. Although these numbers seem modest in relation to the total of five million refugees throughout Africa, they are significant when one considers the number of protracted refugee situations on the continent. The challenge, now, is to ensure that these returns are sustainable and it is in this context that the Office is encouraging development agencies to invest in areas of return so that returnees can rebuild their lives and engage in productive activities.

Although many of the conflicts have not yet been resolved, there were some positive developments in 2001. In the Great Lakes region of Africa, nearly 30,000 refugees returned to the northern provinces of Burundi, where the security situation was relatively good. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the deployment of MONUC played a crucial role in separating armed combatants who fled from the Central African Republic to DRC together with over 24,000 refugees.

There have also been some success in Europe. In the Balkans, over two million people who were forced to flee their homes during ten years of war have returned home. In southern Serbia, UNHCR played a role in preventing new violence by promoting measures such as the creation of a multi-ethnic police force. In The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, UNHCR, in consultation with the European monitors and NATO was instrumental in rebuilding confidence between communities and assisting more than 80 per cent of the 170,000 people who were displaced in 2000 to return to their homes. Similarly, in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, some 100,000 refugees and IDPs have been able to go home. However, significant challenges remain. There are still over 800,000 people from these countries who have not been able to return to their former residences. UNHCR is continuing its efforts to ensure that local authorities implement

property laws and assist with reconstruction of property destroyed by the war.

In Asia, almost 193,000 East Timorese were successfully repatriated from West Timor. On another positive note, and a successful example of local integration in 2001, the Government of Mexico naturalised more than 1,300 Guatemalan refugees who chose not to repatriate. In addition, the government of Quintana Roo State donated a substantial amount of land for these former refugees to ensure the sustainability of their local integration.