

Facts and Figures

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), commonly known as the “UN refugee agency”, was established by United Nations’ General Assembly Resolution 319 A (IV), and began operations on 1 January 1951. The Statute of the Office is contained in General Assembly Resolution 428 (v) of December 1950. 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. It celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2001. Today, there are over 19.8 million refugees and other persons who fall under the mandate of the Office. It is one of the world’s principal humanitarian organisations, with offices in 114 countries, and has twice been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

The Mandate

UNHCR’s mandate is to ensure that international protection is provided 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 applied in Africa and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration, which is relevant to Central America, adapt the 1951 definition of a refugee to circumstances in those regions.

Over the years, there have been several General Assembly resolutions, which have requested UNHCR to provide international protection and humanitarian assistance to persons who are outside their country of origin because of persecution,

armed conflict, generalised violence, foreign aggression or other circumstances leading to flight, especially when host governments are unable to do so. 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 country’s borders.

UNHCR’s work is guided by its Statute, the 1951 refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, the General Assembly, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and the decisions and conclusions of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme (ExCom). 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 who meet specific criteria. Although resettlement remains an important instrument of international protection, the number of refugees resettled in third countries 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. The current High Commissioner, Mr. Ruud Lubbers of the Netherlands, assumed office on 1 January 2001. Mr. Lubbers formerly served as Prime Minister of the Netherlands from 1982 to 1994, following earlier stints as Minister of Economic Affairs and work in the private sector. Since leaving government, Professor Lubbers taught at Tilburg University in the Netherlands and the John F. Kennedy School of Government and Politics at Harvard University. For years, he has been interested in globalisation and environmental conservation, he held the chair of Globus; the Institute for Globalisation and

Development based in Tilburg, and served as the International President of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). Immediately after taking up his appointment, the High Commissioner initiated a prioritisation and restructuring exercise, the so-called Actions 1-2-3 process. Since then, the Office has been pursuing the objective of prioritising the use of available resources within a defined vision of how UNHCR wants to carry out its mandate. In addition, the “UNHCR 2004” process, under the leadership of the High Commissioner, is looking at ways to strengthen UNHCR as a multilateral institution.

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 61 ExCom members – all of them governments, listed in the annexes at the end of this document – 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, there are a number of inter-sessional Standing Committee meetings 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. The Office works most closely with DPA, DPKO, ILO, IOM, OCHA, OHCHR, UNICEF, UNDP, WFP and WHO. UNHCR also liaises closely with the IMF, the World Bank and affiliated institutions, particularly in helping refugees to rebuild their lives and communities once they have returned home.



Switzerland: UNHCR’s governing body – the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme (ExCom) in Geneva, October 2002. UNHCR / S. Hopper

Working with Partners

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

Governments work with UNHCR in 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, providing land, permitting their legal employment or providing financial assistance. UNHCR receives USD 20 million from the UN regular budget with the majority of its funding coming from governments, although contributions from the private sector are growing.

NGOs are vital partners in UNHCR's day-to-day work. In 2003, UNHCR will continue to make efforts to broaden the access and participation of NGOs in the full spectrum of UNHCR's work. The Partnership in Action (PARinAC) process, which was launched in 1994, is an ongoing dialogue with NGOs that has helped to define mechanisms for co-operation and identified areas where existing partnerships – especially among national NGOs – can be reinforced particularly in the regions without an established tradition of non-governmental involvement. Partnership with NGOs will be supported both technically and financially, with emphasis on reinforced support to national NGOs. The Office will promote more strategic involvement of NGOs (not only implementing partners) in operational activities such as needs' assessment, programme planning, project-monitoring and evaluation as well as training and emergency response activities. Furthermore, NGO participation in refugee protection through the Reach Out training and participation in pre-ExCom consultations will be encouraged. In 2002, UNHCR worked with 694 NGO implementing partners; 393 of these were national NGOs.

As well as forging bilateral partnerships with various international and regional organisations, UNHCR

participates in a wide spectrum of co-ordination and decision-making mechanisms comprising both humanitarian and development actors. Such mechanisms include the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) which ensures inter-agency decision-making in response to complex emergencies through 16 leading agencies and NGO consortia, and the United Nations System Chief Executives Board (CEB) for Co-ordination – formerly known as the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination (ACC) – which is comprised of executive heads of UN system organisations including UN funds and programmes as well as specialised agencies including the World Trade Organisation and Bretton Woods Institutions. Several UNHCR field offices are involved in the Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) and the Common Country Assessment and UN Development Assistance Framework (CCA/UNDAF) exercises. UNHCR staff members are encouraged to participate in the framework of the UN Resident and Humanitarian Co-ordinator system. As of February 2002, UNHCR has global agreements with over 50 international organisations. The Memorandum of Understanding with World Food Programme, originally signed in 1997 was revised in July 2002, and will serve to facilitate the distribution of food and food-related assistance to refugees worldwide.

In pursuit of finding durable solutions to the problems of refugees and returnees in Africa, the High Commissioner secured the inclusion of refugees and displaced persons on the plan for the continent's economic recovery through the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). The partnership calls for the involvement of governments, humanitarian development agencies and NGOs to help bridge the yawning gap between emergency relief and the longer-term development needs of refugees and returnees. It is foreseen that such joint venture efforts will increase the self-sufficiency of refugees in countries of asylum and help their reintegration once they return home. In dealing with the return of refugees, the High Commissioner has proposed the "4Rs plan" – Repatriation, Reintegration, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction – to be jointly implemented by UNHCR, in collaboration with other agencies like the World Bank and UNDP. With respect to protracted refugee situations, the High Commissioner has promoted the concept of development through

local integration (DLI). This contemplates that refugees, rather than being treated as a burden, will be recognised by host countries and the international community as agents of development. All of these issues were explored in a panel discussion on durable solutions within NEPAD during ExCom in October 2002, where it was recommended that the efforts in this connection would be pursued in 2003.

Persons of Concern

At the end of 2001, the total number of persons of concern to UNHCR was 19.8 million. This number has decreased from a peak of 27 million in 1995, and is fewer than the 21.8 million recorded in January 2000. In addition, there are some one million stateless or potentially stateless cases whose nationality is disputed or unclear.

Refugees: 12 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 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 by UNHCR. The largest groups of asylum-seekers live in Europe and North America.

Returnees: 0.5 million

Persons who are 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.

Stateless Persons (or those with unresolved nationality): 1 million

A person who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law. Avoidance of statelessness and the elimination of statelessness are part of the Office's core mandate. In carrying out this 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 October 2002, 54 States have acceded to the former and 26 to the latter instrument. The Office provides technical support and advice to States on issues related to statelessness.

Internally Displaced Persons and Others of Concern: 5.3 million

UNHCR extends protection or humanitarian 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.



Budget (USD)

Others of Concern

Region	Refugees	Asylum-Seekers	Returned Refugees	Internally Displaced Persons	Returned IDPs	Various	Total Population of Concern
① Great Lakes	1,211,429	34,420	53,337	23,458	42,000	0	1,364,644
② West and Central Africa	570,074	21,110	101,079	196,116	0	0	888,379
③ East and Horn of Africa	966,757	13,758	99,243	0	0	1,420	1,081,178
④ Southern Africa	366,051	21,798	13,117	202,000	0	0	602,966
⑤ North Africa	183,639	581	2	0	0	29,500	213,722
⑥ The Middle East	463,388	29,264	2,200	0	0	138,000	632,852
⑦ South-West Asia	4,066,803	580	26,105	1,200,000	0	0	5,293,488
⑧ Central Asia	97,757	2,606	2,343	0	0	100,000	202,706
⑨ South Asia	322,684	270	297	683,286	0	0	1,006,537
⑩ East Asia and the Pacific	616,134	18,955	18,184	0	0	2,356	655,629
⑪ Eastern Europe	294,294	7,934	375	1,281,464	47,362	678,788	2,310,217
⑫ South-Eastern Europe	459,578	640	146,072	741,626	151,588	85,000	1,584,504
⑬ Central Europe and the Baltic States	18,711	23,228	39	0	0	4,452	46,430
⑭ Western Europe	1,717,569	300,974	0	0	0	0	2,018,543
⑮ North America and the Caribbean	644,742	441,696	1	0	0	0	1,086,439
⑯ Central America	25,831	2,660	10	0	0	0	28,501
⑰ South America	10,510	5,203	183	720,000	0	0	735,896
Total	12,035,951	925,677	462,587	5,047,950	240,950	1,039,516	19,752,631

Notes

- 1 The data are generally provided by Governments, based on their own definitions and methods of data collection.
- 2 A dash (-) indicates that the value is zero, not available or not applicable.
- 3 Figures as at 1 January 2002 (subject to change)