

A view on the Altos de Cazucá suburb in Bogota, Colombia, where displaced people settle.



# The Year in Review

## *A world in motion*

**A**T FEW TIMES IN HISTORY have so many people been on the move. The year 2008 saw the mass movement of people within and beyond their borders, uprooted by conflict, calamity or searching for opportunity. In the same year, the international community was just beginning to appreciate the full extent of the global financial and economic crisis, compounding existing concerns about the process of climate change and its impact on human security. For UNHCR, these developments present an enormous challenge. On the one hand, they threaten to bring new forms and degrees of turbulence, prompting even more people to flee or migrate. On the other hand, they threaten to create the conditions for States and societies to become increasingly insular, withholding protection, solutions and humanitarian assistance from the growing number of persons of concern to the Office.

### **PERSONS OF CONCERN**

AT THE END OF 2005, THE GLOBAL number of refugees was at its lowest level in almost a quarter of a century. Despite some large-scale repatriation movements, the last three years have witnessed a significant increase in refugee numbers, due primarily to the violence taking place in Iraq and Somalia. By the end of 2008, the total number of refugees under UNHCR's mandate exceeded 10 million. The number of conflict-induced internally displaced persons (IDPs) reached some 26 million worldwide at the end of the year.

Providing exact figures on the number of stateless people is extremely difficult. In those countries where

reliable data is available, at least 3 million people were known to lack an effective nationality by the close of 2008. However, the global number of stateless people might be four times that figure.

Throughout the year, UNHCR made special efforts to spotlight the long-term nature of the crises that exist in many parts of the world, leaving millions of people displaced, in exile or stateless for years or even decades on end. This led the High Commissioner to launch a Special Initiative on Protracted Refugee Situations and to make this issue the theme of his second Dialogue on Protection Challenges, held in December 2008.

### **PATTERNS OF CONFLICT**

IN 2008, THE WORLD EXPERIENCED TWO groups of conflicts. The first extended from South and South-West Asia, through the Middle East to Sudan and the Horn of Africa. While each armed conflict had its own characteristics and historical roots, these crises became increasingly interrelated, posing a growing threat to global peace and security. These conflicts generated some two-thirds of the total number of refugees worldwide.

In Afghanistan, intensified conflict, coupled with the deliberate targeting of aid workers, limited humanitarian access to around half of the country's territory. Even so, in 2008, more than 275,000 Afghans returned to their homeland with UNHCR support.

While this constituted an apparently positive development, most returns were not due to a meaningful improvement of the situation in Afghanistan. On the contrary, most of those who repatriated did so because of growing insecurity in Pakistan and because of declining living standards for

refugees in urban centres. In Afghanistan, continued violence, weak governance and limited development obliged some 3 million Afghans to remain in exile, the vast majority of them in Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The end of 2008 witnessed the displacement of some 300,000 people in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province and Federally Administered Tribal Areas. As in Afghanistan, UNHCR had limited access to these people.

This only confirmed that the Afghan situation cannot be understood or addressed in isolation. At the end of 2008, the Government of Afghanistan and UNHCR organized an international conference in Kabul to agree upon a comprehensive strategy for the sustainable return and reintegration of the country's refugees and displaced persons. The impact of that conference in 2009 will depend on resolute follow-up by all stakeholders, based on a strengthened national and international commitment to improved security, governance, economic and social development.

In Iraq, 2008 saw an improvement in the security situation and a stabilization in the number of people uprooted by political and sectarian violence. UNHCR worked to help the Government create conditions for the voluntary return and sustainable reintegration of refugees and IDPs. There is still, however, a long way to go. UNHCR considers it essential that refugee returns take place on a strictly voluntary basis and in conditions of safety and dignity. It is therefore imperative that States preserve the asylum space available to Iraqi refugees, both in the region and beyond.

At the end of the year, some 2 million Iraqis were hosted by Jordan and the Syrian Arab Republic and a similar number of people remained displaced within the country. UNHCR continued to urge the world's more prosperous States to offer full support to these and other countries that are bearing the brunt of the Iraqi exodus.

In the Darfur region of Sudan, an appalling humanitarian and human rights situation persisted throughout 2008. More than 2 million people remain internally displaced, while nearly a quarter of a million Darfurians remained in exile in Chad. One of UNHCR's primary concerns is that without a political agreement involving both the Government in Khartoum and the different rebel movements, the UN-African Union mission would be unable to meet the security expectations of the affected populations.

In Somalia, the hardships endured by its people deepened in many respects in 2008. With more than a million Somalis already dependent on food aid, UNHCR's main concern was that any further limitations on humanitarian access would lead to additional population displacements. The burden placed on neighbouring States,

including Djibouti, Kenya and Yemen became increasingly onerous throughout the year and threatened to stretch regional capacities beyond breaking point.

Beyond this first group of conflicts, others multiplied and intensified in 2008. Contrary to the situations described above, they generally lacked international attention, largely because their impact was perceived to be local or at most regional, and without global security implications. The Central African Republic provided a typical example. Although it was the subject of discussions at the UN Security Council, few seemed to be aware that some 100,000 refugees had been forced to flee to Cameroon and Chad, and that more than 200,000 people were internally displaced and living in conditions of grave deprivation.

Another increasingly worrying situation was to be found in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), especially the north Kivu region. As the crisis reached a peak at the end of 2008, it became clear that any resolution of the conflict had to be political, involving the DRC, Rwanda, other regional actors and the international community. As in other conflict-affected countries (such as Iraq and Sudan), the continued violence also demonstrated

the need for political solutions to address the underlying problems of access to land, property, citizenship, inter-ethnic relations and the representation of minorities.

#### THE COMPLEXITY OF DISPLACEMENT

JUST AS PATTERNS OF CONFLICT BECAME more complex in the course of 2008, so too did patterns of human displacement. More specifically, while the close relationship between displacement and armed conflict is well understood, its links with other global phenomena, such as climate change, extreme poverty and poor governance, are not.

In 2008, natural disasters continued to increase in frequency, scale and intensity, jeopardizing the security and livelihoods of millions of people and forcing growing numbers of them to abandon their usual place of residence. This was exacerbated by an accumulation of other adverse trends, including the global financial meltdown and economic recession, as well as food and energy crises. By the end of the year, it seemed inevitable that such trends would have a devastating impact on the developing world and place serious constraints on the humanitarian operations required

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**Thousands flee an IDP site in north Kivu towards the provincial capital Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo.**



to assist the people affected by such disasters.

A related development in 2008 was the growing number of people who decided to leave their own country and to seek a more secure life elsewhere in response to a complex mixture of threats: unemployment and insecure livelihoods, social tensions and political violence, authoritarian and arbitrary forms of government and a breakdown in the rule of law. Because these people rarely had access to legal migration opportunities, they embarked upon hazardous and clandestine journeys, often involving smugglers and human traffickers.

Such mixed migration became an increasingly global phenomenon in the course of the year. In Asia, a growing number of people from Myanmar's Muslim minority tried to make their way to Thailand and Malaysia. Citizens of Central and Latin American countries, as well as people from further afield, travelled to Mexico and the Caribbean region, often in the hope of entering the United States of America. Somalis and Eritreans crossed the Gulf of Aden in an attempt to reach Yemen and the

Gulf States, while people from countries in Central, Eastern and Southern Africa made their way to South Africa.

At the same time, 2008 witnessed a growing movement of people travelling from the west coast of Africa to the Spanish Canary Islands, or across the Sahara desert to North Africa. Throughout much of the southern and eastern Mediterranean, irregular migrants, including refugees and asylum-seekers, congregated in a variety of coastal and island locations, many of them waiting for an opportunity to reach the European Union (EU). Others moved by land and entered the EU from the south-east, making their way through Turkey and the Balkan States.

The international community has recognized that migration can have positive consequences, as demonstrated by the successful meeting of the Global Forum on Migration and Development held in the Philippines in September 2008. In the case of irregular migratory movements, however, the negative dimensions of human mobility are particularly evident.

Irregular movements put the lives of people at risk and render them vulnerable to exploitation, extortion and detention. Because of their clandestine nature, these movements are often associated with criminality and corruption. They place serious strains on transit and destination countries, undermining the integrity of established asylum and migration management systems. And they can foster the conditions in which xenophobia thrives, as witnessed in the attacks on irregular migrants and refugees in South Africa in mid-2008.

In 2008, UNHCR continued to address the issue of refugee protection and international migration, following the constructive discussions on this issue that took place at the December 2007 Dialogue on Protection Challenges. More specifically, the Office undertook a global review of its role in relation to human trafficking, conducted a study of the phenomenon of vulnerable and stranded migrants, and brought the issue of mixed migration (including the problem of rescue at sea) to a number of international fora. At the operational level, UNHCR continued to promote and implement its 10-Point



Plan of Action on Refugee Protection and Mixed Migration.

**KEY HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGES**

SOME KEY CHALLENGES THAT confronted UNHCR in the course of 2008 included: meeting the needs and resolving the plight of the world's long-term refugees; the difficulty of providing appropriate forms of protection to all those people involved in mixed movements, whether they are refugees, asylum-seekers or irregular migrants; the need to sustain the institution of asylum, at a time when many refugee-hosting countries feel that their hospitality has been exhausted; and the continuing task of forging an effective inter-agency response to internal displacement.

In addition, three particular issues preoccupied UNHCR throughout 2008, all of which raised important questions about the fundamental principles of humanitarian action.

The first was the role of

forces in places such as Darfur and the DRC indicated that these conditions were not fulfilled.

A second challenge that loomed large for UNHCR was the need to both ensure staff security and to deliver humanitarian protection and assistance to people in need. UNHCR staff and other humanitarian personnel are deployed in the most dangerous places in the world. Many risk their own lives in the effort to help vulnerable populations to preserve theirs. The deliberate targeting of humanitarian workers by combatants has increased, creating tension between the imperative of staff safety and that of effective and equitable humanitarian action.

This generated acute dilemmas for the Office in 2008. In Somalia alone, UNHCR staff were bombed in Bossaso, shot at in Garowe and taken hostage in Mogadishu. In the light of such incidents, UNHCR was obliged to consider at what point it could legitimately withdraw from an

integrated operation can provide an effective framework for collaboration between the humanitarian, political, security and development components of the UN system. But in situations where the conflict has not been resolved, or where it flares up again, efforts to ensure an integrated approach across the UN system must not compromise humanitarian neutrality, impartiality and independence.

**REFORM INITIATIVES**

A FINAL PREOCCUPATION FOR UNHCR was to continue internal and inter-agency reform that would better equip the Office to exercise its mandate on behalf of uprooted and stateless people.

Internally, UNHCR has taken a variety of steps to become more effective, efficient and agile in responding to the needs of beneficiaries. This includes: streamlining UNHCR's Headquarters functions, so that more resources and personnel could be deployed to the

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peacekeeping forces in situations where there is no peace to keep, as well as the broader challenge of protecting civilian populations that are threatened by armed conflict. The international community has agreed that the deliberate targeting of civilians in situations of armed conflict is a flagrant violation of international law. It has recognized that humanitarian organizations such as UNHCR have a limited capacity to provide physical security to their beneficiaries.

As a result, multinational peacekeeping forces have been given an increasing role in protecting civilians, ensuring the security of refugee and IDP camps and maintaining their humanitarian character.

In practice, however, this has proved to be a daunting task. Many peacekeeping operations start in a situation of relative tranquility, only to be affected later by a deteriorating security environment. In such situations, mandates for the protection of civilians must be sufficiently clear and strong, and supported by appropriate levels of political, material and financial support. In 2008, the experience of peacekeeping

operation and whether alternative arrangements could be made for the delivery of humanitarian assistance in situations where it is too dangerous to deploy personnel.

**A** THIRD CHALLENGE that confronted UNHCR and its partners was that of preserving humanitarian space and the autonomy of humanitarian action. The parties to armed conflicts increasingly seek to diminish humanitarian space by targeting or intimidating aid workers, expropriating or manipulating the distribution of assistance, and by preventing access to displaced and conflict-affected populations. Such actions place serious constraints on the credibility, effectiveness and principled nature of humanitarian action.

Events in 2008 also highlighted the challenge of preserving humanitarian space and autonomy in the context of integrated UN operations. UNHCR's experience in Burundi, Liberia and Southern Sudan demonstrated that once a conflict has come to an end and a peace consolidation process is under way, an

field; decentralizing and regionalizing the decision-making process; commissioning an independent review of UNHCR's supply chain management system; adopting a new budget structure and resource allocation framework; as well as embarking on a global assessment of the needs of UNHCR's beneficiaries.

In terms of inter-agency activities, UNHCR remained firmly committed to the process of humanitarian reform. The Office assumed enhanced responsibilities for internally displaced populations within the cluster approach, especially in the areas of protection, emergency shelter, camp management and coordination. In support of the Delivering as One approach, UNHCR played an active role in the pilot programmes and the development of joint UN programmes for refugee-populated areas in Pakistan and the United Republic of Tanzania. The Office is convinced that this approach will reinforce the international community's efforts to find durable solutions for people in protracted situations of exile and displacement. ■