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UNHCR report: 80% of world’s refugees in developing countries

GENEVA, 20 JUNE 2011 - A UNHCR report released today reveals deep imbalance in international support for the world’s forcibly displaced, with a full four-fifths of the world’s refugees being hosted by developing countries – and at a time of rising anti-refugee sentiment in many industrialized ones.

UNHCR’s 2010 Global Trends report shows that many of the world’s poorest countries are hosting huge refugee populations, both in absolute terms and in relation to the size of their economies. Pakistan, Iran, and Syria have the largest refugee populations at 1.9 million, 1.1 million, and 1 million respectively. Pakistan also has the biggest economic impact with 710 refugees for each dollar of its per capita GDP (PPP) followed by Democratic Republic of the Congo and Kenya with 475 and 247 refugees respectively. By comparison Germany, the industrialized country with the largest refugee population (594,000 people), has 17 refugees for each dollar of per capita GDP.

Overall, the picture presented by the 2010 report is of a drastically changed protection environment to that of 60 years ago when the UN refugee agency was founded. At that time UNHCR’s caseload was 2.1 million Europeans, uprooted by World War Two. Today, UNHCR’s work extends to more than 120 countries and encompasses people forced to flee across borders as well as those in flight within their own countries. The 2010 Global Trends report shows that 43.7 million people are now displaced worldwide – roughly equalling the entire populations of Colombia or South Korea, or of Scandinavia and Sri Lanka combined. Within this total are 15.4 million refugees (10.55 million under UNHCR’s care and 4.82 million registered with the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees), 27.5 million people displaced internally by conflict, and nearly 850,000 asylum-seekers, nearly one fifth of them in South Africa alone. Particularly distressing are the 15,500 asylum applications by unaccompanied or separated children, most of them Somali or Afghan. The report does not cover displacement seen during 2011, including from Libya, Côte d’Ivoire, and Syria.

“In today’s world there are worrying misperceptions about refugee movements and the international protection paradigm,” said António Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees and head of UNHCR. “Fears about supposed floods of refugees in industrialized countries are being vastly overblown or mistakenly conflated with issues of migration. Meanwhile it’s poorer countries that are left having to pick up the burden.”

Extended wars mean extended exile

Reflecting the prolonged nature of several of today’s major international conflicts, the report finds that the refugee experience is becoming increasingly drawn-out for millions of people worldwide. UNHCR defines a protracted refugee situation as one in which a large number of people are stuck in exile for five years or longer. In 2010, and of the refugees under UNHCR’s mandate, 7.2 million people were in such a situation –

more than at any time since 2001. Meanwhile only 197,600 people were able to return home, the lowest number since 1990.

Some refugees have been in exile for more than 30 years. Afghans, who first fled the Soviet invasion in 1979, accounted for a third of the world's refugees in both 2001 and in 2010. Iraqis, Somalis, Congolese (DRC) and Sudanese were also among the top 10 nationalities of refugees at both the start and end of the decade.

“One refugee without hope is too many,” said High Commissioner Guterres. “The world is failing these people, leaving them to wait out the instability back home and put their lives on hold indefinitely. Developing countries cannot continue to bear this burden alone and the industrialized world must address this imbalance. We need to see increased resettlement quotas. We need accelerated peace initiatives in long-standing conflicts so that refugees can go home.”

Internally displaced – highest in a decade

Despite the low level of refugee returns last year, the situation for people displaced within their own countries – so-called Internally Displaced People – showed some movement. In 2010, more than 2.9 million IDPs returned home in countries including Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, and Kyrgyzstan. Nonetheless even with these return levels, at 27.5 million people the global number of internally displaced was the highest in a decade.

A further but harder-to-quantify group that UNHCR cares for is stateless people, or people lacking the basic safety-net of a nationality. The number of countries reporting stateless populations has increased steadily since 2004, but differences in definitions and methodologies still prevent reliable measurement of the problem. In 2010, the reported number of stateless people (3.5 million) was nearly half of that in 2009, but mainly due to methodological changes in some countries that supply data. Unofficial estimates put the global number closer to 12 million. UNHCR will be launching a worldwide campaign in August this year to bring better attention to the plight of the world's stateless and to accelerate action to help them.

WORLD REFUGEE DAY 2011

June 20 is World Refugee Day. To mark the occasion and this year's 60th anniversary of the UN Refugee Convention on 28 July, UNHCR is launching a six-month campaign aimed at promoting public awareness of the stories of individual refugees and other forcibly displaced people. The campaign features a number of media products including a video by [UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador Angelina Jolie](#), a new online video experience called “1 Life, 1 Story” in which refugees tell their own stories, and related publicity materials inviting members of the public to get involved and [Do 1 Thing](#) to help refugees, such as follow UNHCR on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). UNHCR is inviting media organizations to also engage and support the campaign via their news and blog sites. For interested media organizations, [online digital banners](#) are available for this purpose. Join us in letting others know that even one person forced to flee war or persecution, is one too many.