

## REFUGEE REGISTRATION AND STATISTICS

### I. INTRODUCTION

1. This conference room paper summarizes UNHCR's experience in compiling and producing statistics on refugees and others of concern to the Office in recent years. It discusses both data collection at the global level, as well as initiatives to strengthen beneficiary statistics in UNHCR operations. As opposed to earlier papers on this subject to the Executive Committee, this conference room paper does not provide a statistical update, as this has been disseminated separately.
2. Since the creation of the Office, UNHCR has collected refugee statistics from Governments. As stipulated in its mandate, "The High Commissioner shall provide for the protection of refugees falling under the competence of his Office by: ... (f) Obtaining from Governments information concerning the *number* and conditions of refugees in their territories..." (emphasis added). While refugee statistics are thus recognized to be an essential part of UNHCR's overall international protection function, it was not until 1993 that the Office created a post of Statistician to improve the overall collection, compilation and dissemination of refugee statistics.
3. Since 1994, one of the principal means to inform members of the Executive Committee, as well as other interested parties, about the size, location, changes and major characteristics of the global refugee population, has been the publication of the annual statistical overview. The latest issue, *Refugees And Others Of Concern to UNHCR: 1997 Statistical Overview*, which was published in July 1998, covers the global population of concern to UNHCR, major recorded refugee movements (new arrivals, voluntary repatriation, resettlement), beneficiaries of UNHCR programmes, asylum-seekers, refugee status determination, key refugee characteristics (origin, sex and age), as well as regional trends over the past 10 years. The tables are preceded by a text which discusses concepts, definitions, sources and methods, as well as provides country-specific notes.
4. Arguably, one of main challenges in compiling global refugee statistics is to reconcile data from developing countries, which benefit from assistance programmes mounted by the international community, and those reported by Governments of industrialized countries, which mainly focus on individual refugee status determination. Thus, the available data on developing countries concerns largely *prima facie* refugee populations who arrived as part of a mass inflow and who are located in camps. In the industrialized world, however, Governments are mostly concerned with the spontaneous arrival of individual asylum-seekers and the adjudication of their claims. The next two sections discuss some issues relating to refugee statistics in these two regions. The paper concludes with some remarks on demographic statistics and on inter-agency cooperation.

## II. SOME METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN RESPECT OF INDUSTRIALIZED COUNTRIES

5. In the industrialized world, very few countries maintain a register from which the total refugee population, as well as its main changes, can be derived. Even in countries which maintain a register, its quality is generally poor due to difficulties in updating, lack of coverage, etc. Consequently, most countries have great difficulty or are not able to provide an answer to the simple question of "how many refugees are living in the country?". Similarly, information is generally lacking on essential characteristics of the refugee population (country of origin, sex), and most changes in the refugee population, except refugee arrivals/recognition, are unknown.

6. To overcome the lack of refugee population figures in countries without a refugee register, UNHCR has utilized a simple methodology to estimate the number of refugees, namely, by adding up the total number of refugee arrivals/recognition over the past ten years. For the countries of permanent settlement, a cut-off period of five years has been applied to reflect the faster pace of refugee naturalization in these countries. Although this estimation is very basic, it has the advantage that it can be easily compared internationally and updated on an annual basis. In fact, this methodology could well be extended to industrialized countries with a register-based refugee population figure. This would have the advantage of replacing generally poor data with estimates based on well documented statistics of a better quality and which provide a simple, verifiable and internationally comparable indicator of refugee protection in all countries concerned.

7. As opposed to the general lack of reliable information on refugee populations, there are aspects of the population of concern to UNHCR which are well documented in these countries. In particular, asylum applications and refugee status determination by country of origin. The international comparability of this data, however, suffers from the different formats in which these statistics are produced. These differences include whether the statistics concern the number of persons or the number of "cases" or decisions; whether the applications concern only those newly submitted or also those which are "re-opened"; and whether the refugee status determination process concerns decisions in first instance or if it also includes review or appeal. Likewise, the coverage of the asylum statistics is uneven as to the extent to which the "pre-screening" of (potential) asylum-seekers is included.

8. As discussed in the 1997 statistical overview, the different status accorded to refugees and others in need of international protection in the region pose a further problems in compiling refugee statistics at the international level. Persons fleeing the war in former Yugoslavia, for instance, have often been registered in a different way and by different government bodies than other groups in need of international protection, thus limiting the possibility of comparing the various groups of concern to UNHCR even within countries.

9. The issue of "when is someone no longer a refugee" is also relevant in the context of counting and estimating refugee populations in the industrialized world. For instance, UNHCR includes resettled refugees who can nevertheless be considered as having *de facto* locally integrated. Rather than the granting of long-term residence status, UNHCR statistics have used naturalization as the main cut-off criterion for a number of reasons. First, naturalization is a fairly straightforward and universally recognized reason for not being a refugee, as opposed to "residence" which is understood and measured differently between States ("short-term", "long-term", "permanent", etc.). Moreover, except for the countries of permanent settlement, few States produce statistics on refugees by length of stay or type of residence permit. Thirdly, by excluding resettled refugees, the considerable effort made by countries of permanent settlement to provide a durable solution to refugees would not be reflected. In short, rather than introducing the concept "residence", it seems that the current practice of adding up refugee arrivals/recognition over a five or ten year period, albeit basic, is arguably the most sound way to estimate decreases in the refugee population under the present circumstances.

10. From the above, it can be concluded that the data on the arrival of refugees and asylum-seekers, and the adjudication of refugee status, rather than on refugee populations, offers the best prospect for a realistic international comparison of refugee statistics in the industrialized countries. The 1997 statistical overview, therefore, contains a significant number of tables on these issues.

### III. MANAGING POPULATION STATISTICS IN UNHCR-OPERATIONS

11. Accurate statistics are key to protecting and assisting refugees, and to plan and implement durable solutions. Since the creation of the Office and as part of its overall activities, UNHCR has assisted Governments in counting, registering, verifying and estimating refugee and displaced populations.

12. Censuses, or registrations, as they are commonly referred to in UNHCR, are undertaken periodically in all field operations where refugees are provided with UNHCR assistance. Independent of the fact of whether or not a formal registration is carried out, beneficiary numbers are regularly evaluated and adapted to reflect changes in the actual population (births, deaths, repatriations, new arrivals). Normally, a registration/verification will lead to an adjustment of the number of assisted refugees and will thus be reflected in related budgets. Registration methodologies are continuously evaluated and improved, and are disseminated through missions by staff and field training.

13. While there is no standard recipe to incorporate changes in the refugee population in-between registrations, there are a number of verification mechanisms in place. Thus, (certified) births are added to the registration cards issued to refugees, (certified) deaths are subtracted; the family size and the identity of the card holder is subject to spot-checks during the distribution of assistance; and random visits to the camp are made to ensure that the registration cards of people who left the camp spontaneously are being cancelled. Decreases in the refugee population may also be reflected through a reduction of rations "across the board", without direct changes to the registration cards.

14. The frequency of undertaking a formal re-registration varies and depends on a number of factors. If the registration system is reliable and if no major population movements have taken place, it may not be cost-effective to carry out a re-registration, as the adjustments to the refugee population database and periodic replacement of the registration cards may be sufficient.

15. Since 1994, a registration project has been managed by the Food and Statistical Unit at Headquarters, in close collaboration with UNHCR's Information and Communications Systems Section (ICSS) and the Supply and Transport Section (STS). The main components of the project are:

(a) Publication of UNHCR registration guidelines. These serve as the main reference for all registration training (see below). They are currently being revised on the basis of registration experiences accumulated since its publication in May 1994;

(b) Development of standard registration items and the maintenance of a registration materials stockpile at Headquarters. This stockpile includes registration cards, registration forms and other essential registration tools such as wristbands, "invisible ink" and tokens;

(c) Development and use of registration software. Software has been developed on the basis of the UNHCR registration forms included in the registration guidelines and is being deployed to an increasing number of locations;

(d) Registration/statistics training. In addition to the registration guidelines, registration training videos have been developed to serve as an essential training tool. The main objective of the training has been to strengthen the expertise of field staff in assessing, planning and carrying out refugee registration. Participants number on average between 20 to 25 persons and include UNHCR, WFP and non-governmental organization (NGO) staff, as well as government officials;

(e) Registration staff. To ensure technical backstopping and basic regional coordination, two posts of Regional Registration Officers have been created; one in Nairobi, Kenya (1994) and one in Western Africa (1997). The latter has yet to be filled;

(f) Informal registration roster. As a result of training and increased registration activities, selected staff members serve as resource persons for registration support within their region on an ad-hoc basis.

16. During 1996, regional registration workshops were organized in Nairobi, Kenya (focusing on the Great Lakes region of Africa), Conakry, Guinea (registration software), Windhoek, Namibia (Angolan repatriation) and Amman, Jordan (including registration of urban refugees). In 1997, much attention was focused on preparing and implementing major registrations in Côte d'Ivoire (February), Ethiopia (February and October) and Guinea (June). A regional registration workshop was organized in Nairobi, Kenya, in November 1997. A number of other, smaller, registrations/verifications were undertaken without the direct involvement of UNHCR Headquarters.

17. UNHCR will further enhance its registration capacity along the lines as discussed above. Budgetary constraints, however, are likely to affect aspects of the registration project, including the provision of registration/statistics training.

18. In addition to registration/verification, estimation plays an important role in the collection of statistics, both during as well as following situations of mass displacement. During the first phases of a mass influx, estimates are usually the only source of quantitative information. Once a proper registration has been carried out, the official refugee population statistics, as well as the assistance programme are usually based on the results of this exercise. However, as registration data may become less accurate over time, population estimation may reveal significant discrepancies between the official statistics and the actual situation on the ground, and thus indicate the need for a re-registration/verification.

19. Plans to convene a technical seminar on refugee estimation, to be organized jointly with UNFPA and WFP, were first announced in 1997. Subject to the availability of resources, the seminar is currently planned for the second half of 1998.

#### IV. OTHER ISSUES AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

20. One area in which a particular effort has been made to improve UNHCR's statistics is that of gender and age. The 1997 statistical overview contains six tables which provide the demographic characteristics of more than four million refugees by country of asylum, origin and type of location (urban areas, refugee camps/centres, rural areas). Due to the data limitations discussed in Part II of this paper, the statistics are essentially limited to UNHCR-assisted refugees, although some available evidence on the gender of asylum-seekers in the industrialized countries is provided in the document.

21. Over the past few years, UNHCR has established working relationships within and outside the United Nations system in the field of refugee statistics. Most notably, it has provided substantive input to the revision of the United Nations recommendations on international migration statistics, an initiative led by the United Nations Statistical Division and the Statistical Office of the European Union. As opposed to the 1980 recommendations, the revised set seeks to address the issue of refugees and asylum within the overall context of international migration statistics. Input has also been provided to selected United Nations coordination meetings on statistics. Research institutes and NGOs have also expressed significant interest in the global and regional trends in refugee statistics.

22. UNHCR will continue to keep the Executive Committee informed of statistical issues through the publication of the annual statistical overview and periodic reports to the Standing Committee.