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REFUGEES

“Wars since the 1990s have been mainly internal. They have been brutal, claiming more than 5 million lives. They have violated, not so much borders, as people. Humanitarian conventions have been routinely flouted, civilians and aid workers have become strategic targets, and children have been forced to become killers.”

– from the *Millennium Report*

Vital Statistics:

- In total, some 50 million people around the world might be described as victims of forced displacement.
- Around 14 million people are refugees in the conventional sense of the word: people who have left their own country to escape from persecution, armed conflict or violence. To this figure can be added a very large number of uprooted people who do not receive any form of international protection or assistance, the majority of whom remain within the borders in their own country.
- Nearly two-thirds of the world's refugees are in the Middle East and Africa. Although refugee flows are widespread, a handful of countries are the primary source. Half of all refugees come from three sources: Palestinians, as well as from Afghanistan and Iraq. Completing the list of the ten leading sources of refugees are Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Yugoslavia, Angola, Croatia, and Eritrea.
- UNHCR, the United Nations refugee organization, is mandated by the UN to lead and coordinate international action for the world-wide protection of refugees and the resolution of refugee problems. When first created by the UN General Assembly in 1951, UNHCR was charged primarily with resettling 1.2 million European refugees left homeless in the aftermath of World War II.

Who Is Today's Refugee?

“A refugee is a person who has fled his or her country and is unable or unwilling to return because of a ‘well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion’(…)”

Article 1 (A.2), 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees

No one likes (or chooses) to be a refugee. Being a refugee means more than just being a foreigner. It means living in exile and often depending on others for basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter.

People become refugees when one or more of their basic human rights are abused. Many are victims of war, political, religious and other forms of persecution. In the initial chaos of fleeing and seeking safety in another country, most victims lose virtually every right and material possession which form the cornerstone of any civilized society – their homes, personal belongings, schooling and health care, close family members and sometimes even their identities. Refugee women and their children, along with the elderly, are the most vulnerable.

On the run

‘Fresh wave of displaced people arrives in Afghan capital’. ‘Rwandan refugees dying in Kisangani’. ‘Hong Kong forces more boat people home’. ‘UNHCR says right to asylum in Europe under threat’. ‘Georgian refugees insist on the right to return’. ‘Thousands displaced by violence in Colombia’. ‘Military interventions to stem Albanian exodus’.

All these headlines appeared in the newspapers during one single week. As they suggest, the problem of displacement now affects every part of the world and has become a major subject of public and political concern.

Box: Useful definitions

- **Refugees:** Persons outside their country of origin who are unable or unwilling to return, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution.
- **Returnees:** Persons who were of concern to the international community when outside of their country of origin and who remain so for a limited period after their return.
- **Internally displaced people:** Persons displaced by conflict within their country. The UN assists some groups of internally displaced.
- **Asylum seekers:** Persons who have left their countries of origin and have applied for recognition as refugees in other countries and whose applications are still pending.
- **Others of concern:** Persons who are in refugee like situations but who have not formally been recognized as refugees. This covers, among others, victims of war in the former Yugoslavia and various groups in the CIS countries.

People flee their countries when their lives become endangered. Every day, somewhere in the world, people become refugees.

Over the past decade several conflicts have been on the increase. As emphasized by the Secretary-General in the Millennium Report, civilians in many parts of the world continue to be forced to flee – mostly – by internal wars. As seen in places as diverse as Kosovo, East Timor, Sierra Leone and the Great Lakes region of Africa, the root causes of conflict and displacement very often lie in the failure to give due recognition to the aspirations and rights of ethnic minorities, or various social groups. This fuels separatist claims, especially in areas with a history of strong autonomy. Tribalism, nationalism, and ethnocentrism are exacerbated. In many cases separatist trends are severely repressed. Minorities are particularly targeted by this repression. The outcomes are polarized societies and communities, displacement and crystallized refugee crises.

As the number of refugees has increased and spread to every corner of the globe, the mandate to help them has been extended every five years. The UN refugee organization has expanded its relief and emergency operations and in recent years has been called upon increasingly to help other groups of people living in refugee-like situations. These include people who have been granted protection on a group basis, or on purely humanitarian grounds, but who have not been fully recognized as refugees.

The largest of these groups of people who live in refugee-like situations are the so-called **internally displaced people** (IDPs) who have fled their homes, generally during a civil war, but have not crossed an international border. The Secretary-General, for example, in 1991 designated UNHCR the lead UN humanitarian agency in former Yugoslavia, where it aided some 3.5 million refugees, IDPs and other war-affected people throughout the conflict. The agency's operational expertise was used to aid nearly the entire population of Bosnia-Herzegovina, including members of the general population who were neither displaced nor refugees, and those who fled the crisis in Kosovo in 1999.

- **Jacob's story (Box)**

In my hometown in Southern Sudan, there was fighting everywhere. Though I was only 9, I always dreamed of running away to a place where there was no war, where I could go to school again. To escape the war, a lot of people in my village were leaving, including a woman next door.

One day I left, too, without telling anyone. Not even my father.

There were so many people walking on the road. I had nothing. No clothes, no food. The first day I did not eat. I just ran. The first night I remembered the wild animals I had seen along the road. So I climbed up a tree to sleep.

The next day I found the woman who had lived next door. She agreed to take me with her. Soon we came to a place that had mines. Someone was blown up and everyone started running and there was blood everywhere. We held hands tightly and ran together across the field.

Soon we reached a river. On the other side, we found more people, all of them hungry. We kept walking and new people joined them in the group. We walked through empty villages. We saw villages where there was nobody, not even a cat. We had no food and people started eating leaves.

After ten days, people in our group began to die. One night, an old man sat in the road and said he could not walk any more. He died an hour later. We crossed another river and planes dropped bombs on us. I was very tired and thought we would never find the camp. But the woman told me, "We are close. After we have crossed the border into Ethiopia we won't have any more problems."

Three hours later we reached a refugee camp. There are many people here from Sudan who are just like me. This is the place I dreamed of. Now I go to school again. In the camp, there is food and medicine. And the sound of planes no longer frighten me because I know they are carrying food, not bombs.

But when I hear the planes I remember my father and brothers in my village and I am sad. I think the day I ran away, they forgot I loved them. I would like to go home.

Adapted from "Refugee Children," published by UNHCR

Reaching Safety

The governments of many of the world's countries have agreed to **grant asylum** to refugees. To grant asylum means to offer protection in a safe country to people who are in danger in their own country. One way of ensuring that refugees are protected by their country of asylum, is to assist asylum countries as far as possible in that task, and to ensure that States are aware of, and respect, their obligations to protect refugees and persons seeking asylum and solutions.

By virtue of its activities on behalf of refugees and displaced people, UNHCR also promotes the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter: maintaining international peace and security; developing friendly relations among nations; and encouraging respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Under its mandate, UNHCR's work is humanitarian and non-political. Its founding statute entrusts UNHCR with two main and closely related functions – to protect refugees and to seek durable solutions to their problems. The former function – the most important responsibility – is known as "**international protection**" and is aimed at ensuring basic human rights, particularly that no refugee be returned involuntarily to a country where he or she has reason to fear persecution.

Every refugee has the right to safe asylum. However, international protection comprises more than physical safety. Refugees should receive at least the same rights and basic help as any other foreigner who is a legal resident, including certain fundamental entitlements of every individual: basic civil rights, including freedom of thought and of movement, and freedom from torture and degrading treatment. Similarly, economic and social rights apply to refugees as they do to other individuals. Every refugee should have access to medical care. Every adult refugee should have the right to work. No refugee child should be deprived of schooling, or recruited into military service or prostitution.

Helping Refugees

Protecting, assisting, and seeking lasting solutions for refugees can be done in a variety of ways. One way to carry out the protection function, for example, is to promote adherence to international agreements on refugees and constantly monitor compliance by Governments. Though they may have succeeded in fleeing

human rights violations in their homelands, refugees may be subjected to new horrors in their asylum countries. Sexual violence, exploitation and other forms of assault have been a particularly disturbing part of some refugees' experience. International staff work both in capital cities and more often in or near remote camps and border areas, attempting to provide protection and to minimize the threat of physical attack.

Emergency assistance provided to refugees may be in the form of food, water, shelter, medicine, blankets, sanitation and equipment such as kitchenware and tools. Tents made from blue plastic sheeting supplied by UNHCR have become an all-too-familiar part of the landscape as such emergencies have multiplied. There are also programs to establish schools and clinics for refugees who are living in camps or other communal groupings. It is important to make every effort to ensure that refugees can become self-sufficient as swiftly as possible – this may require small financial grants and formal income-generating activities or projects to teach new skills.

Finally, durable solutions for the problems of refugees are sought through **repatriation** to their homeland, **integration** in first countries of asylum or **resettlement** to third countries.

- Seventeen-year-old Fatima, a Somali refugee, was raped while herding goats near the Dadaab refugee camp in eastern Kenya. She was then ostracized by her own community because of the incident. UNHCR provided medical, social and legal counseling to the teenager who was subsequently reintegrated into her community after a six-month mediation process.
- Rwanda's ethnic violence in 1994 sent hundreds of thousands of children fleeing their homes, many without parents or guardians. UNICEF, in association with KODAK, helped trace many of those children and re-unite them with their parents. Eight-year-old Oliver was one of them. His photo and those of hundreds of others were displayed in billboards in the camp where Oliver lived in Goma, Zaire. When Beatrice, his mother, saw Oliver in April 1995, she asked him, "Do you know who I am?" Oliver had not seen his mother for nine months. "You are Beatrice, my mother," he said, after a moment's hesitation, and then disappeared into the outstretched arms of her mother.

Signs of progress

Large numbers of people have been forced to abandon their homes and seek safety elsewhere in recent years. But many displaced people have also been able to go back to their own countries and communities.

- **Afghanistan:** Since 1989, almost 2.6 million Afghan refugees have been assisted to return home from Pakistan and Iran.
- **Africa's Great Lakes:** Beginning in 1994 the UN provided humanitarian aid to over 1.7 million Rwandan refugees during the crisis in the Great Lakes region. In 1996 and 1997, most of these people returned home to Rwanda.
- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** The airlift to Sarajevo was the longest-running humanitarian air bridge in history. The airlift began in July 1992 and ended in January 1996. More than 2.7 million men, women and children were helped.
- **Caucasus:** In the newly independent states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, some 450,000 refugees and asylum seekers and nearly 970,000 internally displaced persons are assisted.
- **Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua:** UNHCR and the UNDP assisted a total of 1.9 million internally displaced persons, to return home.
- **Mali and Liberia:** The UN is playing a vital role in peace and reconciliation through its reintegration programmes; over half a million refugees returned home.
- **Mozambique:** Nearly 400,000 refugees were assisted to return home to Mozambique; the organization also spent an estimated \$100 million on development and reintegration programmes to help them restart their lives.
- **Northern Iraq:** In 1991, humanitarian assistance was provided to some 500,000 Iraqi Kurds displaced after the Persian Gulf War.

- **Vietnam:** Under UNHCR sponsorship 109,000 Vietnamese boat people returned to their country.

Box: Tamaz Biblia’s story

When Georgia gained independence following the break-up of the Soviet Union, Abkhazia tried to break away. This led to a conflict that killed over ten thousand people. Hundreds of thousands were displaced.

Thousands came to the city of Zugudidi, among them, Tamaz Biblia who arrived penniless but four years later, thanks to UNHCR and the voluntary organization, International Rescue Committee (IRC), Tamaz has become a businessman selling second-hand clothes.

Tamaz attended an IRC small business development training in 1997. The programme is sponsored by UNHCR. He had the idea of selling second-hand clothes and obtained from the programme a loan of \$820.

Tamaz’s business has become an enormous success. He already has three employees working for him, all of whom like him are displaced from Abkhazia. He proudly told a visiting UN team that he was planning to open a new store in a few days.

“I’ve got a new line of credit and, thanks to this new loan, I will be able to provide employment to three more persons,” he said.

Adapted from “UN in Action”, a United Nations video

Areas in need of attention

During 1999, conflicts in Kosovo and East Timor gave rise to dramatic and massive refugee crises, and in both cases, the international community eventually responded. In other instances, the international response is much slower, timid and piecemeal. This is particularly true in Africa.

In the last few years, the pattern of refugee crises in Africa has undergone significant changes. Refugees continue to flee violence and conflict – almost invariably compounded by poverty – and to seek asylum in safer countries. Others – and increasingly so – seek refuge as internally displaced people in safer parts of their own countries.

- In Angola, almost 20 per cent of the population has fled – both outside and inside the borders of the country.

Dealing with the internally displaced is often more arduous than with refugees who cross borders. The difficulty of having access to large numbers of people in insecure and isolated areas is compounded by the complexity of assisting civilians in their own country – where their own state authorities, or rebel forces in control, are frequently the very cause of their predicament. Hundreds of thousands of people at risk in war areas such as southern Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Angola and Sierra Leone – a majority of them internally displaced – are presently not accessible to humanitarian agencies. And where such access is possible, it is often very dangerous. Therefore, it is particularly worrying that insufficient resources are provided by the international community, increasing the risk of exposing the Africa continent to fresh catastrophes – like the exodus of Rwandans, or the massacres and mutilations of civilians in Sierra Leone.

BOX: Looking Into the Face of Human Suffering

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan on 19 and 20 May 1999 visited refugee camps in Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, where he, in his own words, spent "two heart-rending days" with the victims of Kosovo, who by the end of May numbered nearly 800,000. On returning to New York, Mr. Annan wrote the following first-person account of his visit

“At the Blace border crossing with Kosovo, I held the hand of a 100-year-old woman who asked me with tears in her eyes, "How could this be happening to me at this time in my life?" I spoke to a young mother who only three weeks before had given birth to a child while hiding in the mountains.

A woman holding a 3-year-old boy told me that her last memory of her husband was when he was arrested and taken away. She has not heard from him since. In the Stenkovac camp in Macedonia, I listened to an old man whose entire village had been in flight for two months, seeking refuge wherever possible and finding it only now. In Albania, in the Kukes camp, I visited a young woman in a field hospital who had been shot in the leg as she fled her home with her newborn baby.

On the border between Albania and Kosovo, I visited a small family in a tent who, with extraordinary dignity and quiet courage, welcomed me and asked only that they be allowed to return to their homeland. I could only tell them that it is what we want, too. Indeed, that is what the world demands. And as I was leaving the camp I was deeply moved by a small expression of the generosity and strength of the Kosovar people. I was approached by an aid worker who handed me a small UNICEF pin, explaining that it was a gift from a 9-year-old girl who asked that it be given to their friend from the United Nations.”

Suggested Activities for Students:

1. Cultivate attitudes which support the constructive, active and non-violent resolution of conflict. On the UNHCR website, www.unhcr.ch, resources are available for students to work with issues connected to refugees; to introduce students to relevant concepts such as asylum and international declarations concerning human rights; to provide further background information and to enable students to develop an understanding of the refugee experience.
2. Help students understand some of the complex processes that lead to violence and conflict which in turn cause refugees to flee from their homes and from their countries of origin. To promote refugee awareness, students can for example sponsor a ‘refugee day’ at their school, to which refugees from the local community can be invited to speak. To get information about this contact the State Refugee Coordination Office or NGOs (non-governmental organizations) working with refugees. One possibility is to have a closed circuit TV in the school to share the activities with the rest of the students.
3. Help students develop the personal and social skills necessary to live in harmony with others and to behave in positive and caring ways that respect basic human rights. Contact local resettlement offices to investigate possibilities for students to volunteer in tutoring refugees in English. Another way of helping is to, in coordination with the resettlement office, arrange drives for newly arrived refugees, to provide them with basic things such as shampoo, clothing, baby items etc.
4. One way to help refugees is to go to www.peaceforall.com a special website set up to trigger donations to refugees through the UNHCR. On the website, click on a button to make an automatic free sponsor/donation. To raise money for refugees, students can start campaigns to encourage people to click once a day for a month.

Selected resources:

On the World Wide Web:

www.unhcr.ch
www.unicef.org

Publications:

A Humanitarian Agenda (1997), UNHCR
In Search of Solutions (1995), UNHCR
The Challenge of Protection (1999), UNHCR
Working Paper No. 16: A state of insecurity: the political economy of violence in refugee-populated areas of Kenya, Jeff Crisp, Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, UNHCR, CP2500, CH-211 Geneva 2,

Switzerland (December 1999)

Working Paper No. 15: Returning refugees or migrating villagers? Voluntary repatriation programmes in Africa reconsidered, Oliver Bakewell, 27 Tynemouth Road, Tottenham, London N15 4AT, United Kingdom (December 1999)

Graph/chart

Global refugee population

(From Millennium Report, page 44)

Refugees by numbers

Origin of major refugee populations (10 largest groups)

Country of origin (2)	Main countries of asylum	Refugees
Afghanistan	Iran / Pakistan / India	2,648,000
Iraq	Iran / Syria / Saudi Arabia / Western Europe	631,000
Bosnia & Herzegovina	F.R. Yugoslavia / Germany / Croatia / Sweden / Switzerland	597,000
Somalia	Ethiopia / Kenya/ Yemen / Djibouti	525,000
Burundi	Tanzania / D.R. Congo/ Rwanda / Zambia	517,000
Liberia	Guinea / Côte d'Ivoire / Ghana / Sierra Leone	487,000
Sudan	Uganda / D. R. Congo / Ethiopia / Kenya / Central African Republic	351,000
Croatia	F.R. Yugoslavia / Bosnia & Herzegovina	342,000
Sierra Leone	Guinea / Liberia / Gambia	328,000
Viet Nam	China / France / Sweden / Switzerland	317,000

- An estimated 3.2 million Palestinians who are covered by a separate mandate of the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) are not included in this table. However, Palestinians outside the UNRWA area of operations such as those in Iraq or Libya, are considered to be of concern to UNHCR.

- Statistics reflecting the countries of origin of a large number of refugees in more developed countries are not available. Also, many refugees have acquired the citizenship of the asylum country — for example Vietnamese in the USA — and therefore are not included in the refugee statistics.

Source: UNHCR (www.unhcr.ch)

(This paper was contributed by UNHCR)