

The UN Refugee Agency — global provider of asylum data

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the leading provider of global refugee and asylum-seeker statistics. Since its creation in 1950, it has compiled statistics and reports on the situation of refugees and asylum-seekers all over the world. Its statistics are used both internally and by external partners to monitor progress and as a basis for fundraising and evidence-based decision-making.



UNHCR provides information about the magnitude and scope of conflict-generated forced displacement. Pictured is a UNHCR staff member comforting a child found among a group of boat people intercepted at sea by Italian coastguards. Photo: UNHCR/A. Di Loreto.

As part of its mandate to lead and coordinate international action to protect refugees and other uprooted people, UNHCR provides information to the international community about the magnitude and scope of conflict-generated forced displacement. UNHCR statistics on refugees and asylum-seekers help monitor progress and identify emerging patterns and trends, such as the recent influx of Iraqi asylum-seekers into selected European countries,' says Khassoum Diallo, Senior Statistician in the Division of Operational Services at UNHCR.

UNHCR's field offices are located in more than 120 countries around the world. It uses asylum statistics to monitor levels, flows, trends and characteristics of asylum-seekers worldwide, as well as to plan, implement and monitor protection, assistance and advocacy.

External partners such as governments, other UN agencies, NGOs, donors, media and researchers use UNHCR's data to support their own operations, funding and research activities.



Refugees and migrants risk their lives travelling from Africa to Europe in overcrowded and unseaworthy vessels to escape persecution and violence or simply to find a better life. Photo: UNHCR/A. Rodríguez.

UNHCR offers different forms of assistance, for example providing shelter and food, conducting refugee status determination, providing legal advice and granting assistance packages. Its level of involvement depends on the operational context and country. In general, the level of assistance provided to refugees tends to be high where UNHCR is operationally active, i.e. primarily in developing countries. In fact, many refugees in developed countries do not require assistance from UNHCR, since they are considered as already locally integrated or have reached a minimum level of self-sufficiency.

Global monitoring system

By the end of 2006, UNHCR was assisting about 4.5 million refugees out of an estimated 9.9 million who fall under the UNHCR mandate. It is important to highlight that the 4.4 million Palestinian refugees who fall under the mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine

Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) are not included in UNHCR statistics. In addition, UNHCR was also assisting some 144 000 individuals who have applied for asylum or refugee status and whose claim had not yet been adjudicated by the end of 2006. Overall, an estimated 744 000 asylum claims were globally still pending at any level of the asylum procedure.

'For European policymakers, for instance, our monitoring system of monthly asylum applications is probably the most important one. Currently, our system includes 36 industrialised countries of which 31 are European. We are in the process of expanding our monitoring system and hope to be able to include the Balkan countries and Italy in the near future', says Mr Diallo.

'In addition, we regularly receive requests by researchers analysing our asylum data. They want to know, in partic-

ular, whether the fall in the number of asylum-seekers in Europe is the effect of more restrictive asylum policies or of improved conditions in some of the major countries of origin. UNHCR fully supports this kind of research, since it also provides a good source of background information for us. To facilitate data exchange with our external data users, we have launched the UNHCR statistical online population database, where all the asylum and refugee data are available', he adds.

A unique refugee database

UNHCR collects data on its persons of concern i.e. refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees and stateless persons. The data collection includes information on country of origin and of asylum, sex, age and location or settlement such as camp or centre. Furthermore, information about protection and living conditions is also gathered with variables such as education, health, nutrition as well as information regarding sexual and gender-based violence. Apart from the total number in the different categories and country of origin and asylum, much of the remaining information is partial.

'The collection and analysis activities contribute to filling existing information gaps on these topics. These activities include the standards and indicators data collection pro-

gramme, the health and nutrition information system (HNIS) which monitors, among others, the nutrition status of refugees in selected camps in Africa, surveys on the millennium development goals indicators for refugees and IDPs and the extensive use of the UNHCR ProGres (profile global registration system) database, a unique database on refugee and asylum-seeker data in developing countries. So far, the software has been rolled out in 55 countries and the database has over 2.5 million individual records', says Tarek Abou Chabake, data analyst in the Division of Operational Services at UNHCR.

Challenges of global collection

Several factors make it difficult for UNHCR to collect and compare data on a global level. According to Mr Abou Chabake, some countries do not apply harmonised definitions and measurement criteria even though they have signed the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

'The translation of the principles and definitions contained in the convention into national law is not always done in a systematic and harmonised way. This is the case in many developed countries, in particular in Europe, where the asylum procedure has become extremely complex in recent years. This makes the counting of asylum applications a cumbersome undertaking', explains Mr Abou Chabake.

For example, counting the number of individuals submitting an asylum application for the first time is not as easy as it sounds. Some European immigration offices categorise individuals submitting a second application or who are requesting the reopening of an already closed asylum claim as 'new asylum-seekers'. In some countries, the national statistical systems do not

For European policymakers the UNHCR monitoring system of monthly asylum applications is important. The system currently includes 31 European countries. Pictured are some refugees being transferred to new accommodation in Italy. Photo: UNHCR / A. Di Loreto.



permit the distinction of new claims from other types of asylum claims. The result is inflated asylum figures, which has been the case in several countries for the past decade.

Other factors that make the collection and comparability of data difficult are differences in quality and periodicity. In some countries, data are good and reliable, in others of poorer quality and, in the worst case, simply unavailable.

'When talking about international asylum statistics, one should first differentiate between refugee status determination (RSD) carried out by UNHCR in contrast to RSD carried out by a government. Where the latter does not conduct RSD, or no fair and efficient asylum procedure exists, then UNHCR steps in. For statistical purposes, this distinction is important because UNHCR data are collected in a systematic

way based on the same definitions, which leads to detailed and comparable figures', Mr Abou Chabake says.

'Another issue is the fact that some individuals tend to apply for asylum in more than one country, in particular in Europe, to increase their chances of obtaining refugee status. With the introduction of the Eurodac system (see box), double or even multiple applications can be detected. However, in statistical terms, these multiple applications submitted by one individual lead to a double count of applications. Unfortunately, we cannot estimate the magnitude of this phenomenon, but we believe it to be distorting the real picture significantly', he adds.

Building networks for data sharing

In an attempt to improve the data collection on asylum-seekers and refugees and to share best practices, a thematic meeting was organised in Geneva in December 2006. The two co-organisers were UNHCR and the International Organisation for Migration in cooperation with the International Labour Organisation and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development. Experts from 14 countries, 7 intergovernmental organisations, Eurostat and the UN Economic Commission for Europe attended the meeting.

'An example of best practices in the field of international data collection is the European–Asian programme on forced displacement and migration, a regional network that aims to collect and exchange data on asylum and migration using common indicators and methodologies', says Mr Diallo.

Finally, he says that the upcoming new round of national censuses is an excellent opportunity to improve international data collection.

'We believe that the new round of censuses coming up soon (2008–10) might be a golden opportunity to identify the total number of individuals residing in a country for asylum or refugee-related reasons. We also recommend the use of UN recommendations on international migration statistics.'

*By Beatriz Fernández Nebreda and Johan Wullt,
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UNHCR

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was established in 1950 by the United Nations General Assembly. The agency's mandate is to lead and coordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide. Its primary purpose is to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees. Today, more than 140 countries have signed the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, under which they must provide UNHCR with information concerning the number and condition of refugees.

Eurodac

The Eurodac system enables EU Member States to identify asylum applicants and persons who have been apprehended while unlawfully crossing an external frontier of the Community. By comparing fingerprints, Member States can determine whether an asylum applicant or a foreign national found illegally present within a Member State has previously claimed asylum in another Member State or whether an asylum applicant entered the Union territory unlawfully.

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The UNHCR statistical online population database: www.unhcr.org/statistics/populationdatabase