



UNHCR

United Nations
High Commissioner
for Refugees

THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S REFUGEES

A Humanitarian Agenda



The State of the World's Refugees: A Humanitarian Agenda

UNHCR - the world's leading refugee organization - presents a comprehensive analysis of forced displacement and humanitarian action in the contemporary world.

The 1990s have witnessed a series of civil wars and communal conflicts in which masses of people have been obliged to flee for their lives: Burundi, Chechnya, Colombia, Liberia, Rwanda and Sri Lanka, to give just a few examples.

Elsewhere, particularly in former Yugoslavia, the Caucasus and the Great Lakes region of Africa, millions of women, men and children have been deliberately forced to abandon their homes, often so that their land and property can be occupied by others. Increasingly, mass population displacements are both an objective and a tactic of war.

In this book, UNHCR provides a topical and detailed examination of the problem of forced displacement, focusing on the different groups of people who are protected and assisted by the organization: refugees, returnees, asylum seekers, internally displaced and stateless populations. The book also sets out a wide-ranging agenda for action, suggesting many ways in which the security of these groups might be safeguarded more effectively.

Drawing upon case studies from every part of the world, the book suggests that humanitarian action can play an important part in defending the rights of people who have been uprooted or threatened with displacement. But such action can never act as a substitute for the protection which states must provide to their own citizens.

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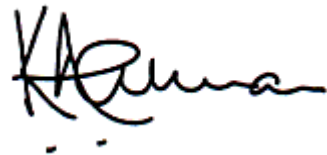
Preface by the United Nations Secretary-General

When the United Nations was established in 1945, the international community was intent on averting a third world war. Today, just over 50 years later, that objective appears to have been attained. With the end of the period of superpower rivalry, reductions in nuclear weapons arsenals and the process of economic globalization, there is a real prospect of lasting peace between the world's most powerful states. More generally, it has become clear, governments are increasingly reluctant to resolve their differences by resorting to the use of military force. Wars between sovereign states appear to be a phenomenon in distinct decline.

Tragically, however, the lives of millions of people around the globe continue to be blighted by violence. In some parts of the world, states have collapsed as a result of internal and communal conflicts, depriving their citizens of any effective protection. Elsewhere, human security has been jeopardized by governments which refuse to act in the common interest, which persecute their opponents and punish innocent members of minority groups. As *The State of the World's Refugees* explains, such conditions have made it impossible for those millions of people to exercise a basic human right: to live safely, peacefully and without fear in their own homes.

The problem of forced displacement is one of the most pressing challenges now confronting the United Nations. This timely and important publication describes in detail the many dangers experienced by the world's uprooted and displaced people. It also presents a wide-ranging set of policy proposals concerning the protection of such populations and the resolution of their plight. Such efforts, it must be stressed, are inextricably linked to our work to prevent and resolve armed conflicts, to defend human rights and to promote sustainable development in every part of the world.

No-one should be obliged to flee from their own country in order to stay alive. No-one should be displaced because others want to seize their land, occupy their homes or control their territory. I am sure that *The State of the World's Refugees* will assist the international community to reach a better understanding of these issues and to respond to them more effectively.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Annan', with a small dash below it.

Kofi Annan

Foreword

by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

The word 'refugee' tends to evoke images of a sprawling camp, housing large numbers of distressed and impoverished people who have had to escape from their own country at short notice and with nothing but the clothes on their back.

This perception is not an entirely false one; a majority of the 22 million people who are cared for by UNHCR come from the world's poorer countries. And many of them are obliged to live in large camps and settlements, waiting for the day when it is safe enough for them to go back to their homes and resume a more normal way of life.

As this book explains, however, the problem of forced displacement has become a much broader and more complex phenomenon than is suggested by the conventional image of a refugee camp. Indeed, refugees in the legal sense of the word now constitute little more than half of the people who are protected and assisted by UNHCR. The organization's other beneficiaries include a variety of different groups: internally displaced and war-affected populations; asylum seekers; stateless people and others whose nationality is disputed; as well as 'returnees' - refugees and displaced people who have been able to go back to their homes, but who still require some support from the international community.

While such groups of people may differ considerably with regard to their specific circumstances and legal status, they have one thing in common: a high level of human insecurity, arising in most instances from the inability or unwillingness of a state to protect its citizens. The primary function of UNHCR is to compensate for this absence of national protection by safeguarding the life, liberty and other rights of people who have been uprooted or threatened with displacement.

That task has become increasingly difficult in the past few years. On one hand, much higher expectations have been placed upon humanitarian action, often because states and regional organizations are reluctant to commit themselves to more decisive forms of intervention when confronted with armed conflicts and crimes against humanity. On the other hand, the circumstances in which humanitarian organizations are required to function have become increasingly difficult and dangerous. Whether in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Liberia, Rwanda or the former Zaire, aid agencies have found themselves working in zones of active conflict, and in many instances have been deliberately singled out for attack by one or more of the warring parties.

The tools available to UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations are thus limited in their nature and impact. However proficiently such agencies are managed and coordinated, they cannot bring civil wars to an end, oblige states to respect the human rights of their citizens or bring a halt to the deliberate displacement of civilian populations.

Even so, in situations where armed conflict has erupted and where people have been uprooted or threatened with displacement, humanitarian action has an essential role to play. It can feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. It can reunite divided families and help displaced people return and reintegrate in their own community. Humanitarian organizations have the capacity to alert the world to impending emergencies and to mobilize public opinion on behalf of people who are in need of international protection. In some circumstances, such organizations can also help to foster the growth of attitudes and institutions which reduce the risk of violence and forced population displacements.

The pages which follow provide a wealth of policy proposals and practical recommendations concerning the problem of forced displacement. Refugee and humanitarian problems, the book suggests, are inherently transnational in nature, not only because they involve the movement of people across state borders, but also because as human beings we have a responsibility to safeguard the security of all people. At the threshold of the 21st century, we are faced with the challenge to assure the universal protection of people by reinforcing even more than before the bonds of human compassion and solidarity. We yearn for the day when people in every part of the world can live safely within their own country and community.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sadako Ogata". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Sadako Ogata