

# 5 Proxy wars in Africa, Asia and Central America

The 1980s were characterized by heightened Cold War tensions and proxy wars in developing countries across the globe. During the decade, the superpowers intervened in local conflicts that might have been minor and short-lived, but which instead escalated and resulted in large-scale displacement. This chapter focuses on three regions where major refugee crises occurred: the Horn of Africa, Afghanistan and Central America. UNHCR played a major role in responding to each of these.

Although some of the conflicts described in this chapter began in the 1970s or earlier, the focus here is on the 1980s. In the Horn of Africa, a series of wars, exacerbated by famine, caused millions of people to flee their homes at different times. In Afghanistan, a major new conflict in a strategically important region compelled over six million people to seek refuge in neighbouring countries. In Central America, three separate wars led to the displacement of over two million people.

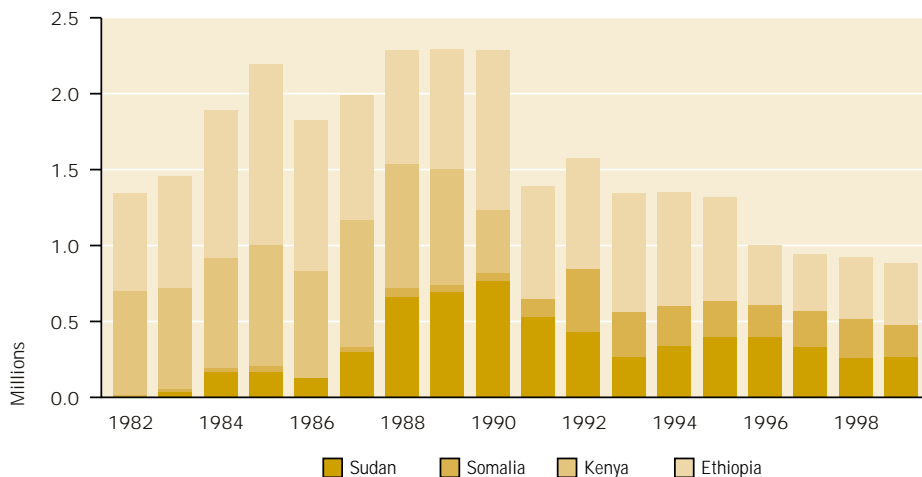
These refugee crises presented complex challenges to both host countries and the international community. For the first time, UNHCR found itself responding to multiple, large-scale refugee emergencies on three different continents simultaneously. UNHCR also had to work under the particular pressures resulting from the involvement of the superpowers. Virtually all of UNHCR's funding, and many of its staff, came from Western countries. Since many of the large refugee populations of the 1980s, including Afghans, Ethiopians, and Nicaraguans, were fleeing communist or socialist governments, these Western countries also had geopolitical interests in funding UNHCR programmes. Meanwhile, the Soviet bloc, which viewed the United Nations as essentially pro-Western, neither supported nor funded UNHCR.

With refugee crises erupting around the globe during the 1980s, UNHCR's budget increased dramatically. In 1975, there were 2.8 million refugees world-wide and UNHCR's budget stood at some US\$76 million. By the end of the 1980s, the refugee population had grown to nearly 15 million, and UNHCR's budget had increased to more than US\$580 million. During these years, UNHCR provided assistance on a much greater scale than ever before. One of the main challenges was that of managing large refugee camps. As had been the case in Indochina, the presence of armed elements in refugee camps was also a major concern to the organization.

The refugee movements described in this chapter were by no means the only ones to take place during the 1980s. Massive displacement also took place in a number of other places. For example, Sri Lankans fled to India, Ugandans fled to southern Sudan, Angolans fled to Zambia and Zaire, and Mozambican refugees fled to six neighbouring countries [see Box 5.2]. UNHCR was involved in providing protection and assistance to refugees in each of these cases.

## Refugee populations in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Sudan, 1982–99

Figure 5.1



## War and famine in the Horn of Africa

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Horn of Africa was the scene of numerous large-scale refugee movements. War, famine and mass displacement caught the world's attention, as the involvement of the superpowers fuelled the conflicts and magnified their consequences. Many Ethiopians, including people from Eritrea—then part of Ethiopia—sought refuge in Sudan, Somalia and Djibouti, and large numbers of Sudanese and Somalis sought refuge in Ethiopia.

A dramatic change in the superpower allegiances of Ethiopia and Somalia took place in the late 1970s. In Ethiopia, the consolidation of power by Lt.-Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1977 resulted in the country seeking support from the Soviet Union and making a break with its traditional ally, the United States. As a result, the United States increased its backing of the governments in Sudan and Somalia. This had a significant impact on the conflicts in the region.

### Ethiopian refugees in Somalia

Large-scale movements of refugees from Ethiopia into Somalia began at the end of the 1970s. Taking advantage of internal upheavals in Ethiopia, President Siad Barre of Somalia carried out an invasion of the Ogaden region of Ethiopia in 1977. Somali forces initially met with success, but when the Soviet Union switched its support to the Marxist regime of President Mengistu, his forces were able to repel the invasion. In early 1978, Somali troops were forced back across the border. Hundreds of thousands of ethnic Somalis in the Ethiopian Ogaden, fearing reprisals for involvement in the upsurge of violence that had

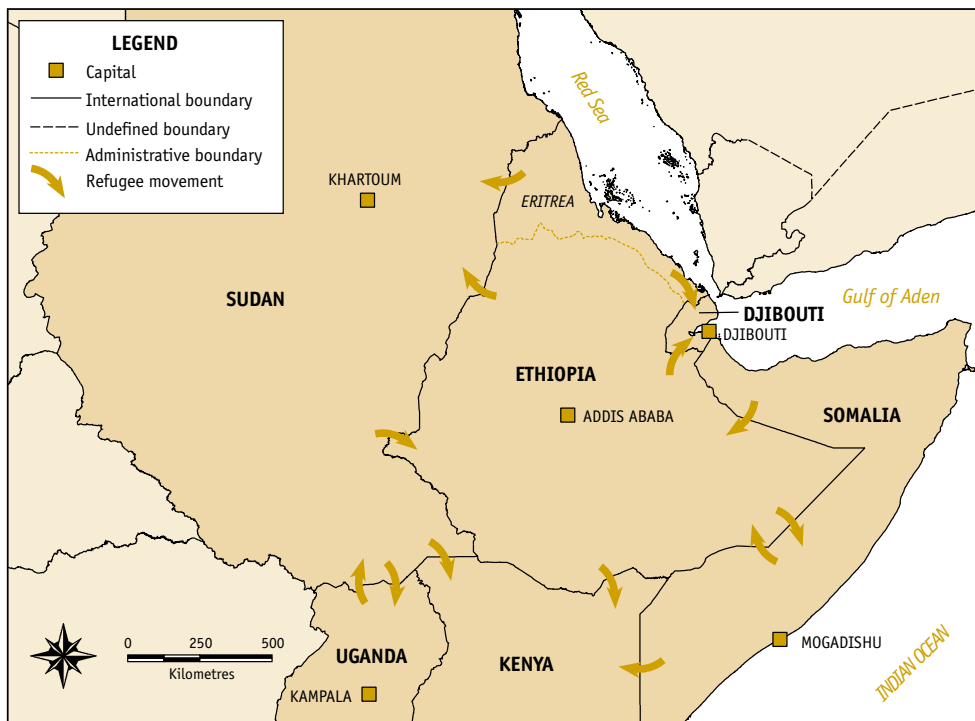
preceded the Somali invasion, fled to Somalia. Another 45,000 went to neighbouring Djibouti.

The government of Somalia appealed to UNHCR for assistance in 1979. UNHCR helped the government establish and manage large refugee camps. In the short term, these camps helped to improve conditions for the refugees, many of whom were suffering from malnutrition and disease, but the problems inherent in large and overcrowded camps became increasingly apparent [see Box 5.1]. Camps grew so large that they became bigger than most cities in Somalia. The refugees, who were mainly nomadic people, found it difficult to adjust to sedentary life. In seeking to reduce the refugees' dependence on relief assistance, UNHCR initiated a number of agricultural projects. These had limited success, however, largely because of the scarcity of arable land and water.

UNHCR's relations with the Somali government were strained by a 'numbers game'. Initially, the Somali government claimed that there were 500,000 refugees in the country, while UNHCR estimated that there were only 80,000. After a second influx of refugees in 1981, the Somali government figure rose to two million, while UNHCR, other UN agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) estimated the numbers of refugees to be between 450,000 and 620,000.<sup>1</sup> The entire population of the Ogaden region had previously been estimated to be well under one million.

### Main refugee flows in northeast Africa during the 1980s

Map 5.1



## Box 5.1

## Refugee camps and settlements

The vast refugee flows of the 1980s resulted in the growth of large camps and other kinds of organized settlements in host countries. In Africa in particular, the establishment of camps began to replace the previous practice of allowing refugees to settle amongst the local population.

For a number of years now, there has been widespread criticism of camps. UNHCR, in particular, has been held responsible both for the policy of establishing such camps and for the problems found in them. Critics argue that camps are harmful and unnecessary and that alternatives such as self-settlement (in which refugees live amongst the host community) should be pursued.<sup>i</sup>

### The nature of camps

There is no clear definition of exactly what constitutes a 'refugee camp'. The term is used to describe human settlements which vary greatly in size and character. In general, refugee camps are enclosed areas, restricted to refugees and those assisting them, where protection and assistance is provided until it is safe for the refugees to return to their homelands or to be resettled elsewhere. Unlike other types of settlements, such as agricultural settlements or the 'refugee villages' seen in Pakistan in the 1980s and 1990s, refugee camps are not usually self-supporting.

Refugee camps are usually intended to be temporary, and are constructed accordingly. In many cases, however, they last for 10 years or more, creating new problems. Water and sewerage facilities often cannot cope with long-term usage, and housing plots become too small as families increase in size. In many

camps, firewood is inadequately supplied and refugees must forage outside the camps, causing deforestation and other environmental problems. As problems spill over from camps and affect the surrounding host communities, governments often impose restrictions on refugees, reducing their freedom to move and work outside the camps.

One of the most serious problems associated with many camps is the failure of local authorities to provide full protection for refugees, particularly since camps are often located in, or close to, conflict zones. In the long term, camps can become dangerous, crime-ridden places, beset by arms and drug smuggling and the presence of organized crime. Refugees in these camps often suffer domestic abuse and physical intimidation. Armed groups sometimes take control of camps or use them as bases, as in the case of the mujahedin in Pakistan, the 'contras' in Honduras and, more recently, the Interahamwe in eastern Zaire [see Box 10.1]. As camps lose their civilian character and become havens for armed groups, they become targets for attack by enemy forces. Camps have been bombed, shelled, raided for hostages, vehicles and supplies, and the scene of 'hot pursuit' by armed groups. Under such circumstances, host governments view them as increased security threats and impose greater restrictions on refugees.

### Is self-settlement preferable?

Critics have accused UNHCR of favouring refugee camps over self-settlement, because camps provide the best means to manage refugees and facilitate repatriation. They argue that camps are harmful and unnecessary and that viable

alternatives can always be found. One such alternative is 'assisted self-settlement', whereby refugees are helped to settle amongst the local population. They claim that self-settled refugees enjoy better lives, are safer, freer, and live in more viable circumstances than those in camps or other organized settlements. The implicit assumption is that refugees would never choose to settle in a camp if they were given a choice.

On the face of it, it may seem obvious that no one would choose to live in a refugee camp when faced with the possibility of living elsewhere. The reality, however, is often more complex. General assumptions about better conditions for refugees outside camps have not been adequately substantiated by empirical research. It is by no means certain that self-settled refugees are generally safer or better off than those in camps. Depending on circumstances, refugees living outside camps can be subject to a range of security and economic problems ranging from threats by resentful local people, to attacks by rebel groups and forced recruitment into those groups. Self-settled refugees can be at risk of being rounded up by host authorities and relocated or forced into camps, as occurred in Karachi and Peshawar in Pakistan in the mid-1980s.

From a refugee's point of view, a camp may actually provide a safer and materially more secure option than self-settlement. Indeed, refugees and their leaders frequently organize themselves into camp-like settlements before UNHCR or any other humanitarian organization establishes an assistance programme. Nor should it be assumed that camps are always dreary, depressing places filled with dependent and passive victims.

On the contrary, refugee camps are often places of vibrant social and economic activity.

Most large camps become important zones of economic activity in the hosting area, with active markets, restaurants, and other facilities, which are run by refugees and attract locals from miles around.<sup>ii</sup> For example, Khao-I-Dang, a camp for Cambodian refugees on the Thai border, was renowned throughout much of the 1980s for its row of restaurants and for its thriving bicycle taxi service. A busy market was also established in the centre of the Rwandan refugee camp in Goma, eastern Zaire, from 1994 to 1997. The level of economic activity in this camp was illustrated by the fact that by late 1995 there were times when up to 20 cattle were slaughtered in the camp on a single day.

Although diseases such as cholera can spread easily in hastily constructed and overcrowded camps, in many cases—particularly after the initial emergency phase—refugees in camps receive significantly better health care, education and other services than people in the surrounding areas. As a result, humanitarian organizations working in camps are increasingly providing health, agricultural and education services not only to refugees but also to the local communities in these areas. This is not to suggest that camps are always an asset to the receiving region. Economic benefits can be offset by other problems, but these should be kept in perspective. The debate over the advantages and disadvantages of refugee camps should take place in the context of a clear understanding of how camps work, and the nature of their impact on the region.

UNHCR's official policy is to avoid the establishment of camps if viable

alternatives are available. This is clearly stated in UNHCR's *Handbook for Emergencies*, and is one of the first rules for UNHCR emergency response teams. In many situations, it is the host government that insists on the establishment of camps, or the refugees themselves who congregate in large groups, forming settlements which eventually take the form of camps as international assistance enters the scene.

The preference of many host governments for camps rather than self-settlement is usually based on three factors: first, perceived security needs; second, the ability to organize repatriation; and third, the ability to attract international assistance through the creation of visible refugee settlements. In this respect, it is both legitimate and necessary to question the motivations of policymakers who insist on the establishment of camps, especially when opportunities for self-settlement exist. At the same time, and notwithstanding Article 26 of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention concerning refugees' rights to choose their place of residence and to freedom of movement, legal experts have recognized that host states do have the right to accommodate refugees in special camps or designated areas as long as minimum standards of treatment are respected. Given the political, economic and legal considerations which have underpinned the establishment of refugee camps, general arguments in favour of self-settlement are unlikely to have a significant impact on the policies of many refugee-hosting countries.

### **A blurred distinction**

The debate over refugee camps has raised a number of important issues. In practice, however, refugee camps and self-settled refugees rarely form

two clearly distinct categories. Apart from exceptions such as the detention camps in Hong Kong in the 1980s and early 1990s, most established camps do not confine refugees within their perimeters. On the contrary, in many situations refugees are able to move freely in and out of camps, to take advantage of wage-earning, trading or farming opportunities in the host country, or to visit their homelands, as many do prior to repatriation. Once displaced from their homes, refugees assess their prospects and spread their options between camps and the surrounding community. Some family members may live in camps while others take advantage of opportunities outside these camps. This means that the demarcation between camp communities and communities in the surrounding areas is often blurred.

In many ways, the debate between pro- and anti-camp advocates misses the point. Refugee camps are not inherently dangerous or destabilizing places, nor is self-settlement always the best option for refugees. The real challenge for host states, humanitarian organizations and policy makers is to ensure that refugees are able to enjoy safe, secure and dignified conditions of life, whether or not they live in a camp. Camps can serve their purpose well where they are prevented from becoming militarized, where the rule of law is maintained, where adequate health care, education and other essential services are provided, and where refugees have an opportunity to sustain themselves. It is to these ends that humanitarian efforts should be directed.

After UNHCR's attempts to conduct a credible census were thwarted, UN organizations agreed with the Somali government in 1982 on a 'planning figure' of 700,000 refugees. This remained the official refugee figure in Somalia until 1985, and all UNHCR assistance to the refugees was based on this figure. This was in spite of the fact that by 1984 UNHCR estimated that more than 300,000 of the refugees had repatriated to Ethiopia. Pressure from the United States, which had its own geopolitical interests in supporting Somalia at the time, was a factor in the continued acceptance by other Western donors of the Somali government's inflated figures.

The Somali government benefited in many ways from the international assistance which poured into the country during these years. Assistance given by organizations such as UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP) to meet the needs of the refugees was but one part of the overall assistance provided to the country. This assistance had a significant impact on Somalia's economy as a whole. According to one assessment, in the mid-1980s it represented at least a quarter of the country's gross national product.<sup>2</sup>

Between 1984 and 1986, there were further refugee influxes into Somalia. During the same period, a large number of refugees returned from Somalia to Ethiopia. By the late 1980s, however, increasing allegations of widespread human rights abuses being committed by the Somali government led to a dramatic reduction in US military assistance, and in 1989 this was halted completely. In August 1989, in an unprecedented action, UNHCR and WFP suspended assistance in northwest Somalia after the failure of repeated efforts to ensure that it was not diverted. Two years later, President Barre was overthrown and the country descended to a level of violence, famine and population displacement greater than anything it had experienced before [see Box 10.3].

## **Ethiopian refugees in Sudan**

The first officially recognized refugees from Eritrea, which had been in a federation with Ethiopia but had been reduced to the status of a province in northern Ethiopia in 1962, arrived in Sudan as early as 1967.<sup>3</sup> They were fleeing the effects of an armed struggle for the right to self-determination which had been going on since the early 1960s. UNHCR assisted in establishing the first camp for these refugees in Sudan in 1970.

Large numbers of refugees also fled from other parts of Ethiopia to Sudan in the 1970s. The prolonged and bloody revolution which followed the overthrow of the autocratic Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 was known at its peak as the 'red terror'. The left-wing military faction which seized power, known as the 'Derg', killed or imprisoned thousands of political opponents, labour activists and students, and caused a continuing exodus of refugees from the country.

By 1977, there were some 200,000 Eritrean refugees in Sudan. This number grew rapidly in 1978, when the Ethiopian government, now receiving massive Soviet aid and buoyed up by its recent victory over Somalia, launched a major offensive against the opposition forces in Eritrea. A mass exodus brought the total



*These refugees in Sudan were among hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians who fled war and famine in their homeland in the mid-1980s. (UNHCR/M. VANAPPELGHEM/1985)*

number of Ethiopian refugees in Sudan to over 400,000 by the end of that year, the majority of whom were from Eritrea.

Initially, the Sudanese government and the local people in the eastern part of the country welcomed the refugees. As the numbers grew, however, so did local resentment towards them. They began to be perceived as a threat to the stability of the eastern region. Fighting inside Eritrea had often taken place near the Sudanese border and had even spread to Sudanese soil.<sup>4</sup> With the country facing a growing economic crisis, exacerbated by a series of crop failures in eastern Sudan, the government requested UNHCR's assistance.

UNHCR worked closely with the Sudanese authorities in setting up refugee settlements. By 1984, the number of Ethiopian refugees had risen to some 500,000. Of these, around 128,000 were living in 23 refugee settlements. The remainder had settled spontaneously in towns, villages and the border area. UNHCR initially hoped that agricultural activities and opportunities for employment on large mechanized farms would enable the refugees to become self-sufficient. It soon became clear, however, that this would be difficult. A UNHCR report written at the time noted: 'Only a handful of settlements have access to sufficient land and water resources to make the concept of self-sufficiency realistic.'<sup>5</sup>

## Box 5.2

## Mozambican refugees in Malawi

During much of the 1980s, Mozambicans represented the world's third-largest refugee population after Palestinians and Afghans. They fled their country in the course of a devastating civil war which began in 1976 and which did not end until 1992. The consequences for neighbouring countries which received the vast majority of these refugees extended well beyond the provision of protection.

The Mozambican conflict began shortly after the country's independence in 1975. When Portugal hastily abandoned its African colonies following the fall of the military regime in Lisbon, the Mozambique Liberation Front (*Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*, or Frelimo), which had been waging a low-level guerrilla war against the Portuguese since 1964, assumed power in Mozambique. The conflict was between this Frelimo government and the Mozambique National Resistance (*Resistência Nacional Moçambicana*, or Renamo), an insurgent group established and supported by the white minority governments of Rhodesia and South Africa.

As the war continued, Renamo forces turned to increasingly ruthless tactics to control the population in their areas of operation. Wherever they went, they terrorized people with systematic killing, maiming, raping and pillaging. As they expanded the areas under their control, the number of Mozambicans fleeing escalated. Frelimo forces also resorted to increasingly brutal

measures, enabling Renamo to secure a degree of popular support.

The refugee crisis peaked in 1992, by which time some 1.7 million Mozambicans had become refugees in neighbouring countries and at least twice as many more had become internally displaced. Some of the areas deserted by the refugees were left virtually empty. For instance, in several districts of Mozambique's Tete province, as many as 90 per cent of all the inhabitants had fled. Apart from uprooting a total of some 5.7 million people, between 1976 and 1992 the conflict left more than one million Mozambicans dead and orphaned hundreds of thousands of children.

But Mozambicans were not the only ones to suffer the consequences of the conflict. A price was also paid by the people of the countries bordering Mozambique, which had to share their meagre resources, social services and sometimes their land with the refugees. These host countries were Malawi, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

#### Malawi opens its doors

By far the most affected of these countries was Malawi, a small, impoverished, densely populated country which hosted the lion's share of those who fled Mozambique. At the height of the exodus there were as many as 1.1 million refugees, equivalent to 10 per cent of the Malawian population.

Malawi was ill-equipped to handle a major refugee influx. In the mid-1980s, Malawi was the world's sixth poorest country and one of Africa's least developed states. Fifty per cent of its children were undernourished and the country had the world's fourth highest infant mortality rate. Although refugees came to outnumber locals by as much as three to two in some areas, Malawi's welcome rarely wavered. Many of the early refugees, who were ethnically similar to Malawians, settled alongside the local population. Some were able to obtain land for agriculture, but others depended on international aid.

During the first decade of the conflict in Mozambique, the Malawian government, which provided covert support for Renamo, resisted international involvement with the refugees. It tried to provide for the refugees' needs through existing government structures and services, giving refugees access to local clinics, hospitals, and its limited social and welfare services. Then, in 1986, the same year that Malawi bowed to pressure from neighbouring governments to end its support for Renamo, Malawi recognized its inability to cope with the influx and asked UNHCR to help.

Initially, UNHCR sought to boost the government's efforts to aid the refugees through existing mechanisms. The UN World Food

Fighting between Ethiopian government forces and armed Eritrean opposition groups, as well as between rival Eritrean factions, continued to produce a flow of refugees from Eritrea into Sudan. But another major crisis was looming, this time in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. This was to result in an even greater influx of Ethiopians into Sudan, putting further strain on the country and presenting UNHCR with one of its greatest challenges yet.



Programme (WFP) assisted by providing food aid. Even with this help, however, local institutions could not begin to meet both locals' and refugees' needs adequately. As refugee numbers mushroomed in 1987, Malawi asked UNHCR to establish refugee camps and instructed all new refugees to move there. The government also barred local people from providing refugees with agricultural land. Eventually, more than two-thirds of the 1.1 million refugees who fled to Malawi settled in refugee camps.

Although housing refugees in camps made it easier for UNHCR, WFP and others to assist them, providing even basic care and maintenance remained a daunting task. Land-locked Malawi had a poor road system and lorries were scarce. Many of the camps were located in areas accessible only by dirt roads not suitable for heavy vehicles. The traffic severely damaged roads and bridges. Relief agencies leased many of the available lorries in Malawi for food distribution and this made it difficult for local farmers and merchants to transport their own goods. UNHCR and WFP had problems maintaining buffer stocks due to the poor transportation system and inadequate storage facilities. The result was disruptions in food supply and a disturbing increase in malnutrition rates amongst the refugees.

Even though most refugees did not have access to land, they found

ways to generate income. More than 90 per cent of the refugees engaged in economic activities such as making and selling pots, pounding maize, rearing and selling domestic animals, and brewing beer. Many also sold or traded part of their rations in order to obtain necessities such as meat, fresh vegetables and soap. The poorest refugees, some of whom did not even have ration cards, survived by cutting trees for firewood. The large-scale cutting of trees inside Malawi led to such a high level of deforestation that Malawi's environment continues to be adversely affected.

The lack of overt conflict between the local people and the refugees was remarkable, given the length of time they stayed and the size of the refugee population. By 1992, however, the refugees' long stay in Malawi had begun to strain relations with the local population. Problems centred on the impact of their presence on the economy, environmental consequences such as deforestation, crime and other social problems. A drought that affected much of the region in 1992 and early 1993 exacerbated the situation. Although relief intended for the refugees was shared with drought-affected local people, theft at food storage warehouses and distribution centres increased. Wells in some refugee camps ran dry, leading to sanitation problems and an outbreak of cholera that spread to the local population.

### Hidden costs

Such consequences represent the hidden costs borne by countries hosting large refugee populations, particularly when they are themselves amongst the poorest countries in the world. Refugees can have a positive impact on host countries, but in some cases their presence can also have far-reaching detrimental consequences. The local economy and environment, as well as the local social and political balance, can all be affected. There can also be serious implications for national, regional or international peace and security.

Development efforts in host countries can be undermined and distorted as the refugees' presence strains local supplies and facilities. Local authorities often find themselves obliged to divert funds from broader development projects in order to meet refugees' immediate needs for food, shelter and security. In Malawi, a World Bank-sponsored study found that, even taking into account the international aid provided through UNHCR, between 1988 and 1990 some US\$25 million of public funds were spent on refugee-related assistance, having been diverted from other projects.

## Famine in Ethiopia and new refugee flows

In 1984, a famine developed in Ethiopia that became one of the most widely publicized humanitarian crises of recent times. As one writer put it, 'the famine in northern Ethiopia, which became world news in 1984, was an earthquake in the humanitarian world'.<sup>6</sup> An estimated one million Ethiopians eventually died as a result.<sup>7</sup>

Although the famine was widely perceived as being drought-induced, the reality was far more complex. One analyst described it in the following terms:

Drought and harvest failure contributed to the famine but did not cause it. The economic and agricultural policies of the [Ethiopian] government also contributed, but were not central. The principal cause of the famine was the counter-insurgency campaign of the Ethiopian army and air force in Tigray and Wollo during 1980–85 . . . [which included] scorched earth tactics, the requisitioning of food by armies, blockades of food and people in sieges . . . and enforced rationing of food.<sup>8</sup>

The Ethiopian government allowed donor governments and international organizations to bring relief supplies into the country, but prevented them from assisting famine victims in areas under the control of the Eritrean and Tigrayan armed opposition groups. As a result, humanitarian organizations in Ethiopia were unable to assist people directly in the main famine-affected areas. From the early 1980s, a consortium of NGOs working from Sudan had begun trying to feed people in areas controlled by the armed opposition groups in Eritrea and Tigray. They delivered relief supplies to these areas in clandestine, night-time cross-border operations from Sudan. At the time, this was seen as an extremely radical form of humanitarian action.

The cross-border operation from Sudan was unable, however, to meet the needs of people in the famine-affected areas and hundreds of thousands of desperate people found themselves with no option but to move to government-controlled areas. Others resisted doing so, largely out of fear of being arrested or rounded up for forcible relocation by the Ethiopian government. The result was a mass exodus of Ethiopians mainly to Sudan, but also to Somalia and Djibouti.

Between October 1984 and March 1985, some 300,000 Ethiopian refugees arrived in Sudan. The majority of the refugees were from Tigray, and they left Ethiopia in a movement carefully organized by the Relief Society of Tigray (REST), which was essentially the civilian wing of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). REST had announced that unless further food assistance was provided inside Tigray itself, it would not be able to retain its people there.

While some observers argued that these new arrivals were fleeing famine rather than conflict, UNHCR considered them refugees. The possibility of a significant influx had already been considered—and an alarm sounded—in late 1983. When it eventually occurred a year later, the scale and speed of the refugees' arrival in Sudan was much greater than expected. Many arrived in such poor physical condition that help came too late. Conditions in the refugee camps which were hastily established were initially poor, and death rates were high. Many died from malnutrition-related diseases, and severe outbreaks of measles killed many children.

At the same time as Ethiopians were entering Sudan from the Tigray region, famine—exacerbated by conflict—in the Eritrean region of Ethiopia caused a further influx of people into Sudan. These people arrived in the camps already accommodating Eritreans. Wad Sherife, a camp built to house 5,000 refugees, rapidly became home to 128,000, making it one of the largest refugee camps in the world.<sup>9</sup> UNHCR

and its NGO partners struggled to accommodate the new arrivals in the camp, and to build the necessary additional warehouses, dispensaries and feeding centres.

UNHCR and other international humanitarian organizations, as well as governments and other donors, mobilized airlifts of food and supplies and sent medical teams and volunteers. In the West, musicians and other artists led by Bob Geldof spearheaded high profile fundraising efforts, including Live Aid and Band Aid, that raised millions of dollars for famine victims not only in Ethiopia and Sudan but all over sub-Saharan Africa. In 1985, donors gave UNHCR US\$76 million for its programme in Sudan alone—an amount equal to the organization's entire global budget just 10 years earlier.<sup>10</sup>

In early 1986, UNHCR reported: 'International mobilization has produced results, and the situation [in Sudan] has improved considerably . . . The unbearable pictures of emaciated children and forlorn-looking men and women . . . already belong to the past.'<sup>11</sup> In May 1985, the rains had returned to Ethiopia and the TPLF encouraged its people to go home. By mid-1987, over 170,000 had returned. Unlike the Tigrayans, however, most of the Eritreans who had arrived in Sudan in 1984 and 1985 did not return. Rather, fighting and continued famine in Eritrea led to new influxes of Eritreans into Sudan.

During the 1980s, Ethiopia not only produced refugees but also hosted large numbers of refugees. From 1983, when war broke out again in southern Sudan between the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and government forces, large numbers of people were displaced and by the end of the decade more than 350,000 southern Sudanese had fled to the Gambela region of Ethiopia. UNHCR assisted the Ethiopian government in meeting the needs of these refugees, though its access to these camps, which provided support for the SPLA, was often restricted. In 1987–88, some 365,000 Somalis also fled to Ethiopia to escape fighting between Somali government forces and rebels seeking independence for northwest Somalia. These refugees were accommodated in large camps in the Hartisheikh area. UNHCR coordinated international assistance to these camps.

The break-up of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War also signalled the end for President Mengistu's Marxist regime in Ethiopia. In May 1991, the EPLF captured the main Eritrean city of Asmara, ending the longest civil war in Africa and paving the way for Eritrean independence in 1993. Less than a week after the capture of Asmara, TPLF-led forces entered the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian army collapsed, and President Mengistu was ousted.

## Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran

Afghanistan—another of the world's poorest and least developed countries—also produced massive refugee movements during the 1980s. Although the conflicts which led to these movements had local roots, the enormous scale of the outflows was largely due to the substantial involvement of the superpowers in this strategically important region.

The crisis began in April 1978, when a group of urban intellectuals led by Nur Mohammad Taraki seized power and attempted to establish a communist state. They introduced wide-ranging social reforms which were resented by the deeply traditional rural populations they were intended to benefit. Opposition, both political and military, spread quickly. The regime, which received substantial military assistance from the Soviet Union, responded harshly. As one author wrote:

Religious, political, and intellectual elites were jailed or executed; ground attacks and aerial bombings destroyed villages and killed countless numbers of the rural population. It is estimated that between 50,000 and 100,000 people disappeared or were eliminated . . . from April 1978 to December 1979.<sup>12</sup>

Within months, Afghans began fleeing to neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. Despite pressure exerted by the Afghan and Soviet governments on Pakistan to expel the refugees, the government of Pakistan welcomed them.<sup>13</sup> By August 1978, some 3,000 had sought refuge in Pakistan; by early 1979, this figure had risen to over 20,000.

When the refugees first started arriving in Pakistan, UNHCR did not have an office in the country. The refugees turned to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for help. UNDP in turn asked UNHCR for funds to provide temporary assistance to the neediest cases.<sup>14</sup> Then, in April 1979, the government of Pakistan formally requested UNHCR's assistance.<sup>15</sup> Following two assessment missions to Pakistan, UNHCR raised more than US\$15 million to assist the refugees, and in October 1979 the organization opened an office in Islamabad.<sup>16</sup>

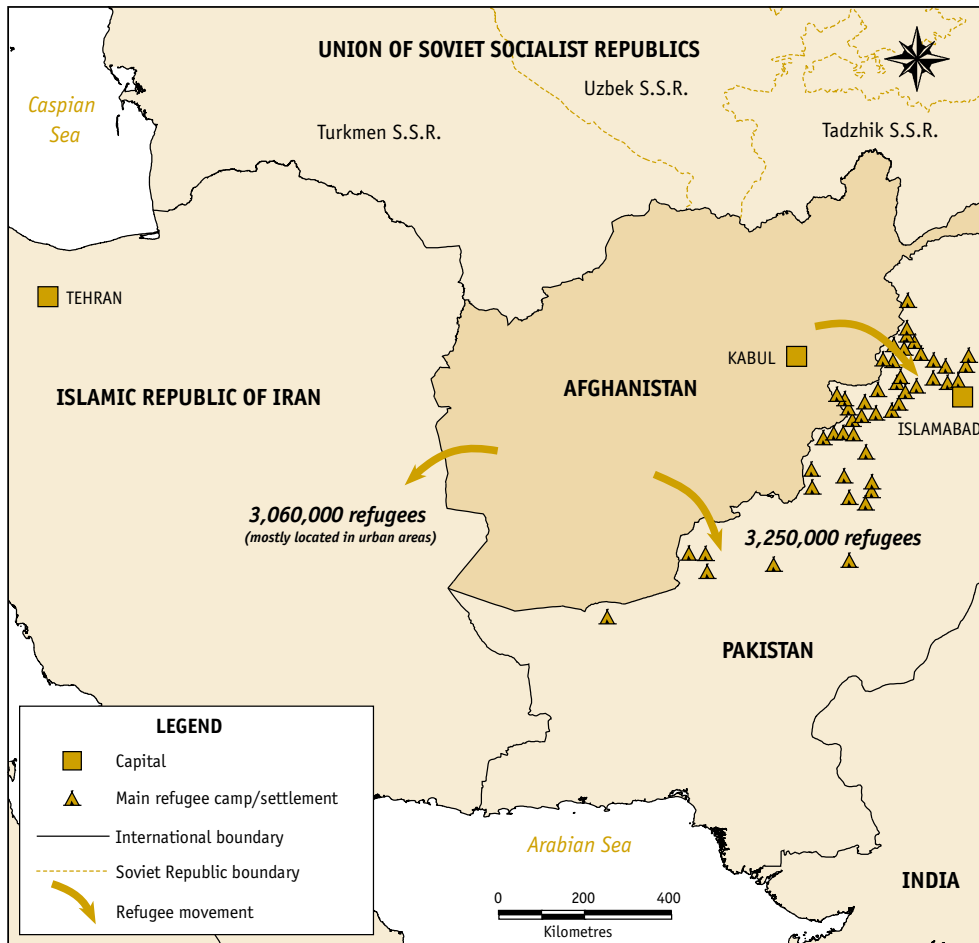
Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, the armed opposition was gaining ground against the communist government. In late December 1979, the Soviet Union, fearing the loss of an important ally on its southern border, invaded Afghanistan, triggering a massive exodus of refugees. Within weeks, 600,000 Afghans fled to Pakistan and Iran. Refugees continued to flee Afghanistan throughout the rest of the decade. By December 1990, UNHCR estimated that there were over 6.3 million Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries, including 3.3 million in Pakistan and three million in Iran. By this time, Afghans had come to constitute the largest refugee population in the world.

### **Disparities in assistance to refugees in Pakistan and Iran**

The condition of the Afghan refugees in Pakistan contrasted greatly with that of the Afghan refugees in Iran. In Pakistan, the refugees were mostly ethnic Pashtuns, and they sought refuge mainly in Pashtun-dominated parts of Pakistan. More than 300 'refugee villages' were established by UNHCR, and the majority of the refugees lived in these villages. By contrast, in Iran, most of the Afghan refugees were ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras, with only a small number of Pashtuns. Only relatively few of these refugees were accommodated in camps. Most spread out to towns and cities throughout the country, where they lived amongst the local community. Many were able to find work, not least because so many Iranian men were conscripted to fight in the war against Iraq which began in September 1980.

## Main Afghan refugee flows, 1979–90

## Map 5.2



The level of international assistance provided to the refugees in Pakistan and Iran also differed markedly. While donors contributed vast sums of money to assist Afghan refugees in Pakistan during the 1980s, they provided little for Afghans in Iran—even though the Afghan refugees in Iran comprised one of the world’s largest refugee populations at the time.

Initially, the Iranian government refrained from asking for international assistance for the refugees. In view of the 1979 Islamic revolution, relations between the new Islamic government and Western states were strained to the limit. In addition, the assault on the US embassy in Teheran in November 1979, in which radical students seized dozens of US hostages, took place just one month before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The resulting tension between Iran and the Western powers may well have been a factor in Iran’s decision at the time not to seek international—or what it perceived as ‘Western’—help.

The situation in Iran changed in 1980, largely as a result of the war with Iraq which began that year. This war generated a new influx of refugees, this time Shiite Iraqis, putting even more pressure on Iran. Two months later the Iranian government officially requested UNHCR assistance. Iran's deputy foreign minister wrote to High Commissioner Poul Hartling: 'We have received tens of thousands of refugees from those two countries and assisted them . . . through our own financial resources.' Adding that Iran did not have the resources to continue to assist the refugees adequately, the government asked UNHCR to 'set up a comprehensive humanitarian assistance programme for these innocent people who . . . should be cared for in the same manner as all other refugees'.<sup>17</sup>

International assistance to Iran was not forthcoming, however, and UNHCR wrestled with the disparity between the international response to the refugee crises in Pakistan and Iran. An internal UNHCR memorandum noted in June 1981: 'After one and a half years without external assistance and often without work, [Afghan refugees in Iran are] in very difficult circumstances . . . We can no longer close our eyes to the obvious needs of Afghan refugees in Iran who are in the same situation as those in Pakistan or India and who are *prima facie* [refugees] under our Mandate as confirmed by the Protection Division.'<sup>18</sup> Although UNHCR ultimately obtained some funds for Afghan refugees in Iran, the disparity in expenditures between Pakistan and Iran remained substantial throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Between 1979 and 1997, UNHCR spent more than US\$1 billion on Afghan refugees in Pakistan, but only US\$150 million on those in Iran.

In Pakistan, UNHCR, as well as other UN agencies, individual governments, and dozens of international NGOs, provided the refugees with food, water, health care, sanitation, and education. The proliferation of NGOs, which had begun in Southeast Asia in the 1970s, continued in Pakistan. By the late 1980s, there were over 100 international NGOs involved in the aid operation in Pakistan. They included many Muslim NGOs, which worked closely with UNHCR for the first time. UNHCR paid the salaries of more than 6,500 local staff, many of whom were employed by the Pakistani Commissariat for Afghan Refugees.<sup>19</sup>

For domestic political reasons, the Pakistan government would not give the refugees, who were mostly from rural areas, land for cultivation. The refugees were able to move freely around the country, however, and this helped many of them to find work. In the mid-1980s, UNHCR introduced a variety of programmes such as small-credit schemes, skills training, and construction projects, to provide employment and apprenticeships and to help the refugees become more self-sufficient. Many of these, however, were terminated at the insistence of the Pakistan government, which argued that since similar programmes were not available to local people, tensions could develop between local populations and the refugees.

From 1984, UNHCR and the World Bank set up a joint project in cooperation with the Pakistan government, known as the Income Generation Project for Refugee Areas. This programme, in which US\$85 million was invested over the next 12 years, involved some 300 projects in three refugee-affected provinces. It included reforestation, watershed management, irrigation, road repair and construction. The

## Afghan refugee population by country of asylum, 1979–99

**Figure 5.2**

Year	Countries of asylum					Total
	Pakistan	Iran	India	Russian Fed. <sup>a</sup>	Other <sup>b</sup>	
1979	402,000	100,000	–	–	–	502,000
1980	1,428,000	300,000	–	–	–	1,728,000
1981	2,375,000	1,500,000	2,700	–	–	3,877,700
1982	2,877,000	1,500,000	3,400	–	–	4,380,400
1983	2,873,000	1,700,000	5,300	–	–	4,578,300
1984	2,500,000	1,800,000	5,900	–	–	4,305,900
1985	2,730,000	1,880,000	5,700	–	–	4,615,700
1986	2,878,000	2,190,000	5,500	–	–	5,073,500
1987	3,156,000	2,350,000	5,200	–	–	5,511,200
1988	3,255,000	2,350,000	4,900	–	–	5,609,900
1989	3,272,000	2,350,000	8,500	–	–	5,630,500
1990	3,253,000	3,061,000	11,900	–	–	6,325,900
1991	3,098,000	3,187,000	9,800	–	–	6,294,800
1992	1,627,000	2,901,000	11,000	8,800	3,000	4,550,800
1993	1,477,000	1,850,000	24,400	24,900	11,900	3,388,200
1994	1,053,000	1,623,000	22,400	28,300	12,300	2,739,000
1995	1,200,000	1,429,000	19,900	18,300	9,700	2,676,900
1996	1,200,000	1,415,000	18,600	20,400	10,700	2,664,700
1997	1,200,000	1,412,000	17,500	21,700	12,500	2,663,700
1998	1,200,000	1,401,000	16,100	8,700	8,400	2,634,200
1999	1,200,000	1,325,700	14,500	12,600	10,000	2,562,800

**Notes:**

As on 31 December of each given year.

<sup>a</sup> Asylum seekers registered with UNHCR only. By the end of 1999, an additional 100,000 Afghans were in need of protection according to UNHCR.

<sup>b</sup> Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

programme was generally considered to have had a significant and positive impact.<sup>20</sup> Such projects, and the ability to work outside the refugee villages, helped many of the refugees to become self-sufficient by the late 1980s.

In Iran, a similar project was set up in the late 1980s in the South Khorasan rangeland. This time it was a joint project between UNHCR and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), carried out in cooperation with the Iranian government. As with other projects in Iran, however, donors were less willing

to provide funds for the project. Of the US\$18 million initially requested by UNHCR and IFAD for this project, only a third was forthcoming during the project's first five years.

Another major difference between services provided to refugees in Pakistan and to those in Iran was in the field of education. In Pakistan, many boys received an education in UNHCR-funded schools in refugee villages, although fewer girls did so owing to discriminatory cultural practices which made it difficult for many of them to attend these schools. A significant number of boys also received an education in private *madrasas* (religious schools) with which UNHCR was not associated. In the mid-1990s, some of the boys who grew up as refugees in Pakistan, and who attended these *madrasas*, became leading members of the Taliban Islamic movement that seized power in Afghanistan. In Iran, by contrast, refugee children were enrolled in Iranian schools and girls had far greater access to education. During the 1990s, when repatriation to Afghanistan began in earnest, this access to education for girls was frequently cited by refugees as a reason for not wanting to return to Afghanistan, where such access was prohibited by the Taliban.

### **Security problems in Pakistan**

Throughout the 1980s, the use of refugee villages in Pakistan as bases for the various Afghan Islamic armed resistance groups—known collectively as the *mujahedin*—was a major concern to UNHCR. The United States, its allies and various Islamic countries provided the *mujahedin* with vast amounts of military and financial assistance. The United States alone is estimated to have given them more than US\$2 billion in aid between 1982 and 1991.<sup>21</sup> Since they supported the *mujahedin* in their fight against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul, many donors were willing to turn a blind eye to the presence of armed fighters in refugee villages. They were also willing to tolerate substantial diversion of humanitarian aid for military purposes. This led some observers at the time to describe the refugee villages as 'refugee-warrior communities'.<sup>22</sup>

In 1984, as the security situation in many of the refugee villages deteriorated, UNHCR looked into ways of moving refugees away from the border, both to protect them from attack by Soviet or Afghan government forces, and to lessen the insurgents' ability to use refugee villages as bases. By this time, anti-aircraft weapons and other heavy weapons were a common feature in many of these refugee villages. In July 1984, the UNHCR Director of International Protection suggested that the organization terminate its assistance to villages which failed to take steps to prevent such militarization: 'The preservation of the civilian character of UNHCR-assisted refugee villages is essential to safeguard the non-political and humanitarian character of the Office . . . In cases where the necessary corrective action [to remove weapons] has not been taken, we would be in favour of the cessation of UNHCR assistance to the villages in question.'<sup>23</sup> He urged UNHCR staff on the ground to make 'every effort to encourage refugees . . . to move for their own safety to suitable alternative sites', but warned that it would be 'unwise and counterproductive to resort to any form of compulsion'.<sup>24</sup>



UNHCR's fears for the refugees' safety proved well founded. In mid-1984, Soviet and Afghan government forces conducted a number of cross-border attacks from Afghanistan into Pakistan in which many refugees were killed or injured. Further attacks in 1986 and 1987 killed hundreds more. Soviet and Afghan government forces also carried out attacks against Pakistani civilians, fanning tensions between local populations and refugees. In late 1986, apparently to appease angry local people, Pakistani authorities rounded up more than 50,000 Afghans who were living without permission in the city of Peshawar and returned them to their refugee villages.

Around the same time, the Pakistani authorities took other harsh measures to round up refugees, largely because of security concerns. In one incident, local authorities in Karachi, Pakistan's largest city, rounded up more than 18,500 Afghan refugees of ethnic Tajik, Uzbek, and Turkmen origin, destroyed their makeshift shelters, and removed them from the city. They were taken to a site some 10 kilometres away, where a new refugee village was established for them. At the time, UNHCR had denounced the way in which the refugees were treated, but the organization eventually provided over US\$400,000 to help establish essential infrastructure for the village.

Meanwhile, nearer the border, UNHCR's concerns regarding the refugees' safety did not result in concrete steps to demilitarize the refugee villages. The *mujahedin* continued to move in and out of the villages throughout the 1980s. Soviet forces eventually withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, but the war continued between the *mujahedin* and the communist regime in Kabul. After the *mujahedin* seized control in 1992, fighting continued in many parts of the country between various factions of the *mujahedin* itself. Many of these factions operated out of bases in Pakistan, and security problems continued in the refugee villages.

## Mass displacement in Central America

During the 1980s, UNHCR became involved for the first time in Central America—the scene of three separate civil wars in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. In each case, insurgency and counterinsurgency caused huge loss of life and large-scale displacement. Altogether, more than two million people in these countries were uprooted. For decades prior to the 1980s, violent struggles had taken place throughout the region, between the landless poor who wanted social and agrarian reform and the land-owning elites which were supported by the military. Successive US administrations had supported right-wing governments in the region in an effort to stop what they viewed as the spread of communism near US borders, and also to safeguard their economic interests in the region. The rebel movements which emerged in the region were influenced, and to some extent supported, by the communist regime in Cuba.

In Nicaragua, the United States had supported the Somoza regime for three generations. During the 1970s, political parties, students, labour unions, and many in

the middle class and Roman Catholic church turned against the last of these dictators, Anastasio Somoza Debayle. The left-wing Sandinista National Liberation Front (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*, or FSLN) made significant advances, and in July 1979, Somoza fled the country, leaving the Sandinistas in control.

Within weeks, many wealthy and middle class Nicaraguans, members of the Somoza government and thousands of the armed forces left the country. Meanwhile, most of the Nicaraguans who had previously gone into exile began returning home.<sup>25</sup> Some of the Nicaraguans who fled to Honduras formed an armed

### Main refugee flows within Central America during the 1980s

Map 5.3



## Box 5.3

## The 1984 Cartagena Declaration

In November 1984, in response to the refugee crisis in Central America, a group of government representatives, academics and lawyers from Central America, Mexico and Panama met in Cartagena, Colombia, and adopted what became known as the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees.

The Cartagena Declaration builds on the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. Like the 1969 Refugee Convention of the Organization of African Unity, it broadens the definition of a refugee given in the 1951 UN Refugee Convention to include those persons who flee their country

. . . because their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order.

Although the Declaration is not legally binding on states, it has repeatedly been endorsed by the General Assembly of the Organization of American States. Most states in Central and Latin America are party to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or its Protocol, and most apply the Cartagena Declaration's broader definition of a refugee as a matter of practice. Some have incorporated this definition into their own national legislation.

opposition group known as the 'contras' (from the Spanish *contrarrevolucionarios* or 'counter-revolutionaries'). Throughout the war waged during the 1980s, the United States, which viewed the Sandinista government in Nicaragua as a threat to its interests, provided considerable support to the contras.

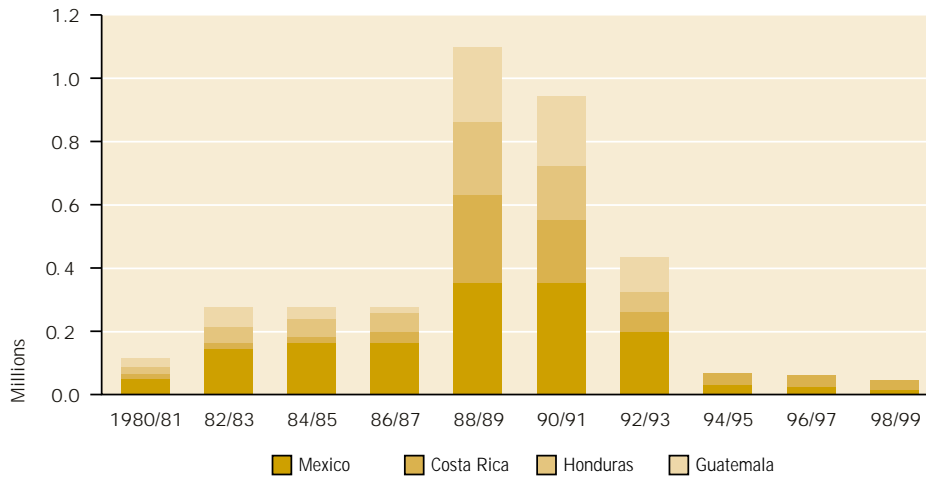
In El Salvador, which had been plagued by frequent coups and political violence since independence, rebel groups, although fragmented, also asserted themselves during the 1970s. Often encouraged by clergy of the Roman Catholic Church, thousands of peasants joined organizations calling for agrarian reform and greater social justice. The government responded with increased repression and thousands of political killings took place.

Rather than quelling dissent, these attacks spurred greater support for the insurgents, particularly in rural areas. In January 1981, a wide range of opposition groups united to form the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (*Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional*, or FMLN). The FMLN established itself as a major military presence in many areas and became a serious political force both at home and abroad. In response, the United States increased military aid to the El Salvadoran government and became more directly involved in the Salvadoran armed forces' campaign against the FMLN. The conflict between the Salvadoran military and the FMLN continued throughout the 1980s.

In Guatemala also, insurgent groups rose up against the military regime in the 1970s. These groups enjoyed the support of much of the country's indigenous people

**Main registered refugee populations in Central America and Mexico, 1980–99**

**Figure 5.3**



who, though comprising a majority of the population, were excluded from Guatemala’s political and economic mainstream. In late 1981, the military initiated an 18-month counterinsurgency campaign that not only targeted the guerrillas but also indigenous communities, which it regarded as bases of rebel support. Tens of thousands of civilians, mostly indigenous people, were killed or disappeared.<sup>26</sup> At the peak of the violence, an estimated one million people were internally displaced as a result of this military campaign. Some months later, the various guerrilla groups united to form the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (*Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca*, or URNG). Despite popular support, the URNG was unable to mount a serious challenge to government troops. By 1983, the Guatemalan military had forced the URNG to retreat to remote mountain areas, where they remained until the beginning of peace talks later in the decade.

Most of the two million people uprooted as a result of these armed conflicts in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala remained internally displaced or became undocumented aliens in other Central or North American countries. These included Honduras, Mexico, Costa Rica, Belize and Panama, as well as the United States and Canada. Of those who fled their own country, only some 150,000 were recognized as refugees within Central America and Mexico. Of the hundreds of thousands who fled to the United States, only a relatively small number were recognized as refugees. The majority either did not have the opportunity to apply for refugee status or did not seek it for fear of deportation if it were denied.

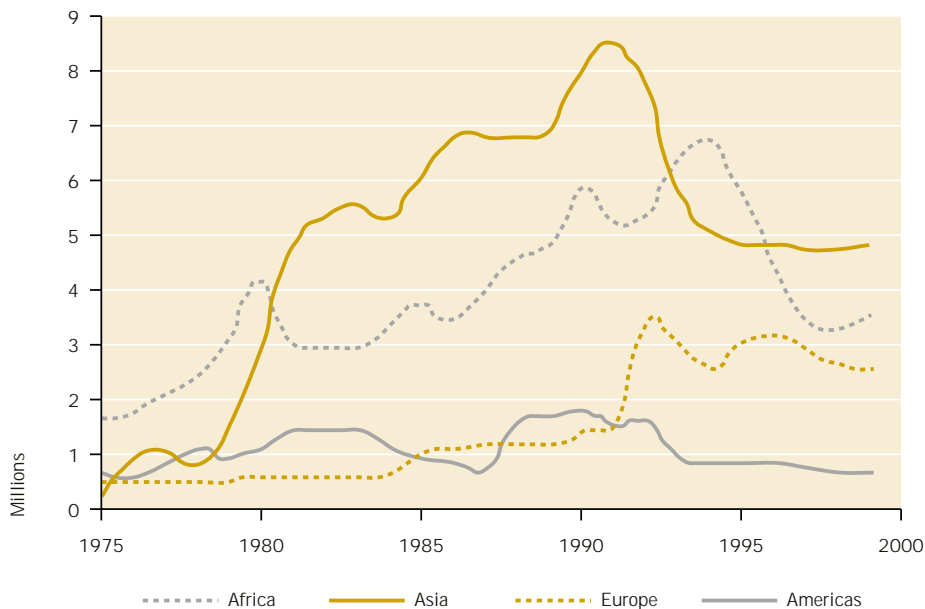
Of the more than 500,000 Central Americans who fled to the United States, most did not receive protection as refugees. The US response to the Central American refugees was strongly influenced by political considerations.

Nicaraguans were generally welcomed and granted asylum, while a large number of Guatemalans and Salvadorans were denied asylum and deported, even though the United States did provide stays of deportation for some groups. Costa Rica, Honduras and Mexico also received several hundred thousand Central Americans, of whom only some 143,000 were recognized as refugees.<sup>27</sup> Two of the largest concentrations of officially recognized refugees were in Honduras and Mexico. In 1986, Honduras hosted some 68,000 refugees, including roughly 43,000 from Nicaragua, some 24,000 from El Salvador, and a small number from Guatemala, while Mexico hosted some 46,000 Guatemalan refugees and many more who were not formally registered.<sup>28</sup>

For UNHCR, efforts to provide protection and assistance to the two different groups of refugees in Honduras were constrained by Cold War politics and other political considerations. The Honduran government, which was dependent on US aid, welcomed the Nicaraguan refugees who were fleeing the Sandinista government, but was highly suspicious of the Salvadoran refugees. The unequal treatment by the Honduran authorities of these two groups of refugees posed serious challenges for UNHCR. Although most of the officially recognized refugees were sheltered in UNHCR-run camps, conditions in these camps varied widely. The Nicaraguan refugees were allowed to move in and out of their camps freely, while Salvadoran refugees were forced to stay in closed camps, guarded by Honduran armed forces.

### Refugees by main region of asylum, 1975–2000\*

Figure 5.4



\* Does not include Palestinian refugees assisted by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

## Box 5.4

## Chile under General Pinochet

Unlike most other Latin American countries, Chile had no tradition of military intervention in politics before 1973. It was regarded as one of the most stable democracies on the continent. On 11 September 1973, however, General Augusto Pinochet launched an armed attack against the democratically elected government of President Salvador Allende. The coup was swiftly followed by the suppression of legitimate political activity and the mass arrest of tens of thousands of supporters of the former socialist government. A 'state of siege' was declared throughout the country.

Torture, disappearances and killings were widespread, especially in the first few months of the military junta. Over 4,000 people are estimated to have been killed and some 60,000 arrested, although the majority of these were short-term detainees. Parliament was closed and purges were conducted of people suspected of left-wing sympathies. A UNHCR report at the time likened the situation to that of the fascist period in Europe in the 1930s.<sup>iii</sup>

### Refugees already in Chile

For UNHCR, the Chilean coup and its aftermath presented considerable challenges. Chile was already home to many thousands of refugees and political exiles who had sought refuge in Chile in the preceding years. Their numbers were estimated by the Allende government in mid-1972 to be around 5,000. Many had come after Allende's election in 1970, either in flight from right-wing governments or in support of what was seen as a unique socialist experiment.

Two days after the coup, High Commissioner Sadruddin Aga Khan cabled the new Foreign Minister, Rear-Admiral Ismael Huerta Díaz, urging the government to honour its obligations under the 1951 UN

Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, which Allende's government had ratified in 1972.<sup>iv</sup> Had Chile not been party to these instruments, UNHCR's negotiations with the new government would almost certainly not have been so successful. On 20 September 1973, a UNHCR office was opened in the capital, Santiago.

Later the same month, the government allowed the creation of a National Committee for Aid to Refugees, (*Comité Nacional de Ayuda a los Refugiados*, or CONAR). The churches and voluntary agencies comprising CONAR set up 26 refugee reception centres, 15 in Santiago and 11 in the provinces. In these centres, 'mandate refugees' were assisted in putting their documents in order and arrangements were made for their transfer to countries of resettlement. By the end of September, 600 refugees had been registered at these centres and by 23 October their number had risen to 1,022.

Several hundred more refugees who were homeless were accommodated at different times in a house under the protection of the Swiss embassy, with the consent of the Chilean government. This *casa suiza* provided asylum to hundreds of UNHCR mandate refugees who had been released from detention and who were under expulsion orders pending resettlement abroad. Most were Brazilians, Uruguayans and Bolivians.

CONAR operated under the auspices of UNHCR, which offered it help in the resolution of refugee problems. By March 1974, out of the 3,574 people who had been registered with CONAR, 2,608 had been resettled in some 40 countries. This included 288 people who were repatriated to their own countries. In addition, some 1,500 had fled illegally to Peru and Argentina. Of CONAR's total expenditure of US\$300,000 during this period, some US\$215,000 was provided by UNHCR.

### Exile of Chileans

From the outset, the Pinochet regime used exile as part of its strategy to redraw Chile's political map, thereby eliminating its previous political traditions. Such were the numbers arrested that the main football stadium in Santiago was turned into a massive makeshift detention centre.

Expulsions were conducted under Decree Law 81 of November 1973, which gave the regime virtually unconditional authority to expel citizens. From December 1974, detainees held under the state of siege and not yet sentenced were allowed to petition for their release on condition of immediate expulsion. In April 1975, Decree Law 504 extended the same policy to sentenced prisoners.

The Inter-governmental Committee for European Migration, the International Committee of the Red Cross and UNHCR played a major role, alongside local non-governmental organizations, in making it possible for thousands of Chileans to leave the country. UNHCR also received a great deal of support from other UN organizations, notably the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). UNHCR established an eligibility determination procedure early in October 1973 to reach decisions on whether individuals had a well-founded fear of persecution in Chile, irrespective of whether this was their country of origin or simply their country of permanent residence. The quickest processing procedure possible was necessary for many refugees because they feared arrest or even death at the hands of the authorities.

As with the Hungarian exodus nearly two decades earlier, refugees were

widely dispersed. Some 110 countries, from Iceland and Cyprus to Kenya and Cape Verde, resettled Chileans. Initially, many fled to other Latin American countries including Peru, Argentina and Brazil. Employment opportunities there were limited, however, and after the 1976 coup in Argentina, Chile's most immediate neighbour became especially unattractive. Other principal destinations for Chilean refugees were France, Sweden, Canada, Mexico, Australia and New Zealand.

UNHCR also appealed to Eastern European countries to resettle Chilean refugees. Around a thousand went spontaneously to the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and a comparable number went to Romania with UNHCR's help. Smaller numbers went to other Eastern European countries including Bulgaria and Yugoslavia—the only Eastern bloc country with which UNHCR had until then had meaningful relations. UNHCR's appeal to these countries was a novelty at a time when the Soviet Union was still openly suspicious of the organization.

### Diplomatic asylum

Many embassies in Santiago drew on the well-established Latin American practice of providing diplomatic protection to those on their premises. Within days of the coup, over 3,500 Chileans had sought asylum in embassies in Santiago, principally in those of Argentina, France, Italy, Mexico, the Netherlands, Panama, Sweden and Venezuela. In one case in December 1973, Harald Edelstam, the Swedish ambassador, was expelled from the country because of the particularly active role which he played in providing diplomatic asylum.

Using its 'good offices' role, UNHCR assisted these asylum seekers. By

mid-October, with UNHCR's assistance and with the agreement of the government, safe-conduct passes were accorded to 4,761 asylum seekers, the majority of whom were Chilean. By May 1974, some 8,000 such safe-conduct passes had been granted by the Foreign Ministry.<sup>v</sup>

### Safe havens

Decree Law 1308 of 3 October 1973 brought about an important innovation in modern international practice on asylum: the creation within Chile of what were called 'safe havens' for foreign refugees, guaranteed by the Chilean government itself. In all there were six safe havens in the Santiago area. At first, these safe havens were respected by the regime, but a UNHCR cable at the end of 1973 noted that the law and order situation affecting refugees appeared extremely tense. It suggested that the junta might want to close the safe havens and insist on transit centres being established outside Chile.<sup>vi</sup> Ironically, this was also a demand of many of the refugees themselves.

In April 1974, the UNHCR office in Santiago estimated that there were still 15,000 people detained for political reasons throughout the country. Restrictions on civil and political liberties remained and there was a continuing absence of any meaningful legal process. It was under these conditions that all six safe havens continued to operate during most of 1974. A number of Chilean nationals waiting for resettlement were also lodged in a safe haven established under the protection of the UN flag by Decree Law 1698 of 17 October 1974. This decree specified that this centre could admit foreign refugees as well as relatives of Chilean refugees abroad who were awaiting family reunion. Chileans were allowed admission to this safe

haven only after receiving authorization from the Ministry of the Interior. The presence of Chilean nationals meant that UNHCR became increasingly involved in cases of family reunion, resettling the families of Chileans who had already found asylum abroad.

With the gradual departure of the refugees the number of safe havens dwindled. By the end of 1975, almost all the foreign refugees who could not remain in Chile had been satisfactorily resettled and in April 1976 the last remaining safe haven was closed.

### A milestone for UNHCR

The UNHCR operation in Chile after 1973 was an important milestone in the history of the organization. It was UNHCR's first major operation in Latin America. There are no precise figures on the number of people who fled into exile in the years during which General Pinochet was head of state. The Inter-governmental Committee for European Migration alone enabled 20,000 people to flee by 1980. Other sources estimate the eventual total of those who fled the regime, whether voluntarily or as a result of expulsion, to be as many as 200,000.<sup>vii</sup>

## Nicaraguan refugees in Honduras

Nicaraguan refugees had first started arriving in neighbouring Honduras in 1981. The majority of them (some 30,000) were indigenous Miskito people, fleeing both fighting between contra and Sandinista forces in their home areas and Sandinista attempts to move them. An estimated 14,000 of these Nicaraguan Miskitos lived in camps established by UNHCR. The remaining 8,000 Nicaraguan refugees were people of Spanish and mixed descent, known as 'ladinos'. These ladinos entered Honduras throughout the early 1980s. Many, like the Miskitos, were fleeing fighting between the contras and Sandinista forces. Others were contra recruits who settled in contra-run camps along the border.

UNHCR sought to maintain a clear division between the contra bases and the refugee communities by attempting to move refugees away from the border. It was well known, however, that contras were operating out of camps administered by UNHCR and the International Committee of the Red Cross, a situation one observer described as 'an instance of the most extreme use of refugees as policy objects'.<sup>29</sup> The presence of armed groups in the Nicaraguan refugee camps in Honduras, like that of Afghan armed groups in refugee villages in Pakistan, placed refugees at great risk. But with both the United States and Honduras supporting the contras, UNHCR found itself unable to prevent them operating from these camps. Meanwhile, a number of NGOs criticized UNHCR for not adequately protecting the refugees.

In 1987, refugee flows increased significantly, largely in response to a military recruitment drive by the Sandinista government. By December 1987, UNHCR had registered nearly 16,000 ladino refugees, roughly double the number registered at the end of 1986. In 1988, in the wake of the Iran-contra affair, the US Congress banned all aid to the contras. Without US assistance, the contras weakened and the conflict reached a stalemate. Later that year, the Sandinistas and the opposition, including the contras, began a 'national dialogue' that led to a series of agreements in 1989 aimed at ending the war.

## Salvadoran refugees in Honduras

Salvadoran refugees first arrived in Honduras in 1980. Initially, the refugees settled without problems in various border communities, particularly in La Virtud. As more refugees arrived, however, the Honduran authorities sought to halt this spontaneous settlement. The Honduran government viewed the refugees as guerrilla collaborators and treated them with distrust and hostility. In May 1980, for example, Honduran troops turned back hundreds of refugees fleeing attack by the Salvadoran military. Many of those forced back were subsequently killed. Yet in spite of their poor reception, intensified fighting in El Salvador continued to force thousands of Salvadorans to flee to Honduras. By early 1981, the Salvadoran refugee population in Honduras had grown to 30,000.

The refugees did not find the safety they had hoped for when they fled to Honduras. According to a European nurse who worked in La Virtud: 'The Salvadoran military, by agreement with the Honduran soldiers at La Virtud, freely entered



Honduran territory. Some refugees disappeared, others were found dead, and others were arrested by the Honduran army.<sup>30</sup> UNHCR issued a formal protest against the raids, as did senior members of the Church in the region, but this achieved little.

Then, in October 1981, the Honduran government announced that it planned to move the refugees in La Virtud to Mesa Grande, a site further from the border. The government's stated aim was to protect the refugees, which UNHCR supported. Some NGOs and other observers believed, however, that the government's real objectives were to prevent the refugees from assisting the Salvadoran guerrillas and to clear the border area so that the Honduran and Salvadoran militaries could operate there more freely. The refugees and most NGOs working at La Virtud opposed the planned move, arguing that this would put them even more at the mercy of the hostile Honduran military.

The situation came to a head on 16 November 1981, when Salvadoran paramilitaries and soldiers entered La Virtud and abducted a number of refugees. The Honduran government used the incursion as an excuse to proceed with the relocation immediately, even though preparations at Mesa Grande were incomplete. Despite the refugees' opposition and in spite of its own concerns, UNHCR found itself with little alternative but to assist with the move. Within five months, 7,500 refugees were relocated. Over 5,000 others returned to El Salvador rather than be moved to Mesa Grande. The relocation brought new problems. Many of the promised amenities never materialized and conditions for the refugees at Mesa Grande were far worse than they had been at La Virtud. As a result, the refugees' mistrust of both the Honduran authorities and of UNHCR increased.

The Honduran government's policy of keeping Salvadoran refugees in closed camps made it difficult for the refugees to achieve self-sufficiency. They were not allowed to seek employment outside the camps. They were also only allowed to farm within the confines of the camps, which limited the amount of food they could grow. In spite of this, the refugees were extremely resourceful. They planted their own vegetable gardens within the camp, which eventually provided all the camp's vegetable requirements. They also built fish ponds that provided tonnes of fish, raised pigs and chickens, and established workshops in which they produced most of their own clothes, shoes and hammocks.

In another controversial incident in 1983, the Honduran government told the Salvadoran refugees at the Colomoncagua camp, close to the Salvadoran border, that they would also have to relocate or be returned to El Salvador. UNHCR supported the proposed relocation but warned the Honduran government that it would oppose any attempt to repatriate these refugees forcibly to El Salvador.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, international NGOs supported the refugees' resistance to the move. In the end, the Honduran authorities backed down and the refugees were not forced to leave, but life in Colomoncagua remained tense and dangerous. From the beginning, there were many security problems at Colomoncagua, including violent attacks on refugees, sometimes in collaboration with members of the Salvadoran armed forces. A number of incidents also occurred involving conflicts between the refugees themselves, particularly when refugees sought to repatriate against the wishes of their leaders.

UNHCR was caught between conflicting pressures in the Salvadoran refugee camps. The Honduran and US governments wanted tighter control over the refugees' activities, while the refugees themselves, and most of the NGOs working in the camps, demanded greater freedom for the refugees. On a number of occasions, UNHCR staff in the camps were physically abused by the Honduran authorities.

UNHCR's relations with the NGOs working with Salvadoran refugees in Honduras were also strained. They often viewed UNHCR as being allied with the Honduran and US governments, which were generally hostile to the Salvadoran refugees. One UNHCR staff member wrote at the time: 'In no other country where I had previously worked was the international staff of voluntary agencies so hostile to UNHCR as in Mesa Grande and Colomoncagua.'<sup>32</sup>

### **Guatemalan refugees in Mexico**

During the 1980s, Mexico—like Honduras—was not a signatory to either the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol. When Guatemalans first started arriving in Mexico in large numbers in 1981, thousands were promptly deported. Following a series of international protests, however, the Mexican government established a registration process for Guatemalan refugees and allowed 46,000 to remain. These were amongst more than 200,000 Guatemalans who entered the country between 1981 and 1982. In 1982, UNHCR opened its first office in Mexico.

Many of those who were not registered had arrived in parts of Mexico to which Guatemalans had traditionally migrated in search of work, and where it was easy for them to blend in with the local and migrant work force. As many as 50,000 also made their way to the capital, Mexico City, where registration was not an option. Others arrived in Mexico after the government ended the registration process. All unregistered refugees lived in constant fear of deportation.

The registered refugees in Mexico were scattered in more than 50 camps in remote jungle areas in the impoverished state of Chiapas, bordering on Guatemala. Living conditions in the camps were desperately poor. From 1984, the Mexican government, aware of the poor conditions in these camps, adopted a policy to move the refugees from Chiapas to new settlements in the states of Campeche and Quintana Roo, on the Yucatan peninsula. Eventually some 18,000 refugees were moved. The government claimed, with some justification, that the move was necessary because the Guatemalan military had conducted several cross-border attacks on refugee sites. At the same time, the governor of Chiapas vehemently opposed the refugees' presence, while the Yucatan peninsula was an underdeveloped area where the refugees could assist development efforts.

Some 25,000 of the registered refugees in Chiapas resisted the relocation to Campeche and Quintana Roo, and remained in Chiapas. The Mexican government discouraged Mexican NGOs from assisting these refugees. The low wages they received for their labour and their lack of access to land and social services, made living conditions for these refugees extremely difficult, and in 1987 a number left

the camps, some repatriating to Guatemala. Subsequently, however, the security situation and the living conditions for the refugees in Chiapas did improve somewhat.

From 1984, the Mexican government—in cooperation with UNHCR and NGOs—provided the refugees now settled in Campeche and Quintana Roo with land, shelter, food aid, and comprehensive social services. These settlements proved to be highly successful in terms of achieving self-sufficiency and local integration for refugees. Most of the refugees who moved to the settlements remained there permanently and the Mexican government eventually granted them citizenship.

## Conflict resolution and repatriation

At the start of the 1980s, the Cold War was still firmly entrenched. By the end of the decade, both UNHCR and the global political landscape had changed dramatically. UNHCR had expanded significantly, not only in its staffing and budget levels, but also in terms of the scope of its activities. At the same time, many of the conflicts which had characterized the last decade of the Cold War were over or at least heading toward a resolution.

In the case of Afghanistan, Soviet troops withdrew from the country in 1989, shortly before the Soviet Union itself collapsed. The communist regime it left in place in Kabul fell to the *mujahedin* in 1992, eventually paving the way for the repatriation of some four million Afghans during the 1990s.

In Ethiopia, President Mengistu's government fell in 1991, leading to a period of relative calm in the country. Africa's longest ongoing civil war came to an end in 1991 and Eritrea formally obtained independence in 1993.

In Central America, the peace process which began in Esquipulas in 1987 crystallized the resolve of Central American leaders to bring an end to the conflicts in the region. In Nicaragua, a negotiated end to the conflict between the government and the *contras* began in 1989, and the following year the Sandinistas were voted out of office. In El Salvador and Guatemala, formal peace agreements were reached in 1992 and 1996 respectively, though many of the refugees returned home prior to these dates. At the beginning of the 1990s, the focus of UNHCR's activities therefore turned to repatriation.

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