

## The State of The World's Refugees in search of solutions

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### Introduction - Searching for solutions



Displaced Bosnians at Turanj on the Croatian border, November 1994  
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**Large-scale movements of refugees and other forced migrants have become a defining characteristic of the contemporary world. At few times in recent history have such large numbers of people in so many parts of the globe been obliged to leave their own countries and communities to seek safety elsewhere. Never before has the issue of mass population displacement gained such a prominent position on the agenda of the United Nations and its member states. And in no other age has the plight of uprooted people been so swiftly and graphically communicated to such an extensive public audience.**

## Debates and dilemmas

The global refugee problem has confronted the world with a wide range of practical challenges and ethical dilemmas. How, for example, can aid agencies respond more effectively to large and sudden movements of displaced people? To what extent do states have an obligation to keep their borders open when they are confronted with large influxes of asylum seekers? Can a meaningful distinction be made between refugees and other types of migrant? Is it possible to improve the security of people who have been displaced within their own country? What action can be taken to avert the need for people to go into exile? And how can the world's refugees be helped to resume more settled and productive lives?

The turbulent condition of the post-Cold War world has forced the international community to address such issues with a heightened sense of urgency. Humanitarian organizations are struggling to cope with the mounting demands made upon them. Governments in every continent are expressing alarm about the growing scale of the refugee problem, and are increasingly reluctant to bear the costs which they feel it imposes on them. At the same time, the international media's intensive coverage of selected conflicts and humanitarian emergencies has placed substantial pressure on states to intervene in crises which are generating large numbers of distressed and displaced people.



### The world's major refugee situations

The recent restructuring of the global balance of power has both obliged and enabled the international community to consider the refugee problem from a distinctly fresh perspective. The relevance of traditional approaches is being questioned and new strategies for solutions are emerging. Evidence of this new orientation can be found in the world's response to the succession of major emergencies which have occurred over the past five years: Haiti, Iraq, Liberia, Rwanda, Somalia and former Yugoslavia, for example, not to mention the crises which have erupted in newly independent states such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Russian Federation and Tajikistan.

In almost every one of these situations, states and other members of the international community have found themselves responding to the causes and consequences of human displacement with innovative forms of action: the creation of a 'safety zone' in northern Iraq; the deployment of human rights monitors within Rwanda; the intervention of a regional peacekeeping force in Liberia; the use of UN troops to protect the delivery of humanitarian assistance in Bosnia and Herzegovina; the introduction of 'regional safe havens' for Haitian asylum seekers; and the establishment of a war crimes tribunal for former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, to give just a few of the examples cited in this book.

Such innovations cannot be said to derive from any clearly defined international strategy. Many of the initiatives which have been taken during the past five years have been experimental in nature, hastily formulated to meet urgent and unexpected needs. Inevitably, some have proved more effective and equitable than others, while approaches that were gaining ground just two or three years ago - the intervention of UN-mandated military forces in war zones, for example - are already being reconsidered.

## **Contradictory trends**

In the turbulent context of the post-Cold War world, the United Nations, its member states and specialized agencies have found it difficult to develop coherent and consistent policies in relation to mass population displacements. Not surprisingly, therefore, recent years have witnessed a number of lively controversies within and amongst the governmental, international and non-governmental institutions dealing with refugee problems.

Recent events in Rwanda, for example, have generated a heated discussion concerning the propriety of providing assistance to refugee populations which include individuals who have been implicated in grave human rights violations. The UN operation in Somalia has raised a number of important questions concerning the relationship between humanitarian assistance and the use of military force. The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina has generated some acute dilemmas concerning the evacuation of civilians from areas which are threatened by ethnic cleansing. And the international community's efforts to hold the government of Iraq accountable for the invasion of Kuwait have posed serious questions about the imposition of sanctions which have a direct impact on the welfare of ordinary citizens.

Drawing upon the experience of these and other recent humanitarian operations, the chapters that follow seek to identify and analyze some of the emerging characteristics of the world's response to the problem of mass displacement. Primary attention is given to the evolving role of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), whose Office is responsible for protecting refugees and promoting lasting solutions to their plight.

The book suggests that several different - and in some senses contradictory - trends can be discerned in the international community's response to the refugee problem.

First, there is a growing recognition of the need to address the issue of involuntary migration in a more proactive manner. Greater efforts are now being made to avert refugee movements before they begin, to contain armed conflicts and the population movements which they provoke, and to create the conditions which will enable displaced people to return to their homes.

Second, to achieve these objectives, a wider range of actors have become involved in the search for solutions to refugee problems. In addition to UNHCR and its traditional partners, the question of human displacement has attracted the concern of the political organs of the United Nations, security organizations such as NATO and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, financial institutions such as the World Bank, and regional organizations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Organization of African Unity. Refugee problems, the world has recognized, are too complex to be resolved by refugee organizations alone.

Third, there is a new awareness of the need to tackle the refugee issue and other transnational problems in an integrated fashion. Somewhat belatedly, the international community has concluded that lasting solutions to the problem of human displacement will only be found if a concerted effort is made to protect human rights, to keep the peace within and between states, to promote sustainable development and to manage international migration. While the following chapters examine each of these challenges in turn, such tasks are, of course, inextricably linked to each other. As has been seen in countries as diverse

as Afghanistan, Angola and Azerbaijan, problems such as armed conflict, political repression, social violence, poverty, economic inequity and involuntary migration invariably coexist and reinforce each other.

Fourth, as the following chapters also point out, the search for new solutions to the question of human displacement has had a number of negative manifestations, most notably a declining commitment to the principle of asylum, and a growing readiness to ignore long-established protection principles and humanitarian norms. Instead of providing sanctuary to people whose safety is at risk, states are increasingly taking steps to obstruct the arrival of asylum seekers, to contain displaced people within their homeland, and to return refugees to their country of origin as quickly as possible, even if conditions there remain unsafe and the populations concerned have not expressed a desire to repatriate.

### **Dangers and opportunities**

States are increasingly taking steps to obstruct the arrival of asylum seekers, to contain displaced people within their homeland, and to return refugees to their country of origin.

The state of the world's refugees in 1995 is therefore one of both danger and opportunity. The danger is that increasing numbers of people will be uprooted by the social and political fragmentation which has characterized the post-Cold War period, and that states will prove unwilling or unable to offer these populations the protection they need. Media exposure and public pressure may oblige governments to provide such people with emergency relief. But, as recent experience in the Balkans and Central Africa has demonstrated, there is also a risk that humanitarian assistance will become a substitute for decisive action to tackle the causes of refugee-producing conflicts. At the same time, as the major powers turn inwards and become preoccupied with domestic issues and national interests, there is a distinct danger that the United Nations will be used in a selective manner and asked to lend its flag to operations which are designed to address the concerns of specific states and alliances.

The rapid changes taking place in the international state system have also presented the world with an opportunity to address the causes and consequences of mass displacement in a more constructive manner. The adversarial attitudes of the past decades have in some senses been replaced by a greater willingness to cooperate. Repressive forms of government have been largely discredited, and in several parts of the world have given way to more democratic and pluralistic political structures. There is a growing recognition of the need for good governance at both the national and international levels, and a heightened awareness of the dangers posed by the spread of small arms, land-mines and other weapons of war.

Fifty years after its creation, therefore, the United Nations and its member states are still confronted with the challenge identified in the organization's Charter: 'to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.' The search for solutions to refugee problems - and the problems which create refugees - is an essential part of this task. Displaced people are victims of the ills which affect our age: governments which refuse to respect the human rights of their citizens; rapacious armed factions which use political goals as a smokescreen for personal or communal aggrandizement; social and religious groups which cannot tolerate alternative opinions and lifestyles; not to mention deep-rooted trends such as the growing inequality within and between nations; the rapid increase of the global population; and the depletion of the world's natural resources.

Experience has demonstrated that displaced populations can bring benefits to the areas where they settle. They may attract international aid to a region which has been deprived of development assistance. In some situations refugee movements have brought new skills and human resources into the host community, thereby boosting the local economy. And throughout the world, exiled individuals and communities have contributed greatly to the cultural diversity and the intellectual vitality of their adopted countries.

At the same time, it would be naive to ignore the negative consequences of forced population movements. For the individuals concerned, becoming a refugee is, by definition, a harrowing experience. No-one should have to abandon their home and escape from their homeland in order to feel secure. For the countries and communities involved, mass population displacements can also create a number of important problems. When large number of displaced and destitute people arrive in an area, they almost inevitably place a strain upon scarce local resources, particularly in the low-income countries where the vast majority of the world's refugees are to be found. At the same time, refugee movements can generate social tensions, reinforce political divisions within and between states, and add new elements of instability to already volatile situations.

The task of preventing and resolving refugee problems - and the forces which create them - is therefore not simply a question of humanitarian concern. It must also form an integral part of the broader effort to establish a more peaceful, prosperous and secure world.



Map A  
The world's major refugee situations

UNHCR is providing protection and assistance to 27.4 million people around the world, of whom 14.5 million are refugees.

**War in former Yugoslavia**  
Some 3.7 million people who have been displaced or affected by the war are receiving humanitarian assistance from the United Nations, 2.7 million of them in Bosnia and Herzegovina alone.

**Asylum in Europe**  
Since the early 1980s, around five million applications for refugee status have been submitted in Western Europe. UNHCR tries to ensure that any measures taken to control this phenomenon are consistent with the principles of refugee protection.

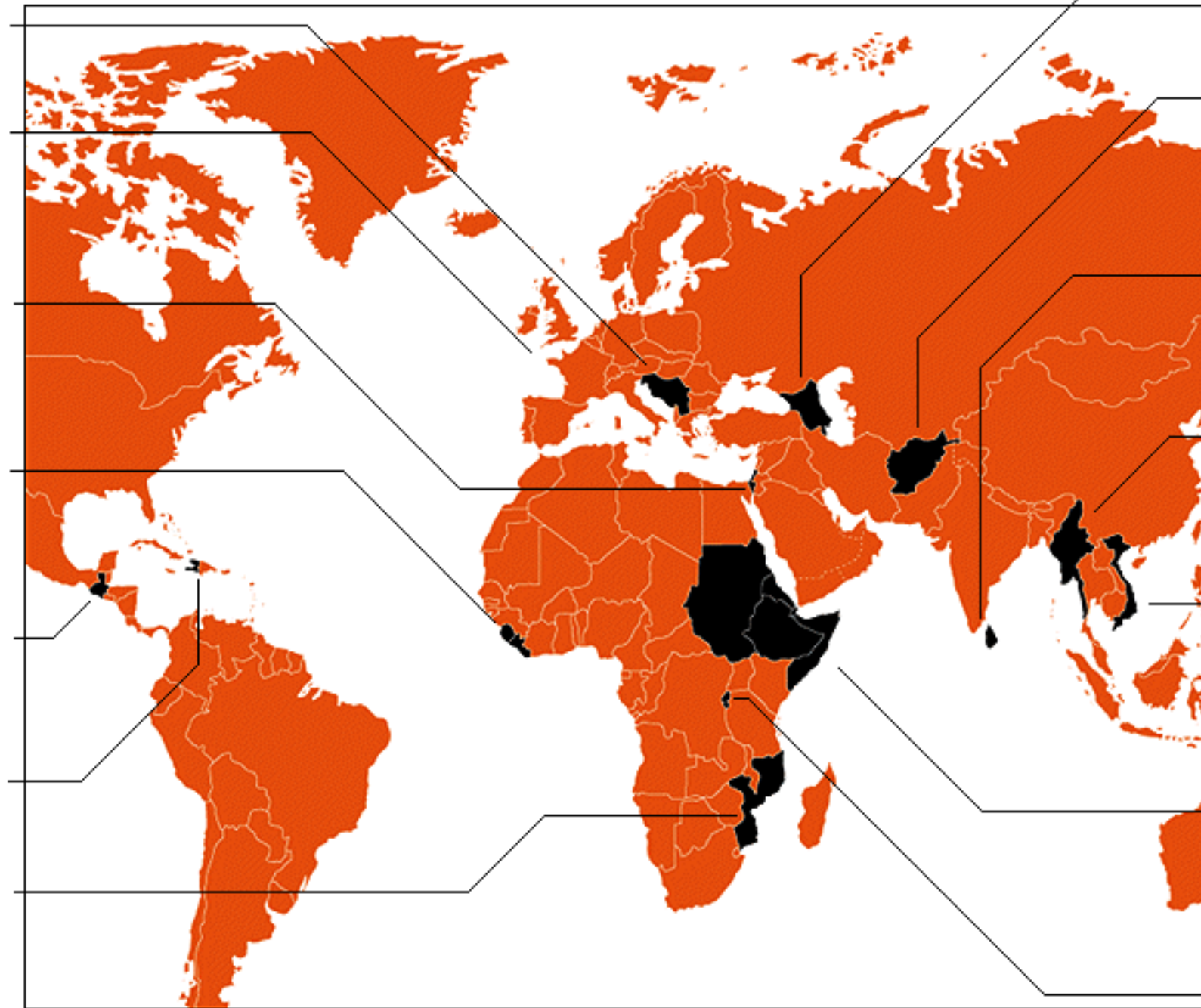
**The Palestinian question**  
Around 2.8 million people are registered with UNRWA, the agency responsible for Palestinian refugees. Their future remains one of the most complex issues which must be addressed in the Middle East peace process.

**West African refugees**  
The conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone have forced almost a million people into exile in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire. Large numbers are also displaced within their own countries, beyond the reach of international assistance.

**Guatemalan repatriation**  
Some 20,000 Guatemalans have returned to their homeland over the past 10 years. Up to a quarter of the 45,000 who remain in Mexico are expected to repatriate in 1995 with assistance from UNHCR.

**Haitian asylum seekers**  
UNHCR is assisting with procedures designed to determine the status of asylum seekers from Haiti and to monitor the situation of those who return.

**Reintegration in Mozambique**  
More than 1.6 million refugees returned to Mozambique from six neighbouring states between late 1992 and early 1995. They must now begin to support themselves and to reintegrate within their own communities.



**Conflicts in the Caucasus**  
Recent years have witnessed a succession of population displacements within and between Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and the Russian Federation, involving around 1.5 million people. Many of this number are unable or unwilling to return to their former place of residence.

**Reconstruction in Afghanistan**  
Half of the Afghan refugees have repatriated since 1992, leaving nearly three million the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan. Additional reconstruction efforts are needed within Afghanistan to enable their return.

**Displaced Sri Lankans**  
More than 30,000 Sri Lankan refugees have returned from India since 1992, leaving nearly 75,000 in their country of asylum. UNHCR provides assistance to the returnees and to other people who are threatened or displaced by the war.

**Repatriation to Myanmar**  
By mid-1995, only 50,000 of the 250,000 people who fled from Myanmar in 1991 and 1992 remained in Bangladesh. The homeward movement, organized by UNHCR, is scheduled for completion by the end of the year.

**Vietnamese boat people**  
Although the departure of boat people has effectively come to a halt, just over 40,000 Vietnamese asylum seekers remain in camps throughout South-East Asia. More than 70,000 have gone back to their own country, where their situation is monitored by UNHCR.

**The Horn of Africa: exile and repatriation**  
UNHCR continues to assist around 1.6 million people from the Horn of Africa and the Sudan, traditionally one of the most important refugee-producing regions. The repatriation to Eritrea from Sudan is finally under way, more than 30 years after the first refugees left that country.

**The Rwanda/Burundi emergency**  
More than a million Rwandese poured into Zaire in mid-1994, one of the largest and fastest refugee movements ever seen. UNHCR is now providing protection and assistance to some 2.2 million displaced people in Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda and Zaire.

Statistics dated 1 January 1995 unless otherwise stated