



Burundian refugee children in Mahama camp, Rwanda.

Every life matters

by **Filippo Grandi**
UNITED NATIONS
HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

The world again witnessed record levels of forced displacement in 2015. More than 65 million people were uprooted by war, conflict, persecution or human rights abuses by year end, including over 10 million displaced during the year.

The war in the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria) was again the single largest driver of displacement in 2015. At the end of the year, more than 4 million Syrians were living in exile in neighbouring countries and 6.5 million people were internally displaced.



UNHCR/Kate Holt

The year 2015 was also the year that the global refugee crisis reached Europe. More than 1 million refugees and migrants arrived on the southern European shores. Tragically, nearly 4,000 died in the attempt. More than 84 per cent came from the world's top ten refugee-producing countries, chief among them Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, but also Eritrea and Somalia. More than one-third were children, many of them travelling

unaccompanied. Greece, a country already under strain from a severe economic and financial crisis, received more than 800,000 arrivals and became overwhelmed by the sheer numbers. The local communities demonstrated extraordinary generosity and thousands of volunteers came to the Greek islands to help the refugees and migrants. UNHCR launched its biggest humanitarian operation in Europe since the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

New crises erupted in Burundi and Yemen, forcing hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes and seek safety in neighbouring countries. Meanwhile, older crises continued unresolved. South Sudan marked the fourth anniversary of its independence with more than 2.25 million displaced people. Since then, and despite a peace deal between the Government and the opposition concluded in August, violence has spread to different parts of the country and unprecedented hunger has driven even larger numbers of people from their homes. Violence and instability kept people from eastern Nigeria and the Central Africa Republic in exile, and the situation in Ukraine remained precarious for large numbers of internally displaced people. Political developments in Afghanistan in early 2015 generated hope for increased stability and opportunities to find solutions for displaced people. However, in the second half of the year, escalating violence in the country brought the number of internally displaced people to a new high of 1 million.

Today's protection challenges

Despite socio-economic challenges, numerous countries kept their border open, generously welcoming large numbers of refugees. But in many parts of the world we also witnessed threats to the international protection regime, sometimes fuelled by dangerous anti-foreigner rhetoric giving rise to xenophobic attitudes. Europe initially responded to the arrival of large numbers refugees and migrants on its southern shores with some very sound decisions on the internal relocation of people in need of international protection. However, the lack of a common vision and solidarity among European countries resulted in a fragmented and deficient response. Large numbers of people went unchecked to a few countries in Northern Europe, where the initial public support for welcoming refugees began to waver. Many

countries passed restrictive legislation or used physical obstacles – including fences constructed along borders – to dissuade refugees and migrants from reaching their territories, with dire consequences for the people on the move.

The phenomenon of dangerous mixed movements by sea was not limited to Europe. In South-East Asia, large numbers of migrants and refugees, including many Rohingya, put their lives in the hands of smugglers in search for safety and a future. Inadequate protection, uneven access to education and employment opportunities, and a lack of available solutions, are often behind these irregular movements. Thousands of people were reportedly abandoned by smugglers at sea and mass graves were found along the land border between Thailand and Malaysia near the deserted camps of smugglers.

In Central America, shocking levels of gang violence in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras displaced tens of thousands of people and forced many of them along traditional migrant routes, mostly travelling north, in search of safety and protection. Asylum applications in the region from nationals of these three countries increased sharply, as did recognition rates. But deportations of large numbers of people, including those who could be in need of international protection, have continued. While overshadowed by crises elsewhere in the world, refugee movements in Central America are expected to grow.

Building a better future

At the same time, traditional solutions for refugees, namely voluntary return, local integration and resettlement, were in short supply. During the year, some 201,000 refugees returned to their home countries and 115,800 were assisted to integrate locally. Voluntary repatriation was at its lowest in three decades, and possibilities for local integration remained



UNHCR/Emrah Gurel

High Commissioner Filippo Grandi visiting Syrian refugee children in Istanbul, Turkey.

limited. Few such opportunities brought to the forefront the importance of resettlement as part of the international community's response to forced displacement. Globally, resettlement continued to play a crucial protection role in UNHCR's response to forced displacement. More than 81,000 refugees departed for resettlement, many of them to the United States and Canada.

With the rapid increase in displacement and the stagnation in the number of refugees finding a solution, it has become even more important to invest in quality education for refugee children, creating livelihood opportunities, and efforts aimed at finding alternatives to camps and including displaced people in national economies and services. The inclusion of nearly 1 million Afghan and Iraqi refugees in the Islamic Republic

of Iran's national health insurance plan in 2015 was a remarkable achievement in this regard.

Emergency response

In 2015, UNHCR declared 11 emergency situations affecting operations in 30 countries and deployed 460 emergency missions, involving UNHCR and partner staff, to support the response mainly in Africa and Europe. Protection staff comprised more than 25 per cent of these deployments. From the outset of each emergency we sent senior-level protection colleagues to establish community-based protection mechanisms, to work with partners to undertake participatory assessments, and to develop protection strategies. In situations of internal displacement, we strengthened

the coordination of the protection cluster and working groups, and developed tools to prevent and follow up on child protection challenges and sexual and gender-based violence.

The security of our beneficiaries and our staff remained key concerns, not only in new emergencies but also in protracted situations. Last year, we mourned the loss of one of our colleagues in Somalia. A brave young woman, who had recently returned to work from maternity leave, was gunned down in Mogadishu; a sad and stark reminder of the risks so many aid workers face today. In contexts such as Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria and Yemen, it is extremely difficult to keep staff safe and deliver protection and assistance at the same time. In many places we now work in conflict areas. As these conflicts continue, they draw in more armed actors including those who see civilians and humanitarian workers as legitimate targets. To be able to reach people who are desperately in need of humanitarian aid in Syria or Yemen, we must make difficult decisions on a case-by-case basis as to whether risk levels are acceptable. At the same time, we keep investing in expertise and equipment to mitigate risks, including through training of UNHCR and partner staff.

Support from donors and partners

On behalf of the millions of refugees, internally displaced, stateless people and others of concern to UNHCR, I would like to thank our many donors and partners for their steady and generous support.

We continue to work with a growing number of partners. In 2015, UNHCR disbursed USD 1.26 billion to 938 non-governmental organizations, government institutions and United Nations agencies for protection and assistance projects worldwide. National NGOs received 30 per cent of the funds we expended to our partners. In 2015, we consolidated the Refugee Coordination Model to ensure transparent and inclusive leadership in large refugee situations and to improve joint operational planning and resource mobilization. Countless others supported UNHCR's work, including corporate partners, individual donors and celebrities – bringing added financial assistance, innovative solutions and essential advocacy to our efforts.

Last year we received an unprecedented USD 3.4 billion in financial contributions for which I am deeply grateful. Our requirements, however, also stood at an all-time high: USD 7.2 billion to protect and assist some 64 million people of concern. This means that in spite of the extraordinary support from donors over the last year, the gap between needs and funding available continued to grow, with very real consequences for the people we serve.

Looking ahead, we know that these challenges will persist and perhaps even increase. We are committed to being even more effective, efficient, creative and innovative in our responses. We will continue to push boundaries to uphold protection principles and preserve protection space everywhere, rally solidarity and mobilize resources, and we cannot achieve this without the steadfast and generous support of our partners and donors worldwide. ■



Special Envoy

UNHCR Special Envoy Angelina Jolie Pitt meeting internally displaced Iraqis in Khanke camp, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

UNHCR/Andrew McConnell

Throughout 2015, UNHCR Special Envoy Angelina Jolie Pitt continued to show extraordinary commitment and dedication towards refugees, and tirelessly advocated on their behalf around the globe.

Her advocacy remained centered around the worsening plight of Syrian refugees. The Special Envoy began the year with a visit to Iraq to support the 3.3 million displaced people in the country and to highlight their dire needs. She witnessed a dramatic increase in the scale and gravity of the humanitarian situation since her previous visit in 2012 as conflicts in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic intensified and became intertwined.

In the weeks following, the Special Envoy continued to raise awareness by reaching out to

audiences worldwide. She penned an opinion editorial in the *New York Times* on the Syrians and Iraqis who can't return home, entitled *A New Level of Refugee Suffering*. In April, the Special Envoy appeared before the UN Security Council to advocate on behalf of Syrian refugees, and briefed the Council on nearly a dozen field visits she has carried out to Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta and Turkey since the onset of the Syrian conflict.

The Special Envoy later joined High Commissioner Guterres to mark World Refugee Day in Turkey, the world's largest refugee-hosting nation. She visited Syrian and Iraqi refugees in southeastern Turkey, and met with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to thank Turkey and its people for their generosity and to discuss the challenges that refugee-hosting nations face. ■

“Any one of the Syrians that I met would speak more eloquently about the conflict than I ever could. I'm here for them because this is their United Nations.” - Special Envoy Angelina Jolie Pitt briefing the UN Security Council