

# The plight of refugees, asylum-seekers and IDPs around the globe

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Ashwaq, 12, stands outside her family's tent at the Markaze refugee camp in Obock, Djibouti, May 19, 2015. She and thousands of others had fled the civil war in Yemen and made it across the Gulf of Aden to find refuge in Djibouti, a Horn of Africa nation where the United Nations set up a staging hub for aid for the conflict-torn Arab country. On February 28, 2019, U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres said 24 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in Yemen. Photo by Mosa'ab Elshamy for AP

Refugees are people who must leave their home for their own safety. A refugee's home area could be a country, state or region. People become refugees for many reasons. Some of the most common are war, natural disasters and climate change. People may also become refugees if they are persecuted or oppressed. They might be oppressed because of their race, religion, nationality, social activities, political views or membership in a certain group.



The United Nations (U.N.) is a group of countries that meet regularly to create peace and cooperation between nations. In 1951, the group wrote a document about the rights of refugees. At the time, many people were refugees because of World War II. The U.N. established rules for helping these people settle in other countries.

Today, refugees can seek asylum in 147 different countries. Asylum is the protection offered by another country. To be granted asylum, a refugee must be approved by the government. People who are not yet approved are called asylum-seekers.

## Refugees In History

History is filled with stories of people forced to leave their homes. One example is in France, where in the 1600s most people were Catholics. In 1685, France outlawed the Protestant religion. Hundreds of thousands of Protestants were forced to flee the country. Most of these refugees moved to other European countries. Some traveled as far as North America. Intolerance of this kind is repeated throughout history. Many people have been forced to move because of their religion.

After World War II, there were many refugees. Millions of people had lost their homes or been forced out of their home countries. Life was especially difficult for Jews who had survived Nazi concentration camps. They often returned home to find that their property had been stolen. They had no home and little hope of finding work. As a result, many became refugees and had to look for help elsewhere.

After World War II, the most powerful countries were the Soviet Union and the United States. They engaged in a conflict called the Cold War. It wasn't an actual war, just a war of threats. The two countries competed for power and influence.

## DEFINITIONS

### asylum

Protection given by a government to someone who has left another country to escape being harmed

### human rights

Basic rights and freedoms that all people are entitled to, no matter their nationality, gender, ethnicity, race, religion, or political views

### refugees

People fleeing wars, conflict, or persecution in their countries

Each wanted to be the most powerful country in the world. The Cold War ended in 1991 when the Soviet Union broke apart. During the Cold War, thousands of refugees left the Soviet Union. They went to seek asylum in Europe and the U.S.

## **Refugees Today**

In 2017, the number of refugees rose to 25.4 million around the world.

Most of these refugees come from just three countries. They are Afghanistan, South Sudan and Syria. Each of these regions has been devastated by war and conflict. Many people have been forced to flee their homes. About 5.4 million Palestinians are part of a longer-standing group of refugees.

More than 8 out of 10 of the world's refugees are from poor countries. Most of them seek asylum in other poor countries. Turkey has taken in the largest number of refugees in the world.

Over half of all refugees live in cities. They tend to settle there for a number of reasons. For one, legal help for asylum-seekers is often found in cities. Refugees are also drawn to cities because they have large immigrant communities.

## **Internally Displaced Persons**

Not everyone who has to leave home ends up leaving their country. Some refugees move within their country. These refugees are called "internally displaced persons," or IDPs. Today, about 40 million people around the world are IDPs. That is the highest number recorded since 1994.

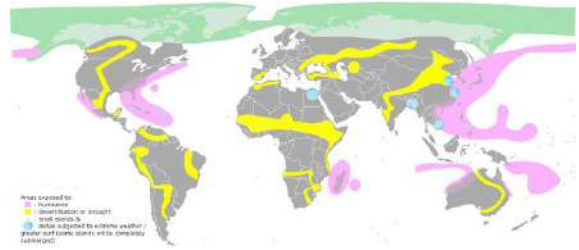
Sudan is a country in eastern Africa. It has one of the largest IDP populations in the world. From 1983 to 2005, war between north and south Sudan forced millions of people from their homes. By the end of 2017, around 4.4 million Sudanese were IDPs.

Other countries have large numbers of IDPs, too. They include Colombia, Iraq, Somalia and Pakistan.

## **Environmental Refugees**

Environmental disruption is another problem that creates refugees. Natural disasters include events such as earthquakes, hurricanes and floods. They often force people to flee their homes. In 2010, a giant earthquake hit the city of Port-au-Prince in Haiti. Many people had to leave the country.

Today, human activity causes climate change. Burning fossil fuels, like oil and coal, adds greenhouse gases to the atmosphere. This traps the sun's heat in the atmosphere. The Earth then becomes warmer. The rising temperature causes glaciers to melt, making sea levels rise. It also leads to droughts and floods. Many people are now forced to move because of climate change. They are known as climate refugees.



The Red Cross is a group that helps refugees. It says that there are more environmental refugees today than refugees from wars.

Environmental disruption is a growing problem. It may also increase the number of traditional refugees. Climate change makes it harder for people to get food and water, the U.N. says. That can cause more fighting between different groups.

## Fast Facts:

### Places Of Refuge

Nations with the most refugees, asylum-seekers and IDPs (2017):

Colombia: 7,747,365

Syria: 7,033,119

Democratic Republic of the Congo: 5,144,932

Iraq: 4,501,786

Turkey: 3,789,320

### Refugees

Countries of origin of refugees, asylum-seekers and IDPs (2017):

Syria: 13,288,372

Colombia: 7,901,909

Democratic Republic of the Congo: 5,374,765

Afghanistan: 5,336,582

Iraq: 4,809,858

### **City Of Refuge**

Puuhonua o Hnaunau is a national park on the Big Island of Hawaii. It marks an ancient City of Refuge. The site was once a place where people could seek asylum and protection. Puuhonua o Hnaunau accepted refugees from the 1400s through the 1800s.

### **Peace Out**

From 1955 to 1975, the U.S. was involved in the Vietnam War. Many Americans opposed the war and did not want to take part in the fighting. To avoid having to serve in the Army, they asked for asylum in Canada. After the war, President Jimmy Carter issued a pardon for them. They were allowed to return to the U.S. without punishment.

URL: <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/refugee/>