

# Facts and Figures

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), commonly known as the “UN refugee agency”, was created in December 1950 by Resolution 428 (v) of the United Nations' General Assembly. It began operations on 1 January 1951. Initially established as a temporary office, with a projected life span of three years, UNHCR's mandate has since then been extended every five years to respond to the world's growing refugee problems. It celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2001. Today, there are over 21.1 million refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR. It is one of the world's principal humanitarian organisations, with 123 representational offices in 120 countries, and has twice been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

## THE MANDATE

UNHCR's mandate is to provide international protection to refugees and seek durable solutions to their plight. The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as a “person who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.” In addition to the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol, the 1969 Refugee Convention of the Organisation of African Unity and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration, applied in Africa and Central America respectively, adapt the 1951 definition of a refugee to circumstances in those regions.

Over the years, there were several General Assembly resolutions which have requested UNHCR's involvement with persons who are outside their country of origin because of persecution, armed conflict, generalised violence, foreign aggression or other circumstances leading to flight. UNHCR's involvement has also been requested with respect to internally displaced persons who have been obliged to flee their homes for similar reasons but remain within their own borders. UNHCR provides refugees with international protection and humanitarian assistance, especially when host governments are unable to do so.

UNHCR's work is guided by its Statute, the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol, the General Assembly, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and the decisions and conclusions of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme (ExCom). Of the various durable solutions it seeks to achieve, the preferred one is voluntary repatriation, whereby refugees return to their homes and resume their lives. When repatriation is impossible, UNHCR tries to help refugees settle locally in the country of asylum. When neither of these solutions is possible, resettlement in third countries is explored for persons who meet specific criteria. Although resettlement remains an important instrument of international protection, the number of refugees resettled in a third country has declined since the late 1980s.

## THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

The High Commissioner is nominated by the UN Secretary-General and elected by the General Assembly for a term of five years. The current High Commissioner, Mr. Ruud Lubbers of the Netherlands, assumed office on 1 January 2001. Mr. Lubbers formerly served as Prime Minister of the Netherlands from 1982 to 1994, following an earlier stint as Minister of Economic Affairs and work in the private sector. Since leaving government, Professor Lubbers has taught at Tilburg University in the Netherlands and the John F. Kennedy School of Government and Politics at Harvard University. Long interested in globalisation and

environmental conservation, he was also the chair of Globus; the Institute for Globalisation and Development based in Tilburg, and served as the International President of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). Immediately after taking up his appointment, the High Commissioner initiated a prioritisation and restructuring exercise, the so-called Actions 1-2-3 process.

## THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

UNHCR's governing body – the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme (ExCom) – was created in 1958, pursuant to a request by the General Assembly. Its main tasks are to approve the High Commissioner's assistance programmes, advise the High Commissioner in the exercise of his/her functions (mainly on protection issues) and oversee the agency's finances and administration. The 57 ExCom members – all of them governments, listed in the annexes at the end of this appeal – meet in a plenary session once a year (every October, in Geneva). To maintain a dialogue with UNHCR throughout the year on protection, administration and finance, ExCom's Standing Committee meets every three or four months in Geneva. UNHCR reports annually to the General Assembly through ECOSOC.

## PART OF THE UN SYSTEM

UNHCR was created by a resolution of the General Assembly and is part of a broad network of UN Funds and programmes, specialised agencies and commissions. UNHCR works most closely with WFP, UNICEF, WHO, OCHA, OHCHR and UNDP. UNHCR also liaises closely with Bretton Woods institutions such as the World Bank, particularly in helping refugees to rebuild their lives and communities once they have returned home.

## WORKING WITH PARTNERS

In today's complex world, protecting and assisting refugees and others of concern to the Office requires co-operation with many national and international actors. To carry out its work effectively, UNHCR must foster good working relationships with governments and national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as well as other UN agencies, intergovernmental and regional organisations.

Governments work with UNHCR by granting asylum to refugees and permitting them to stay in their countries. Many governments also help refugees settle permanently in their countries, by facilitating their naturalisation, providing land, permitting their legal employment or providing financial assistance. UNHCR receives the majority of its funding from governments, although contributions from the private sector are growing.

NGOs are vital partners in UNHCR's day-to-day work. In 2002, UNHCR will continue to make efforts to broaden the access and participation of NGOs in the full spectrum of UNHCR's work. The Partnership in Action (PARinAC) process, which was launched in 1994, is an ongoing dialogue with NGOs that has helped to define mechanisms for co-operation and identified areas where existing partnerships – especially among national NGOs – can be reinforced especially in the regions without an established tradition of non-governmental involvement. Partnership with NGOs will be supported both technically and financially, with an emphasis on reinforced support to national NGOs. At the field level, the Office will continue to promote more strategic involvement of NGOs in operational activities such as needs assessment, programme planning, project monitoring and evaluation as well as training and emergency response activities. Furthermore, NGO participation in refugee protection through the ReachOut training and the Global Consultations as well as through the pre-ExCom consultations will be encouraged. In 2001, UNHCR worked with 537 NGO implementing partners; 398 of these were national NGOs.

As well as forging partnerships at the bilateral level with various international and regional organisations, UNHCR participates actively in a wide spectrum of co-ordination and decision-making mechanisms comprising both humanitarian and development actors. Such mechanisms include the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) which ensures inter-agency decision-making in response to complex emergencies through 16 leading agencies and NGO consortia, and the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) which is comprised of executive heads of UN system organisations including UN funds and programmes as well as specialised agencies, the World Trade Organisation and Bretton Woods Institutions. Several Field offices are involved in the Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) and the Common Country Assessment and UN Development Assistance Framework (CCA/UNDAF) exercises. UNHCR staff are also encouraged to fully participate in the framework of the UN Resident and Humanitarian Co-ordinator system. As of February 2001, UNHCR has global agreements with 52 international organisations. The current revision of the 1997 Memorandum of

Understanding with World Food Programme is going to be completed in early 2002 and will serve to facilitate the implementation of food and food-related assistance and to overcome some operational constraints of the two organisations.

UNHCR is committed to the deepening of a culture of partnership. As a first step, the Office is focusing on its co-operation with NGOs, UN organisations and other international organisations. In this connection, a task force on promoting partnerships has been established. It is examining existing relationships with selected UN and international organisations as well as NGOs, identifying areas where improvements to the culture of partnership can be made. A specific programme of work relating to priority issues will then be established.

## PERSONS OF CONCERN

As of January 2001, the total number of persons of concern to UNHCR is 21.1 million. This number has decreased from a peak of 27 million in 1995, and is fewer than the 22.5 million recorded in January 2000. In addition, some 8.9 million stateless or potentially stateless cases are also of concern to the Office because their nationality is disputed or unclear.

### **Refugees: 12.1 million**

Persons who are outside their country of origin and recognised as refugees by governments which have signed the various UN or regional instruments relating to the status of refugees; or persons recognised by UNHCR, according to the definition contained in its Statute. The latter are known as “mandate refugees”. This category includes persons who have been granted temporary protection on a group basis.

### **Asylum-seekers: 0.9 million**

Persons who have left their countries of origin and have applied for recognition as refugees in other countries, and whose applications are still pending a decision by the appropriate government body or UNHCR. The largest group of asylum-seekers lives in Europe and North America.

### **Returnees: 0.8 million**

Persons who were of concern to UNHCR when outside their country of origin and who remain so for a limited period (usually two years) after their return while UNHCR assists in their reintegration and monitors their well-being. The agency’s activities in the country of origin are intended to make return sustainable and, in some cases, help preclude new refugee outflows or promote reconciliation.

### **Stateless Persons: 8.9 million (cases at-risk)**

A person who is not considered as a national by any state under the operation of its law. Avoidance of statelessness and the elimination of statelessness are part of the Office’s core mandate. In carrying out this mandate, UNHCR continues to encourage States to accede to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. By September 2001, 53 States have acceded to the former and 25 to the latter instrument. The Office provides technical support and advice to States on issues related to statelessness.

### **Internally Displaced Persons and Others of Concern: 7.3 million**

UNHCR extends protection or assistance to certain groups not included in the Office’s original mandate, but which the UN Secretary-General or the General Assembly has requested UNHCR to assist. Like refugees, these persons may have been forced to flee their homes because their lives and/or liberty were at risk; but unlike refugees, they were either unable to or did not wish to cross an international border. According to international law, they remain under the sovereignty of their own government, even though that government may be unable or unwilling to protect them. Given its expertise with mass movements of people in crisis situations, and the fact that internally displaced persons (IDPs) are often in “a refugee-like situation” (in a plight akin to that of refugees), UNHCR has in recent years, been called upon to protect and assist certain groups of IDPs.