With dozens of families sharing a single tent in Yemen's overcrowded reception area, men often sleep in the open giving women and children limited space in tents.

The
Year in Review
Global mega-trends

UNHCR works in a constantly changing international environment, characterized by global mega-trends that have an immediate impact on the organization's ability to provide refugees and other people of concern with protection, assistance and solutions. In 2009, a number of those mega-trends were of particular salience to the activities of the Office.

First and foremost, the global economic and financial crisis threatened the jobs and livelihoods of millions of people throughout the world, and at the same time had an adverse impact on international financial flows such as migrant remittances, development assistance and direct overseas investment. As a result, serious questions were raised with respect to the international community's ability to attain the Millennium Development Goals.

Population growth continued apace in 2009. At present, there are approximately 6.7 billion people on earth. By 2050, that number is expected to surpass 9 billion, with almost all of the growth taking place in developing regions where the overwhelming majority of refugees and displaced people are to be found.

Demographic expansion is inextricably linked to the phenomenon of rapid urbanization. More than 50 per cent of the world's population is already found in cities and towns, and that proportion is expected to reach 70 per cent by 2050. Public services are failing to keep pace with this development, and yet a growing number of UNHCR's beneficiaries are taking up residence in urban areas.

Climate change, global warming and environmental degradation threaten to displace growing numbers of people, and at the same time are placing serious new pressures on the limited disaster-response capacity of developing countries. While large-scale population movements provoked by natural disasters have hitherto taken place within the borders of such States, there is a growing risk that the victims of these catastrophes will look further afield for safety and security.

The challenge of food, water and energy insecurity, which received a high degree of international attention just two or three years ago, has not gone away, even if such issues now appear less prominently in the international headlines. Although world food prices dropped from their earlier peak, by the end of 2009, more than a billion people were threatened with starvation and hunger, especially in Africa.

An even greater number of people, approximately 1.4 billion, lack safe water. Meanwhile, energy demand is expected to increase by some 50 per cent in the next 20 years, most of it in the form of fossil fuels, a situation that will contribute to global warming. According to many analysts, the competition for scarce resources is playing an increasingly important role in provoking conflicts and human displacement, both within and between States.

More generally, the movement of people from one country and continent to another has continued to escalate. The world already has some 220 million international migrants, equivalent to the population of Brazil, the fifth most populous nation on earth; that figure seems certain to rise, even if States seek to obstruct or deter the arrival of foreign nationals.

THE DEMOGRAPHY OF DISPLACEMENT

At the beginning of 2009, there were more than 36 million people of concern to UNHCR (the highest figure on record), including some 10.4 million refugees. The number of people displaced within their own country as a result of conflict grew to an estimated 26 million, with 15.5 million of them benefiting from UNHCR protection and assistance.

Two-thirds of the world's refugees are to be found in developing countries, many of them in an arc of conflict and crisis that stretches from South-West

Asia through the Middle East to the Horn, Great Lakes and central regions of Africa. Almost three-quarters of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) assisted by UNHCR were to be found in this arc, as were the four largest IDP crises of 2009: the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen.

On a brighter note, it is hoped that the important new instrument on the protection of IDPs adopted by African Heads of State in Kampala, Uganda, at the African Union's 2009 Special Summit on Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons will be replicated by other regions.

HUMANITARIAN SPACE

In 2009, new pressures were placed on the humanitarian space which is required for the exercise of UNHCR's mandate. Armed conflicts were characterized by a proliferation of protagonists, including unruly armed forces and militia groups, which obstructed access to displaced and

process that has been fuelled by the movement of people who are struggling to live off the land and who are attracted by the better opportunities, goods and services that are perceived to be available in urban areas. Influxes of refugees and displaced people who have been obliged to abandon their homes by the threat of armed conflict, political violence, lawlessness and natural disasters have further compounded the phenomenon.

The issue of urban displacement has become a global phenomenon and a matter of growing concern for city authorities, governments, as well as humanitarian and development organizations. It places additional strains on scarce public services such as health and education, and may lead to increases in the price of basic needs such as food and accommodation. As a result, the potential for social tension, crime, communal violence and political instability is reinforced.

In response to this challenge, UNHCR issued a new policy on refugee

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vulnerable populations; systematically expropriated their assets; or sought to manipulate and undermine the activities of humanitarian organizations.

The year witnessed a growing determination to uphold traditional notions of State sovereignty, challenging the notion of the 'Responsibility to Protect', as endorsed by the United Nations at the Millennium Summit. At the same time, humanitarian organizations and personnel increasingly came under threat, triggering renewed efforts by UNHCR to examine the security situation in key operations and to formulate enhanced responses to the risks encountered by its personnel.

URBAN DISPLACEMENT

As indicated already, urbanization is one of the key trends of the 21st century. It is a

protection and solutions in urban areas in September 2009. The new policy emphasizes the fact that UNHCR's mandated responsibilities towards refugees are not affected by their location. It also recognizes that cities and towns are legitimate places for refugees and displaced populations to reside and to enjoy their basic human rights. The issue of urban displacement was also the theme of the 2009 High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges.

REFUGEE PROTECTION AND INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

While the issue of shrinking humanitarian space represented a major challenge to UNHCR in developing regions, shrinking asylum space, primarily but not exclusively in the world's most prosperous States, was a major concern for UNHCR in 2009.

Despite positive developments in asylum law and practice in certain jurisdictions, including a welcome emphasis on alternatives to the detention of asylum-seekers, the overall situation was characterized by greater

restrictions and fewer rights. A number of industrialized States limited access to their territories in ways that did not respect the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers under international and regional law. Some asylum systems recorded a refugee recognition rate of close to zero, even for asylum-seekers from war-torn countries.

DURABLE SOLUTIONS

Some 251,500 refugees voluntarily returned to their country of origin with UNHCR support in the course of the year, the lowest number in the last 20 years. Mass repatriation movements slowed as the security situations in Afghanistan, the DRC and Southern Sudan became less conducive to return and reintegration.

In terms of local integration, there were a few bright spots. The United Republic of Tanzania approved the citizenship applications of more than 155,000 of the approximately 163,000 Burundian refugees for whom it has agreed to consider naturalization.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) recognized that refugees from Member States are entitled to work, residency and other rights under the organization's freedom of movement protocol. Several thousand Sierra Leonean refugees in the Gambia were helped by UNHCR to access these entitlements, a model that is now being replicated elsewhere in the region.

With voluntary repatriation and local integration opportunities declining, there is a correspondingly greater demand for resettlement. In 2009, UNHCR submitted twice as many refugees for resettlement consideration as in 2006, and nearly four times the average number of referrals in the preceding decade.

PROTRACTED REFUGEE SITUATIONS

The inability of many refugees to find durable solutions to their plight compounded the problem of protracted refugee situations, an issue that formed the focus of the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges in December 2008.

In 2009, UNHCR followed up the Dialogue by formulating a Global Plan of Action on protracted refugee situations, consisting of several key elements: enhanced support to voluntary repatriation as the preferred solution; a revised education strategy, with an enrolment target of 95 per cent for primary education by the end of 2012; multi-year strategies for self-reliance; enhanced support to refugee-populated areas; the strategic use of resettlement; and an increased emphasis on partnerships with development partners.

STATELESSNESS

In 2009, UNHCR reinforced its recent efforts to address the scourge of statelessness, a problem that restricts the rights and opportunities available to millions of people throughout the world. A number of important breakthroughs were recorded in this respect, most notably in relation to the Urdu-speaking Biharis in Bangladesh as well as those who were left stateless following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

UNHCR worked with governments and civil society in a number of countries to survey and register stateless populations – an important first step towards providing them with long-term solutions. Increased information-sharing on nationality and documentation was undertaken in Côte d'Ivoire, while legal counselling was made available in the western Balkans, Iraq and Nepal. According to UNHCR estimates, some 2 million stateless people have been granted citizenship in the last two years. ■