Global forced displacement tops 50 million for first time in post-World War II era

A report released today by UNHCR shows that the number of refugees, asylum-seekers, and internally displaced people worldwide has, for the first time in the post-World War II era, exceeded 50 million people.

UNHCR’s annual Global Trends report, which is based on data compiled by governments, non-governmental partner organizations, and from the organization’s own records, shows 51.2 million people were forcibly displaced at the end of 2013, fully six million more than the 45.2 million reported in 2012.

This massive increase was driven mainly by the war in Syria, which at the end of last year had forced 2.5 million people into becoming refugees and made 6.5 million internally displaced. Major new displacement was also seen in Africa – notably in Central African Republic, and towards the end of 2013 in South Sudan too.

“We are seeing here the immense costs of not ending wars, of failing to resolve or prevent conflict,” said UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres. “Peace is today dangerously in deficit. Humanitarians can help as a palliative, but political solutions are vitally needed. Without this, the alarming levels of conflict and the mass suffering that is reflected in these figures will continue.”

The worldwide total of 51.2 million forcibly displaced represents a huge number of people in need of help, with implications both for foreign aid budgets in the world’s donor nations and the absorption and hosting capacities of countries on the front lines of refugee crises.

“The international community has to overcome its differences and find solutions to the conflicts of today in South Sudan, Syria, Central African Republic and elsewhere. Non-traditional donors need to step up alongside traditional donors. As many people are forcibly displaced today as the entire populations of medium-to-large countries such as Colombia or Spain, South Africa or South Korea,” said Guterres.

Refugees

Displacement data in the Global Trends report covers three groups – refugees, asylum-seekers, and the internally displaced. Among these, refugee numbers amounted to 16.7 million people worldwide, 11.7 million of whom are under UNHCR’s care and the remainder registered with our
sister organization, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine. These totals alone are the highest UNHCR has seen since 2001. In addition, more than half of the refugees under UNHCR’s care (6.3 million) had at end 2013 been in exile for more than five years.

Overall, the biggest refugee populations under UNHCR care and by source country are Afghans, Syrians and Somalis – together accounting for more than half of the global refugee total. Pakistan, Iran and Lebanon, meanwhile, hosted more refugees than other countries.

By region, Asia and the Pacific had the largest refugee population overall at 3.5 million people. Sub-Saharan Africa had 2.9 million people, while the Middle East and North Africa had 2.6 million.

Asylum Seekers

In addition to refugees, 2013 saw 1.1 million people submitting applications for asylum, the majority of these in developed countries (Germany in 2013 became the largest single recipient of new asylum claims). A record 25,300 asylum applications were from children who were separated from or unaccompanied by parents. Syrians lodged 64,300 claims, more than any other nationality, followed by asylum seekers from Democratic Republic of the Congo (60,400) and Myanmar (57,400).

Internal Displacement

Internal displacement – meaning people forced to flee their homes but still in their own country – amounted to a record 33.3 million people, accounting to the largest increase of any group in the Global Trends report. For UNHCR and other humanitarian actors, helping these people represents a special challenge as many are in conflict zones, where getting to aid to them is difficult and where they lack the international protection norms afforded to refugees.

Solutions for the individual

Part of UNHCR’s work is finding long-term solutions for people who become forcibly displaced. Where possible this is through voluntary return, but other possibilities include local integration or resettlement in third countries. The year 2013 saw the fourth lowest level of refugee returns in almost a quarter century – 414,600 people. Some 98,400 refugees were resettled in 21 countries. Full worldwide data on local integration and returns of internally displaced people was not available for inclusion in the report, although 1.4 million internally displaced people returned home in countries where UNHCR is operational with IDPs.

Statelessness

The worldwide population of stateless people is not included in the figure of 51.2 million forcibly displaced people (since being stateless doesn’t necessarily correlate to being displaced).
Statelessness remains hard to quantify with precision, both because of the inherent difficulties governments and UNHCR have in recording people who lack citizenship and related documentation, and because some countries do not gather data on populations they do not consider as their citizens. For 2013, UNHCR’s offices worldwide reported a figure of almost 3.5 million stateless people, however this is about a third of the number of people estimated to be stateless globally.

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The full report and accompanying multimedia materials may be downloaded at http://unhcr.org/trends2013/

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