

# History Research Center

## refugees

*Refugees* are defined as people who are forced to leave their homes in order to seek safety or refuge elsewhere. Many factors can lead to a person becoming a refugee, but conflict, persecution, economic deprivation, natural disaster, and harsh living and working conditions are among the major causes. The United Nations defines the term *refugees* more narrowly as "persons who are outside their country and cannot return owing to a well-founded fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group."

At the beginning of 2002, the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#) (UNHCR) estimated that there were more than 12 million refugees in the world. The refugee population has remained relatively stable for two decades. (In 1981 there were an estimated 10 million refugees.) Asia has played host to nearly 50 percent of the world's refugee population; Africa and Europe have offered sanctuary to just over 20 percent. Refugees are accorded certain protections under international law that are not granted to [internally displaced persons](#) (IDPs) who have not crossed international borders. (Internally displaced persons are described by the UN as "persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular, as a result of, or in order to avoid the effects of, armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border." There are an estimated 20–25 million IDPs in the world, far greater than the number of refugees.) International law requires governments to grant asylum to refugees who have a legitimate fear of persecution if they are returned to their homelands. In principle, states are obliged to provide shelter, food, and other vital resources to refugees and are prohibited from repatriating them so long as conditions remain unsafe in their countries of origin.

For all intents and purposes, many refugees have become permanent inhabitants of their host countries; thousands of Afghans, for instance, remain in refugee camps in Pakistan, having taken refuge there in the 1980s after the Soviet invasion of their country. There are thought to be over 3.5 million Afghan refugees living abroad—the largest refugee population in the world—although some have begun to return since the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001. New refugee populations have been created (or else prevented from returning home) in recent years due to conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Angola, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Each of these conflict areas has added another 400,000 refugees to the total. A potential refugee crisis is brewing as a result of economic and political instability in Communist North Korea; many desperate North Koreans have tried to find refuge in China and Russia in the hope of eventually finding asylum in South Korea, the United States, or elsewhere. The Western Hemisphere has seen large influxes of refugees fleeing political oppression and destitution in Cuba and Haiti. The emergence of a refugee problem is often the first signal the world has of political dislocation in the country from which refugees are fleeing. Europe has also begun to grapple with a tide of African and central Asian refugees who risk their lives to make the treacherous sea crossing.

Like the United States, European countries have become increasingly restrictive and more discriminating about according refugee status. Ideas have been floated to "outsource" the refugee problem by establishing temporary havens outside of Europe for asylum seekers; one such zone, for instance, was proposed for Libya to prevent refugees from sub-Saharan countries from reaching European shores. In the United States, refugees from Haiti are at risk of being repatriated because they are deemed to be economic refugees seeking jobs rather than people who fear political violence. Cuban refugees, on the other hand, are granted refugee status under a program called humanitarian parole. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the leading international agency for refugee issues, has promoted three ways to protect refugees: voluntary repatriation, settlement in the host country, and third-country resettlement.

### Further Information

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