

Overview of the Global Humanitarian and Displacement Crisis

Humanitarian and displacement crises worldwide have become significantly worse in the past five years. The ongoing Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has exacerbated humanitarian need. In addition, the lockdowns and economic recession caused by the pandemic created far-reaching secondary impacts such as increased food insecurity, gender-based violence, and poverty, and reduced access to education and health. The United Nations (U.N.) anticipates that globally more than 238 million people will require humanitarian assistance and protection due to conflict, disaster, and the pandemic in 2021 (a near 30% increase over 2020). The United States is the single largest humanitarian and emergency food assistance donor, consistently providing nearly one-third of total assistance worldwide (more than \$9.6 billion in FY2021, excluding American Relief Plan Act funds).

Types of Crises and Affected Populations

As of late 2020 (latest global data available), more than 82.4 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide due to armed conflict, widespread or indiscriminate violence, or human rights violations. According to the United Nations, those displaced included 26.4 million refugees, 4.1 million asylum seekers, 48 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and 3.9 million Venezuelans displaced abroad. An estimated 10 million people remained stateless. (See definitions of key populations of concern below.)

Key Populations of Concern

Asylum-seekers, who flee their home country, seek sanctuary in another state where they apply for asylum (i.e., the right to be recognized as a refugee). They may receive legal protection and assistance while their formal status is determined.

Refugees, who have fled their country of origin because of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or membership in a particular social or political group. Refugees are unwilling or unable to avail themselves of the protection of their home government due to fears of persecution. Once granted refugee status, a person has certain rights and protections under international law.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), who have been forced from their homes, often for many of the same reasons as refugees, but have not crossed an international border.

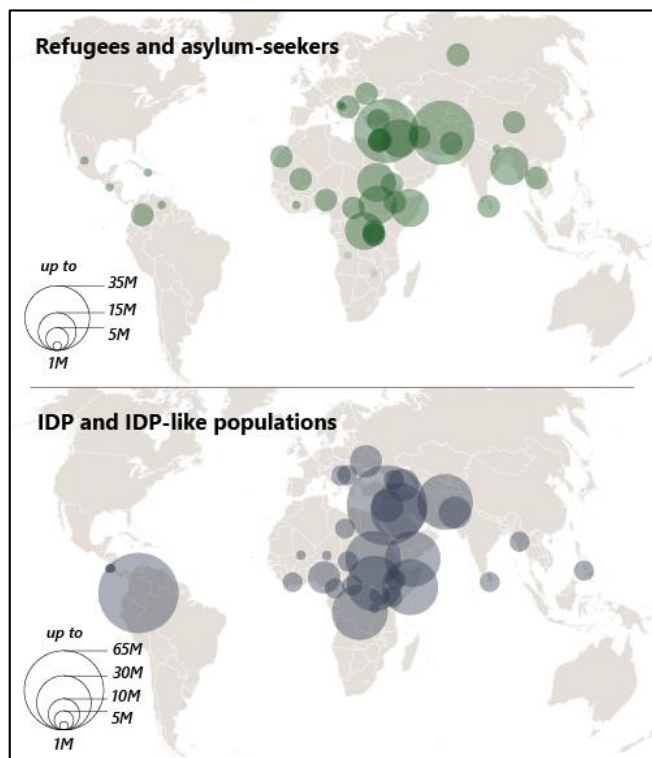
Stateless persons, who are not considered to be citizens of any state under national laws.

Vulnerable migrants, who are often forced to flee circumstances in their country of origin (such as generalized violence, food insecurity, and environmental change) but do not qualify as refugees.

Natural disasters and climate-related impacts further affect millions of people a year. They often require urgent and prolonged assistance due to sudden events (such as earthquakes or storms) or protracted ones (like drought conditions). On average, disasters displace 26 million people annually.

Some populations move voluntarily, while others have to flee. Economic migrants, who often leave poverty and unemployment to seek better livelihood opportunities or family reunification, numbered approximately 281 million in 2020 (roughly 3.6% of the world's population). Refugees and others forcibly displaced, including vulnerable migrants, often face a different set of circumstances. They are forced to leave their homes for reasons such as ethnic strife, violence, human rights violations, or natural disasters. In 2020, more than two-thirds (68%) of all refugees and Venezuelans displaced abroad came from five countries (the same reported in 2019): Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Burma. (See **Figure 1** for worldwide snapshot of forced displacement.)

Figure 1. Refugees/Asylum Seekers and IDPs



Source: Created by CRS using global data available from UNHCR.

Notes: Smallest map values begin at 470,000.

U.S. Policy

The United States is a major contributor to international humanitarian relief efforts, with funding provided through the U.S. Agency for International Development, the

Department of State, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Agriculture. On a bipartisan basis, Congress has consistently supported humanitarian efforts as a means of responding in the short- and long-term to natural disasters and conflict-induced crises, mitigating humanitarian impacts, and promoting a U.S. presence. It generally gives the President broad authority on humanitarian issues and flexibility to respond to disasters with a wide range of assistance. In a long-standing trend across Administrations, it typically funds global humanitarian efforts at appropriation levels well above the budget request through established global humanitarian and emergency food accounts in annual State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs and other appropriations bills. In practice, the provision of U.S. humanitarian assistance is typically case- and time-specific and includes assistance through humanitarian partners and multilateral mechanisms. These efforts are based on need and include supporting protection activities for vulnerable populations and countries and communities hosting the displaced, encouraging donor contributions, and building response capacity. The Biden Administration's budget request for FY2022 aims to strengthen U.S. global humanitarian leadership and calls for \$10.1 billion in humanitarian assistance to support displaced and vulnerable persons worldwide.

International Humanitarian Compacts

Building on several 2016 international humanitarian meetings, in 2018, U.N. member states negotiated two global compacts, which were adopted under separate processes: the **Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM)** and the **Global Compact on Refugees (GCR)**. The United States ended its participation in the GCM in December 2017 and in the GCR in November 2018.

Selected Issues and Challenges

COVID-19. COVID-19 added a complicated layer to the global humanitarian landscape in 2020. The conditions in which vulnerable, displaced populations live make them particularly susceptible to coronavirus spread and present additional challenges for humanitarian response and virus containment. COVID-19 cases and deaths in humanitarian and conflict settings are likely underreported, and testing remains limited and uneven. Pandemic restrictions continue to affect the mobility of vulnerable populations and limit humanitarian access and operations (such as delivery of goods and services and activities of personnel in the field). Experts predict barriers for displaced populations and vulnerable migrants to access vaccines. Four specific sectors emerged as priorities during the pandemic: severe food insecurity, urgent health care access and services, protection of women and girls amid increases in the incidence of gender-based violence, and sustained access to education for displaced children and youth. In addition, refugee returns to countries of origin and refugee resettlement, which declined due to COVID-19, are important parts of the long-term solution to displacement.

Emergence of New Crises and Underfunding. A major challenge facing the humanitarian community is the emergence of new crises (including the pandemic), which means lifesaving assistance and protection activities take

precedence over long-term development and the search for durable solutions. Chronic underfunding of existing U.N. and other humanitarian appeals means that urgent needs frequently outpace available budgets for operations. The 2021 revised U.N. global humanitarian appeal for \$36.1 billion is the highest ever and aims to help populations in 56 countries meet basic needs such as food, water, shelter, and medical services, including those related to COVID-19.

Displacement and Host Countries. Economic migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, trafficked persons, and unaccompanied children, usually in a mix of nationalities or ethnic groups, may travel the same routes together. Many of these individuals lack required documentation, and may use unauthorized border crossings, often with the assistance of smugglers. An individual's decision to move is based on a complex mix of factors. Even if they do not qualify as refugees, experts say a significant number of those fleeing may need humanitarian assistance, international protection, and opportunities to regularize their status. However, states concerned about the economic burden of those seeking help and the potential security issues resulting from uncontrolled migration (raised in part because of the threat of terrorism) argue for stricter enforcement of asylum and immigration policies.

Protracted Displacement. Refugees and IDPs may be separated from their homes for long periods, particularly in instances of large-scale, protracted crises or ongoing-armed conflicts where political solutions prove elusive. The global population of those forcibly displaced increased by 75% in the past two decades, and on average, a person is displaced as a refugee for 20 years. Displaced populations are often not confined to camps, placing a heavy burden on governments and host communities. National governments carry primary responsibility for all displaced people in their territory; however, in many cases they are unable or unwilling to fulfill this obligation, complicating the humanitarian response. In 2020, the countries with the largest populations of IDPs were the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Syria, and Sudan. The top countries hosting refugees included Turkey, Colombia, Pakistan, and Uganda. Less than 1% of global refugees are resettled each year.

Operational Constraints and Access. Displaced populations require protection, the basis of which may be found in international humanitarian law (IHL) and reflected in humanitarian assistance provided by a variety of actors and organizations. Local, national, and regional authorities have a role in the provision of assistance, law enforcement, and access control. Systematic violations of human rights and IHL have been widespread in some conflicts, resulting in high levels of civilian casualties, exposure to explosive hazards, and indiscriminate attacks. This has severely constrained national and international humanitarian efforts, hindering aid delivery or restricting access altogether, while threatening the safety of humanitarian personnel and the populations they aim to assist and protect.

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