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Refugees in today's world

Who is a refugee?

It seems obvious to us: a refugee is someone who is fleeing serious danger back home - and we usually do not think about what kind of danger that might be. It could be war, political persecution, famine, economic crises or natural disasters.

Under international law, however, the word refugee has a very precise meaning. It describes someone who is forced to flee home and country, escapes to another country and is recognised as a refugee under international law by the government of the new country. The government of the new country has to decide whether the person has fled or is unable to return *home owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.*

A person who has fled from his or her home country and is seeking to be recognised as a refugee under the asylum laws in the new country, is called an *asylum seeker*.

Where does the refugee definition come from?

The definition of a refugee and how countries are meant to treat refugees are outlined in the *1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees* and the *1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees*. The Convention was the first international law to define refugees in more general terms - previous provisions only catered for specific groups. The Convention was drafted because of the millions of people who became refugees in Europe during the Second World War and the Cold War era that followed.

Initially, the Convention was limited to European refugees only. As new refugee producing situations emerged worldwide, the Protocol was added to expand refugee protection to cover anybody. At least 134 states have signed up to both. Of those, four have signed only the Convention, and four have signed only the Protocol - countries can sign either because both texts, although linked, they are separate documents, equally binding to protect refugees.

What are the criteria that refugees have to meet?

The refugee definition is very strict, and asylum seekers have to prove that they meet all of the following criteria in order to be given refugee status. They must

- be outside their country of origin, or outside the country where they usually live;
- be at genuine risk and in fear of serious harm;
- prove their own government does not want or is failing to protect them from harm;

- prove that their fear is linked to their civil, political, or social status (for example, they are being persecuted by the state because they are affiliated to an opposition political party, or because they are of different ethnic origin);
- need and deserve protection.

Why do people flee?

People flee from their homes and become refugees for many different reasons, such as war between countries, civil war, persecution of minority ethnic groups or religious groups, or of members of political organisations. People are also persecuted because they belong to a distinct social group, such as gay men and lesbians. In some countries, women who refuse to conform to the dress code in their country are targeted.

Who are internally displaced people?

There are large numbers of people who have fled from their homes in fear of their lives - yet they are not recognised as refugees. They may, for example, have left their homes because of war or human rights abuses, but have not crossed the borders of their country. People in such a situation are called internally displaced people.

Of course, there are also those people who have fled their country in fear of persecution but, for different reasons, do not in the end up applying for protection status in a developed country. They may simply move to another country and stay there without permission. Or they may be able to stay legally in another country because they have relatives or are offered work there.

Refugees: facts and figures

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the largest international refugee organisation responsible for the protection of refugees worldwide, there were more than 20 million people worldwide who were in need of protection in 2001. This includes an estimated 6.3 million internally displaced people. Of the 20 million people of concern to UNHCR, about 12 million are *refugees* as defined by the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. About 2.2 million, or 11 per cent of those, are refugees in Europe.

In 2001, the UK received 71,365 new asylum applications – less than 0.01 per cent of the global refugee population and 0.03 per cent of the refugee population in Europe. The UK has signed both the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol. This means that the UK recognises that people whose applications for asylum are found to meet the Convention definition are refugees. Refugees in the UK are given refugee status, which means they have the same rights as other UK citizens and are allowed to remain in the UK indefinitely.

For further information about the work of the Refugee Council and other issues affecting asylum seekers and refugees, please visit our website at:
www.refugeecouncil.org.uk