

Refugee experience



Background Briefs
Development issues and efforts

The issue

Imagine waking up at night and having to run for your life because soldiers are attacking your home. You can take nothing with you. You run and hide to save your own life. You leave behind everything that is important to you—your family, home, friends and possessions. You survive by eating leaves until you reach a camp where others like yourself have found some safety. Most of us cannot imagine how frightening this would be.

People run for their lives for many reasons. They may be running from oppression or persecution. They may be running because a rival group is hunting them. Perhaps they are running from human rights violations. But the main reason people run for their lives is war.

Two groups of people leave their homes to look for safety. Refugees are people who are fleeing to another country for safety. Internally displaced persons are people who seek safer places in another part of their own country. Africa and Asia are the most severely affected, but there are refugees in most areas around the world.

Currently, there are about 37 wars or armed conflicts in various places around the world. As a result, there are about 12 million refugees seeking safety; 39 percent of these people are children under the age of 18. In addition, there are six million displaced children.

Children and their families who reach a refugee camp may still face dangers. The

camps are overcrowded and living conditions are terrible. Survival is often a daily struggle. Sometimes there is not enough food and many children die of hunger. There is often a lack of health care and people die of diseases that could easily be treated.

Child refugees often face other dangers as well. Many of them have no one to protect them since they may have lost or been separated from their parents. Rebel or government armies may abduct children to serve as child soldiers. Other adults may sexually assault or exploit them. They may face physical abuse.

Rarely is there any kind of schooling in a refugee camp, yet the key to a better future is education beyond Grade 6. Child refugees often are not able to gain the skills they need in their future lives.

Sometimes refugees do not have a chance to move to another country. They end up staying in the camps for many years. Some are lucky enough to return home after many years. Others are born in a refugee camp and live their whole lives there.

The road to providing for refugees

In 1951, the United Nations (UN) passed a convention guaranteeing the most basic parts of a refugee's life. It was an international agreement that laid out a set of human rights



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for refugees. It recognized the international scope of the problem and the need for international cooperation. As of October 2002, 141 countries had ratified the Refugee Convention. While there are international laws in place to protect refugees, their protection depends upon two major things.

The first is the willingness of other countries to take in refugees. When refugees flee their home country, they seek asylum in a country where they believe they will be safe. If the receiving country refuses to accept them, the refugees are sent back to their home country where they may be tortured, imprisoned or killed.

The second is the willingness of other countries to provide money to support the international organizations that work to help refugees. Although the UN Refugee Convention set out the need for countries to share the burden of caring for refugees, there are always far more refugees than money to look after them.

Projects to assist refugees

Canada is a strong supporter for the rights and well-being of refugees. The Canadian government helps refugees through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). CIDA supports international organizations such as the UN and the Red Cross. It sends food and medicine to refugee camps and contributes to programs that reunite refugee children with their families.

Feeding refugees from Liberia and Sierra Leone: More than 500,000 refugees from these two countries fled to the forest region of Guinea. CIDA, working with a number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), supplied supplemental food to the refugees. They distributed 250 metric tonnes (t) of

rice, 25 t of edible oil and 50 t of lentils to approximately 65 000 refugees each month,

Improving living conditions for Palestinian refugees: CIDA worked with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) to improve the living conditions for Palestinian refugees in two refugee camps in Syria. CIDA's contribution helped UNRWA develop roads, public lighting and common green spaces. UNRWA constructed housing for Palestinian refugees who came from another camp. The NGO built a total of 300 new homes to accommodate 1275 refugees. They also built a new kindergarten and community centre that improved the quality of life for Palestinian refugees.

Meeting the basic needs of refugees in Bangladesh: Approximately 228 000 refugees fled their homes in northern Myanmar (Burma) to seek safety in Bangladesh. In spite of improvements in recent years, living conditions for the refugees do not meet even minimum international standards. CIDA contributed funds to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to help meet the refugee's basic needs. UNHCR is providing health care, education, nutrition and shelter while working toward a more permanent solution.

Find more information about:

- CIDA's aid for Afghan refugees at <http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/acdi-cida/acdi-cida.nsf/eng/REN-218132627-PN6>
- CIDA's humanitarian work in Sudan at <http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/sudan>
- Somalia refugees fleeing the drought at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/international-community-must-help-shoulder-somalia-refugee-burden-2011-07-15>.



Canadian International Development Agency Agence canadienne de développement international

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