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On 60th anniversary, UN refugee agency highlights new causes of displacement



Vietnamese boat people arriving in Malaysia in 1978. Helping refugees from Vietnam was one of the major challenges in UNHCR's first 60 years

14 December 2010 – The head of the United Nations refugee agency today urged the international community to come up with ways of responding to the displacement of people as a result of evolving circumstances that did not exist when the organization was founded or when treaties on refugees were created.

“UNHCR [UN High Commissioner for Refugees] traditionally was supporting refugees, people that would cross a border because of a conflict or persecution,” said António Guterres, the High Commissioner for Refugees, in a speech in Geneva to mark the agency’s [60th anniversary](#).

“But now we see that more and more people are crossing borders because of extreme poverty, because of the impact of climate change, [and] because of their interrelation with conflict. So there are new patterns of forced displacement and the international community needs to be able to tackle those challenges,” Mr. Guterres said.

[UNHCR](#) was created on 14 December 1950 by the UN General Assembly. Its original purpose was to address the post-World War II refugee situation in Europe, but its work quickly expanded. By 1956 it was facing its first major international emergency with the outpouring of refugees when Soviet forces crushed the Hungarian Revolution.

In the 1960s, the forces unleashed by the decolonization of Africa resulted in numerous refugee crises. Over the following two decades, UNHCR was called on to help in the displacement crises in Asia and Latin America.

The agency now responds to major displacement situations around the world. Globally, the combined population of refugees, internally displaced people and asylum-seekers has swelled to 43 million people – most of them under UNHCR's care.

Mr. Guterres pointed to displacement of people from Somalia and Afghanistan as examples of 21st century refugee problems that transcend multiple borders, and which require new international solutions. He also highlighted the phenomenon of statelessness, which he said calls for special attention.

UNHCR has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize twice. Despite its achievements to date, Mr. Guterres said the focus should be on the new challenges.

“I think it is very important to recognize that the actions of UNHCR has represented for many people life instead of death, home instead of total deprivation, health instead of a disease that can even represent the risk to die, protection against the most dramatic violations of human rights,” he said.

“We have many reasons to be proud, but we also have much more reason to be concerned with the challenges we face at the present moment, and recognizing that unfortunately the root causes of conflict and displacement are not being eliminated and the next few years will be as challenging as the past,” Mr. Guterres added.

UNHCR's 60th anniversary year coincides with several related occasions, including the 60th anniversary of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees on 28 July, the 50th anniversary of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness on 30 August, and the 150th anniversary of the birth of Fridtjof Nansen, the first League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees on 10 October.

The agency will use the occasions to advocate for the strengthening of the international legal framework for dealing with the world's statelessness and displaced, including through increased State accessions to the key refugee and statelessness conventions.

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