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As key global treaty turns 60, UN urges better refugee protection measures



Antonio Guterres, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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A top United Nations official today called for innovative ways to protect millions of uprooted people amid an environment where forced displacement has become increasingly complex and developing countries are struggling to host the large majority of the world's refugees.

“We need protection-sensitive borders so those in fear for their lives or freedom continue to find it,” UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres said on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

“At the same time we need to find innovative ways to fill the increasingly clear gaps in the international protection system and to promote the values of tolerance and inclusion rather than fear and suspicion,” [said](#) Mr. Guterres.

The Convention, which was formally adopted on 28 July 1951 to resolve the refugee problem in Europe after the Second World War, provides a definition of who qualifies as a refugee – a person with a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion – and spells out the rights and obligations between host countries and refugees.

It forms the legal foundation on which the work of the agency headed by Mr. Guterres, known as UNHCR, is based.

While the Convention remains the cornerstone of refugee protection, having adapted and endured through six decades of massive changes, it faces “unprecedented” challenges today, according to the Geneva-based agency.

“The causes of forced displacement are multiplying,” Mr. Guterres said. “People are uprooted not just by conflict and persecution, but also by extreme poverty and the impact of climate change. These factors are increasingly inter-related.”

UNHCR noted that in Somalia, more than 170,000 people have fled into neighbouring countries since January, citing famine, drought and insecurity as reasons for leaving. Up to one million others have left embattled Libya, among them refugees and asylum-seekers, but also economic migrants seeking a better life elsewhere.

At the same time, the agency pointed out that four fifths of the world’s refugees live in developing countries, and the recent crises in Somalia, Libya and Côte d’Ivoire have added to this burden.

Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti are hosting nearly 450,000 Somali refugees who have fled their homeland, while Tunisia and Egypt have received the bulk of the exodus from Libya. In addition, Liberia – which is still recovering from its own civil war – provides refuge to over 150,000 Ivorians who fled post-election violence and ongoing insecurity in their home country.

By comparison, the 27 countries of the European Union (EU) together received just over 243,000 asylum applications last year, or about 29 per cent of the total worldwide.

“Europe owes it to these people, to all refugees, and to itself to uphold the values of the 1951 Refugee Convention,” the High Commissioner said, noting that the EU has the capacity to enlarge its share of responsibility for refugees and asylum-seekers.

“At present, a truly common system remains elusive, as significant differences persist among Member States in their reception and treatment of asylum-seekers. The 60th anniversary of the Refugee Convention, we hope, will give impetus to the establishment of a true common European asylum system,” he stated.

“Europe could also do more to resettle refugees,” he added, referring to the process through which refugees in one country, usually in the developing world, are permanently relocated to new countries, usually in the developed world.

In December, UNHCR will convene a ministerial meeting of States Parties to the 1951 Convention at which they will be able to reaffirm their commitment to the treaty as the key instrument of refugee protection and pledge concrete actions to resolve refugee and statelessness problems.

The meeting will also seek ways forward on protection gaps in the fast-changing environment of forced displacement, the agency stated.

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