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UN urges better protection for world's forcibly displaced, stateless people



High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres addresses landmark meeting on the displaced and stateless

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The United Nations refugee chief today called on the international community to assume its shared duty to protect and assist millions of forcibly displaced and stateless people around the world, as he opened the largest-ever [conference](#) on the issue in Geneva.

The two-day forum, organized by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)), brings together government officials from almost 150 countries and marks the 60th anniversary of the

UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 50th anniversary of the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.

“This is a unique opportunity for us all to come together to discuss and shape the evolution of the international protection system over the next decade,” High Commissioner António Guterres [told](#) the meeting.

“What I am asking is for all of us to assume our shared duty. To reaffirm and recommit to the values of international protection. To face the new challenges of forced displacement, and find concrete and constructive ways to address them collectively.”

Mr. Guterres noted that dramatic events have forced hundreds of thousands of people to seek refuge across borders in 2011. More than three quarters of a million people became refugees, following upheaval and conflict in Africa and the Middle East.

Global forced displacement figures already stood at a 15-year high at the end of 2010, with 43.7 million people uprooted by conflict and persecution worldwide. Recent events indicate that this number is likely to rise again by the end of the year. The number of stateless people is estimated to be at least 12 million.

All of this, said Mr. Guterres, demonstrates why it is important to re-engage with and recommit to the core values underpinning the entire system of international protection – tolerance, solidarity and respect for human rights and dignity.

The UN refugee chief warned that a succession of political crises and the global economic downturn were contributing to a significantly more challenging environment for protecting people who are forced to flee their homes.

He also noted that some people are playing on public uncertainty and anxiety to promote xenophobia.

“Populist politicians and irresponsible elements of the media exploit feelings of fear and insecurity to scapegoat foreigners, try to force the adoption of restrictive policies, and actively spread racist and xenophobic sentiments.”

While States have the right to define their own immigration policies, they should do so in respect for human dignity and basic rights, he stated.

“All this can be done, and needs to be done, in ways that ensure protection is granted to those who need it,” Mr. Guterres stressed. “This means guaranteeing their access to territory, fair treatment of their asylum claims, and adequate integration policies that contribute to social harmony.”

The High Commissioner also highlighted four challenges to providing the kind of protection that the Refugee Convention aspired to: failures of States to live up to their treaty obligations; disproportionate burdens for developing countries, who host 80 per cent of the world’s refugees; the millions of refugees left stranded in protracted displacement limbo; and the complicating

effects of factors such as population growth, and food and water insecurity. In addition, climate change was increasingly exacerbating other drivers of forced displacement, he said.

Mr. Guterres called on States to look at ways to strengthen their own protection mechanisms for the displaced and stateless. He also announced his agency's commitment to do more to fight sexual and gender-based violence, with a particular focus on women and girls.

The UN refugee agency was created in December 1950, initially as a response to displacement in Europe in the wake of the Second World War. The 1951 UN Refugee Convention came into effect about a few months later and has since become one of the most widely accepted international human rights instruments – responsible for saving millions of refugee lives.

In a video [message](#), [Secretary-General](#) Ban Ki-moon called the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1961 Statelessness Convention “life-saving treaties” that have helped millions around the world.

They are based, he said, on a simple principle that is as true today as ever: the principle that people should never be forced into harm's way.

“Today you have a chance to help us reduce statelessness, and assist refugees. Today you can pledge your support for UNHCR,” he stated. “Your contributions will help people far from their home countries, struggling against injustice, marginalization and fear.”

The conference is expected to see governments making a number of commitments to better standards of national and international protection for the forcibly displaced and stateless. Several countries are expected to formally accede to one of the statelessness conventions during the course of the forum, and a final communiqué will be issued tomorrow.

News Tracker: past stories on this issue

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