

## **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees**

The UNHCR, now referred to as the UN Refugee Agency, was established in 1950 with the mandate “to lead and co-ordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide.” Its mandate has since been expanded, officially, to help stateless people, and, unofficially, to help internally displaced people (IDP’s). The UNHCR currently works in 110 countries, assisting around 34 million people forced from their homes due to conflict or natural disaster.

The guiding documents of the UNHCR include the *1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees* and the *1949 Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. The Convention declares that the responsibility to care for refugees falls on the host country, though most nations with high refugee populations have difficulty providing the necessities for their uninvited guests. According to the Convention, a refugee is someone who, “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.” By the 1951 Convention, the option to return home, remain in the new country, or resettle in a third country is given to the refugees; in other words, they cannot be forced to repatriate if they have any reason to fear returning to their nation of origin.

IDP’s, like refugees, may have fled from conflict, or they may have been forced to relocate within their own countries due to natural disaster, as was the case after Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in May 2008. Contrary to refugees, they have not crossed any international border, and are therefore not covered by the 1951 Convention. Instead, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has published the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, which is quite analogous to the 1951 Convention. Along with this document, an inter-agency global cluster system was established in December 2005 to fulfill the needs of a growing global IDP population. The cluster approach designates leaders at both an international and local level in eleven different sectors, such as shelter, sanitation, logistics, and education. The UNHCR heads the protection, camp management, and emergency shelter clusters, and the agency also participates heavily in those clusters it does not lead. Currently, however, the UNHCR only has the capacity to care for 14.4 of the 26 million IDP’s worldwide.

The UNHCR works to assist refugees and IDP’s in several capacities. The agency is primarily responsible for the protection of refugees. To this end, it ensures that refugees are not involuntarily repatriated while there is still reason for them to fear persecution at home. The UNHCR also attempts to find solutions to the problems faced by refugees and IDP’s, which vary depending on the situation. For refugees for whom repatriation is impossible, the UNHCR helps them integrate into the country of asylum or a third country. IDP’s are disadvantaged in that they rarely have the option to resettle to another country and are often forced to remain in IDP camps for extended periods of time. The agency also plays a major role in coordinating and implementing emergency relief efforts when a disaster or conflict first occurs. After basic needs are taken care of, UNHCR aims to assure that refugee children are educated and that those in need of psychological counseling are helped.

### **Topic I: Improving Long Term Living Conditions in IDP and Refugee Camps**

#### ***Overview***

During establishment of IDP and refugee camps, the primary concern of the UNHCR is helping the displaced survive. Within the first 72 hours after an emergency, the UNHCR distributes necessities like tents, blankets, water treatment kits, and food aid; it also immediately establishes emergency clinics and begins registering the displaced people. Quickly thereafter, tent schools are created or children are

enrolled in local schools. The UNHCR also ensures that individuals who might have experienced a traumatic event are provided counseling in a timely manner.

Though a refugee or IDP situation is bound to be chaotic by nature, the UNHCR is typically successful at ensuring that those displaced by violence or nature are able to survive in a new environment. However, once survival is ensured, the quality of life of those living in refugee and IDP camps is slow to improve. There are roughly 10.5 million refugees and 26 million IDP's worldwide, and individuals are typically displaced at a higher rate than they are able to return home. International relief aid is short-lived; the industrialized world generally provides assistance for a specific situation only until a new situation arises. In the meantime, the forgotten displaced remain in the camps, no longer receiving basic necessities on a regular basis.

The UNHCR's Gimme Shelter Campaign, launched in December 2008, urges individuals to donate funds to supply refugees with emergency relief items such as tents, heating stoves, and wells. However, with the current financial crisis, it is unlikely that the UNHCR will have much additional funding to improve the living conditions at existing IDP and refugee camps. Instead, practical and cost-effective solutions should be implemented to ensure that those living in camps do not suffer unnecessarily. Shelter and employment, as discussed below, are only two of the issues facing refugee and IDP camps in the long-term. Improvements to a variety of other sectors, including public health, security, and water/sanitation would also be quite beneficial.

### *Shelter*

As a co-leader of the emergency shelter cluster, the UNHCR makes every effort to ensure that tents, plastic sheeting, and bed mats are available to those in need when conflict first strikes. In fact, the agency's Supply Management Service, located in Budapest, has the responsibility of stockpiling enough tents to respond to an emergency affecting up to 250,000 people. However, years after refugee and IDP camps are established, the vast majority of individuals still reside in tents, many of which are no longer in good condition and offer little protection from the environment. Despite the notion that refugee situations are temporary, many individuals will spend years and even decades within the confines of a refugee or IDP camp. The UNHCR has several initiatives to provide more permanent housing in protracted refugee situations, often using the IDP's or refugees as the source of labor to provide temporary employment. However, funding for such programs is incredibly limited, as the majority of international relief aid goes to the most pressing emergencies.

### *Employment*

Once refugee camps are established, there may be very few activities for adults to participate in. The camp may have no internal economy, and residents may be isolated from participating in local markets by geographic distance, security, or xenophobic legislation. In addition to absolute poverty, the situation can breed many social issues, as previously employed adults suddenly find themselves with nothing to occupy their time and no income. In Syria, for instance, Iraqi refugees cannot legally gain employment; many girls and women turn to prostitution in order to support their families. Drug abuse and alcoholism are also common problems resulting, at least in part, from the high rates of unemployment in refugee camps. Furthermore, the refugee lifestyle can cause depression, as was the case among Bhutanese refugees in Nepal in 2000. An aid worker for the Bhutanese camps sited "monotony in life and unemployment, as well as dependence on aid with no freedom to earn a livelihood" as the major factors leading to depression among the Bhutanese refugees.

The UNHCR has begun income-generating projects in several locations worldwide. In Colombia, a new initiative by the agency provided 120 particularly vulnerable IDP's with supplies, such as sewing

machines, to start small businesses. Still, the great majority of IDP's and refugees do not benefit from such programs. In order to help relieve the poverty faced by refugees and IDP's and to provide something constructive to occupy their time, income-generating initiatives should be expanded to as many refugees and IDP's as possible.

### ***Things to Consider***

When preparing for the committee, consider how refugee and IDP issues relate to the country you're representing. What affect do refugees and IDP's have on your state's economy and political stability? Do nationals of your country reside in other countries as refugees? If so, what are your relationships with the states hosting your nationals? Does your country host refugees, and, if so, what issues are they causing within your nation's borders? Some countries provide the same humanitarian benefits to IDP's as refugees, while others refuse to recognize their status as displaced persons. If you're representing an industrialized country, what is your country's policy regarding humanitarian aid and/or intervention in refugee situations?

Regarding shelter and employment, what are living standards like in the country you're representing? Do refugees and IDP's in your country live in comparable conditions to average citizens? What issues do refugees and IDP's face within your borders? If your country has IDP or refugee camps, are they secured and closed, or can residents move freely into the surrounding community? Consider trends in your country's policies; for instance, how supportive is your country of the UNDP? What percentage of GDP does your government put towards social programs? What kind of campaigns and legislation does your country have to fight prostitution, alcohol abuse, etc.?

Most importantly, once you've finished the background research on your country, consider global solutions to the issue that can be supported by the country you're representing. Funding is always a major problem for the UN, and it should not be assumed that NGO's or industrialized nations will be able to provide enough money to solve the issue. Consider the complexity of the issue, and think of creative and cost-effective solutions that can be implemented realistically.

## **Topic II: Education of Refugees and IDP's**

### ***Overview***

Primary education is at the forefront of humanitarian relief efforts and development work. Universal primary education is the second Millennium Development Goal, and UNICEF works tirelessly with state governments to achieve it. As part of the global approach to assist IDP's, UNICEF and Save the Children co-lead the education cluster. As a member of the cluster, UNHCR supports the goal of education in refugee and IDP camps.

Education not only ensures future success for refugee and IDP children, but it also reduces additional psychological harm by providing the children with a structured and child-friendly environment. At school, children are protected from physical violence, abduction into military service, and numerous forms of exploitation and abuse. Furthermore, public health information is often taught in schools, which can be particularly beneficial in the often sub-standard health conditions in refugee and IDP camps. Students in refugee and IDP camps may attend schools within the camp, or, if the camp is not closed, may attend schools in the surrounding area.

### ***Primary Education***

As previously explained, a good portion of funding and effort goes to ensure that primary school-aged children are being educated. UNICEF's role in refugee and IDP camps is to ensure that children return to school as soon as possible so as to not interrupt their educations. The organization's Back to School Campaigns focus on creating physical learning environments and distributing supplies quickly as well as advocating within communities and on a national level. In recovery situations, UNICEF operates Back on Track in order to rebuild educational systems at an infrastructural and organizational level.

Where possible, primary school-aged children are fed a meal during the school day in order to encourage attendance and promote nutrition among children. Occasionally, however, the funding does not exist to reserve food specifically for the school, or corruption within the camp prevents the food from reaching the desired recipients.

Though primary school may be available and attendance may be compulsory, some children will still be unable to attend. Parents may require their children to remain at home to fulfill household tasks like cooking or fetching water, or they may need their children to care for younger siblings. Children with developmental, physical, or severe learning disabilities may not be accommodated for in the often over-crowded, understaffed, and hastily-constructed schools that are available to them.

### ***Secondary Schools***

Secondary schools (the American equivalent of grades 9-12) are not a big focus of the international community. In some communities, particularly rural areas, a primary school education is enough for children to have a moderately successful future. Eliminating illiteracy and providing basic life skills is understandably a more immediate concern than ensuring that young adults learn chemistry or geography. Still, as urbanization increases in the developing world, a secondary education is becoming a prerequisite for success. For instance, in Kenya, secondary school students take a commerce class, in which they learn how to successfully run a business. Furthermore, only through a secondary school education can individuals pursue careers in teaching or university degrees.

In refugee and IDP camps, secondary school-aged children are not a serious concern. For example, not until 2006, three years after the genocide in Darfur began, did an NGO build the first secondary school for Darfuri refugees in Chad. In many cases, particularly at smaller refugee and IDP camps, students must attend schools in the surrounding area because the camp has no secondary school specifically for its residents. When the population of a region soars, as is the case with an influx of refugees, the local schools may not have the personnel or physical capacity to host the new students. Schools may need to hire additional teachers and build additional classrooms—projects for which they likely do not have the funding. Also, because secondary school is not always free, the students may be required to pay school fees. The vast majority of refugees do not have enough money for basic necessities, let alone to send their teenage children to school.

Legislation might also be keeping refugee children out of local schools. Iraqi refugee children in Jordan, for instance, are not enrolled in the public school system. If they are fortunate enough to be enrolled in a state-run secondary school, they may be legally turned away at any time. Private schools are the only option in many similar situations where students are not allowed to enroll in government-run schools. The only way for students to afford such an expensive education, however, is to be sponsored by an NGO; few students are fortunate enough to have that benefit.

### ***Continuing Education***

Adults displaced by violence are not immune to the affects of a poor or irrelevant education. In a new environment, many adults may struggle to apply the skills they had been depending upon for years. For

instance, roughly 16,000 of the Kenyans displaced by the post-election violence in early 2008 are now living in a rural IDP settlement called Shalom City. Many previous urban dwellers are struggling to find employment because the majority of work available is agricultural. An informal education in agricultural work could allow these individuals to become competitive in the local job market or, at the very least, to be able to raise crops to feed their families.

### *Things to Consider*

For the topic of education, examine statistics and news articles regarding the education of refugees and IDP's within your borders (if applicable) as well as of the general population. Is there a serious disparity between the two groups? Some countries have taken the second Millennium Development Goal seriously and have drastically improved their education systems, while others have only increased official enrollment as opposed to actual attendance. How do the enrollment and attendance ratios differ between primary and secondary schools? If the country you're representing is slacking in education, is it due to poor infrastructure, lack of funding for teacher salaries, cultural practices, or some other factor? As always, though you should know your country's background regarding the issue, focus on creative solutions to the education problem faced by refugees and IDP's.

Depending on the reason students aren't attending school, there can be different solutions. Would additional funding be beneficial, or are students not attending schools for other reasons? How can refugee and IDP children and young adults be benefitted from educational efforts without creating inequalities between the camp and the surrounding communities? Should education be dealt with on a case-by-case or country-by-country basis, or should there be a protocol for establishing secondary and continuing educational facilities in IDP and refugee camps? Also, IDP's should be allowed to enroll in government-run schools because they are still within their borders; how can school capacity be increased quickly in IDP situations?