



Updated December 11, 2020

Overview of the Global Humanitarian and Displacement Crisis

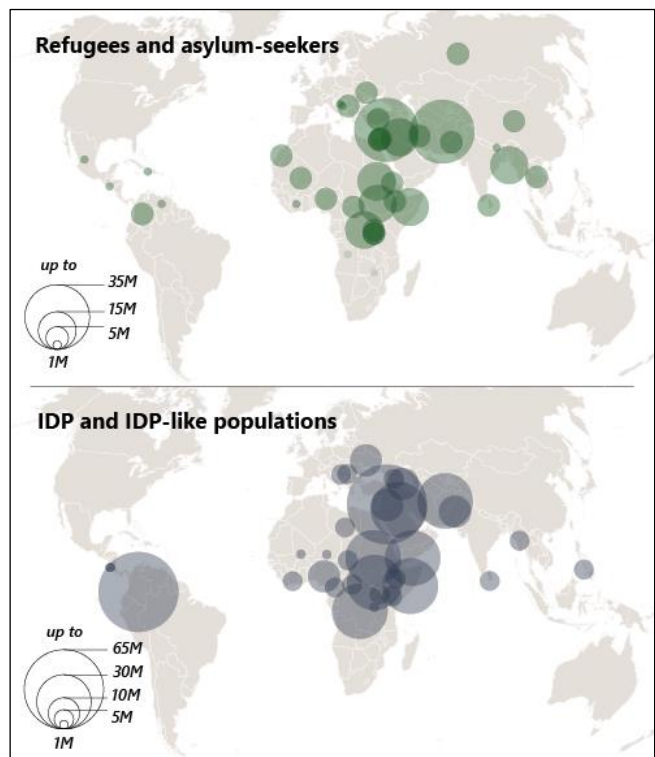
Even before the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, the global humanitarian and displacement crisis was unprecedented. The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) anticipated that in 2020 more than 168 million people worldwide would require humanitarian assistance and protection due to conflict and disaster. For 2021, UNOCHA’s estimate has reached 235 million people. The United States is the single largest donor, consistently providing nearly one-third (more than \$9.5 billion in FY2020) of total humanitarian and emergency food assistance through global accounts.

Types of Crises and Affected Populations

The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that at the end of 2019 (latest global data available, before the pandemic), more than 79.5 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide due to armed conflict, widespread or indiscriminate violence, or human rights violations. Those displaced included 26 million refugees, 4.2 million asylum seekers, 45.7 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and 3.6 million Venezuelans displaced abroad. UNHCR estimated that a further 10 million people remained stateless. Natural and weather-related disasters affect millions of people a year who often require urgent and prolonged assistance due to sudden events (such as earthquakes or storms) or protracted ones (like drought conditions). On average, disasters displace 26 million people annually. In 2019, more than two-thirds (68%) of all refugees and Venezuelans displaced abroad came from five countries: Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Burma.

Some populations moved voluntarily, while others had to flee. Economic migrants, who often leave poverty and unemployment to seek better livelihood opportunities or family reunification numbered approximately 272 million in 2019 (roughly 3.5% of the world’s population). Refugees and others forcibly displaced, including vulnerable migrants, often faced a different set of circumstances. Instead of choosing to leave their place of origin, they were forced to do so for reasons such as ethnic strife, violence, human rights violations, or natural disasters.

Figure 1. Refugees/Asylum Seekers and IDPs



Source: Created by CRS using global data available from UNHCR.

Notes: Smallest map values begin at 470,000.

Key Populations of Concern

Asylum-seekers, who flee their home country, seek sanctuary in another state where they apply for asylum (i.e., the right to be recognized as a refugee). They may receive legal protection and assistance while their formal status is determined.

Refugees, who have fled their country of origin because of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or membership in a particular social or political group. Refugees are unwilling or unable to avail themselves of the protection of their home government due to fears of persecution. Once granted refugee status, a person has certain rights and protections under international law.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), who have been forced from their homes, often for many of the same reasons as refugees, but have not crossed an international border.

Stateless persons, who are not considered to be citizens of any state under national laws.

Vulnerable Migrants, who are often forced to flee circumstances in their country of origin (such as generalized violence, food insecurity, and environmental change) but do not qualify as refugees.

U.S. Policy

The United States is a major contributor to international humanitarian relief efforts. In the past five fiscal years (FY2015–FY2019), the United States provided \$44.0 billion in global humanitarian assistance with funding through the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Department of State, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Agriculture. Congress has given the President broad authority on humanitarian issues and flexibility to respond to disasters with a wide range of assistance. On a bipartisan basis, it has consistently supported humanitarian efforts as a means of responding to natural disasters and conflict-induced crises in the short

term, mitigating humanitarian impacts, and promoting a U.S. presence.

In practice, the provision of U.S. humanitarian assistance is typically case- and time-specific and may include assistance through bilateral and multilateral mechanisms and humanitarian partners; protection activities for vulnerable populations; support for countries and communities hosting the displaced; encouraging donor contributions; and building response capacity. The plethora of humanitarian emergencies, including food security challenges, and human displacement worldwide will likely continue to receive the attention of the Administration and Congress. The Administration's FY2021 budget request for global humanitarian assistance was nearly \$6.27 billion, a decrease of 35% from the FY2020 appropriated amount of \$9.5 billion. Congress has continued to support humanitarian assistance through appropriations legislation. FY2021 appropriations bills, as passed in the House (H.R. 7608), total \$9.6 billion for global humanitarian accounts and specify additional funding for the COVID-19 humanitarian-related response.

International Humanitarian Compacts

Building on several 2016 international humanitarian meetings, in 2018, U.N. member states negotiated two global compacts, which were adopted under separate processes—the **Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM)** and the **Global Compact on Refugees (GCR)**. The United States ended its participation in the GCM in December 2017 and in the GCR in November 2018.

Selected Issues and Challenges

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). COVID-19 emerged as a pandemic in early 2020 and added a complicated layer to the global humanitarian landscape. In general, vulnerable, displaced populations live in conditions that make them particularly susceptible to COVID-19 and present significant challenges to response and containment. Across humanitarian settings, the humanitarian community has prioritized capacity-building support for hospitals as well as health, water, sanitation, and emergency food interventions for vulnerable populations, including host communities, as well as information and awareness campaigns. Needs have increased significantly, while border closures, quarantine orders, and other limitations on movement in place due to COVID-19 may affect population flows. In FY2020, the United States provided \$908 million in supplemental humanitarian COVID-19 assistance.

Emergence of New Crises and Underfunding. A major challenge facing the humanitarian community is the emergence of new crises (including the pandemic), which means lifesaving assistance and protection activities take precedence over long-term investments and the search for durable solutions. Chronic underfunding of existing U.N. and other humanitarian appeals means that urgent needs frequently outpace available budgets for operations. UNOCHA's 2021 global appeal for \$35 billion is the highest ever and five times the 2010 global appeal. With an additional \$10.7 billion appeal for the COVID-19 response, global needs for 2021 total more than \$45 billion (\$15 billion more than in 2020).

Protracted Displacement. Refugees and IDPs may be separated from their homes for long periods, particularly in instances of large-scale, protracted crises or ongoing armed conflicts where political solutions prove elusive. The global population of those forcibly displaced has increased by 75% in the past two decades, and on average, a person is displaced as a refugee for 20 years. Displaced populations are often not confined to camps, placing a heavy burden on governments and host communities. National governments carry primary responsibility for all displaced people in their territory; however, in many cases they are unable or unwilling to fulfill this obligation, complicating the humanitarian response. In 2019, some of the largest numbers of IDPs were in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Syria, and Sudan. The top countries hosting refugees included Turkey, Colombia, Pakistan, and Uganda. Of the millions of global refugees, less than 1% of cases are submitted for resettlement, although this remains an important tool of refugee protection and response.

Mixed Migration. An emerging challenge stems from "mixed migration" where different groups of people—such as economic migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, trafficked persons, and unaccompanied children, usually in a mix of nationalities or ethnic groups—travel the same route and use the same modes of transportation. Many of these individuals lack required documentation, and may use unauthorized border crossings, often with the assistance of smugglers. The lines of distinction within these groups have caused some confusion and raised questions about determination of status and protection required. Even if they do not qualify as refugees, a significant number of those fleeing may need humanitarian assistance, international protection, and opportunities to regularize their status. The status of a person may change en route, but often the reasons that drive an individual's decision to move are a complex mix of factors. States concerned about the economic burden of those seeking help and the potential security issues resulting from uncontrolled migration (raised in part because of the threat of terrorism) insist on stricter enforcement of asylum and immigration policies, while others are concerned about international protection of those on the move.

Operational Constraints and Response. Displaced populations in all areas of the world require protection, the basis of which may be found in international humanitarian law and reflected in humanitarian assistance provided by a variety of actors and organizations. Local, regional, and national authorities also often have a role in the provision of assistance, law enforcement, and access control. Security concerns can severely constrain humanitarian operations in areas of conflict posing risks for those needing assistance and humanitarian personnel. Although preventing displacement and creating solutions for those already displaced are bookends to the problem, sustaining a humanitarian response, building capacity within governments and civil society, and creating resilience in vulnerable populations remain daily challenges.

Rhoda Margesson, Specialist in International Humanitarian Policy

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.