The plight of refugees, asylum-seekers and IDPs around the globe

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Ashwaq, 12, stands outside her family’s tent at the Markaze refugee camp in Obock, Djibouti, May 19, 2015. She and thousands of others had fled the civil war in Yemen and made it across the Gulf of Aden to find refuge in Djibouti, a Horn of Africa nation where the United Nations set up a staging hub for aid for the conflict-torn Arab country. On February 28, 2019, U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres said 24 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in Yemen. Photo by Mosa'ab Elshamy for AP

Refugees are people who must leave their home area for their own safety or survival. A refugee’s home area could be a country, state or region. People become refugees for many reasons, including war, oppression, natural disasters and climate change.

Most refugee laws are based on a 1951 United Nations (U.N.) document, the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The Convention was created to deal with the large number of people displaced by World War II. According to the
Convention, refugees are people who leave their home countries "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality or membership of a particular social group or political opinion."

The Convention originally limited this definition to refugees from war-torn Europe. In 1967, the U.N, expanded it to include refugees from any conflict or disaster.

Today, refugees can seek asylum in any of the 147 countries that have signed the Convention. Asylum is the protection from oppression or hardship offered by another country. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is an international resource for refugees and countries offering asylum.

Refugee status is an official decision made by the country providing asylum or an international agency. A person who is seeking asylum but has not yet received refugee status is called an asylum-seeker. Countries that have signed the Convention have agreed not to deport asylum-seekers to places where their lives or freedom may be in danger. Once an asylum-seeker is approved for refugee status, the host country is expected to provide civil rights, the right to work and access to social services.

**Refugees In History**

History is filled with stories of people forced to leave their homes. For example, in 1685, France outlawed the Protestant religion, forcing hundreds of thousands of Protestants to flee the country. Most of these refugees, known as Huguenots, moved to other European countries, such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Germany. Some traveled as far as South Africa and British colonies in North America. Intolerance of this kind is repeated throughout history, forcing many from their homes due to their religious views.
Refugees posed a global crisis after World War II. The end of the war didn't end the suffering of millions of people whose homes were destroyed, who were released from prison camps or who had been expelled from their home countries. For example, resentment of Germany after the war was so strong that many countries drove out ethnic Germans, even if those people had spent their entire lives in their adopted country. About 11.5 million Germans living in Eastern Europe were expelled or voluntarily left their homes after the war.

Jews who had survived Nazi concentration camps throughout Europe often returned home to find that their property and businesses had been taken over by other people. Most of these Jews could no longer survive in their hometowns. They had no home, few possessions and little hope of finding work. Even though the war was over, anti-Semitism was still a strong force in Europe. Many communities and groups worked to drive Jews from their homes and places of business. Often, returning Jews were even met with violence. In some countries, such as Poland and Slovakia, pogroms — organized massacres — forced those who survived to flee for their lives.

After World War II, the Soviet Union and the United States engaged in a conflict called the Cold War. The Cold War was a conflict between the communist political system of the Soviet Union and the democratic political system of the U.S. The Cold War involved dozens of countries in the sphere of influence of each of the world's two "superpowers." It ended in 1991 with the breakup of the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, thousands of refugees fled Soviet territory to seek asylum elsewhere, primarily in Western Europe and the U.S.

The Cold War involved so-called "proxy wars." Proxy wars are conflicts where countries oppose each other by supporting different sides in another conflict. Conflicts in Lebanon, Korea, Afghanistan and Angola were proxy wars of the Cold War. During the conflict in Korea, the South was supported by the U.S. and the North by China and the Soviet Union. After the Korean War, thousands of North Korean refugees streamed into South Korea.

Proxy wars in Southeast Asia during the 1970s led to large numbers of refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. More than 2 million Southeast Asians fled their homes during this time, many of them on boats, which earned them the nickname "boat people." The journey was brutal and often deadly. Traveling in flimsy, overcrowded boats, many people were lost at sea, attacked by pirates or devastated by illness and dehydration.
Refugees Today

In 2017, the number of refugees rose to 19.9 million and 3.1 million asylum-seekers around the world, under the UNHCR mandate. Another 5.4 million Palestinian refugees receive assistance from United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

Refugees from Afghanistan, South Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic account for the most refugees worldwide. Wars and oppression in each of these regions force refugees to flee their homes. About 2.6 million people from Afghanistan have relocated to 69 different asylum countries, and half of those have been forced to flee more than once. Civil war, drought and flooding have displaced about 2.4 million people from South Sudan, mostly to neighboring asylum countries. Over 6.3 million refugees have left Syria, the source of the most refugees worldwide.

About 85 percent of the world’s refugees are from developing countries. Most refugees from developing countries seek asylum in other developing countries. Refugees from the conflict in Afghanistan, for instance, often immigrate to Pakistan, Iran or Europe. Turkey hosts the largest number of refugees worldwide — about 3.5 million.

Over half of all refugees live in urban areas. Refugees tend to settle in urban areas for a number of reasons. The legal facilities available to asylum-seekers — including lawyers, consulates and diplomats — are often clustered in cities. Nongovernmental organizations, such as religious groups, can respond to refugees more quickly in urban areas. Most importantly, however, is the community of other immigrants in cities.

About one-third of the world’s refugees live in refugee camps. Refugee camps are temporary communities built to provide shelter and resources to refugees. UNHCR works with the asylum country to provide tents or other temporary shelters, emergency medical facilities, communications equipment and security.

Most refugees remain near their home regions, moving to neighboring countries. For example, refugees from Afghanistan are likely to move to Pakistan. Refugees fleeing conflict in the Darfur region of Sudan settled in Chad. The UNHCR estimates that over 80 percent of refugees live in a country that borders the one they fled.
Internally Displaced Persons

Not everyone who has to leave home ends up leaving their country. Refugees who move within their national borders are called "internally displaced persons," or IDPs. Today, about 40 million people around the world are internally displaced by conflict or violence. That is the highest number recorded since 1994. International refugee laws do not provide protection and support for IDPs, rather, IDPs have to rely on their own government for protection.

Sudan, in eastern Africa, has one of the largest internally displaced populations in the world. From 1983 through 2005, civil war between north and south Sudan forced millions of people from their homes. By the end of 2017, around 4.4 million people were displaced throughout the country, particularly in Darfur.

According to nongovernmental organizations such as Doctors Without Borders, most IDPs in Darfur live in "prisonlike" camps, crammed inside makeshift shelters and constantly at risk of violence. Overcrowding causes illness to spread quickly, and malnutrition can occur when food deliveries are reduced or delayed.

Other countries with large numbers of IDPs are Colombia, Iraq, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia and Pakistan. Refugees from Colombia flee internal conflict associated with the illegal drug trade. Iraq is the site of a major international conflict. Political conflict between rebels and the government have driven Congolese and Somalis from their homes. Pakistan, asylum to thousands of refugees from other countries as well as IDPs, is tied to the international conflict in neighboring Afghanistan. The government of Pakistan must also deal with militias and rebel groups.

Environmental Refugees

Environmental refugees are people who must leave their homes because of environmental disruption. Natural disasters like earthquakes, hurricanes and floods often force people to flee. The eruption of Mount Vesuvius, Italy, in A.D. 79 forced surviving residents of the towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum to become refugees. Toxic volcanic ash and pumice stone buried the towns entirely. Residents of the towns had to find shelter and work elsewhere in the Roman Empire. In January 2010, a magnitude-7.0 earthquake devastated the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince. Many of the city's residents became IDPs and fled to other parts of the country. Still more sought asylum as refugees in the neighboring Dominican Republic.
Environmental disruption can also be man-made, such as a nuclear accident or pollution. The World Bank estimates that 100 million people were displaced by dam-building projects in the 1990s. This generally happens when the reservoir of water held behind the dam floods towns and villages where people once lived. In addition, people who live downstream from dams may be unable to support themselves through fishing or farming once the water dries up. Construction of the massive Three Gorges Dam in China, for example, flooded dozens of towns and displaced 1.3 million people. In 1986, a nuclear reactor exploded in the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine, then a part of the Soviet Union. The disaster released a lethal amount of radiation. More than 350,000 people were permanently evacuated from the area and had to resettled elsewhere.

The effects of climate change can also lead to environmental refugees. During the last ice age, for example, people living near glaciers were forced to migrate to warmer climates as the glaciers and ice sheets spread across the land.

Today, human activity contributes to the current instance of climate change, called global warming. Activities, such as burning fossil fuels and cutting down forests, add greenhouse gases to the atmosphere, trapping the sun's heat. The rising temperature causes glaciers and ice caps to melt, making sea levels rise. It also leads to droughts, floods and desertification — the transformation of arable land to desert.

Environmental refugees impacted by climate change are often called climate refugees. Climate refugees may be forced to seek asylum because of changes in their ecosystem, such as major portions of Maldives being underwater. Climate refugees may also seek asylum as their economic livelihood vanishes, as farmers bordering the Gobi Desert in China lose their land to desertification.

Even though environmental refugees are not protected by international law, they often receive a great deal of help. Sudden, major disasters are reported in newspapers and on TV around the world. In 2011 for instance, when a devastating earthquake and resulting tsunami occurred in northeastern Japan, countries from around the world offered aid to assist in the relief efforts.
Other environmental refugees can be difficult to identify. The gradual changes that happen due to global warming are harder to see. People don't often rally to help the victims of these changes. But they can be as devastating as an earthquake or storm. Morocco, Tunisia and Libya each lose more than 1,000 square kilometers (386 square miles) of productive land per year to desertification. The farmers, merchants and families who depend on these lands are losing their ability to survive and support themselves.

The International Red Cross estimates that there are more environmental refugees today than refugees from wars. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees stated that 36 million people were displaced by natural disasters in 2009, and about 20 million of those were forced to move for climate change-related issues. Between 15 million and 42 million people have been displaced by natural disasters each year since 2008.

Like IDPs, environmental refugees are not protected under international refugee laws. In fact, most of them are IDPs as well. They are not entitled to the same protection and assistance as other refugees.

Many international organizations recognize that environmental disruption is a growing problem, one that we need to address. The problem may also increase the numbers of traditional refugees. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees has noted, "Climate change can enhance the competition for resources — water, food, grazing lands — and that competition can trigger conflict."

**Fast Facts:**

**Places Of Refuge**

Nations with the most refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced persons in their borders, according to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (2017):

- Colombia: 7,747,365
- Syrian Arab Republic: 7,033,119
- Democratic Republic of the Congo: 5,144,932
- Iraq: 4,501,786
- Turkey: 3,789,320
Refugees

Countries of origin of refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced persons, according to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (2017):

Syrian Arabic Republic: 13,288,372
Colombia: 7,901,909
Democratic Republic of the Congo: 5,374,765
Afghanistan: 5,336,582
Iraq: 4,809,858

City Of Refuge

Puuhonua o Hnaunau, a national park on the Big Island of Hawaii, marks an ancient City of Refuge. The site, on the island's western coast, was a place where people who fled the law could seek asylum and refuge. Asylum-seekers could be absolved by a priest and freed to leave.

Puuhonua o Hnaunau accepted refugees from the 15th through the 19th centuries.

Peace Out

Many U.S. citizens who opposed the Vietnam War and wished to avoid being drafted into fighting sought political asylum in Canada. After the war, President Jimmy Carter issued a pardon to these conscientious objectors, allowing them to return to the U.S. without punishment.

URL: https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/refugee/
1. The U.N. Convention provided an agreement for the treatment of refugees after World War II that is still in effect today. Although it sets a legal process for asylum-seekers who flee their countries, there are a growing number of refugees today who are victims of environmental disruption or are IDPs who are not protected under international law.

2. Refugees are people who are forced to leave their homes because of war, oppression and environmental disruption. Although there have been refugees throughout history, the number of people displaced by conflict or climate change today is unprecedented. Competition over resources will create more conflict.

Which option provides an objective, accurate summary of the text, and why?

(A) Option 1; it describes the role of the U.N. and defines the legal process for asylum-seekers who are protected by international law.

(B) Option 1; it provides historical background and describes more recent situations that have given rise to different kinds of refugees.

(C) Option 2; it provides reasons why people have commonly become refugees and explains why refugee numbers are increasing.

(D) Option 2; it shows how refugees today face different challenges and explains why the situation will continue to get worse.
Read the following two details from the article.

_Sudan, in eastern Africa, has one of the largest internally displaced populations in the world. From 1983 through 2005, civil war between north and south Sudan forced millions of people from their homes._

_According to nongovernmental organizations such as Doctors Without Borders, most IDPs in Darfur live in "prisonlike" camps, crammed inside makeshift shelters and constantly at risk of violence._

Select the option that BEST explains how these details develop a central idea of the article.

(A) The details highlight a growing segment of the refugee population; they illustrate living conditions and limited resources available to IDPs.

(B) The details explain why refugees in Sudan are unable to leave the country; they show how a growing number of IDPs are forced to live.

(C) The details show what happens when civil war creates IDPs; they illustrate the failure of the U.N. to address conditions in the camps.

(D) The details provide an example of internally displaced persons; they illustrate the nature of longstanding conflicts that occur in East Africa.

Which sentence BEST summarizes how the end of World War II affected the refugee crisis in Europe?

(A) Millions of Germans and Jews were met with continued violence and were expelled from Eastern Europe.

(B) Surviving Jews returned to find that their property had been taken over by others, and they had to move.

(C) Anti-Semitism did not dissipate in much of Europe, forcing Jews to seek asylum outside of Europe.

(D) Ethnic Germans and Jews were unwelcome at home and were often forced to flee for their lives.
Which of the following accurately summarizes HOW different people feel about the effect of climate change on the world's refugees?

(A) Although aid and assistance is quickly available after many natural disasters, changes due to climate change occur more slowly; victims get less attention and assistance.

(B) Despite an increase in the number of environmental disruptions, people are more likely to support traditional refugees; conflict and war gain more public sympathy.

(C) Because most people pay attention to natural disasters, countries quickly take part in relief efforts; more people see climate change as a future, not a current, problem.

(D) Since environmental refugees are treated like IDPs, they do not receive the same protections as other refugees; fewer people think climate change is a problem.