

Refugee Background Information

Imagine the following scenario: You are a citizen in a nation where political factions have been at war with each other and where civil war has been standard over the past two years. The fighting has officially reached your city, and you know that you are a member of the faction that your townspeople have been sworn to fight. You are no longer safe in your city. With bullets buzzing by your head and soldiers moving in swarms around you, you pack what little you can assemble in twenty minutes and you leave your home. After a long and treacherous walk through your country, you arrive, exhausted, terrified, and hungry, at the border of the neighboring country. Will the other country turn you away? Will you be treated with respect, will you be treated poorly, or will you be sent back to your own country to face persecution or even death?

In this scenario, you would be considered an asylum seeker because your refugee claim has not been definitively evaluated by UNHCR or the host country. If your claim that you are a refugee is accepted, then you are granted refugee status and so are accorded the rights that refugees are guaranteed. 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 or her nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself to the protection of that country” (from the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees). Refugees flee their home countries because their human rights are in jeopardy; it is often their own government that threatens to persecute them or the government is unable or unwilling to protect them. They often flee their own countries because of armed conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations.

Governments have prime responsibility for protecting refugees, but UNHCR, host countries and local non-governmental organizations provide assistance as well. UNHCR, or the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, was created in 1950 in Geneva, Switzerland, and implemented in 1951 so that states who were recovering from the disastrous effects of WWII would have help in protecting refugees. (For a map containing Geneva, please go to: <http://www.unhcr.org/4b0508839.pdf>, pg. 3.)

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, refugees are granted the same basic civic, economic, political, and social rights and freedoms that all human beings should have. These include, but are not limited to: the right to safe asylum; freedom of thought and of movement; freedom from torture and degrading treatment; access to medical care; the right to work; the right to attend school, and to avoid being forced into military service or prostitution.



In situations where there are few resources available from governments of the country of asylum for large influxes of refugees, UNHCR provides assistance to those refugees. UNHCR coordinates the provision and delivery of necessities (food, water, shelter, medical care and clean water) in addition to helping the refugees and internally displaced people return to their homes (repatriate), integrate into the country to where they fled, or resettle to a third country. At times, UNHCR provides start-up packages that may include grants or income-generation projects.

