

UNHCR Background

Granting asylum to people fleeing persecution is one of the earliest hallmarks of civilization. Historians cite examples of caring for refugees going back 3,500 years during the great early empires of the Middle East: the Hittites, Babylonians, Assyrians and ancient Egyptians. Caring for our fellow humans, even our enemies, is what distinguishes us from all other species.

In December 1948, the UN General Assembly adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the first global expression of rights for all human beings. Among its thirty articles that define the rights are freedom from discrimination, freedom from slavery, equality before the law, and the right to asylum in other countries. This right is the cornerstone of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

In 1950, the United Nations General Assembly wanted to ensure it had a strong and effective organization to protect refugees seeking asylum from the devastation of World War II. There were one million refugees at the time. In cities and towns all across the continent, hundreds and thousands of people were displaced due to military occupation, persecution, and loss of homes. UNHCR was created in 1950 to protect the basic human rights of European refugees so that no one would be involuntarily returned to a country where there was fear of persecution.

The agency was originally set up as a three-year program to provide refugee protection and assistance. However, in the ensuing years, the problem of displacement not only failed to disappear, but it also grew to become a persistent worldwide problem. Wars continued on a national and regional scale. The number of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons increased with each conflict. Since its creation, UNHCR has helped an estimated 50 million refugees restart their lives and has been awarded two Nobel Peace Prizes.

UNHCR's role has evolved over the past several decades, broadening its mandate of securing basic human rights of refugees and, in certain situations, now protects and in some cases assists internally displaced persons, stateless people and has had a limited role in certain natural disasters. UNHCR has worked in countries such as Afghanistan, Colombia, Pakistan, Iraq, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sudan, Sri Lanka and many more.

But UNHCR's primary mission is to provide legal protection to refugees whose rights are in jeopardy. Governments normally guarantee the basic human rights of their citizens. But when a country is in conflict—invasion, civil disorder, or revolution—basic rights often disappear. UNHCR works to find —durable solutions to refugees' plight. There are three main options to accomplish this: voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement in another country. See chart below.



Durable Solution	Definition	Benefits
Voluntary Repatriation	Repatriation is when a refugee returns to his or her home country when a conflict has ended and a degree of stability has been restored. Most refugees prefer to return to their home countries. UNHCR encourages voluntary returns.	Transportation to homeland, cash grants, legal assistance, income-generation projects, job training, and farming assistance (information, tools and seeds)
Local integration	When repatriation is not possible, UNHCR helps people rebuild their lives in the countries where they first sought asylum.	Transportation to new location, cash grants, income-generation projects, job training, assistance on legal residence in asylum country and becoming a citizen.
Resettlement	When refugees cannot voluntarily return to their home country or integrate in a country where they first sought asylum, they might be relocated to a third country willing to accept them for resettlement.	Transportation to new a location, cash grants, income-generation projects, job training, assistance on legal resettlement in new country and assistance on becoming a citizen.

