



# INTERNALLY DISPLACED Persons

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS





**A mother and child after fleeing their home in Sudan following an attack by government militias.**



**Afghan women in the unusual role of helping to rebuild Afghanistan.**



**UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency

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P. BRONSTEIN/GETTY IMAGES/ATG

# INTERNALLY DISPLACED Persons

## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Cover:  
**Displaced  
peasants eat  
lunch in  
northwestern  
Colombia** after  
being forced to  
flee because of  
fighting between  
opposing  
paramilitary  
forces.



AP/LUIS BENAVIDES/COL

- 4** THE WORLD'S LARGEST GROUP OF VULNERABLE PEOPLE?
- 6** WHO IS AN INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSON?
- 8** IDP WORLD MAP
- 10** ARE REFUGEES AND IDPs TREATED DIFFERENTLY?
- 11** THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY'S ROLE
- 13** GUIDING PRINCIPLES
- 13** UNHCR AND THE INTERNALLY DISPLACED
- 14** HOW THE REFUGEE AGENCY RESPONDS OPERATIONALLY



**F**OR DECADES THEY WERE LARGELY IGNORED AND FORGOTTEN, but together they comprise probably the world's largest group of vulnerable people.

Currently, there are an estimated 25 million of them, living amidst war, persecution and natural disaster, in at least 50 countries. They have little legal or physical protection and a very uncertain future—outcasts in their own countries.

Bureaucratically, they are described as IDPs—internally displaced persons. In the real world, they are civilians, mostly women and children, who have been forced to abandon their



**Civilians preparing to return to their homes after decades of conflict in Angola.**

homes because of conflict or persecution to seek safety elsewhere.

When these displaced civilians cross an international frontier into a second state, they are generally afforded food and shelter by the host state, protected by international laws and legally classified as refugees.

Others in similar circumstances but who, for whatever reason, remain in their own countries, become IDPs with few, if any, of the safeguards and assistance afforded refugees, under the ‘protection’ of often antagonistic governments or prey to rebel militias.

UNHCR’s mandate does not specifically cover IDPs. But because internally displaced civilians are often caught up in the same conflicts and face the same problems as

refugees and because of the agency’s expertise, at the behest of the U.N. Secretary-General or other U.N. agencies, it does help some of these people, currently an estimated 5.8 million.

In the last few years, the international community has begun to more vigorously debate major IDP issues—the question of the sanctity of state sovereignty versus human rights, how better to help these vulnerable people and what organizations should fulfill what roles.

During that same period, the number of IDPs has remained relatively stable though there were major population movements, with millions of persons returning to their homes in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Angola and Bosnia, but similar numbers being displaced in Colombia, Côte d’Ivoire, Sudan and Africa’s Congo basin.

UNICEF/S. GREENE/AGE/STEIN/1993



**Sudan probably has more internally displaced persons, at least four million, than any country in the world.**



## FORGOTTEN NO LONGER?

■ Who are the world's internally displaced people?

They are individuals or groups of people who have been forced to flee their homes to escape armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights abuses or natural or man-made disasters.



At least three million people have been killed and millions displaced in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

### ■ How many internally displaced persons are there?

The Special Representative of the U.N. Secretary-General for Internally Displaced Persons estimates there are as many as 25 million in 50 countries. Half of the overall total are in Africa. UNHCR cares for 5.8 million people from this group, in addition to some 10.4 million refugees.

### ■ How do IDPs differ from refugees?

Both groups often leave their homes for similar reasons. Civilians become internationally recognized as 'refugees' when they cross an international frontier to seek sanctuary in another country. The internally displaced, so-called IDPs, remain, for whatever reason, in their own states.

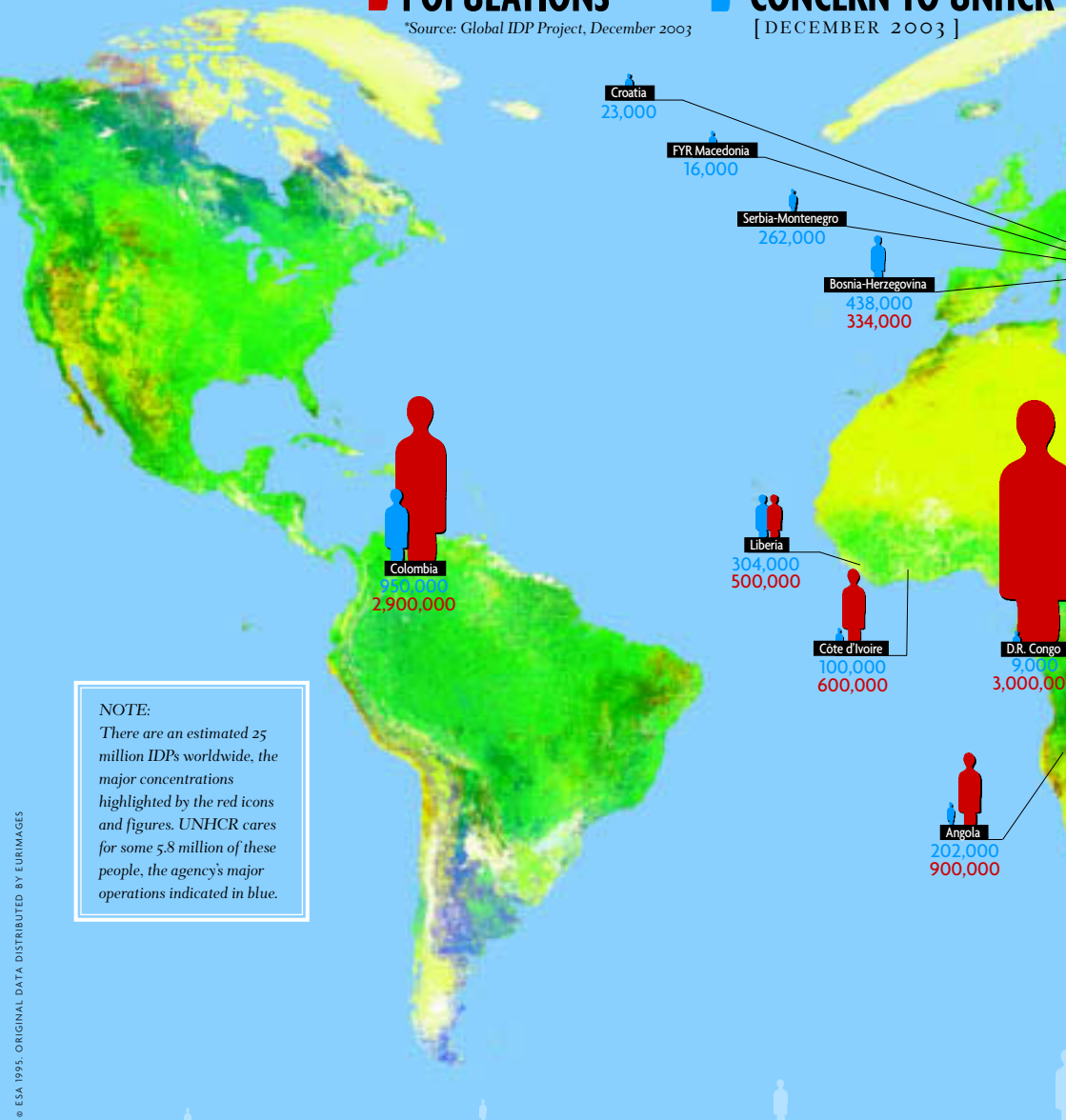
# The World's ID

## GLOBAL POPULATIONS

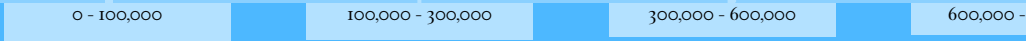
\*Source: Global IDP Project, December 2003

## POPULATIONS OF CONCERN TO UNHCR

[ DECEMBER 2003 ]



**NOTE:**  
There are an estimated 25 million IDPs worldwide, the major concentrations highlighted by the red icons and figures. UNHCR cares for some 5.8 million of these people, the agency's major operations indicated in blue.



# P Populations



# FORGOTTEN NO LONGER?

UNHCR/A. HOLLMANN/CS/RUS1999



**Children in Georgia attend psychosocial rehabilitation classes after being uprooted from their homes for years.**

## ■ How are the two groups treated?

Newly arrived refugees normally receive food, shelter and a place of safety from the host country. They are protected by a well-defined body of international laws and conventions. The U.N. refugee agency and other humanitarian organizations work within this legal framework to help refugees restart their lives in a new state or eventually return home.

## ■ And IDPs?

Internally displaced persons often face a far more difficult future. They may be trapped in an ongoing internal conflict. The domestic government, which may view the uprooted people as ‘enemies of the state,’ retains ultimate control over their fate. There are no specific international instruments covering the internally displaced, and general agreements such as the Geneva Conventions are often difficult to apply. Donors are sometimes reluctant to intervene in internal conflicts or offer sustained assistance.

## ■ The IDP problem recently became more widely debated. Why?

In the wake of World War II, the international community focused its attention principally on helping the most obvious victims of the conflict—refugees. In the immediate postwar years, UNHCR was established to further that goal and an international legal framework for refugees was created. As the cold war ended, the nature of conflict began to change, from superpower confrontation to smaller, internal struggles. These wars helped produce far larger numbers of internally displaced victims.

## ■ How has the international community reacted?

These civilians received limited assistance in the past. The International Committee of the Red Cross, as the guardian of the Geneva Conventions, has been active in this field for many decades and other agencies and governments began a wider debate in the last few years on how to tackle the crisis and who should be involved. The U.N. Special Representative produced a booklet, *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, which contains 30 pointers for governments and humanitarian organizations to help the displaced.



Going home in Sri Lanka.

# FORGOTTEN NO LONGER?

## ■ What effect has that had on the situation?

The Guiding Principles are not legally binding, but the recommendations—which define who IDPs are, outline a large body of international law already in existence protecting a person’s basic rights and the responsibility of states—are increasingly being accepted by more and more states.

## ■ With this increased attention, is the number of IDPs decreasing?

The overall number of internally displaced remained relatively stable at around 25 million in the first years of the new millennium. However, there were still significant population movements with several million people in countries such as Afghanistan, Angola, Bosnia and Sri Lanka returning home, but similar numbers being displaced in Colombia, Burundi, Africa’s Congo basin, Sudan and other regions.



A self-help rebuilding project in Colombia.

UNHCR/B. HEGER/07/CO1-2003



# GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The 14-page booklet, *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* contains 30 pointers for governments and humanitarian organizations to help the displaced.

The definition of the internally displaced “are persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.”

## The 30 principles include:

■ **Principle 2 (2):** These Principles shall not be interpreted as restricting, modifying or impairing the provisions of any international human rights or international humanitarian law instrument or rights granted to persons under domestic law. In particular, these Principles are without prejudice to the right to seek and enjoy asylum in other countries.

■ **Principle 5:** All authorities and international actors shall respect and ensure respect for their obligations under international law, including human rights and humanitarian law, in all circumstances, so as to prevent and avoid conditions that might lead to displacement of persons.

■ **Principle 6 (1):** Every human being shall have the right to be protected against being arbitrarily displaced from his or her home or place of habitual residence.

■ **Principle 15:** Internally displaced persons have:

- a. The right to seek safety in another part of the country;
- b. The right to leave their country;
- c. The right to seek asylum in another country; and
- d. The right to be protected against forcible return to or resettlement in any place where their life, safety, liberty and/or health would be at risk.

■ **Principle 28 (1):** Competent authorities have the primary duty and responsibility to establish conditions, as well as provide the means, which allow internally displaced persons to return voluntarily, in safety and with dignity, to their homes or places of habitual residence, or to resettle voluntarily in another part of the country. Such authorities shall endeavor to facilitate the reintegration of returned or resettled internally displaced persons.

## ■ What is UNHCR's position vis-à-vis the internally displaced?

The agency's mandate specifically covers refugees, but in the last 30 years it assisted in around 30 operations involving IDPs including Colombia, Kosovo and Afghanistan. It becomes involved only at the specific request of the Secretary-General or another appropriate U.N. authority and with the agreement of involved nations. It has been careful not to compromise its refugee mandate and must work within limited financial and manpower resources.

## ■ Is there any friction between the two roles?

The organization's Statute has been interpreted flexibly to allow it to work with IDPs. The most frequent restraints are lack of security and refusal of access to the displaced by governments and other insurgents. There may also be difficulties at times in helping refugees and IDPs simultaneously. Programs designed to help people in situ—IDPs—by their very nature could complicate asylum procedures. During the Kosovo conflict, for instance, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia argued there was no need to allow displaced persons to cross a frontier to seek asylum because they were already receiving aid in their own country.

# FORGOTTEN NO LONGER?



A UNHCR convoy of uprooted peoples heads home to Timor-Leste.

## ■ Were there other problem areas?

In the former Yugoslavia and Timor, UNHCR decided to provide protection and assistance to all uprooted peoples on the basis of humanitarian needs rather than refugee status. Refugees are sometimes a minor component in an otherwise massive internal displacement, Colombia and Chechnya being two such operations in which UNHCR is involved. Effective reintegration of returning refugees also may require assistance to be extended to the internally displaced in the same region as happened in Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Guatemala.

## ■ Operationally, how does UNHCR respond?

The plight of refugees and IDPs often overlap and a single coordinated operation is the most sensible and obvious solution, especially during repatriation operations when internally displaced persons are often in the same geographical locations. The agency in recent years

strengthened its capacity to respond to the needs of this group to provide them not only with meaningful protection on the ground, but eventually a lasting solution to their plight.

## ■ Will UNHCR consider taking a 'lead role' in such operations?

Yes. When its protection expertise is particularly relevant or where involvement with the internally displaced is closely linked to the voluntary repatriation and reintegration of refugees.