

What is a refugee?

In ordinary usage **Refugees and Displaced People** are those in flight to freedom and safety, who seek to escape oppression, threats to life and liberty, civil war, natural disasters, persecution, degradation and poverty.

By the legal definition contained within the *1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* and the *1967 Protocol*, a **Refugee** is a person 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/her nationality and is unable or owing to such a fear is unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country...”

Where are the Refugees?

-New refugees are ‘created’ everyday, so this is constantly changing.

Estimated number of persons of concern who fall under the mandate of UNHCR, by region		
Region	Total of concern 1 Jan. 1998	Total of concern 1 Jan. 1999
Africa	7,385,100	6,284,950
Asia	7,458,500	7,474,740
Europe	6,056,500	6,212,620
Latin America / Caribbean	103,300	102,400
North America	1,294,900	1,305,400
Oceania	78,000	79,510
TOTAL	22,376,300	21,459,620
Totals may not add up, due to rounding.		

- Does not include internally displaced peoples.

Shortcomings of the United Nations Definition of Refugees

- Not all categories under which someone can be persecuted are included (e.g. women [problematizing the current situation of Afghanistani refugees] or sexual orientation)
- One must be 'outside the country' of origin. Therefore it doesn't take into account the 30 million internally displaced people throughout the world (e.g. the 600,000 + Tamils in Sri Lanka).
- Under international law, for the clause 'well-founded' to be accepted, documentary proof of persecution is required. As most refugees leave their countries with little or nothing, they do not carry documentary proof of their persecution.

Why are there refugees?

a) *Conflict* = competition over resources.

- Apart from minor and isolated incidents, conflict always occurs when a group seeks to gain a disproportionate share of total resources for their own group. The other people, then, form groups to counteract this original group to protect their own interests. Then, the two groups are in conflict with one another.

b) *Contributors to conflict:*

□ militarisation

15% of 'third world' countries are currently under some form of military domination.

-The end of the cold war, rather than leading to a decrease in the amount of arms available in the world, has actually allowed arms to travel more freely around the globe. The 'Big 5' (U.S., Russia, U.K., France and China), who manufacture and supply 86% of the world's weapons, have not been inclined to stop the trade due to the enormous amounts of financial gains they receive. Also, following the end of the Cold War,

these countries have been slowly selling off their arms stockpiles to ‘third world’ countries, merely fuelling small-scale conflicts into larger ones.

-Every person is affected by the arms trade to some degree. Did you know that General Motors, Westinghouse and EMI are all major arms manufacturers and suppliers?

□ economic and state weakness

It is no coincidence that conflicts often begin, or flare up, in times of economic hardship or weak political control.

-To deal with the latter first – one of the greatest causes of state weakness has been the disintegration of colonialism – largely results of the ‘divide and rule’ stance taken by most colonial powers. And, in most cases, division is actually *part* of the decolonising process, in order to insure that the country in question does not become too powerful. (e.g this can be seen post-cold-war in the division of Yugoslavia, Russia etc into smaller nations)

-In terms of the economy, when there are limited resources the tendency is for ‘groups’ within society to form to ensure that they get an adequate share of those resources. It can be seen, therefore, that when there is poverty in a country, people are more likely to align themselves with others in order to maximise their chances of survival.

Today, however, the third world is in a particularly resource-less position largely due to ‘first-world’ plundering of resources. The ‘globalised’ economy has enabled this to a large extent. For example, did you know that 46 of the world’s largest economies are transnational corporations? Or, that half the world’s economy is controlled by 350 companies? These companies are outside of the ‘democratic’ process, and thus we, governments, and the UN effectively have no control over them.

□ group identification (ethnicity, religion, language)

-Since many governments can no longer ensure the welfare of their citizens, the disadvantaged seek to fulfil their aspirations by reverting to that which is familiar: blood, land and religion. Almost two thirds of all current conflicts involve issues related to ethnic or religious identity.

-Race, ethnicity, religion and language allow the powerful to easily mobilise and encourage groups to enter into conflict with one another. Whether intentionally or otherwise it can be seen that ethnicity and religion all too often become smoke screens for the root causes of a conflict, exacerbating the conflict and preventing a deep understanding from being obtained.

Phases of the Refugee Experience*

- 1) Living in a situation of war, widespread violence or social upheaval.
- 2) Attacks, torture, imprisonment, disappearance of family members.
- 3) Becoming fugitives in own country
- 4) Fleeing the country in hazardous circumstances.
- 5) Country of First Asylum: Refugee Camps/Detention
- 6) Resettlement in 'host country' or Repatriation.

Solutions:

Preventative solutions are necessary.

- Current solutions are 'after-the-fact' – aid, repatriation, resettlement. Although all important, it is necessary to find preventative solutions.

Generally, there are two main ways to do this.

- 1) Institutional reforms to recognise existing ethnic/religious cleavages.
- 2) The provision of incentives for the formation of new groups across divisive lines, to weaken existing cleavages.

* * The Revd Eira Clapton, Consultant on Refugee & Migrant Services, Conference of Churches of WA

Specific Solutions:

For these to be effective they must occur at the international political level.

- Formation of regional peace systems
It is essential to establish regional structures for peace. Although, one must note, the five major refugee-producing centres all have UN formulated agendas, there is no real accountability to being a member of such a system.
- Redefinition of the UN
In several ways the UN exacerbates conflict.
 - 1) *The role of peace-troops needs to be looked at – they hinder as many situations as they help (e.g. Srebrenica)*
 - 2) *Structurally some MAJOR changes are needed. The ‘Big-5’ (and especially the U.S.) have the decisive votes within the UN; and strangely enough these are the five biggest arms suppliers in the world.*
- Conversion
The world must change from a conflict producing economy (militarisation) to a peaceful economy, using resources from military production to make socially-just and genuinely productive products.
- Greater socio-economic equality on a ‘world-scale’.
This must occur both within countries and between countries. It includes equitable sharing of resources and just distributions of power.

All of these solutions will require an enormous amount of good will!!!

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