

THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S REFUGEES 2000

Fifty years of humanitarian action

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Preface

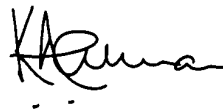
by the United Nations Secretary-General

The problem of forced displacement has been one of the most pressing issues facing the United Nations throughout its history. Among the most vulnerable groups of people in the world are those who are displaced, whether as a result of conflict, persecution or other human rights violations. In the 50 years since its creation, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has been at the forefront of efforts to protect these people.

UNHCR began as a small organization, with a three-year mandate to help resettle European refugees who were still homeless in the aftermath of the Second World War. Since that time, the organization has continually expanded to meet the growing needs of refugees and other displaced people. Today it assists some 22 million people in every corner of the world.

The State of the World's Refugees 2000 is a timely and important book. It provides a detailed history of half a century of international humanitarian action on behalf of refugees and other displaced people, covering all the major refugee emergencies of the last 50 years. It examines the way in which each succeeding crisis has helped shape an expanding body of refugee law, and it analyses the international community's changing response to the problem of forced migration. Above all, it places humanitarian action in the broader political context and examines the fundamental link between displacement and international peace and security.

As a former UNHCR staff member myself, I have personally witnessed the desperate plight of uprooted people in many situations. This book is a tribute both to the courage demonstrated by millions of displaced people and to the dedication and commitment of all those who have worked to protect and assist them over the last half century.



Kofi Annan

Foreword

by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

It takes only a glance at some of the chapter titles of this book to understand why UNHCR's 50th anniversary is not a cause for celebration. Decade by decade, the book provides a stark chronicle of the major upheavals of the past half century—a seemingly unending string of conflicts and crises that have resulted in the displacement of tens of millions of people.

As we enter the new millennium, the fact that the world still finds a need for UNHCR should serve as a sobering reminder of the international community's continuing failure to prevent prejudice, persecution, poverty and other root causes of conflict and displacement. With over a million people forced to flee their homes in Kosovo, East Timor and Chechnya in the last year of the 20th century alone, it is clear that the problem of forced displacement has not gone away, and is likely to remain a major concern of the international community in the 21st century.

But if the longevity of UNHCR as an organization is nothing to celebrate, the courage of the tens of millions of refugees and displaced people who have survived over the past 50 years certainly is. Often losing everything but hope, they are amongst the great survivors of the 20th century and they deserve our respect. That is why in this anniversary year, UNHCR is honouring them for their countless individual and collective accomplishments.

As the number of people of concern to UNHCR has grown, so has the complexity of the problem of forced displacement. Today, policy is set against a backdrop of radical geopolitical shifts; the enormous growth in numbers of the internally displaced; the prevalence of humanitarian emergencies in conflict situations where civilians are the main targets and where humanitarian workers often come under fire; the process of globalization which simultaneously offers opportunities to some but denies them to others; the rise in human trafficking; declining opportunities for asylum; and open criticism of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention which lies at the heart of UNHCR's work.

States have often shown great hospitality and generosity in hosting refugees and other displaced people. Likewise, UNHCR—together with its partners—has on many occasions played an important role in protecting and assisting these people, and in helping them to restart their lives. But, as the chapters of this book illustrate all too clearly, humanitarian action is of limited value if it does not form part of a wider strategic and political framework aimed at addressing the root causes of conflict. Experience has shown time and time again that humanitarian action alone cannot solve problems which are fundamentally political in nature. Yet all too often, humanitarian organizations like UNHCR have found themselves isolated and alone in dangerous and difficult situations, where they have had to operate without adequate financial and political support.

Unfortunately, the kind of international political commitment that states have shown in dealing with human displacement in some regions has been absent in other regions considered to be of lesser strategic importance. Although the international community has responded quickly to some of the major refugee emergencies in Africa, such as the Rwandan refugee crisis which began in 1994, donors have been slow to provide support in other situations. In 1999, for example, donors were quick to provide funds and resources for those displaced by the conflict in Kosovo. But little attention was paid to the situation in West Africa, where hundreds of thousands of people were uprooted by crises in Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau.

States have also often demonstrated a lack of political commitment to solving refugee problems during the post-conflict phase, when the spotlight of the international media has moved away. Refugees and other displaced people often return to places where a fragile peace needs to be consolidated through reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction. Unfortunately, political uncertainty often discourages the involvement of development organizations and investment by financial institutions, with the result that the gap between emergency humanitarian assistance and longer-term development aid remains largely unaddressed.

This book provides a critical analysis of many of these important issues. It attempts to offer an objective account of the difficult situations in which displaced people have found themselves, and of the changing international political environment in which UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations have operated. The aim of the book is not to be judgemental, nor is it to provide an official history of UNHCR and the refugee problem. Rather, it is to present a historical overview of the many dilemmas which have been faced by governments, humanitarian organizations and other actors in dealing with the problem of human displacement.

I have had the privilege of leading UNHCR and its dedicated staff throughout most of the 1990s. During my time as High Commissioner, I have repeatedly attempted to highlight the link between human displacement and international peace and security. It is vital that the international community continue to seek lasting solutions to problems of human displacement. Those who would ignore them do so at their peril. History has shown that displacement is not only a consequence of conflicts; it can also cause conflict. Without human security, there can be no peace and stability.



Sadako Ogata