Searching for SAFE HAVEN

Of the planet’s more than 6 billion people, some 240 million are on the move, fleeing war, persecution, poverty, environmental degradation, or just seeking a better life.

You’ll find their names on page two of every issue of the Bulletin: Albert Einstein, Hans Bethe, Rudolf Peierls, Leo Szilard, Victor Weisskopf, and James Franck. Besides having served on the Bulletin’s board of sponsors, these individuals share much in common. They were some of the most distinguished physicists of the twentieth century. All except Einstein were members of the Manhattan Project, the secret U.S. government program that produced the first atomic bombs; all were involved in efforts to fight the spread and use of nuclear weapons after World War II; and all fled their countries because of Nazi persecution.

In other words, these men were refugees. But at the time of their flight—in the 1930s—there was no established international system aimed at aiding and protecting those who were forcibly displaced from their homes and countries. While these scientists were among those who were able to find refuge abroad, by the end of World War II, Europe had more than 40 million displaced persons. To tackle this humanitarian crisis, the League of Nations—and later, the United Nations—established a series of temporary agencies that distributed emergency aid and assisted repatriation. Although these agencies had some success—for example, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, established in 1943, repatriated 7 million European civilians during the five-month period following the end of the war—the Cold War quickly intervened. How could a humanitarian relief agency justify repatriating refugees to Soviet-bloc or communist-controlled East European countries, where they often faced political repression and sometimes life in a labor camp? As refugee policy shifted from repatriation to resettlement, the Soviet Union grew increasingly critical, arguing that Western countries were sheltering subversives and looking for cheap labor.

Then, in 1950, the United Nations created a durable and lasting relief organization—the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Initially given a three-year mandate to help resettle those still displaced from the war, UNHCR has grown into one of the world’s chief humanitarian agencies, every year aiding millions of displaced persons in more than 100 countries. Working in tandem with various sis-
On the move . . .

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International migrants</td>
<td>168 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>Refugees, including Palestinians</td>
<td>16 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internally displaced due to:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Conflict or persecution</td>
<td>25 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>Natural disasters, other causes</td>
<td>30 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asylum seekers</td>
<td>940,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total uprooted people</td>
<td>240 million</td>
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Note on estimates: According to the U.N. Population Division, there are 180 million international migrants, including refugees, but 3.9 million Palestinians are not included in U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) numbers. Of the 20–25 million internally displaced due to conflict or persecution, only 5.3 million receive UNHCR aid. The 30 million figure is from the World Food Program.
budget and support its mandate. And increasingly, governments from Europe to Asia to the Americas are balking at their responsibilities vis-à-vis displaced people—and reducing the size of their UNHCR contributions. The United States routinely detains potential asylum seekers offshore, preventing them from applying for refugee status; in Britain, which complains of a ten-fold increase in asylum applicants since 1988, government ministers charge that the 1951 convention is outdated; and in Australia, immigration officials criticize UNHCR for having a double standard, “[spending] cents a day looking after people in Africa [while] we spend tens of thousands of dollars on people in developed countries who have been free enough to travel and had the money to engage people smugglers.” Further aggravating the situation, officials across the globe have argued since last September’s attacks that asylum policies provide convenient cover for terrorist activities.

The fact is, the vast majority of refugees live in hastily established camps located in the world’s most underdeveloped countries. As the Forced Migration Review reports on its Web site, “Refugee burden-sharing is highly unequal.” At the end of 2001, Iran was hosting one refugee for every 26 citizens; Lebanon, one for every 11. In Britain, however, the number is one for every 972. “The European Union, a collection of some of the richest countries in the world, hosts less than 5 percent of the world’s refugee population.” Aware of this unequal distribution, underdeveloped countries are growing increasingly reluctant to accept refugee flows.

Further, most of the world’s uprooted are migrants—people who have left their countries in search of food, better living conditions, jobs, or to be with family members. Millions of others are so-called environmental refugees, who have fled ecological destruction or large-scale development projects (according to some estimates, climate change and environmental degradation could displace as many as 150 million more by 2050). Then there are the estimated 25 million people internally displaced because of violence or persecution, of whom only a fraction receive aid from UNHCR. For most of these people, the international community and individual countries provide little or no assistance.

Still, this tremendous assembly of people on the move cannot be ignored. But who deserves protection? What responsibilities should governments and the international community shoulder? How can refugee protection efforts be fine-tuned? What is the price we pay for not coming to the aid of displaced people? And if, as many believe, the number of uprooted continues to grow, how will the protection regime need to evolve?

Michael Flynn

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**Selected refugee facts**

**Who are they?**
- Someone you probably know—of the world’s population, one person in four is either displaced or a refugee, or has a parent or grandparent who was.
- In 1990, 13 to 14 million people were “internally displaced” (were forced to flee from home to another location within their country because of violence or persecution). By the end of the decade, the number had grown to 21 million.
- Approximately 80 percent of refugees and internally displaced persons are women and children.

**Giving generously to those in need—or not**
- Because of a drop in donations, in September 2001 the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was forced to cut its budget by 10 percent, its staff by 16 percent.
- In 2001, Norway contributed $12.55 per capita to major international agencies assisting refugees, Denmark gave $8.87, Sweden, $7.30, and the Netherlands, $4.76. Lower on the list: Germany at $0.51 per citizen, Britain at $1.06, and the United States at $1.38.
- Governments now spend $10 billion a year to examine asylum applications, or 10 times the UNHCR’s annual budget.

**Welcoming, or not so welcoming**
- Nearly one-third of all African refugees have been forced to flee to countries that are themselves embroiled in armed conflict.
- Australia, the only Western country to maintain a policy of mandatory detention for all asylum seekers, contributes less than $23 million to UNHCR while spending more than $120 million on detention camps.
- Between 1994 and 1997, Japan accepted one out of every 516 individuals who sought asylum in that country.

**What refugees can offer**
- Fish and chips, Britain’s national dish, was brought to London by Portuguese Marrano refugees in the seventeenth century, and Britain’s first soft toilet paper was manufactured by German Jewish refugees in 1945.
- Even more impressive—17 Nobel Prizes have been won by refugees.

Source: Adapted from Forced Migration Review (fmreview.org/2didyouknow.htm).