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UNHCR global refugee tally at 26-year low while internally displaced increase

While the number of refugees worldwide has reached a 26-year low, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees reported today that its annual global count of uprooted people rose last year to nearly 21 million, primarily because of the agency's expanding role in caring for the world's internally displaced.

UNHCR's "2005 Global Refugee Trends" report says that despite a drop in refugee totals from 9.5 million in 2004 to 8.4 million last year, the overall number of concern to the agency has increased by 1.3 million -- from 19.5 million to 20.8 million. Much of the increase is due to a rise in the number of people living in refugee-like situations within their own countries. UNHCR now counts 6.6 million conflict-generated internally displaced people in 16 countries as being "of concern," compared to 5.4 million in 13 countries at the end of 2004.

"As we approach World Refugee Day on June 20, the good news is that global refugee numbers are the lowest since 1980; that last year saw the smallest mass outflows of new refugees into neighbouring states in 29 years; and that more than 6 million refugees have been able to go home since 2002," said High Commissioner António Guterres. "We're finding lasting solutions for millions of refugees through voluntary repatriation, through local integration in countries of first asylum, and through resettlement to third countries."

"But the bad news is that the international community still has a long way to go in resolving the plight of millions of internally displaced people in places like Darfur, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo," Guterres added. "While we have helped hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people go home in Liberia, the Russian Federation, the Balkans and elsewhere, millions more are still living like refugees within their own borders. They need much more help than they currently get, and UNHCR intends to do its share."

UNHCR began work in 1951 with a mandate to protect and find solutions for refugees – people who have crossed international borders to escape persecution and violence in their homeland. While it has also helped specific populations of internally displaced people (IDP) for three decades, it is now being asked to take an increasingly active role with the world's estimated 20-25 million IDPs – sometimes called "internal refugees" – who are not covered by the 1951 Refugee Convention because they have not left their countries. Nevertheless, they face many of the same problems as refugees. Last year, the United Nations strengthened its collaborative effort to address the needs of more internally displaced people by assigning specific sectoral functions to various UN agencies. UNHCR was given responsibility to lead the protection, camp management and emergency shelter clusters.

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The 6.6 million internally displaced people for whom UNHCR already works represent 32 percent of the total population of concern (20.8 million) to the agency, second only to refugees at 40 percent. The remaining 28 percent in the agency's 2005 count includes returned refugees and returned displaced (1.6 million); asylum seekers (773,000); stateless people (2.4 million); and "various" such as those unable to apply for asylum despite being in need of protection (960,000). UNHCR's figures do not include 4.3 million Palestinian refugees who fall under the responsibility of the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

The vast majority of the world's uprooted people remain in developing nations. The 2005 statistics show five nationalities accounting for nearly half of the total population of concern to UNHCR: Afghans (2.9 million); Colombians (2.5 million); Iraqis (1.8 million); Sudanese (1.6 million); and Somalis (839,000). With more than 2 million internally displaced, Colombia hosted the largest population of uprooted people of concern to UNHCR, followed by Iraq (1.6 million), Pakistan (1.1 million), Sudan (1 million) and Afghanistan (912,000).

According to the report compiled by UNHCR's Field Information and Coordination Support Section, it was the fifth straight year in which the global population of refugees – those who have crossed an international border – declined. Global refugee numbers have fallen by 31 percent since 2001, from 12.1 million to 8.4 million at the end of 2005. All five regions covered by UNHCR reported a decrease in the refugee population in 2005, with the largest reductions (19 percent) recorded in West Africa and in the so-called CASWANAME region (Central Asia, Southwest Asia, North Africa, Middle East). Large repatriation operations have been underway in both regions, which still host about two-thirds of the world's refugees. The number of refugees fell by 15 percent last year in Europe, which hosted about a quarter of all refugees. Asia and the Pacific hosted 10 percent of the world's refugees, and the Americas 7 percent.

Although Afghanistan remained the source of the largest number of refugees -- 1.9 million in 72 asylum countries -- the overall total of Afghan refugees fell by 21 percent last year because of an ongoing repatriation program that has seen more than 4.6 million people go home since 2002. UNHCR repatriation operations also accounted for declines in the numbers of Burundi refugees (down 10 percent) and Liberian refugees (down 31 percent). Of the 1.1 million refugees who went home last year, 752,000 went to Afghanistan, 70,000 to Liberia, 68,000 to Burundi, 56,000 to Iraq and 54,000 to Angola. In all, there were 15 UNHCR repatriation operations involving at least 1,000 refugees last year.

Mass movements of new refugees into neighbouring countries – so-called *prima facie* refugees – amounted to their lowest total since 1976. A total of 136,000 *prima facie* refugee arrivals were reported by 19 asylum countries, a 46 percent decline on the previous year. Six countries of origin produced more than 10,000 *prima facie* refugees, including Togo (39,000), Sudan (35,000), the Democratic Republic of Congo (16,000), Somalia (14,000), the Central African Republic (12,000) and Iraq (11,000).

The number of people seeking asylum or appeals last year totaled 668,000 in 149 countries, down 2 percent over 2004 when 680,000 applications were lodged globally. Most were registered in Europe (374,000), Africa (125,000), Asia-Pacific (75,000), and the Americas (72,000).

The "2005 Global Refugee Trends" report is on the UNHCR web site at www.unhcr.org

