Refugee migration 1: Source analysis

Who are refugees?

Until 1951, there was no commonly accepted term for people fleeing persecution. People who fled their country were known as stateless people, migrants or refugees. There were no universally recognised definitions for these categories, and different countries treated these people in different ways.

Following the mass migrations caused by the World War II (particularly in Europe), it was decided that there needed to be a common understanding about which people needed protection and how they should be protected. This resulted in the development of The Refugee Convention, 1951 (commonly known as the Refugee Convention) relating to the status of refugees, which defines that the term ‘refugee’ shall apply to:

… any person who … owing to a well-founded fear of persecutions for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his (or her) nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself (or herself) of the protection of that country.


Who are asylum seekers?

An asylum seeker is a person who has sought protection as a refugee, but whose claim for refugee status has not yet been assessed. Many refugees have at some point been asylum seekers, that is, they have lodged an individual claim for protection and have had that claim assessed by a government or the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Some refugees, however, do not formally seek protection as asylum seekers. During mass influx situations, people may be declared 'prima facie' refugees without having undergone an individual assessment of their claims. Conducting individual interviews in these circumstances is generally unviable (due the large numbers involved) and unnecessary (as the reasons for flight are usually self-evident). In other cases, refugees may be unable to access formal status determination processes, or they may simply be unaware that they are entitled to claim protection as a refugee.

It is important to note that refugee status exists regardless of whether it has been formally recognised. People do not ‘become’ refugees at the point when their claims for protection are upheld – they are already refugees, and the assessment process simply recognises their pre-existing status. People become refugees (and are entitled to international protection and assistance) from the moment they flee their country due to a well-founded fear of persecution, as stipulated in the Refugee Convention. This means that a person can simultaneously be a refugee and an asylum seeker.
While many refugees are, or have been, asylum seekers, not all asylum seekers are refugees. Some will be found to have valid claims for protection which entitle them to international protection and assistance. Others will be found not to be refugees, nor to be in need of any other form of international protection, and as such are expected to return to their country of origin.

Climate-induced displacement

Weather-related disasters, environmental degradation and changing climatic conditions are forcing people from their homes in growing numbers. Natural disasters are increasing in force and frequency and were responsible for displacing over 36 million people in 2008. As the world’s population continues to grow, water scarcity, desertification and decreased agricultural output are causing increasing numbers of people to migrate to survive. With increasing numbers of poor people living in vulnerable environments, moving becomes a necessity for many.

As the desert expands in places like Darfur, the scarcity of natural resources creates and exacerbates conflict. In the future, climate change and rising sea levels will harm some of the world’s most vulnerable populations through greater weather variability, water scarcity and severe environmental degradation. The sheer numbers of people displaced are a significant issue for all concerned.

The most dramatic impacts of climate-induced displacement, such as the complete submersion of island states like the Maldives, are many decades in the future. But today, increased displacement due to more frequent large-scale natural disasters is challenging an already stressed international humanitarian system. As recent floods in Pakistan and Colombia have shown, the current system is ill-prepared to respond effectively.

Humanitarian response

During civil conflicts or natural disasters, civilians are often forced to flee their homes, suffer the loss of their property, and are stripped of their ability to fend for themselves. They frequently seek out safety within other areas of their country, becoming more vulnerable to human rights abuses and more dependent on humanitarian assistance for their survival.

There are around 27.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) worldwide. In contrast to those who cross an international border and have legal protection as refugees, IDPs lack these protections and must rely on their own government to assist and protect them. When a country is unwilling or incapable of providing those services, international agencies have a duty to step in and fill the gap.

Over the past ten years, the United Nations and other actors (agencies and organisations responding to emergencies) have taken steps to improve the way they respond to humanitarian crisis. But the nature of displacement has changed dramatically in recent years. As a result, humanitarian actors are now being forced to rethink and adapt their interventions. For example, more civilians are being targeted during conflicts, leading to increased numbers of IDPs. Many displaced populations are also now settling outside of well-defined camps, making it difficult for agencies to provide effective assistance. In other cases, access to asylum procedures has become more lengthy and cumbersome, with national governments and local populations showing increasing hostility to refugees.
What is the difference between migrants and refugees?

**Migrants**

A migrant is a person who makes a conscious choice to leave their country to seek a better life elsewhere. Before they decide to leave their country, migrants can seek information about their new home, study the language and explore employment opportunities. They can plan their travel, take their belongings with them and say goodbye to the important people in their lives. They are free to return home at any time if things don't work out as they had hoped, if they get homesick or if they wish to visit family members and friends left behind.

**Refugees**

Refugees are forced to leave their country because they are at risk of, or have experienced, persecution. The concerns of refugees are human rights and safety, not economic advantage. They leave behind their homes, most or all of their belongings, family members and friends. Some are forced to flee with no warning and many have experienced significant trauma, or have been tortured or ill-treated. The journey to safety is fraught with hazards and many refugees risk their lives in search of protection. They cannot return unless the situation that forced them to leave improves.

People who choose to migrate for economic reasons are sometimes called 'economic refugees', especially if they are trying to escape from poverty. However, they are not refugees under international law. The correct term for people who leave their country or place of residence because they want to seek a better life is 'economic migrant'.


Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are often referred to as refugees. However, while refugees and IDPs may flee for similar reasons (for example, armed conflict or persecution), their legal status is very different. Unlike refugees, IDPs remain within the borders of their home country and are legally under the protection of their own government, even in cases where the government's actions are the cause of their flight. A person cannot be recognised as a refugee unless they are outside their home country.

The term 'refugee' is also used colloquially to refer to people who have been displaced due to a natural disaster (such as an earthquake or volcanic eruption) or environmental change. This usage is also incorrect. For further information, see the **Refugee Council of Australia's** [web page on climate refugees](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/f/int-env.php).