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Overview of the Global Humanitarian and Displacement Crisis

The world is experiencing what many experts say is an unprecedented humanitarian and displacement crisis. The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) reported that in 2018 more than 134 million people worldwide required humanitarian assistance and protection as a result of conflict and disaster. The United States is the single largest donor, consistently providing nearly one-third (more than \$7 billion in FY2016 and \$9.3 billion in FY2017) of total global humanitarian assistance. Congress enacted \$9.4 billion for global humanitarian accounts in FY2018.

Types of Crises and Affected Populations

According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2017, more than 68.5 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide due to armed conflict, widespread or indiscriminate violence, and/or human rights violations. Those displaced included 25.4 million refugees, 3.1 million asylum seekers, and 40 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). UNHCR estimates that 10 million people remained stateless. Large, forcibly displaced populations included Syrians, Afghans, Rohingya, Colombians, Congolese, Iraqis, Nigerians, Somalis, Sudanese, South Sudanese, and Yemenis. Millions of people a year are also affected by natural disasters and often require prolonged and urgent assistance. These events may be sudden (such as earthquakes or storms) or protracted (like drought conditions). On average, 26 million people are displaced annually due to disasters.

Key Populations of Concern

Refugees, who have fled their country of origin because of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or membership in a particular social or political group. Refugees are unwilling or unable to avail themselves of the protection of their home government due to fears of persecution. Once granted refugee status, a person has certain rights and protections under international law.

Asylum-seekers, who flee their home country and seek sanctuary in another state where they apply for asylum, i.e., the right to be recognized as a refugee. They may receive legal protection and assistance while their formal status is determined.

Returnees, who are refugees voluntarily returned to their country of origin.

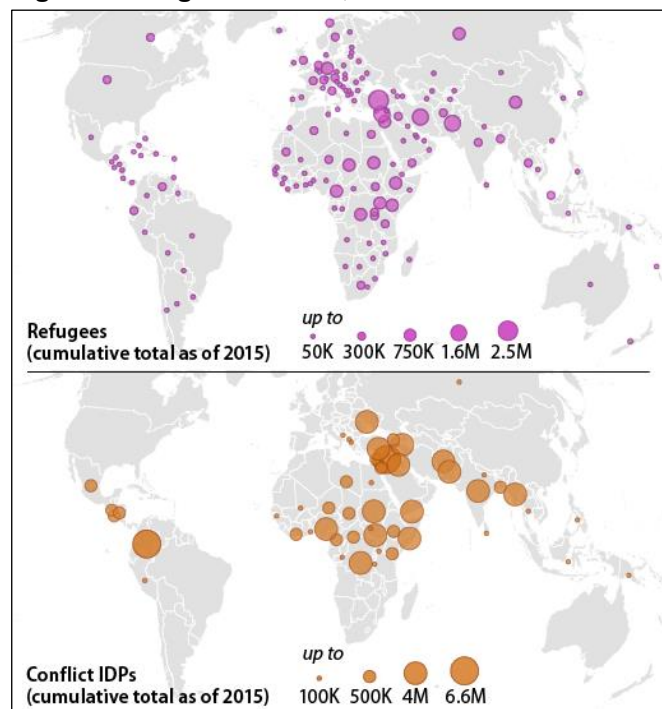
Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), who have been forced from their homes often for many of the same reasons as refugees but have not crossed an international border.

Stateless persons, who are not considered to be citizens of any state under national laws.

Other populations, such as children, women, the elderly, and people with disabilities, who are particularly vulnerable.

Some populations move voluntarily while others are forced to flee. Migrants, who often leave poverty and unemployment to seek better opportunities or family reunification, numbered approximately 258 million in 2017. Refugees and others displaced involuntarily often face a different set of circumstances. Instead of choosing to leave their place of origin, they may be forced to do so for reasons such as armed conflict, ethnic strife, violence, human rights violations, or natural disasters. For many, their status is uncertain, leaving them at risk of exploitation.

Figure 1. Refugees and IDPs, as of 2015



Source: Created by CRS using data from UNHCR and IDMC.

U.S. Policy

The United States is a major contributor to humanitarian relief efforts in international crises and disaster situations. The key U.S. agencies providing humanitarian assistance include the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Department of State, and the Department of Defense. In the past five fiscal years (FY2013–FY2017), the United States has provided over \$36 billion in humanitarian assistance.

Congress has given the President broad authority on humanitarian issues and flexibility to respond to disasters with a wide range of assistance. On a bipartisan basis, it has consistently supported humanitarian efforts as a means of responding to natural disasters and conflict-induced crises in the short term, mitigating humanitarian impacts, and promoting a U.S. presence.

In practice, the provision of U.S. humanitarian assistance is typically case and time specific and may include assistance through bilateral and multilateral mechanisms and humanitarian partners; protection activities for vulnerable populations; support for countries and communities hosting the displaced; encouraging donor contributions; and building response capacity. The plethora of humanitarian emergencies, including food security challenges, and human displacement worldwide will likely continue to demand the attention of the Administration and Congress. While the Administration's FY2019 budget request for global humanitarian assistance totals \$6.3 billion, roughly 33% less than FY2018 appropriated amounts, Congress continues to support humanitarian aid through legislation.

Selected Issues and Challenges

Emergence of New Crises and Underfunding. A major challenge facing the humanitarian community is the emergence of new crises (and additional requirements for existing ones), as in the four concurrent famine threats in Africa, many of which may result in lifesaving assistance and protection activities taking precedence over long-term investments and the search for durable solutions. In addition to the global scale of the problem, chronic underfunding of U.N. and other humanitarian appeals means that urgent humanitarian needs frequently outpace available budgets for operations. The 2018 UNOCHA global appeal is at its highest ever—\$25.28 billion—nearly three times the amount five years ago.

Protracted Displacement. Refugees may be stranded in other countries and IDPs may be separated from their homes for long periods. This is particularly the case with respect to large, protracted displacements, where armed conflict continues and a political solution proves elusive. The global population of those forcibly displaced has increased by 75 percent in the past two decades, and on average, a person is displaced as a refugee for 20 years. The combination of new crises and old conflicts places heavy demands on governments and communities that are hosting large, long-term displaced populations particularly since these populations are often not confined to camps. National governments have the primary responsibility for all displaced people in their territory; however, in many cases they are unable or unwilling to fulfill this obligation, creating challenges for those aiming to assist IDPs. In 2017, some of the largest numbers of IDPs were in Iraq, Syria, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Colombia. The top countries hosting refugees included Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Uganda, and Ethiopia. A key related issue is the level of refugee admissions into major donor countries.

Mixed Migration. An emerging challenge stems from “mixed migration” where flows of different groups of people—such as economic migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, trafficked persons, and unaccompanied children, usually in a mix of nationalities or ethnic groups—travel the same route and use the same modes of transportation. Many of these individuals do not have the required documentation, and may use unauthorized border crossings or involve smugglers to do so. The lines of distinction within these groups have caused confusion and

raised questions about determination of status and protection required. Even if they do not qualify as refugees, migrants may need some type of protection because they are fleeing other risks. Sometimes the status of a person may change en route, but often the reasons that drive an individual's decision to move are a complex mix of factors. States concerned about the economic burden of those seeking help and the potential security issues resulting from uncontrolled migration (and raised in part because of the threat of terrorism) insist on stricter enforcement of asylum and immigration policies, while others are concerned about international protection of those on the move.

Operational Constraints and Response. Displaced populations in all areas of the world require protection, the basis of which may be found in international humanitarian law and reflected in humanitarian assistance provided by a variety of actors and organizations. Local, regional, and national authorities also often have a role in the provision of assistance, law enforcement, and access control. Security concerns can severely constrain humanitarian operations in areas of conflict posing risks for those needing assistance and humanitarian personnel. Although preventing displacement and creating solutions for those already displaced are obvious bookends to the problem, sustaining a humanitarian response, building capacity within governments and civil society, and creating resilience in vulnerable populations remain daily challenges.

Key International Humanitarian Meetings

In May 2016, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon convened the first *U.N. World Humanitarian Summit* in Istanbul, Turkey, which brought together thousands of stakeholders representing 173 countries to address the unprecedented challenges facing the global humanitarian system. A key outcome was the signing of a “Grand Bargain,” which aims to make aid more efficient and effective, to include greater local and national participation and partnerships, and to establish coherence between humanitarian and development responses.

In addition, at the **U.N. General Assembly High-Level Plenary Summit on Refugees and Migrants** in September 2016, world leaders agreed to the “New York Declaration,” which aims to save lives, protect rights, and share responsibility for refugees and migrants on a global scale. As a complement to this event, President Obama co-hosted a **Leaders' Summit on Refugees** to ask nations to increase their efforts to respond to the global displacement crisis. Participants agreed to increase contributions to U.N. appeals; expand options for resettlement and other legal channels of admission; and improve access to education for one million refugee children and lawful work for one million refugees. Building on these 2016 meetings, negotiations between U.N. member states began on two global compacts—a **Global Compact on Refugees (GCR)** and a **Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM)**. The United States announced in December 2017 that it was ending its participation in the GCM.

Rhoda Margesson, Specialist in International
Humanitarian Policy

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