

Refugees



Fatmata's story

"My name is Fatmata Sesay and I am from Sierra Leone. I used to go to boarding school in Freetown, the capital city. I was in school one day in October in 1997, ... I was 13 years of age. The rebels were killing people and burning their houses. I didn't know what to do. We were all afraid. I ran out of the school and found my mother. She held me by the hand and we started running together. Then the rebels attacked us. They shot my mother in front of me. She pushed me away so that I would not also be killed. That is how I lost my sweet mother. It has given me a pain that I can never forget."

In June 2002, the decade-long conflict in Sierra Leone was officially declared over.

Trauma

Like Fatmata, many refugees have lived through appalling trauma. They may have been raped or tortured and may have seen their loved ones killed before their eyes. They often arrive at their country of destination with severe physical and psychological problems, and much in need of comfort and support. They may not speak the language, they probably have no work or money and they are often very afraid. They have to adapt to a totally different culture and sometimes face hostility from people in the host country.

How do you define a refugee?

In 1951 the UN defined a refugee as: "a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her origin and is unwilling or... unable to return to it." In 1984 this definition was expanded to include people who have fled because of war or civil conflict.

The internally displaced

A large number of people who have had to flee their homes do not leave their own country, but go into hiding or seek refuge in a "safer" part of their own country. These people are known as "internally displaced people" (IDPs). They have often been uprooted from their homes, family and friends and have lost their only source of income. In 2001 there were an estimated 5.3 million internally displaced people worldwide. Of these, nearly 900,000 were in the three conflict zones of Afghanistan, Colombia and Liberia. People who are internally displaced are the fastest growing group of uprooted people in the world.

Asylum seekers

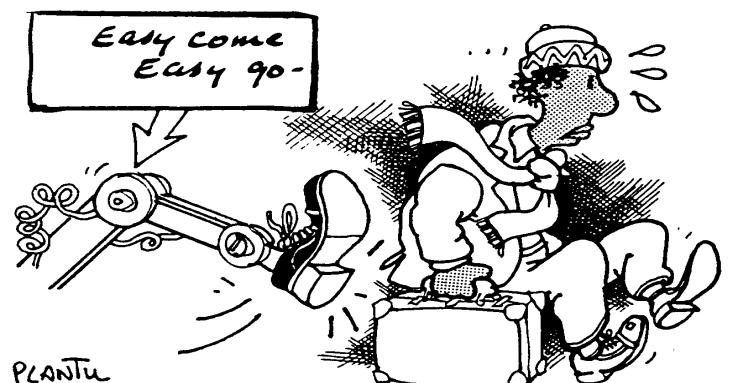
When people escape from their own country and seek sanctuary in another country, they usually apply for "asylum". This is the right to be recognised officially as a refugee. Once their case has been examined and they have been given refugee status, they can receive legal protection and some material help to survive in the new country.

Most asylum seekers do not travel to Europe or the United States, but to their neighbouring countries. For example, the majority of Afghan refugees sought asylum in Pakistan and Iran. Those fleeing the wars in Burundi, Sudan, Angola and Somalia went to neighbouring African countries like Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya and Namibia. Those that fled the first war in Iraq went mainly to Iraq's previous enemy, Iran. The majority of asylum seekers who come to Britain are genuine refugees.

Returned refugees

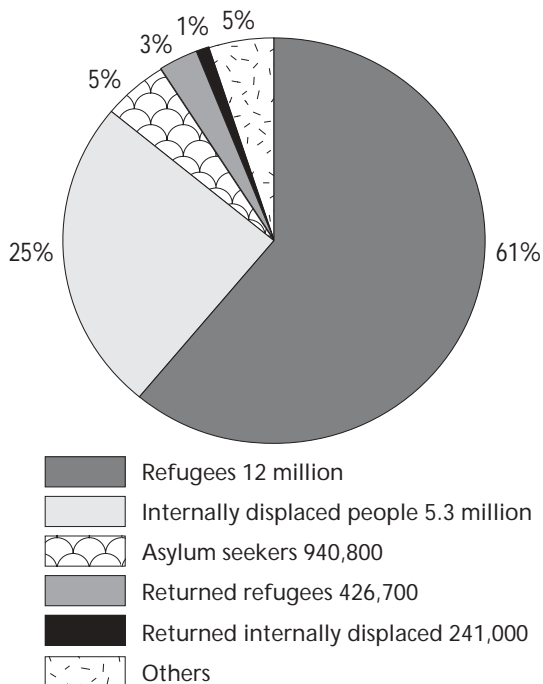
Most refugees return when it is safe to do so, even if their homes and livelihoods have been destroyed. They may receive assistance from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) or other organisations like CAFOD. This usually takes the form of practical help, like farm tools and seeds, so that they can build a new livelihood. Some governments have now agreed to take quotas of refugees to help them through a short-term crisis such as a war, on the understanding that they will return home with some help for resettlement.

At the start of 2002 the number of people "of concern" to UNHCR was 19.8 million compared with 21.8 million a year earlier. The overall decrease of two million people reflected two conflicting trends: huge groups fleeing their homes during the year, but even greater numbers of uprooted persons returning from exile.



People of concern to UNHCR (2002)

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was set up in 1950 to safeguard the rights and well being of refugees. It strives to ensure that everyone can exercise the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another State, with the option to return home voluntarily, integrate locally or to resettle in a third country. By the beginning of 2002 there were an estimated 19.8 million people "of concern" to UNHCR.



"The fact that 15 Nobel Prizes have been won by refugees who found asylum in Britain is a dramatic illustration of refugees' potential to enrich and contribute to society."

(Employment as a key to settlement, A. Philips)

What does CAFOD do to help refugees?

Some 150,000 people in devastated East Timor have received food and shelter as part of the Caritas International relief operation supported by CAFOD.



Children from East Timor with UN peacekeeping forces

Violence followed a referendum on independence from Indonesia in August 1999. As the rainy season set in before Christmas, plastic sheets, tools and tarpaulin were distributed to people whose homes were destroyed in the troubles. Staff of local organisations supported by CAFOD, many of whom were targets for pro-Indonesian militias, have returned from hiding and work has begun on restarting the health, rural development and training programmes that were destroyed by the conflict.

Activities

Find out what else CAFOD does for refugees by using the SEARCH button at

www.cafod.org.uk

Find out more about refugees in Britain from

www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

Find out if there are ways you can support refugees in your school or community. What do you think would make them feel welcome?

Illegal immigrants

An illegal immigrant is someone who enters a country without the proper papers. However, many illegal immigrants are genuine refugees. People who have to flee their countries in fear for their lives are often unable to obtain passports or visas because this would put them in greater danger. In some countries, including the UK, governments will fine airlines and ferry companies that carry illegal immigrants. Sometimes people that manage to get to Britain without papers are treated as prisoners and kept locked up, even though they may still be suffering from trauma.

Economic migrants

The definition of a refugee does not include those who leave their homes because they have no means of survival. This might be because of environmental degradation, because they have been evicted from their lands or because there is no work and no way for them to make a living. Most economic migrants move to another part of their own country or to a neighbouring country. A very small number go to a different continent, usually because they have friends and family who have settled there. The majority live on very little money and send most of what they earn back home to help their families.

Where do most refugees come from?

Most refugees come from countries that are in conflict, anywhere in the world. Often people assume that refugees come from the poorest countries, but this is not true. During the war in Afghanistan in late 2001, there were nearly 200,000 Afghan refugees (mostly fleeing to Pakistan) compared to 188,000 from the whole of the continent of Africa. The second largest number was from Macedonia (65,000, mostly fleeing to neighbouring Yugoslavia).

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