

The Friction of Freedom

Forcible Displacement: According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Refugee Agency, by mid-2021, approximately 84 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide. This includes: 48 million internally displaced people, 26.6 million refugees, and 4.4 million asylum seekers. The number of new displacements in 2020 was 11.2 million people. The majority of these (9.8 million) were internally displaced, while the others were looking for protection outside their home countries. 42 percent of forcibly displaced people are children under the age of 18.

UNHCR reports that Syria and Venezuela have the most internally displaced people, followed by Afghanistan and South Sudan. For refugees, more than two thirds come from only five countries: The Syrian Arab Republic, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar. In 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, and as a result, millions of people fled from Ukraine to Poland and other neighboring countries.

Reasons for Displacement: People leave their homes for many reasons, but UNHCR states that the most common reasons are ethnic, tribal, and religious violence. In Syria, people have been fleeing the country for more than 10 years because of civil war. Many of them now live in neighboring Turkey. Millions more remain displaced within Syria. Venezuelans have also been fleeing their country for almost ten years because of economic and political instability. A large number of Venezuelan refugees live in Columbia. In Afghanistan, displacement both within and outside of the country is being caused by conflict, drought, and other natural disasters. Many Afghan refugees live in Pakistan. South Sudan is another country experiencing a refugee crisis. Millions of people have been internally displaced or have fled to Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia, and other neighboring countries as a result of civil war and famine. Finally, more than a million Rohingya—a stateless Muslim ethnic minority—have been displaced in Myanmar due to human rights violations. A large number now live in Bangladesh.

Climate change has also become a major cause of forcible displacement. UNHCR estimates that weather-related events such as natural disasters and droughts have been causing about 21.5 million displacements every year for the past 10 years. As climate change continues in the future, UNHCR and many other organizations predict that the number of climate refugees worldwide will increase significantly. In 2018, the Institute for Economics and Peace issued a report predicting that by 2050, at least 1.2 billion people will be displaced by climate-change-related threats.

Refugee Destinations: UNHCR finds that almost three quarters of refugees are hosted in neighboring countries. Worldwide, Turkey hosts the most refugees (3.1 million), followed by Columbia (1.7 million). Uganda (1.5 million), Pakistan (1.4 million), and Germany (1.2 million).

The United States accepts thousands of refugees every year. According to the most recent data from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, in 2019 it accepted 29,916 refugees, with the largest numbers coming from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burma, and Ukraine. In addition, 46,508 people were granted asylum by the United States, with the largest number coming from the People's Republic of China, Venezuela, and El Salvador. The agency reports that the United States has accepted more than 3.7 million asylum seekers and refugees since 1980. An analysis of immigration court records by the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse shows that 71 percent of asylum cases were denied in 2020 and 63 percent were denied in 2021.

International Organizations:

Amnesty International: <https://www.amnesty.org/en> • Human Rights Watch: <https://www.hrw.org> • International Organization for Migration: <https://www.iom.int> • International Rescue Committee: <https://www.rescue.org> • Refugees International: <https://www.refugeesinternational.org> • United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): <https://www.unhcr.org> • United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA): <https://www.unrwa.org>