Second Edition

A BETTER COUNTRY

Embracing the Refugees in Our Midst



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Chapter 1

GLOBAL PEOPLE, GLOBAL PROBLEMS

We are all living in one big town. –Mary Pipher

BEFORE WE BEGIN

In this chapter you will learn about the modern-day global refugee crisis. We will make distinctions between the different types of migrants and learn how global protection for refugees got started.

What are the first three words or images that pop into your mind when you hear the word "refugee"? Write your answers below.

What fears or unknowns come to mind when you think about refugees resettling in the US?

Look around your home. Chances are your clothes, food, furniture, and appliances come from all around the world. This might be something you take for granted. Goods that once took weeks to arrive by slow boat can now be ordered online and delivered to your home within days, if not hours. You can access television and radio programming in multiple languages from your living room sofa or car, 24/7.

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Look around our country's major cities. You see crowds in all colors. You can drive down Main Street and find restaurants serving cuisine from distant lands. There is nothing remarkable about this anymore.

Globalization has linked the peoples of the globe to one another. On the one hand, living in a globalized world creates a sense of connectedness and closeness; globalization has the potential to enhance development and reduce inequality. On the other hand, a global economy can cause social, political, and economic upheaval; problems that face a faraway part of the world now have nearby impact.

> ***Displace*** to displace means to force someone to leave their home, typically because of war, persecution, or natural disaster.

Today we are facing a crisis with worldwide reverberations—the global refugee crisis—considered the worst mass displacement since World War II, surpassing what was then the largest in history.

Why are so many people displaced today? Several factors contribute:

- *Economic deprivation*: Migrants are forced by poverty and lack of development to seek better economic opportunity as a means of basic survival.
- *Repression*: Political instability and corruption, often in the form of totalitarian regimes, deny citizens their human rights.
- *Environment*: Environmental degradation or natural disasters destroy the land. Political dynamics often worsen the impact of natural disasters.
- *Violence*: War and civil unrest can force people to flee in fear of their physical safety.
- *Persecution*: Discrimination or ill-treatment based on a person's identity, religion, or affiliation often turns into a threat on someone's life.

In our connected world, a forced migration crisis that takes place in one part of the world will inevitably impact other parts of the world. A crisis of a global scale requires a global, concerted response. In 1950 a global refugee protection regime was created to provide that response.

How many forcibly displaced persons are there in the world today? Visit the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees website, www.unhcr.org, and write the number here: _____

Write down the name of one country where conflict is causing people to flee, perhaps some place you've heard about in the news.

What factors are contributing to the migration?

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REFUGEE AND ASYLUM REGIME IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The first international effort for refugees began in 1921 under the League of Nations with the collaboration of international humanitarian organizations. In order to address the large-scale refugee populations produced by World War II, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was created.

UNHCR was established in 1950, initially as a temporary body to specifically and exclusively address the needs of forcibly displaced Europeans in the aftermath of World War II. Today UNHCR is a permanent body within the United Nations, and its scope extends globally. There are various players in the international refugee protection regime, but the primary organization is UNHCR.

In the 1970s the United States settled hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asian refugees through an ad hoc Refugee Task Force with temporary funding. The sheer volume of refugees prompted Congress to pass the Refugee Act of 1980, the first comprehensive plan for refugee resettlement, which standardized resettlement services and created the US Refugee Admissions Program.[1]

DEFINING "REFUGEES": THE 1951 REFUGEE CONVENTION

To begin our discussion on refugees, it is important to know what we mean by "refugee." A refugee is someone seeking *asylum*—protection or shelter from danger. The inherent right of every human being to find protection is at the heart of the international asylum and refugee protection regime. In 1951 the Refugee Convention, a multi-lateral treaty signed at a special United Nations conference in Geneva, Switzerland, put forth this international standard for defining refugee status and rights:[2]

> A ***refugee*** is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to his/her country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. A refugee is outside of his country of origin.

1 National Archives Foundation "Refugee Act of 1980."

2 The United Nations Convention and Protocol provides this full definition of refugee in Article 1.A.2: For purposes of the present Convention, the term "refugee" shall apply to a person who: (2) … owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such a fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return.

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> ***Resettlement***: the selection and transfer of refugees from a State in which they have sought protection to a third state which has agreed to them—as refugees—with permanent resident status.[3]

While the definition of terms like "fear" and "persecuted" were intentionally left vague to afford maximum protection to those who qualified, the scope of "refugee" was originally very narrow, applying only to Europeans displaced by WWII and to "events occurring before 1 January 1951." A 1967 Protocol removed the geographic and temporal limitation of the original 1951 Convention to make refugee protection more expansive.[4]

But refugees are only one type of forced migrant. Understanding the distinction between refugees and other types of migrants will help clarify the issues surrounding forced migration. Keep these definitions in mind whenever you listen to conversations or news reports about refugees. Generic application of the term can lead to misunderstanding about the population this workbook is addressing—refugees. A refugee in the United States is someone who has been classified and vetted by the UNHCR and US governmental agencies.

Debate revolves around the classification and evaluation of refugee status for those displaced by environmental factors. Some have conflated all causes for displacement and apply the term "refugee" generically to anyone who has been forced from their home. For instance, the category "environmental" or "climate" refugee has been introduced in more recent years as the plight of victims of environmental disasters has been brought to light. One source estimates that more people have been displaced from their homes due to environmental disaster than war and conflict.[5] Still, the technical UNHCR definition for refugee applies only to those fleeing religious, political, and/or ethnic persecution. Currently there is no protocol for dealing with "environmental refugees," even though their predicament is often tied with political factors. In 2016 the United States gave a first-ever grant to move a community impacted by climate change.[6]

We must find a way to manage this crisis in a more humane, equitable, and organized manner. It is only possible if the international community is united and in agreement on how to move forward.

–**Filippo Grandi**,
United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees,
2016–current.

3 UNHCR Resettlement Handbook 2011, 3.

4 Refugee advocates disagree on what constitutes a "refugee." Some refugee advocates suggest the Refugee Convention needs to be broadened further still to include victims of environmental devastation, economic deprivation, or violence. This would result in an even greater number of those classified as refugees.

5 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre.

6 Davenport and Robertson, "Resettling the First 'Climate Refugees.'" The majority of those impacted by the climate crisis and move belong to the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe of Louisiana.

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Asylum seekers have already entered the land where they seek protection and are appealing for authorization to remain there. Asylum seekers have to be able to present a legitimate case for protection based on persecution, or they risk deportation. The right to seek asylum is enshrined in international law.
Asylees have legally received asylum. Asylees are eligible for Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA) and other benefits, like job training.

Internally displaced persons (IDP) have been forcibly removed from home but remain within the boundaries of their country of origin. IDPs constitute the largest category of forced migrants, but there is no international legal instrument to protect them.[7]

How many Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) are in the world today? Visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), www.internal-displacement.org, and write the number here: _____

On the IDMC website, locate the Global Report on Internal Displacement. Which countries have the most internal displacements? What other data in the report do you find enlightening?

Why is it helpful to know the distinction between the different types of forced migrants? In your opinion, which type of forced migrant makes the most compelling case for protection?

7 Other persons of concern to the UNHCR are stateless persons—those who are not considered citizens of any political state under national laws, have no legal status, and are therefore deprived of many rights and benefits—and returned refugees (returnees) or returned IDPs—those who have returned voluntarily to their country of origin or area of habitual residence. Going home does not mean the need for protection has ended.

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