

Understanding the Challenge of Protracted Refugee Situationsⁱ

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What is a ‘protracted refugee situation’?

More than two-thirds of refugees in the world today are trapped in so-called ‘protracted refugee situations’. UNHCR defines a protracted refugee situation as ‘one in which refugees find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo. Their lives may not be at risk, but their basic rights and essential economic, social and psychological needs remain unfulfilled after years in exile.’ⁱⁱ These situations pose a growing range of challenges to refugees, the states that host them and agencies that work to ensure their protection and find a solution to their plight. These situations are also proving harder to resolve: UNHCR estimates that ‘the average of major refugee situations ... has increased from nine years in 1993 to 17 years at the end of 2003.’ⁱⁱⁱ

Where are protracted refugee situations?

While most regions of the world host protracted refugee situations, the largest situations are to be found in the global South. Below is a list of major protracted refugee situations at the start of 2005, with a population of at least 25,000 refugees who have been in existence for at least 5 years. While these are not the only protracted refugee situations in the world, they are the largest:

Major Protracted Refugee Situations,
1 January 2005^{iv}

Country of Asylum	Origin	end-2004
Algeria	Western Sahara	165,000
Armenia	Azerbaijan	235,000
Burundi	Dem. Rep. of Congo	48,000
Cameroon	Chad	39,000
China	Viet Nam	299,000
Congo	Dem. Rep. of Congo	59,000
Côte d'Ivoire	Liberia	70,000
Dem. Rep. of Congo	Angola	98,000
Dem. Rep. of Congo	Sudan	45,000
Egypt	Occupied Palestinian Territory	70,000
Ethiopia	Sudan	90,000
Guinea	Liberia	127,000
India	China	94,000

India	Sri Lanka	57,000
Islamic Rep. of Iran	Afghanistan	953,000
Islamic Rep. of Iran	Iraq	93,000
Kenya	Somalia	154,000
Kenya	Sudan	68,000
Nepal	Bhutan	105,000
Pakistan	Afghanistan (UNHCR estimate)	960,000
Rwanda	Dem. Rep. of Congo	45,000
Saudi Arabia	Occupied Palestinian Territory	240,000
Serbia and Montenegro	Bosnia and Herzegovina	95,000
Serbia and Montenegro	Croatia	180,000
Sudan	Eritrea	111,000
Thailand	Myanmar	121,000
Uganda	Sudan	215,000
United Rep. of Tanzania	Burundi	444,000
United Rep. of Tanzania	Dem. Rep. of Congo	153,000
Uzbekistan	Tajikistan	39,000
Yemen	Somalia	64,000
Zambia	Angola	89,000
Zambia	Dem. Rep. of Congo	66,000

Causes of protracted refugee situations

Protracted refugee populations originate from the very states whose instability lies at the heart of chronic regional insecurity. The bulk of refugees in these regions – Afghans, Burmese, Somalis, and Sudanese – come from countries where conflict and persecution have persisted for years. In this way, the rising significance of protracted refugee situations is closely associated to the growing phenomenon of so-called ‘failed’ and ‘fragile’ states.

More specifically, UNHCR argues that ‘protracted refugee situations stem from political impasses. They are not inevitable, but are rather the result of political action and inaction, both in the country of origin (the persecution and violence that led to flight) and in the country of asylum. They endure because of ongoing problems in the country of origin, and stagnate and become protracted as a result of responses to refugee inflows, typically involving restrictions on refugee movement and employment possibilities, and confinement to camps.’^v

Protracted refugee situations are also caused by both a lack of engagement by the international community. Failure to address the situation in the country of origin means that the refugee cannot return home. Failure to engage with the host country reinforces the perception of refugees as a burden and a security concern, which leads

to encampment and a lack of local solutions, including self-reliance and local integration.

Consequences of protracted refugee situations

Most refugees trapped in protracted refugee situations are forced to live in isolated and insecure refugee camps and face a number of protection and human rights challenges.^{vi} Levels of sexual and physical violence in refugee camps are typically very high, and refugee women and children are at particular risk. The prolonged encampment of refugee populations has also led to the violation of a number of refugee rights, including freedom of movement and the right to seek wage-earning employment. Faced with these restrictions, refugees become dependent on subsistence-level assistance, or less, and lead lives of poverty, frustration and unrealized potential.

Protracted refugee situations are also a critical element in continuing conflict and instability and have obstructed peace processes and undermined attempts at peacebuilding and economic development.^{vii} At a local level, tensions between refugees and the local population over scarce resources can increasingly become a source of insecurity. Protracted refugee situations also lead to a number of political and security concerns for host states, the countries of origin, regional actors and the international community. A resolution of these protracted refugee situations will therefore benefit not only the protection needs of refugees, but wider efforts at peace and stability.

Addressing protracted refugee situations

The problem of protracted refugee situations has typically not featured prominently on the international political agenda. There are, however, early signs of positive change. UNHCR has increasingly highlighted the issue since 2004. The Government of Canada established an Interdepartmental Working Group on Protracted Refugee Situations in 2006, and is taking a leadership role internationally. Other countries are slowly starting to follow. Host countries in Africa and Asia are also starting to demonstrate a willingness to revisit their policies on hosting refugees. A range of NGOs and researcher have also engaged with the issue.

In an effort to bring these efforts together, UNHCR hosted a major conference on the issue in Geneva in December 2008, bringing together over 300 representatives of governments, civil society and the research community. Among the conclusions of the conference was agreement that the *status quo* needed to change, greater opportunities for refugee self-reliance should be explored, the individual solutions of repatriation, local integration and resettlement should be expanded, and opportunities to engage other development and security actors with the UN system should be enhanced to help find comprehensive solutions to some of the world's most protracted refugee situations.

As a follow-up to the Geneva meeting, the Refugee Research Network sponsored a series of events at Carleton University in Ottawa in January 2009. These events brought together representatives of the policy, research, practitioner and advocacy communities in Canada to ensure that momentum is carried from the Geneva meeting and a common approach developed for policy, advocacy, practice and research in Canada.^{viii} There was a common feeling that sustained collaboration between the research, advocacy, policy and practitioner communities will not only provide a better understanding of the problem of protracted refugee situations, but ultimately contribute to their resolution.

Refugees are now spending an average of 17 years in exile, often in isolated and insecure conditions that violate a wide range of rights. Given the scale of human suffering represented by this statistic, a solution to the problem of protracted refugee situations cannot come soon enough.

ⁱ This article is based on Gil Loescher and James Milner, "Understanding protracted refugee situations", in Gil Loescher, James Milner, Edward Newman and Gary Troeller (eds.), *Protracted Refugee Situations: Political, Human Rights and Security Implications*, Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2008; and Gil Loescher and James Milner, "Protracted Refugee Situations: The search for practical solutions", in UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees: Human displacement in the new millennium*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), available on-line at: <http://www.unhcr.org/publ/PUBL/4444afcb0.pdf>

ⁱⁱ UNHCR, Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme (ExCom), "Protracted Refugee Situations", Standing Committee, 30th Meeting, UN Doc. EC/54/SC/CRP.14, 10 June 2004, p. 1, available on-line at <http://www.unhcr.org/excom/EXCOM/40c982172.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ UNHCR, ExCom, June 2004, p. 2.

^{iv} This table refers to refugee situations where the number of refugees of a certain origin within a particular country of asylum has been 25,000 or more for at least 5 consecutive years. Industrialized countries are not included. Data does not include Palestinian refugees under the mandate of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Source: UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees: Human Displacement in the New Millennium*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 107.

^v UNHCR, ExCom, June 2004, p. 1.

^{vi} For more information on the human rights of refugees trapped in protracted refugee situations, see: US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), Campaign to end Human Warehousing, <http://www.refugees.org/>

^{vii} For details on the links between protracted refugee situations, peacebuilding and development, see: Gil Loescher, James Milner, Edward Newman and Gary Troeller (eds.), *Protracted Refugee Situations: Political, Human Rights and Security Implications*, Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2008.

^{viii} Part of the Carleton program was a public event, bringing together prominent researchers on protracted refugee situations to discuss their findings. To view videos of these presentations, see: <http://integration-net.ca/english/videos/index.cfm>