

# Refugees – Historical Overview

*“Every day, all over the world, ordinary people must flee their homes for fear of death or persecution. Many leave without notice, taking only what they can carry. Many will never return. They cross oceans and minefields, they risk their lives and their futures. When they cross international borders they are called refugees”*

[www.therefugeeproject.org](http://www.therefugeeproject.org)

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The ubiquitous existence of conflicts situations in metamorphosed forms within the human cultural milieu has created a resonating effect in the displacement of humans from their settlements.

From forced deportations to wilful abandonment of settlements of origin due to war, religious persecution, genocide, death threats, famine, drought, economic depression, political repression, and Natural disasters; the wave of forced human migrations due to these incidences cannot be ignored.

The Online Etymology Dictionary defines the word “refugee” as coined from the French word *refugié* (noun use of past participle of *refugier*) which means to take shelter or protect,” from Old French *refuge*. The word ‘refugee’ first applied to French Huguenots who migrated after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. The word meant “one seeking asylum,” till 1914, when it evolved to mean “one fleeing home” (first applied in this sense to civilians in Flanders heading west to escape fighting in World War I). Prior to that time, the word ‘Asylum’ was used for to connote the current word usage for refugee; however in present day usage, the word asylum is used to refer to a person or group of persons who are outside their home country because they have suffered (or feared) persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, or political opinion; because they are a member of a

persecuted social category of persons; or because they are fleeing a war. Such a person may be called an **“asylum seeker”** until recognized by the state where they make a claim.

In any case, not everyone who is *“forced”* to migrate (or flee) from their place of abode is considered a refugee. Persons who flee persecution, violence and natural/man made disasters in their environs but do not enter another country are considered *“internal displaced persons”* (IDPs) rather than refugees.

Forced emigrations have been an age long humanitarian problem, bringing the need for attendant care or relief responsibilities for the displaced persons (refugees). A foretimes before the 20th century, care for refugees was dependant on the hospitality level of the host country/communities who sometimes absorb these refugees into their National life eternally or expel refugee immigrants in later years after initial national assimilation. The immigration policy of the United States especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the Spanish inquisition of the late 15th and early 16th centuries are typical examples.

The 20th century was laden with numerous conflicts which included two world wars. Alongside heavy military and civilian casualties across continents, these wars precipitated the emergence and creation of new Nation States amid a massive Nationalistic awakening of subjugated peoples of colonial empires. As such, this wave of enthusiastic nationalism triggered an exchange of populations in series of forced migrations via these typical examples:

- Armenians and other Christian minority races in an initial series of mass deportations were forced to flee Anatolia after waves of targeted killings in what may be termed in some quarters as genocide in 1915 during the First World War as Muslim peoples living in the Balkans and Thrace (Greece) were deported to Anatolia in a wave of forced population exchanges aftermathing the First World War.
- Jews from all over Eastern Europe were forced to flee their homes during the Second World War as they, alongside Gypsies and homosexuals were

targeted for extermination in 'the final solution' by the Nazi regime of Germany.

- The Indian subcontinent experienced waves of forced migrations in series of population exchanges as Hindus migrated eastwards into India from Pakistan and Muslims moved in the opposite direction from India to Pakistan.
- The Middle East experienced waves of forced migrations as Jews fleeing the Nazi Holocaust sought refuge and a homeland in Palestine whilst many Arabs of Palestine fled their homes and settled as refugees in several countries around the Middle East upon the war of Israeli Independence after the creation of the State of Israel in 1948.

With an unfolding refugee crises resulting from political creations aftermathing World Wars 1 & 2, care for refugees became that of an international concern. As such, the International Refugee Organization (IRO) was founded in 1947 by the United Nations to manage the ensuing global refugee crises. This organization in itself was a successor to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration founded in 1943 basically to resolve the European refugee crises during the Second World War.

Preceding these refugee humanitarian organizations was a creation in 1921 of the High Commissioner for Refugees by the League of Nations headed by Fridtjof Nansen. His mandate was to provide relief and resettlement to Eastern European refugees especially those from Russia whose citizenship had been expunged owing to the aftermath of the First World War

In a quest for a greater organizational mandate to resolve an ensuing global refugee problem, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was founded as a subsidiary organ of the General Assembly by Resolution 319 (IV) of the United Nations General Assembly of December 1949. Headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, the mandate of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (as established December 14, 1950) protects and supports refugees at the request of a government or the United Nations and assists in their return or resettlement. All refugees in the world are covered under the UNHCR mandate except Palestinian refugees who

fled the area now known as Israel between 1947 and 1949, as a result of the Arab-Israeli war of Independence, and their descendants, who are assisted by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). Nevertheless other categories of Palestinian refugees are under the jurisdictional care of the UNHCR. With the expanding scope of humanitarian displacements due to conflicts, persecution and disasters the mandate of the UNHCR covers and takes charge of Internally displaced persons (IDPs) and Refugees in conflict and danger spots around the world as under internationally recognized categorization for refugee claims which best suits the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (in Article 1.A.2):

*[A]ny 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 nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country”.*

World Refugee day is marked 20th June of every year as instituted by the United Nations General Assembly on 4 December 2000, in Resolution 55/76 which decided that, from 2001, 20 June would be celebrated as World Refugee Day. In this resolution, the General Assembly noted that 2001 marked the 50th anniversary of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.