Frequently Asked Questions about Refugees

1) What does the term “refugee” mean?

Refugees are migrants who have left their countries of origin and are unable or unwilling to return because of persecution, or a well-founded fear of persecution, on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a social group, or political opinion. The term “refugee” does not refer to migrants who have left their country of origin as a result of economic pressures or environmental catastrophe.¹

2) How many refugees are there? Who are they?

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that in 2009 there were 15.2 million refugees in the world. The top three countries of origin for the world’s refugees were Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia. Increasingly, the largest proportion of the world’s refugees comes from Asian and Pacific countries.²

3) What other types of people are forcibly displaced?

Other forcibly displaced people include *asylum seekers and internally displaced persons (IDPs)*:

- **Asylum seekers**³ – Migrants in the process of seeking protection in a country outside of their country of origin. Asylum seekers are different from refugees because they seek protection from a country they have already entered. In 2009, the United States received nearly 40,000 asylum applications.⁴
- **Internally displaced people (IDPs)**⁵ – Migrants who have been uprooted from their homes but remain in their country of origin, unlike refugees who have left their countries. At the end of 2008, there were more than 16 million IDPs in the world. The countries with the largest number of IDPs in 2008 were the Sudan, Colombia and Iraq.⁶

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⁶ “Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees”
4) What happens to refugees after they flee their country of origin?

Refugees often end up in refugee camps in neighboring countries. These camps are built as temporary shelters but in many cases last for years, even decades. Refugee camps are often built by the United Nations (U.N.), by the receiving country’s government, or by international NGOs. Despite the important contributions of the U.N. and the international aid community, life in refugee camps can be extremely challenging. Receiving countries are often not amenable to the major influx of a new population. Increasingly, many refugees reside in cities or towns because these locations present them with opportunities to work and to remain anonymous. This population is referred to as “urban refugees.”

5) What options are available to refugees after they have left their home country?

As a first step to determine the appropriate action, UNHCR sets up processing posts where they determine if people meet the refugee definition. For people determined to be refugees, three options will be considered:

(a) Voluntary Repatriation – Some countries return to political stability after some time. In this case, many refugees may choose to return to their homes through the voluntary repatriation process.

(b) Local Integration – In many places, it is not safe for refugees to return to their home country in the foreseeable future. One potential option is the integration of refugees into the host country. This process is complex, gradual, and places considerable demands on the individual and receiving society. However, it allows refugees the opportunity to establish themselves in a country instead of remaining in a camp and depending on international aid.

(c) Resettlement – When neither voluntary repatriation nor local integration is an option, some refugees may be eligible for resettlement to a third country. The United States resettles more refugees than all other countries combined, offering protection and assistance to thousands of refugees and their families each year.

6) How many refugees are resettled to the United States?

Since 1975, the United States has resettled over 2.6 million refugees. Every year, the President of the United States determines how many refugees the country will admit in that given year. In the past decade, resettlement numbers have fluctuated from a low of 26,773 in fiscal year 2002 (after September 11, 2001) to a high of 74,602 in fiscal year 2009. In fiscal year 1980 and 1981, the United States resettled over 200,000 refugees. In 2009 the leading countries of nationality for refugee admissions were Iraq (25%), Burma (24%), and Bhutan (18%).

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7) How do refugees arrive to the United States?

Refugees are eligible for resettlement to the United States after the U.S. government performs a formal interview, medical check and background check. They are referred to LIRS or one of the other nine voluntary agencies. LIRS and other voluntary agencies partner with local non-government organizations around the United States to ensure that the basic needs of refugees are met when they arrive to the country.

8) What must refugees do when they arrive in the United States?

Resettlement can be a very complex and confusing process for refugees. Refugees must immediately obtain a social security card, visit medical facilities, enroll children in schools, learn English, navigate public transportation, enroll in government programs for refugees, acclimate to local culture, and begin to repay their travel loans. After one year of residence in the United States, they are required by law to apply for lawful permanent residency (green card).

If employable, refugees must typically find work as soon as possible after arrival. Some refugees were been doctors, journalists, lawyers, and business leaders in their home country. Other refugees have been farmers or worked as skilled laborers. Regardless of their history, most refugees must seek work in low-skilled jobs to start making money to pay bills and loans. Over time, they often are able to upgrade their jobs as they improve their English and obtain more work experience in the country.

9) Who helps refugees resettle in the United States?

The U.S. government, LIRS, their local affiliates and volunteers work together to help refugees integrate into American society and become self sufficient. The Department of State’s Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration and the Department of Health and Human Service’s Office of Refugee Resettlement provide critical services and benefits to refugees upon arrival. These benefits are related to initial housing, healthcare, employment, English language acquisition, educational opportunities, among others. To help refugees access these services and integrate into their community, LIRS and local affiliate agencies partner to provide refugees with case management and other assistance. In 2009, LIRS and our national network of resettlement partners resettled 10,904 refugees in the United States.

10) How are local communities involved in resettlement?

Through churches, businesses and other volunteers, the community plays an integral role in refugee resettlement by providing support and assistance to refugees before and after they arrive to the United States. Volunteers may help to furnish a refugee family’s new apartment, donate food, teach them English, raise funds for them, and take them to work or to various appointments, or simply act as their friends in time of need.

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