

# ADDRESSING INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT

BACKGROUND GUIDE  
CHALLENGE TOPIC #4



The MUN Refugee Challenge is an initiative launched by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, to encourage students worldwide to shape solutions for people forced to flee their homes. This guide was drafted to help students prepare for their debates as part of the 2023 edition.

After 6 years of being internally displaced, Sayed Mohammad and his family came back to rebuild their home in Marja, Afghanistan. © UNHCR/Andrew McConnell.

## THE CHALLENGE



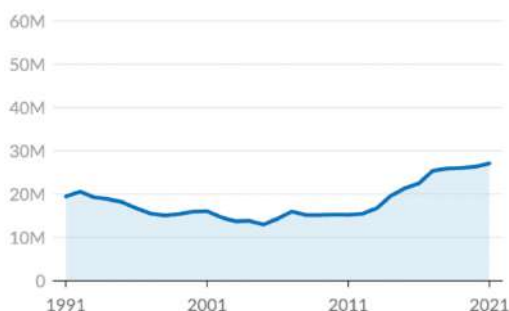
When we talk about people fleeing their homes, we often talk about refugees. Refugees are people who flee persecution, war, other forms of violence and human rights abuses and cross an international border to find safety in another country. There are about 27.1 million refugees. But did you know that a much higher number of people - 53.2 million - flee their homes but stay within their country? When this happens, these people become “internally displaced”.

Internally Displaced Persons, or IDPs, are people who have been forced to flee their homes because of persecution, conflict, violence or disasters but have not crossed an international border. Some stay hoping the situation will get better; others don't have the means or the physical strength to undertake dangerous cross-border journeys.

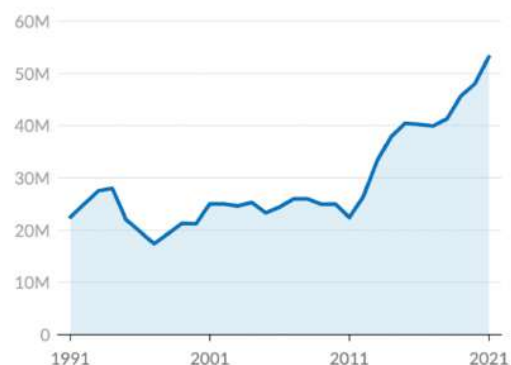
Unlike refugees, IDPs remain citizens or habitual residents of their country. They can invoke their rights as citizens but they do not have a special status under international law. IDPs account for 60% of people forced to flee. In the future, we expect climate change to be a major driver of internal displacement.

### 27.1 million refugees

21.3 million refugees under UNHCR's mandate  
5.8 million Palestine refugees under UNRWA's mandate



### 53.2 million internally displaced people



## WHY IS THIS ISSUE IMPORTANT TO ADDRESS?

IDPs remain under the protection of their government, even if that government is the reason for their displacement. They are sometimes stuck in conflict areas where violence or other threats cut them off from reaching the border. They often move to areas where it is difficult to deliver humanitarian assistance. Many lose property, jobs and loved ones. While both refugees and IDPs are vulnerable, refugees tend to be more in the public eye while IDPs get less attention from the media and decision-makers.



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**“We are witnessing a changed reality in that forced displacement nowadays is not only vastly more widespread but is simply no longer a short-term and temporary phenomenon”**

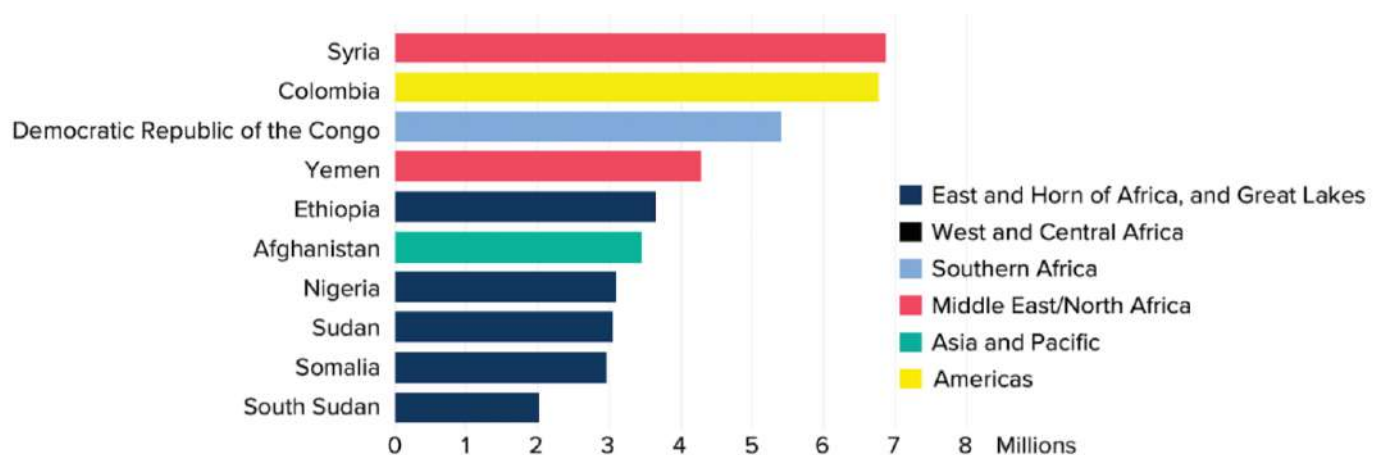
– Filippo Grandi,  
UN High Commissioner for Refugees

## WHERE ARE MOST IDPS LOCATED?

### 1 COUNTRIES WITH THE LARGEST IDP POPULATIONS

At the end of 2021, the following countries continued to host the largest IDP populations globally: Syria (6.9m) Colombia (6.8m), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (5.4m), Yemen (4.3m), Ethiopia (3.6m) and Afghanistan (3.5m). Official displacement numbers for 2022 have not yet been published but Ukraine can be expected to top the list; as of late 2022, close to [7 million Ukrainians](#) were estimated to be IDPs.

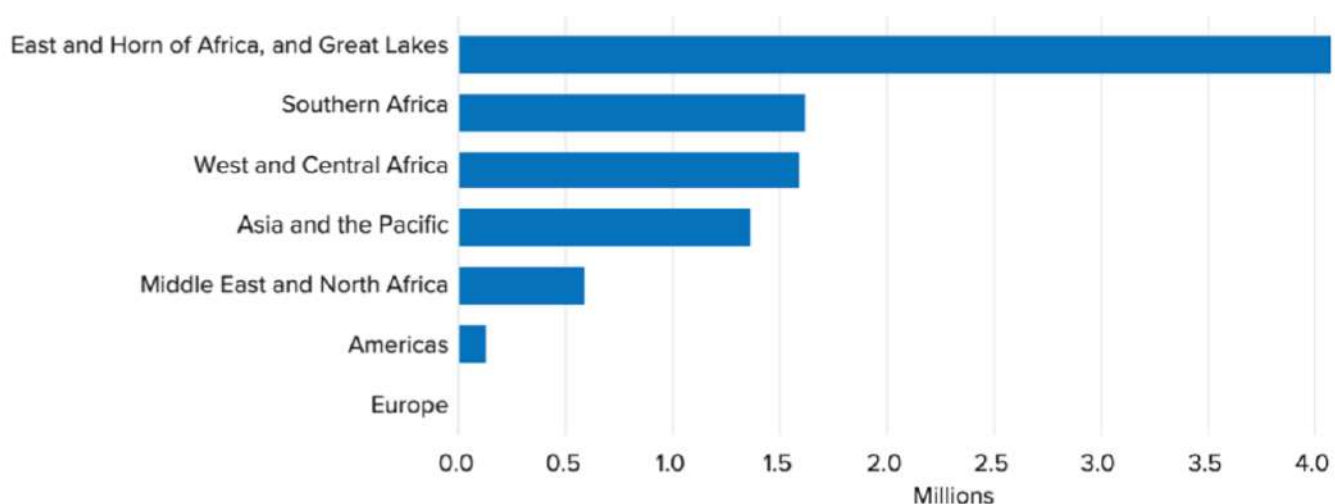
#### IDPs protected/assisted by UNHCR | end-2021



### 2 COUNTRIES WITH THE MOST RECENT IDP POPULATIONS

The countries with the largest IDP populations and those with the newest IDP populations are not necessarily the same. Below are the regions with the biggest number of newly internally displaced people, due to recent crises (again, 2022 figures have not been included).

#### Newly displaced IDPs of concern to UNHCR by region | in 2021





### 3 OVERVIEW BY REGION

#### AMERICAS

In Colombia, 124,000 new IDPs were registered in 2021. Colombia still tops the list with a total of 6.8 million IDPs in need of humanitarian assistance. This is the result of decades of conflict between the government and the FARC armed group, which signed a peace agreement in 2016, but also of ongoing criminal violence by paramilitary groups and local gangs.

#### ASIA AND THE PACIFIC REGION

In the Asia and the Pacific region, new displacement stems mostly from humanitarian crises in Afghanistan and Myanmar. In 2021, 1.4 million new IDPs were recorded. Afghanistan has experienced over four decades of conflict and displacement. The takeover of Kabul by the Taliban in August 2021 resulted in new displacement, but with many people returning home since then. In Myanmar, the military takeover in February 2021 and subsequent violence also led to internal displacement.

#### EAST AND HORN OF AFRICA AND GREAT LAKES REGION

The largest numbers of people newly displaced within their countries in 2021 can be found in the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes region, with nearly 4.1 million new IDPs recorded. The reasons for displacement include fighting that broke out at the end of 2020 in Ethiopia between the federal government and former regional government of Tigray; intercommunal violence in South Sudan and Sudan; and ongoing fighting in Somalia between the military and non-state armed groups (al-Shabaab).

#### EUROPE

In Ukraine, the escalation of conflict since February 2022 and the destruction of civilian infrastructure and urban settings has led millions of refugees to seek safety in other European countries. But over 6 million Ukrainians are also internally displaced as of late 2022.



Families in Sabakhil village in Afghanistan, are among the survivors of the devastating earthquake that hit the region in June 2022. UNHCR is providing 1,300 earthquake-resilient houses for families in the worst-affected villages across Paktika and Khost provinces. ©UNHCR/Oxygen Film Studio

## MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

In Syria, more than 10 years of conflict have forced millions to find safety both within and outside the country. At the end of 2021, an estimated 6.9 million people were still internally displaced in Syria, which means that more than 1 in 3 Syrians remaining within the country were IDPs at the end of 2021. In Yemen, more than 4.3 million people remained internally displaced at the end of 2021 due to the civil war, an increase of 7% compared to the previous year.

## WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA REGION

In the West and Central Africa region, 1.6 million new IDPs were recorded in 2021. Increased movements were mainly driven by escalating conflict in Burkina Faso and Nigeria between government forces and non-state armed groups. In the Central African Republic, elections in December 2020 triggered new violence and insecurity. Mali and Chad also experienced displacement triggered by violence. Chronic underdevelopment, economic inequality and other socio-economic factors are among the root causes of conflicts in West and Central Africa.

## SOUTHERN AFRICA REGION

In the Southern Africa region, 1.6 million new IDPs were recorded in 2021. Both the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Mozambique saw an increase in the number of IDPs, up 4% and 12% respectively. In the DRC, people are fleeing military operations against armed groups and intercommunal violence, but also environmental disasters such as the eruption of Mount Nyiragongo and torrential rains and floods. The DRC has the third-largest IDP population worldwide and the largest in Africa.

## 4 CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTERS

IDPs are not only displaced by conflict and violence but also by environmental disasters and the adverse effects of climate change. In 2021 23.7 million new internal displacements were due to environmental disasters, an increase of 23% compared to the previous year. The largest displacements in the context of disasters in 2021 occurred in China due to floods, cyclones and earthquakes (6m), the Philippines due to Typhoon Rai (5.7m) and India due to floods and cyclones (4.9m). Most of these displacements were temporary as people were able to return once the situation improved.

People fleeing the eruption of Mount Nyiragongo in the Democratic Republic of the Congo seek shelter in the town of Sake, May 2021.  
© UNHCR/Guerchom Ndebo



## WHAT CHALLENGES DO IDPS FACE?

### 1 SHELTER

IDPs need to find some form of shelter to protect them from the elements and give them a sense of physical and emotional security. [Two-thirds of IDPs live in urban areas](#) with host families and in private houses, or in the worst cases in damaged and unfinished buildings or urban slums. Less than 1% live in managed camps and 11% live in self-settled camps, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa. When conflicts are “protracted” - meaning that they last more than five years - IDPs remain in limbo. It is crucial to find them more permanent homes - either by relocation to somewhere else in the country, integration in their new community, or by facilitating their return home if it is safe to go.

### 2 ACCESS TO ASSISTANCE

Providing humanitarian assistance to IDPs can be a challenge. IDPs are often widely dispersed. Some continue to move from place to place. Others might be afraid of being found by the authorities or armed groups, and are thus harder to identify. As a result, humanitarian organizations struggle to monitor the number of IDPs and provide assistance.

### 3 DOCUMENTATION

Identity documents are essential for keeping or gaining access to many services such as education and health-care. Yet, IDPs face obstacles to obtaining or replacing lost documentation because going to government offices is costly or dangerous, or because they cannot pay the fees needed to obtain these documents. For example, [in Yemen](#), less than 20% of children under 5 are registered with the civil authorities. In Nigeria, that number is as high as 60%.

### 4 ECONOMIC INCLUSION

Unlike refugees, who can face legal barriers to accessing work, IDPs remain citizens of their countries and have the right to work. However, they still struggle to make a living. Indeed, they have probably lost their previous source of income, having left behind their businesses, jobs, farms and so on. They also need to recover from the trauma of fleeing, adjust to a new place and in many cases learn new skills. Their new community, even if they are from the same country, might also perceive their presence as a threat and exclude them from the labour market. [Livelihood programmes](#) that include training or financial support can help IDPs start anew.

### 5 CHALLENGING RETURNS

Many IDPs hope to return to their place of origin but they cannot do so if it is too dangerous. Their homes have often been destroyed or damaged, alongside other infrastructure such as schools. Rebuilding and restoring normality is important so that people who return aren't forced to leave again.

## WHAT IS CURRENTLY BEING DONE TO ADDRESS THIS ISSUE?



- **UNHCR helps coordinate** the work of international actors to improve the response to IDP situations. For example, UNHCR leads the [Global Protection Cluster](#), and is also one of the organizations leading on the [Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement](#).
- **UNHCR provides shelter.** With the help of others, UNHCR provides shelter to IDPs. This involves providing the right kind of materials (eg. plastic sheeting, timber, bamboo, brick), products (eg. tents or shelter kits), tools, experts (eg. builders, technical advisors), cash, etc.
- **UNHCR helps manage IDP camps.** While UNHCR discourages the establishment of formal settlements and prefers alternatives, camps are sometimes necessary in the event of large-scale arrivals of IDPs or refugees.
- **UNHCR supports the voluntary return of IDPs to their place of origin.** If IDPs wish to return and if the conditions are safe, UNHCR can support the return and reintegration of IDPs. In 2021, there were more than 5.3 million returns of IDPs globally. The greatest numbers were in Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Nigeria and Somalia, usually following a decrease in violence.
- **UNHCR also encourages states to create laws and policies** supportive of IDPs.
- **UNHCR consults IDPs** and ensures they are involved in decisions affecting their lives.



UNHCR and its partners support thousands of internally displaced in Poltava Oblast, Ukraine. Staff members of UNHCR partner, R2P, consult with internally displaced people in Poltava city, providing cash assistance and legal counselling. © UNHCR/Victoria Andrievska





## GOVERNMENTS

States are first and foremost responsible for ensuring the protection of persons on their territory. Furthermore, there isn't one lead entity within the UN system leading on the response to internal displacement. Instead, various organizations work together, each of them part of a different "cluster" focusing on different aspects (e.g. shelter).

- **Governments need to acknowledge their responsibility** for the protection of IDPs by agreeing with and implementing the standards set out in the [Guiding Principles](#) on internal displacement. If they do not have the capacity to protect IDPs, they should accept the help of the international community.
- **Governments can put in place laws guaranteeing the rights of IDPs.** For example, in 2020, [Ukraine adopted a policy](#) to allow IDPs to vote from any location, thus allowing them to participate politically and better integrate locally.
- **Governments can improve IDPs' access to documentation.** For example, Nigeria has pledged to scale up the issuance of birth registration and national identity numbers. In 2021, the Nigerian government, together with UNHCR, organized a [birth registration drive](#) in three IDP camps, issuing birth certificates to more than 1,500 children.
- **Governments can address the root causes of internal displacement** by finding solutions to the conflicts that drive it. They can make sure to include IDPs in dialogues and negotiations.



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**“...IDPs can and do contribute to the resolution of the conflicts that uprooted them. Involving them in this National Dialogue with their compatriots helps to build long-lasting peace, including through durable solutions to displacement...”**

– Arafat Jamal, UNHCR Representative in South Sudan.

## NGOS



- **NGOs can help IDPs in emergency contexts.** For example, in [Ukraine](#), NGOs play a big role in welcoming newly arrived IDPs and providing them with food and hygiene products.
- **NGOs can support IDPs who do not get access to official services.** For example, in [Burkina Faso](#), ICMC and the Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Refugees (CEPMR) provides displaced children with education, health-care, psychosocial care and documentation assistance. Preschool-aged children can access educational and recreational activities until they can integrate into the formal school system.
- **NGOs can help reduce potential tensions between IDPs and their host community.**



## **Questions to Guide the Debate**

- How can we mobilize the international community to take more actions for IDPs?
- How could the response to IDP situations be better coordinated?
- How can we better address the root causes (violence, conflict, disaster) of internal displacement?
- How could we improve the identification of IDPs to improve assistance programmes?
- How could we help IDPs access safer shelter, both temporary and in the long-run?
- How could we support the economic inclusion of IDPs?
- How could we make sure IDPs can access documentation?
- How could we make sure that IDPs have a say in programmes designed to help them?
- How could we include IDPs in local dialogues and peace negotiations?

## **Useful Resources**

- [UNHCR Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#)
- [UNHCR Storymap: Uprooted in their own land](#)
- [UNHCR Global Trends Report - Chapter 3, p22 Internal Displacement](#)
- [Internal Displacement Monitoring Center \(IDMC\) - Website](#)
- [UN Secretary General Action Agenda on Internal Displacement](#)

## **Contact Us**

If you have any questions about UNHCR's MUN Refugee Challenge or this background guide, please visit our [webpage](#) or contact [hqmunrefugee@unhcr.org](mailto:hqmunrefugee@unhcr.org).