



Protecting refugees

60
YEARS • ANS





Introduction

Refugee

A refugee is someone who has left his or 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 and is unable or owing to such fear is unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution (Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951). The definition excludes those who have committed serious crimes and those involved in military activities.

Asylum

Asylum refers to the protection offered by a country to refugees. Asylum-seekers are those who have asked to be recognised as refugees, but whose claims have not yet been accepted or denied.

Statelessness

A stateless person is someone who is not considered as a national by any state. Statelessness can occur in many contexts, for instance, when a country's nationality law excludes certain groups, or in cases of state succession, or when there are conflicts of laws between states.

Internal displacement

The term "internal displacement" describes situations in which people are forced to leave their homes, but remain within the borders of their own countries. Unlike refugees, internally displaced persons have not crossed an international border. Internal displacement occurs typically as a result of human rights abuses, armed conflict, situations of widespread violence or natural disasters. In some cases, it also results from large-scale development projects.

Migration

Each year, millions of people leave their countries to live somewhere else, whether to work, study, or join family members. Migrants normally leave their countries voluntarily and are able to return safely whenever they wish. Migrants should not be confused with refugees, who flee on account of persecution or war.

The Council of Europe

Throughout its sixty years of existence, one of the Council of Europe's concerns has been to protect refugees. Its work in this field takes several forms. Through the Committee of Ministers the Council sets standards by drawing up international treaties and by making recommendations to member states.



It monitors conditions and treatment of refugees in European countries; for instance, by means of the visits carried out by the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights and Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT). It responds to individual cases by means of judgments under the European Convention on Human Rights, creating a body of case-law that should be applied in all signatory states. And it seeks to raise awareness of refugee issues and of the responsibilities of national authorities by disseminating information and by offering training to magistrates and public officials.

UNHCR

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is mandated by the United Nations to lead and co-ordinate international action for the worldwide protection of refugees and the resolution of refugee problems. UNHCR's activities are governed by the organisation's Statute and guided by the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the status of refugees and its 1967 Protocol. UNHCR's Executive Committee and the UN General Assembly have also authorised UNHCR's involvement with other groups. These include: former refugees who have returned to their homeland; internally displaced persons; and people who are stateless or whose nationality is disputed. There were 1,647,500 forcibly displaced persons in Europe at the end of 2009.

The UNHCR Representation to the European Institutions in Strasbourg, the only UN agency present in the city, was established in 1996 to ensure that the standard-setting instruments and human rights monitoring mechanisms of the Council of Europe continue to address the needs of refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR. The Representation provides information on situations in countries of origin and asylum and international refugee law expertise to the Parliamentary Assembly, the Secretariat of the Committee of Ministers, and the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights.

The Council of Europe and UNHCR

UNHCR's co-operation with the Council of Europe is underwritten by the 1999 Memorandum of Understanding between the two organisations and by the United Nations General Assembly resolution on Co-operation between the United Nations and the Council of Europe (2008). The Council of Europe and its relevant bodies (including the CPT and the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance) co-operate with UNHCR to seek solutions to the problems of refugees.





Asylum-seekers and detention

Background

Many thousands of asylum-seekers are detained in Europe every year. The 1951 Refugee Convention states that refugees should not be punished on account of irregular entry. Detention should be left as a last resort, yet it is often employed for long periods of time, in centres ill-suited to the numbers of individuals they shelter and where conditions can be appalling and inhumane. The problems faced can include overcrowding, lack of hygiene, and insufficient clothing or food provisions. In some extreme cases there have been allegations of ill-treatment and abuse by officials.

Nonetheless, detention continues to be used as a means of ensuring that asylum-seekers remain available while their claim is assessed. Indeed, in some cases it is seen as the only option available to ensure that they can be removed efficiently in the event that their claim is rejected. The right to liberty is a fundamental human right, as is the right to seek asylum, and the act of seeking asylum should not be considered as a ground for detention of applicants.

Our objectives

The Council of Europe and UNHCR oppose the detention of asylum-seekers and refugees, particularly in the case of vulnerable groups such as women, children and those with medical needs. UNHCR believes that unaccompanied children should never be detained.

UNHCR, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, the Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) and other Council of Europe organs all provide protection against the risk of arbitrary detention through advocacy. One collective aim is to make governments more aware of the alternatives to detention which exist. Such alternatives include: release on condition that one's place of residence be registered with the relevant authorities; release on surrender of a passport or other documents; or electronic "tagging" to monitor asylum-seekers' locations.

When asylum-seekers are detained, the period of time spent in detention should be kept to the absolute minimum and the facilities should be adequately furnished and clean, with sufficient living space for those detained. Detainees



should be able to receive visits, and be granted access to their possessions, washing facilities, food, medical care and outdoor exercise.

How we work

The right to liberty is guaranteed under the European Convention on Human Rights. The right to seek asylum is set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and is upheld by the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights. The Council of Europe and UNHCR have produced guidelines on the detention of asylum-seekers and refugees.

The Council of Europe's CPT visits detention centres across Europe, to monitor how persons deprived of their liberty are treated. It has conducted approximately 270 visits during its 20 years of existence and has made recommendations to states as a result of its findings. It has also developed a series of standards relating to the treatment of those in detention, to be used as guidelines for national authorities.

As a result of the CPT and UNHCR's visits, detainees have been granted access to lawyers, and detention facilities not providing acceptable conditions have been closed down.

UNHCR's guidelines on detention conditions and alternatives to detention include "UNHCR's Revised Guidelines on Applicable Criteria and Standards relating to the Detention of Asylum-Seekers" (February 1999) and "Alternatives to Detention of Asylum-seekers and Refugees" (April 2006). The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has issued a report on "the detention of asylum-seekers and irregular migrants in Europe", containing a set of guidelines on detention.





Refugees and intolerance

Background

Refugees often flee intolerance only to face it again in their country of asylum. They are victims of political, social, religious or ethnic intolerance acute enough to force them to leave their own country for fear of persecution. With unemployment on the rise due to the economic crisis, an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear surrounding foreigners prevails, which can breed intolerance.

Though the migration of people and communities is an age-old phenomenon, the popular media often misuse the term “refugee” when describing migration. The perception of “floods” of refugees heading towards Europe in search of asylum is not accurate. Most refugees stay in their region of origin.

Some of the most popular but incorrect perceptions about asylum-seekers are the following: first, that they are not real refugees; second, that they receive allowances without working, abusing their host country’s hospitality; and third, that their numbers are greater than is actually the case. These perceptions fuel intolerance towards asylum-seekers and make their often difficult existence even worse. Protection from abuse and xenophobia is provided for by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and together with UNHCR, the Council of Europe strives to guarantee protection from human rights violations for all.

Our objectives

One of the main aims of UNHCR is to protect refugees and stateless individuals, and pursue durable solutions for persons of its concern. Since refugees are not a “race”, an ethnic group per se, nor members of the same religion, they are not always protected by anti-racism laws whose implementation is in any case often fraught. UNHCR helps them to get the protection they desperately need.

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), an independent body of the Council of Europe, is dedicated to bringing an end to racism, discrimination, xenophobia, anti-semitism and intolerance.





How we work

ECRI conducts visits to all Council of Europe member states, monitoring instances of intolerance. It has published reports of these visits, commissioned ground-breaking research and engages in an ongoing and constructive dialogue with national authorities to identify solutions to problems of racism and intolerance.

UNHCR has drawn up guidelines to counter discrimination and intolerance against refugees, which include training teachers, religious leaders and other influential persons to address the importance of tolerance, establishing social cohesion committees, and strengthening guidance and regulations for the press on issues of asylum-seekers and refugees.

Since 2001, World Refugee Day has been celebrated on 20 June each year. It was initiated by the United Nations General Assembly to raise public awareness of the plight of refugees all over the world.





Refugees and the legal system: challenges

Background

For asylum-seekers who may have undergone a long and arduous journey, the struggle is not over when they arrive in a country of potential asylum. Acceptance rates in Europe differ dramatically from country to country, showing that there are clearly areas of weakness in the legal system. Certain groups of asylum-seekers may, for example, have problems accessing the asylum process, or there may be procedural problems which mean that asylum claims are not properly investigated. The eligibility criteria may be interpreted differently in different countries, or there may be difficulties in establishing the asylum applicant's country of origin.

Moreover, strict requirements for identity documents, non-recognition of existing documents, or delays or failure in replacing or issuing new documents can all hinder refugees from exercising their rights to healthcare, education, property and work – often for years after their initial displacement.

Our objectives

The Council of Europe and UNHCR strive to protect and assist refugees experiencing problems with the legal system. Both organisations are concerned about the increased criminalisation of irregular entry; the detention of asylum-seekers as a first response or even as a deterrent, rather than as a last resort; and the lack of access to justice in some circumstances. The Council of Europe and UNHCR encourage prompt registration procedures for asylum-seekers and access to adequate means of subsistence for asylum-seekers and refugees.

Asylum legislation and practice vary widely from country to country, resulting in asylum-seekers receiving different treatment across Europe. Harmonisation and quality of asylum procedures are areas which need to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

How we work

The Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) has published standards which provide recommendations on appropriate treatment of foreign nationals; they





should be informed, without delay and in a language they understand, of all their rights and of the procedure applicable to them, and they should have the right of access to a lawyer and a doctor as soon as they are deprived of their liberty.

The Parliamentary Assembly has issued several resolutions and recommendations relating to the issues that the legal system creates for asylum-seekers, including Resolution 1695, “Improving the quality and consistency of asylum decisions in the Council of Europe member States”; Recommendation 781, “Harmonisation of eligibility practice under the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol”; and Recommendation 1475, “Arrival of asylum-seekers at European airports”.

UNHCR has issued recommendations on procedural safeguards in asylum procedures as well as on conditions of reception of asylum-seekers. UNHCR has also studied asylum procedures in a number of European countries and published findings, in an effort to contribute to more consistent practice.





Refugees and social and economic inclusion: challenges

Background

Integration into the local community has the potential to improve the lives of many of the world's millions of refugees who are not able to return home. For some, the reasons which led to their flight, such as war, or the risk of persecution, remain, and so they are left with the option of settling in their country of asylum or leaving for another country, which is not always possible. Integration is not a simple process, but it is essential to protect refugees as it enables those who have lost everything to begin new lives.

Also, as asylum procedures can take long periods of time to conclude, it is important in the intervening time for asylum-seekers to begin to integrate themselves into the society of which they may at some point become long-term residents.

Successful integration is made up of three key aspects: the legal aspect, covering the inclusion of refugees in legal processes and ensuring access to their rights; the economic aspect, looking at finding sources of income, and long-term employment for as many people as possible, to ensure a standard of living appropriate to the country of asylum; and the social aspect, which focuses on including refugees and their families in society, promoting integration to allow refugees to make a contribution to society and to benefit from being an accepted part of the community.

Far from being a burden to society, the economic contribution that refugees can make to their host nations is significant.

Our objectives

The Council of Europe strives to ensure that all the people living in Europe experience social and economic inclusion. Together with UNHCR, it seeks to find and provide durable solutions that will allow refugees to integrate into their new societies in dignity and in peace.

In cases where voluntary repatriation is not possible, the next priority for UNHCR is to aid refugees in integrating locally. This includes enabling them to find education, long-term work and a place of residence. For some, the ultimate goal is to become a citizen of their country of asylum. This can place much pressure both on the refugees involved and on the host society. UNHCR can assist both parties in the successful conclusion of this process.





How we work

The Council of Europe's European Social Charter guarantees social and economic rights for all. Among these are the right to access to social housing and housing benefits, access to healthcare facilities, to free education and to vocational guidance including "special measures" for foreign residents and the right to earn a living in a chosen occupation. The European Committee for Social Rights monitors the member states to ensure that they are honouring the undertakings set out in the Charter.

In addition, both the Council of Europe and UNHCR have organised extensive outreach and awareness campaigns about integrating refugees, targeting the general public as well as authorities and specific groups working with refugees. UNHCR supports integration programmes for refugees, incorporating both language training and cultural orientation, and provides information and referral services through which refugees can learn about their rights and obligations and how to access social services, healthcare and the education system.

In many parts of the world, the integration of refugees has been a challenging issue. With many refugee-producing situations lasting many years, however, and an increasing number of States acknowledging the importance of integration, the issue remains central for UNHCR in Europe. The Council of Europe and UNHCR have in recent years organised in Strasbourg two round tables to raise awareness of refugees' social rights and of the need to search for durable solutions.





Women and children

Background

The 1951 Convention did not specifically contemplate persecution because of gender. However, it is widely recognized that women and girls may need protection because of gender-specific forms of persecution. Moreover, while all refugees and displaced people may be subject to abuse and violence, it is the very young and women refugees who are often the most at risk from all kinds of exploitation and, in the case of women, discrimination. Furthermore, asylum procedures are not always adapted to women and children asylum-seekers.

Refugee women and girls often face intimidation at work or school, human trafficking, forced prostitution, sexual violence and rape, female genital mutilation and labour exploitation. It does not help that women are often very poorly represented in the leadership of camps and refugee programmes, and that they are frequently seen as mothers or wives, rather than as individuals in their own right.

Refugee families are often separated and many children miss out on years of their education. This not only affects children (and girls in particular) while they are displaced and struggling to re-establish themselves, but can also lead to problems when and if they are able to return home, where they find themselves uneducated and striving to earn a living or gain the means to continue with their schooling. Unaccompanied children are also often caught in reception procedures upon arrival in Europe which are not child-friendly (lack of legal assistance, guardianship arrangements, and information which is accessible to them about their rights).

Our objectives

The European Convention on Human Rights prohibits discrimination and provides for equality between spouses. Notions of family and family reunification enjoy protection under the Convention and also under the European Social Charter. Measures which could greatly improve the situation of refugee women in particular are: a greater involvement of women in designing refugee programmes; further projects to stop sexual violence; continued counselling and emergency resettlement of victims; and the employment of more female staff in refugee support programmes.





How we work

The Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers has issued a recommendation on the protection of women against violence, which contains specific references to female refugees. Another recommendation advocates "life projects" to help unaccompanied minor migrants acquire the skills necessary to become independent, responsible and active in society. Furthermore, the Council of Europe's Directorate of Youth and Sport, in its development of guidelines and staging of activities for young people, has in recent years had a particular focus on the inclusion of young refugees and asylum-seekers. It has also organised joint seminars with UNHCR. The Council of Europe transversal programme "Building a Europe for and with children" launched a campaign to stop sexual violence against children, while the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse came into force on 1 July 2010.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child addresses the needs of child refugees: they should receive appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance, should have access to the resources and skills necessary for survival and full development, and should enjoy protection from all forms of abuse. The international protection regime in the asylum context and the child protection regime are intertwined and cannot be separated. This is why it is important to monitor the situation of all unaccompanied children (those who have not applied for asylum may have international protection needs, but may not have been able to seek asylum) at every step of the process beginning with departure from the country of origin. States that deal with refugee children shall ensure that the best interest of the child shall be the primary consideration in all cases.

UNHCR has issued guidelines on child asylum claims to assist states in ensuring that a child who is seeking refugee status or who is considered a refugee shall receive appropriate treatment. UNHCR has also issued guidelines on gender-related persecution, and in 2008 published a handbook on the protection of women and girls, to complement its guidelines on sexual and gender-based violence against refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons.





Refugees and violence

Background

Violence can be an everyday reality for refugees and displaced persons who are living without the protection of a government or community.

Violence against refugees is a global problem, and one of its most widespread forms is sexual or gender-based violence. Yet there has traditionally been a culture of denial surrounding violence against women and girls, particularly since this violence is not always the well-documented public violence of war zones, but often happens behind closed doors, the result of socio-cultural discrimination.

By the nature of their situation, refugees are vulnerable people who are in need of help. Violence prior to, during, and after departure constitutes a violation of basic human rights, instilling fear in the lives of victims already profoundly affected by their displacement. Away from their support networks, in detention or reception facilities, refugees are even more vulnerable to violence at the hands of smugglers and traffickers. Many refugees experience physical, sexual and emotional violence. Exposure to extreme violence at any age can be a traumatic experience. For children, the impact can be deep and far-reaching. Despite this fact, there are reports of child refugees encountering violence both in the communities where they are growing up, often due to scarcity of and competition for resources, and in their schools and homes due to socio-economic deprivation.

Our objectives

The Council of Europe and UNHCR denounce violence against refugees. UNHCR in particular aims to give a voice to refugees who experience violence, as well as to implement measures to prevent violence, including sexual and gender-based violence; while the Council of Europe's CPT Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) strives to prevent the use of force or physical/chemical restraint against foreign nationals to be deported.

How we work

The European Convention on Human Rights stipulates that "no one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading



treatment or punishment”. To promote and protect this fundamental right, the Council of Europe has addressed many aspects of violence through regulations, awareness-raising initiatives and campaigns on issues such as gender-based violence and child labour.

The CPT has developed standards for the protection of those deprived of their liberty. It visits detention facilities to ensure that detained refugees and asylum-seekers are not being subjected to any form of violence. In addition, the new Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings aims to prevent trafficking, protect its victims and prosecute traffickers. Not all victims of human trafficking are refugees, but in their flight, refugees frequently have to rely on smugglers or traffickers, with both preying on their vulnerabilities. Other victims of trafficking may also become refugees because they are unable to return to their countries of origin for fear of being stigmatised for their forced participation in sex work, for instance, or because of the risk of being re-trafficked. Early identification of victims, referral mechanisms to the asylum authorities and access to free legal counselling are key to victim protection.

UNHCR published its “Guidelines for the Prevention of and Response to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence against Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons” in 2003. These guidelines, intended to promote change, contain advice to governments and organisations on how to include the refugee community, and specifically women, in programmes for the prevention of, and response to, sexual and gender-based violence.





Forced returns

Background

In 2009, around a quarter of a million people sought asylum in Europe – roughly the same number as applied for asylum in South Africa alone. Nearly half received permission to remain as refugees or for other reasons of a humanitarian nature. However, especially in the economic downturn, some countries are concerned that their welfare systems are being abused by asylum-seekers and have therefore taken a variety of measures to discourage new arrivals, including stepping up the enforced return of persons who have been found not to qualify as refugees. While states are entitled to insist that persons who have been found not to need protection should return to their own countries, it is important to ensure that no one is sent back to a risk of persecution or serious harm. This would be a violation of a key principle of international refugee law.

Removal orders for asylum-seekers may only be issued after authorities have ensured that the individuals in question will not be returning to a situation where their life or freedom will be compromised. A best-interest determination should always be conducted prior to the return of unaccompanied children.

Our objectives

Refugees are entitled to international protection in countries where they have sought asylum. Where they choose to return freely to their countries of origin after the situation improves, it is known as voluntary repatriation, which UNHCR supports as an important durable solution. However, where persons have no legal right to remain in a European state, including in cases where their asylum claims have been rejected after a full and fair procedure, that particular state may require that they leave the territory. In such cases, the Council of Europe and UNHCR advocate for an opportunity for such people to comply of their own accord with the removal order, rather than undergo forced return. Forced return should take place only in conditions of safety and dignity. Opportunities for reintegration should be foreseen.





How we work

The Council of Europe has produced a document entitled “Twenty guidelines on forced return”, which sets out recommendations concerning all stages of the procedure of forced return. The Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment has published its standards on the deportation by air of foreign nationals. In 2010 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted two reports on the challenges facing the return of irregular migrants: “Readmission agreements: a mechanism for returning irregular migrants” and “Voluntary return programmes: an effective, humane and cost-effective mechanism for returning irregular migrants”. These reports, together with certain cases before the European Court of Human Rights, highlight problems of access to the asylum process and cases of forced returns to unsafe countries.





Stateless persons

Background

A stateless person is someone who is not considered as a national by any state. A stateless person has no passport, no citizenship, nor access to the protection or assistance a state normally provides.

Statelessness may occur, for example, when one state breaks up into several countries (state succession) and not all citizens are included; or when there are conflicts of laws between states. Stateless people can also be created by accident, victims of simple bureaucratic or legislative errors. For some children, statelessness is inherited from their stateless parents. Absence of birth registration procedures and the existence of laws which prevent mothers from passing their citizenship on to their children are particular problems. Some stateless persons are also refugees, but some may have never moved away from their home country. Many face discrimination and are frequently denied basic social rights (such as employment, housing or access to healthcare) and freedom of movement because they do not have valid personal identity documents. It can be an extremely demoralising and distressing situation to be in, and stateless persons speak of feeling worthless and not having a sense of identity.

In 2006 UNHCR recorded 5.8 million stateless people in 49 states. Since many countries do not keep reliable records relating to stateless people, the number could be as high as 12 million worldwide.

Our objectives

The Council of Europe maintains that everyone has the right to a nationality and that no one should be arbitrarily deprived of his or her nationality or denied the right to change their nationality. Although the Council of Europe acknowledges that it is up to states to decide who their nationals are, within the confines of international law, it also encourages them to be co-operative and co-ordinate their nationality laws in order to avoid instances of statelessness and to help with issues such as state succession.

UNHCR aims to assist stateless persons in four main ways: identification of the problem of statelessness – its causes, consequences and scope; prevention – by addressing the



causes of statelessness and protect potential victims; reduction – by supporting legislative changes which allow stateless people to acquire a nationality; and protection – by intervening to help stateless people exercise their rights and by promoting accession to the 1954 Convention relating to the status of stateless persons.

The success achieved by UNHCR and states in helping hundreds of thousands of stateless people in Eastern Europe after the break-up of the USSR is something which needs to be replicated across Asia, Africa, the Middle East and the Americas.

How we work

The UN General Assembly gave UNHCR a mandate to deal with the stateless in 1974, including by providing stateless persons with legal assistance and working to avoid or reduce statelessness.

International standards have been drawn up to protect the right of each person to have a nationality and to be treated fairly during the period when he/she is without citizenship. The 1954 UN Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons stipulates that host countries should provide opportunities for stateless persons to enjoy fundamental human rights and integration into society. The 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness includes provisions to prevent statelessness. The Council of Europe's European Convention on Nationality and the Convention on the Avoidance of Statelessness in relation to State Succession contain general principles and procedures regarding the right to a nationality.





Internally Displaced Persons

Background

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are those who have been forced to leave their homes to escape conflict, human rights abuses or natural disasters but who have remained within their own country. Many IDPs flee for reasons similar to refugees, but since they remain inside their own country they are still subject to its laws, and do not enjoy the protection of international refugee law. It is estimated that there are between 2.5 and 2.8 million persons internally displaced in Council of Europe member states.

Protecting those who have been displaced, even after the causes of displacement no longer exist, is not possible without respect for human rights. Though IDPs are entitled to their rights as citizens, they often face administrative and physical barriers, preventing them from enjoying the rights which a non-displaced person within their country would take for granted. For example, IDPs often have had to leave their homes, risking the destruction of their houses or their occupation by someone else. The right to vote can likewise be affected in systems where voting is only permitted from a registered place of residence, which internally displaced persons have had to leave behind.

Our objectives

The Council of Europe and UNHCR advocate that every human has the right to be protected against being arbitrarily displaced from his/her home. They encourage governments to respect international law, including humanitarian law, so that conditions that might lead to the displacement of persons are avoided and so that the reintegration of IDPs can occur in safety and dignity.

UNHCR has been playing an increasingly important role in recent years in assisting IDPs. UNHCR oversees the protection and shelter needs of IDPs as well as the co-ordination and management of camps.

At the end of 2009, out of 27.1 million IDPs worldwide, the UN refugee agency was caring for around 15.6 million, i.e. more than the total number of refugees of concern to UNHCR. In 2009 the plight of IDPs was a priority issue for the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly. Of particular concern was the plight of IDPs in Georgia who fled the conflict in South Ossetia in 2008.



How we work

European IDPs enjoy protection of their fundamental rights through the European Convention on Human Rights, as well as through national laws. Thus, every IDP within the jurisdiction of a Council of Europe member State has the right to appeal to the European Court of Human Rights. The Court has issued judgments relating to internal displacement in many countries and regions, including Russia, the Balkans, South Caucasus and Turkey.

The Council of Europe continues to support the processes of voluntary return and local integration, offering technical knowledge and expertise. In 2009, the Council of Europe Development Bank funded a training programme on inter-community relations in Georgia to improve the situation of the IDPs.

UNHCR is also guided in its work with IDPs by the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, which contain recommendations for governments and humanitarian organisations. The Council of Europe has built on these principles in the Committee of Ministers' Recommendation Rec (2006) 6 on internally displaced persons, a set of 13 recommendations; while the Parliamentary Assembly has issued a report on "Solving property issues of refugees and displaced persons".

UNHCR is actively involved in IDP operations in South Eastern Europe, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, providing protection and shelter, in co-operation and co-ordination with partners.





for further information:
www.coe.int
www.unhcr.org