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An Age of Protracted Displacement: From Humanitarian Aid to Sustainable Investment

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The number of people forced from their homes worldwide has reached a historic high. As of June 2025, 117.3 million people were forcibly displaced, roughly one in every seventy person on the planet, uprooted by conflict, persecution, or human rights abuses. Behind that figure lies a question that is not simple to answer. Forced displacement is no longer a humanitarian issue confined to particular regions; it is a structural crisis woven through peace and security, economic stability, and development.

Displacement Is Not the Same as Migration

The distinction matters. Refugees and migrants are not interchangeable terms. While all people on the move are entitled to have their human rights and dignity respected, refugees are specifically defined and protected under international law because they have fled persecution, conflict, violence, serious human rights violations, or other events seriously disturbing public order, and cannot safely return home. Internally displaced people have also been forced to flee, but remain within their own country. Migrants, by contrast, move for a range of reasons, including work, education, family reunification, or other personal circumstances, and generally do not face the same legal impediment to return. This is more than a statistical distinction: it determines the specific protection, assistance, and responsibilities that States and the international community owe to people forced to flee.

71 percent of the world’s refugees and people in need of international protection are hosted by low- and middle-income countries. Many countries with the fewest resources are hosting the largest displaced populations, which in turn places additional pressure to the national systems and potentially affects the progress to meet the Sustainable Development Goals. Forced displacement is not only a humanitarian issue, it is linked closely to development, and the broader international peace and security agenda.

The Complexity Behind the Numbers

A slight decline in the overall number of forcibly displaced people was recorded in 2025, marking the first decrease in more than a decade. However, this should not be interpreted as a sign that the displacement crisis is easing. Much of the reduction was driven by increased returns to countries such as Afghanistan, Syria and Sudan, and UNHCR has cautioned that many of these returns took place under adverse or precarious conditions, raising concerns about their safety and sustainability.

A more fundamental challenge is the increasingly protracted nature of displacement. Today, around 70 per cent of refugees remain in long-term displacement, often living below the poverty line and with limited prospects for rebuilding their lives. As UN High Commissioner for Refugees Barham Salih has emphasized, for too many refugees, displacement begins as a lifeline but lasts a lifetime. What is needed is a sustained, medium- to long-term approach. Without addressing refugees' education, employment, and economic self-reliance, together with the long-term development of the communities that host them, no response will be truly effective.

Shrinking Resources, Straining Operations

The trouble is that just as needs are rising to unprecedented levels, the resources meant to meet them are contracting. Funding from donors has reduced sharply in recent years, and what support remains is increasingly earmarked for specific purposes rather than provided with the flexibility of the past. This significantly narrows UNHCR's ability to allocate resources where the need is greatest on the ground.

The consequences are visible in both organizational operations and frontline services. UNHCR reduced its workforce over the past year and plans further reductions this year. In the field, the staff and space available for legal protection are being scaled back, and the services provided to people forced to flee are visibly shrinking.

From Emergency Relief to Self-Reliance

Against this backdrop of changing financial conditions, UNHCR is seeking to shift its center of gravity from a life-saving emergency relief approach toward a more forward-looking approach that also supports refugees' economic self-reliance and integration into host communities. This is not a goal UNHCR can achieve alone. A genuine shift will require broad cooperation among donors, development agencies, humanitarian organizations, local governments, civil society, and the private sector.

Not Someone Else's Problem, but Our Own Investment

Responding to forced displacement is often seen as charity for distant places, but in practice it is closer to an investment that helps mitigate the spread of conflict, regional instability, economic vulnerability, and cross-border population movements. This is not unrelated to RoK's long-term security or its standing in the international community. Even with limited resources, there are areas where RoK can make a meaningful contribution; what matters now is a policy judgment about where to set priorities and how to engage.

One more point is the importance of investing in people. There is concern that interest in pursuing careers in international organizations is not what it used to be, but the interest I see among young people in the field has not disappeared. Many UNHCR interns, in fact, first became interested in this work through civil society engagement related to refugees. What international organizations value in recruitment is the expertise and sense of purpose that candidates bring. Developing people with concrete expertise is a far more effective pathway than concerns about barriers to entry.

The forced displacement situation is likely to continue for some time. What matters is a shift in perspective: rather than seeing this crisis only as a burden to be managed with shrinking resources, we should view it over the long term as an investment in peace, stability, and sustainable development. In this regard, UNHCR is setting the 50 by 35 vision, a target to support more than half of the world's aid-reliant refugees in long-term displacement in low- and middle-income countries – nearly 8 million people – to move beyond aid through greater self-reliance and pathways to solutions by 2035. Advancing self-reliance and solutions must always reinforce - not replace – protection. That shift is not the responsibility of international organizations alone; it is a task that donors, civil society, and the next generation must take on together.