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Global Refugee Resettlement: Background and Selected Issues

During the past decade, the global number of refugees (including asylum-seekers—those who have applied for refugee status but whose claim has not yet been definitively evaluated) tripled to over 46 million people worldwide. Congress funds and oversees U.S. humanitarian assistance to refugees, and some Members have demonstrated an ongoing interest in the policies and practices that govern refugee resettlement at the global and domestic levels.

Global Displacement and Resettlement

As of June 2024 (latest data available), the United Nations estimated that 122.6 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide due to armed conflict, widespread violence, or human rights violations. Those displaced include refugees, asylum seekers, and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Displaced populations may be separated from their homes for long periods, particularly in instances of large-scale, protracted crises or ongoing armed conflicts where political solutions have proven elusive. According to the United Nations, on average, a person is displaced as a refugee for 20 years. Some refugees are able to return to their country of origin and others integrate with local populations in the country to which they fled; however, for millions of refugees without these options, less than one percent may be eligible for *refugee resettlement* in another country.

Refugee resettlement is the transfer of refugees from a host country where they have received temporary asylum to another country that has agreed to admit them and usually grant them permanent settlement with legal and physical protection, including access to civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights similar to those enjoyed by nationals. Generally, resettlement eventually leads to permanent resident status or even citizenship in the resettlement country.

Although the number of global resettlement spots available is significantly smaller than the refugee population, experts view resettlement as an important tool of refugee protection and response. Resettlement can also be a way for governments to demonstrate to countries hosting refugees and other donor countries that they are carrying some of the burden of the impact of refugees, even symbolically. Other complementary programs that support refugees include humanitarian admission programs, individual sponsorship, and admission of relatives beyond existing family reunification programs. Countries may also expand their capacity to receive refugees through labor mobility and private investor schemes and student scholarships, among other approaches.

Key Entities and Mechanisms

Several global entities and mechanisms play key roles in refugee resettlement.

The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Convention) and its 1967 Protocol. The Convention outlines the standards for the rights and protection of refugees; it is also the primary legal instrument related to global refugee resettlement. Its 1967 Protocol removed geographic and time-based limitations in the Convention, expanding the scope to apply universally to persons fleeing conflict and persecution. A cornerstone of the Convention is the principle of “non-refoulement,” which means that a refugee should not be returned to a country where he or she faces serious threats to his or her life or freedom. The Convention defines a *refugee* as a person fleeing his or her country because of persecution or “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 of the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.” Once an individual is considered a refugee, that individual automatically has certain legal rights, and States Parties to the Refugee Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol are obligated to provide certain resources and protection. The United States has not ratified the Convention; however, it is party to the 1967 Protocol.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

UNHCR, established by the UN General Assembly, is mandated with leading and coordinating international action for the protection of refugees and the resolution of refugee problems worldwide. It leads the global refugee resettlement program (see below). The United States is UNHCR’s largest donor.

Refugee Status Determination (RSD). RSD is the administrative process governments or UNHCR use to determine whether a person seeking international protection is a refugee under international, regional, or national law. Host countries have the primary responsibility for determining the status of asylum-seekers; UNHCR may do so when countries are unable or unwilling. During mass movements of refugees, individual asylum interviews cannot be conducted for everyone who has crossed the border. In such cases, with the agreement of the host country, these groups are often declared “prima facie” refugees.

Processes for Refugee Resettlement

The global refugee resettlement process typically involves the following steps, which are coordinated between UNHCR and the government of the resettlement country:

1. UNHCR registration (includes taking biometrics, such as iris scans, digital photos, and fingerprinting);
2. UNHCR conducts RSD or confirms host country RSD;
3. UNHCR identification of a need for resettlement;

4. UNHCR confirmation of resettlement country;
5. Resettlement country RSD/admissibility determination;
6. Resettlement country clearances; and
7. Travel to and reception in resettlement country.

Resettlement Eligibility. UNHCR is usually involved in the process of identifying those refugees who may be eligible for resettlement referral. Refugees identified for resettlement usually fall into a category of need or vulnerability, such as legal or physical insecurity; lack of foreseeable alternative durable solutions; survivors of violence or torture; women and girls at risk; medical needs; family reunion; and children and adolescents. UNHCR may use different mechanisms to identify eligible refugees, including the registration process; UNHCR staff referral; a “Best Interest Determination” (which is required for all unaccompanied minors); and nongovernmental organization (NGO) referral. Countries may also use direct referrals through their embassies, private sponsorships, and other programs. UNHCR stresses the need for coordination among those organizations making referrals to avoid multiple claims. The length of time required to identify a case for resettlement varies and could happen the day the person registers with UNHCR as a refugee or years later.

Participating Countries. Since 2019, an average of 25 countries, including the United States, annually have taken part in UNHCR’s global refugee resettlement program. The United States is one of the main recipients of UNHCR referrals.

UNHCR Resettlement Figures, 2019-2023

Year	Number of Resettlement Countries	UNHCR Total Resettlement Submissions	UNHCR Submissions to the U.S.
2019	29	81,671	24,810
2020	25	39,534	6,740
2021	23	63,190	32,851
2022	25	116,481	80,553
2023	24	155,486	105,490

Source: UNHCR Global Resettlement Fact Sheets, 2019-2023, and <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/resettlement-data.html>.

Resettlement Country: Criteria for Selection. UNHCR considers several factors when deciding where to resettle eligible refugees, including family or other significant connections; resettlement country criteria; timing (normal, urgent, emergency); availability of quota or places; refugee input (but the refugee cannot choose); and/or prior agreement with a resettlement country. Countries vary in their approach and priorities with regard to resettlement, depending on the individual case and circumstance. Resettlement is determined in part by whether the case involves an individual or a group. With many individual cases, UNHCR will have a detailed history of refugee status (biometric data and other information). If the person arrived as part of a group (or as a “prima facie” refugee), registration would have taken place in a camp or at a point of arrival, but more information and review would be required to make a determination on resettlement eligibility.

Security. Resettlement countries tend to have extensive security measures; UNHCR typically has relied on them to

check against their own databases and intelligence information. UNHCR does not perform security checks; it has no access to terrorist databases. When UNHCR conducts RSD interviews to ensure that the person is eligible for refugee status under the Convention, it screens for exclusion factors such as the commission of crimes against humanity or serious nonpolitical crimes. If UNHCR makes such a discovery, it may withdraw the individual from the resettlement pool or even deny refugee status, depending upon the situation. Because resettlement places are scarce, problematic cases are likely to be set aside unless the person is in imminent peril. Biometric data plays a key role in resettlement by providing continual identification that confirms the person who registered as a refugee is the same person referred for resettlement. It also ensures greater protection and assistance for refugees by minimizing fraud and linking information across locations.

U.S. Policy and Congressional Role

The United States participates in refugee resettlement processes at both the national and global level. The U.S. refugee admissions program is administered by the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) of the Department of State, and authorized by the Immigration and Nationality Act, as amended, which uses a definition of a refugee that conforms with that of the Refugee Convention. Resettlement referrals from and in consultation with UNHCR and other entities (such as a U.S. embassy, U.S. government agency, or a designated NGO) help inform the U.S. refugee admissions process. In addition, members of groups of U.S. “special humanitarian concern,” designated by the Department of State in consultation with the Department of Homeland Security, UNHCR, NGOs, and other experts, may be considered for U.S. refugee admission without a referral from one of these entities. The U.S. worldwide refugee admissions ceiling is set by the President after consultation with Congress. It has varied in the last 10 years, ranging from 18,000 in FY2020 to 125,000 annually between FY2022–FY2025. For more information, see CRS Report R47399, *U.S. Refugee Admissions Program*.

At the global level, the United States generally supports UNHCR and its global refugee resettlement program and engages in U.S. humanitarian diplomacy efforts with other countries. While Congress’s role in refugee resettlement is limited, it has lent bipartisan support to UNHCR’s work, primarily through funding the Migration and Refugee Assistance account in annual State Department-Foreign Operations appropriations. Looking ahead, Congress may broadly consider U.S. humanitarian funding levels, and may oversee Administration funding of and/or support for global refugee resettlement given increased displacement worldwide. It could also consider the pros and cons of alternatives to resettlement and whether best practices undertaken in other countries have possible application in the United States. As one example, the U.S. Welcome Corps, launched in 2023, is modeled after Canada’s Private Sponsorship of Refugees program.

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