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Forced displacement in the context of COVID-19 – UNHCR's new report on refugees

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Forced displacement remains one of the major global challenges in 2021. On 18 June 2021, the UNHCR (United Nations' High Commission for Refugees) presented its new [Global Trends Report](#) on the developments around the world. Many refugee situations around the world have become protracted. The situation in some regions in sub-Saharan Africa has deteriorated. 10 key findings:

- 1. Figures have risen since 2020 despite worldwide border closures:** At the end of 2020, a total of 82.4 million people were forcibly displaced, representing just over 1% of the world's population. The percentage of internally displaced persons (IDPs) rose to 58.3% – a new record high. 20.7 million were refugees under the UNHCR mandate; added to this are 5.7 million under the mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), 3.9 million Venezuelans displaced abroad¹ and 4.1 million asylum seekers. 4.2 million people are stateless. Overall, the figure rose by 4% compared to the previous year (79.5 million), a smaller increase than in 2019. This is primarily due to the border closures in the context of COVID-19. Some of the most recent hotspots in 2020: Mozambique, the Sahel region and Ethiopia (Tigray).
- 2. The figures doubled since 2010:** In absolute terms, the number of forcibly displaced has almost doubled over the last ten years (from

41.1 million to 82.4 million); but in relative figures as well, the period saw an increase in the percentage of the global population affected, from 0.6% (2010) to 1%. According to the UNHCR, the question is no longer if forced displacement will exceed 100 million – but rather when.

- 3. Impact of COVID-19:** The international protection regime, particularly the right to claim asylum and the principle of non-refoulement, faced an unprecedented challenge in 2020. More than 160 countries kept their borders closed, and 99 did not provide for any exceptions to those seeking protection. Around 1.5 million fewer refugees and asylum seekers than expected arrived at their destination. This trend is evident in all regions of the world, except West and Central Africa. At 69%, resettlement also saw a considerable decline. 34,400 refugees were admitted for resettlement compared to a need of 1.4 million². Forcibly displaced and stateless have been among the hardest hit groups of society, not least due to the increased food and economic insecurity and challenges to access health and protection services. The sharp increase in gender-based violence (GBV) is also conspicuous. According to the report, in some cases, COVID-19 may have also been a factor in triggering new movement of people. While the impact of the pandemic cannot be fully measured yet, the after-

¹ Refers to Venezuelans who do not seek asylum but who are in need of international protection in accordance with the criteria of the 1984 Cartagena Declaration

– a regional agreement broader in its scope than the Geneva Convention on Refugees of 1951.

² Canada, the U.S. and Australia offered most places for resettlement.

- math in terms of loss of income, food insecurity and missed education will be felt for generations, according to the UNHCR.
4. **The causes:** Wars and conflicts remained significant drivers of forced displacement in 2020, in spite the appeal for a global humanitarian ceasefire in view of the COVID-19 pandemic by the Secretary General of the United Nations on 23 March. This is especially true for Syria, Afghanistan and Yemen. The outbreaks of violence in Ethiopia (Tigray) and northern Mozambique also led to large-scale displacements of people. The rekindling of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict contributed to the rise in figures for refugees and displaced persons. In addition to conflicts, the consequences of climate change, e.g. in the Sahel region, are among the most relevant causes of why people flee their home regions. The threat is increasingly assumed to be threefold: protracted conflicts, extreme weather events due to climate change and the impact of COVID-19 are closely linked and mutually reinforcing.
 5. **Most refugees stay within their region – massive growth of internally displaced persons in the Sahel and in the Horn of Africa:** 73% of refugees find shelter in a country bordering their own country. In addition: 48 million are internally displaced persons, a threefold increase compared to 2010 (15 million). For more than two decades, they have accounted for the majority of all forcibly displaced persons. Colombia has currently the largest number, nearly 8.3 million, followed by Syria (6.7 million), DR Congo (5.2 million), Yemen (4.0 million) and Somalia (3.0 million). The region of East Africa/Horn of Africa (due to the conflict in the Ethiopian region of Tigray) as well as West and Central Africa (mainly Burkina Faso and Chad) report an enormous increase in the numbers of internally displaced persons compared with 2019.
 6. **The main countries of origin: As in 2019, more than two-thirds of all UNHCR refugees came from five countries only:** Syria (6.7 million), Venezuela (4 million), Afghanistan (2.6 million), South Sudan (2.2 million) and Myanmar (1.1 million). The list of countries of origin is topped by Syria again, which has been the case since 2014. Iraq is no longer among the top 10; Eritrea has moved up on account of the conflict in Tigray. Some countries (such as Sudan) are countries of origin as well as host countries. At 12%, West and Central Africa posted the greatest increase compared with 2019. The Sahel region is considered the area with the most complex regional crisis worldwide. The Americas also experienced an 8% rise, mainly due to the crisis in Venezuela.
 7. **The main host countries:** The five main host countries remain the same as in the previous year. In absolute figures, Turkey is the most heavily affected country, with 4 of the 28.6 million refugees and asylum seekers³; it is followed by Colombia (1.7 million), Germany (1.45 million), Pakistan and Uganda (1.4 million each). This means that 15% of all refugees and asylum seekers are located in Turkey. In 2020, the European Union accounted for a total of around 11.8% (3.37 million). The countries with the highest percentage of refugees relative to the total population were Aruba, Lebanon, Curaçao, Jordan and Turkey. The Horn of Africa/African Great Lakes region accommodates 20% of all refugees worldwide.
 8. **EU strongly hit but not above average – Germany largest host country in absolute numbers (but not in relative numbers):** In total, the EU houses around 3.53 million people who come under the responsibility of the UNHCR (0.78% of its population). With 1.45 million UNHCR refugees and open applications for asylum, Germany is now in 3rd place in the group of global host countries. This makes it the EU country with the highest absolute figure. However, the picture is different when the calculation is made of refugees and open applications

³ UNHCR refugees and Venezuelans are grouped together here and in the following.

for asylum per inhabitant. Then Cyprus, Sweden, Malta, Austria have (in some cases considerably) higher figures; Greece comes after Germany.

- 9. The burden is unevenly distributed:** There are massive differences between states and global regions. A total of ten countries provide shelter for 52.6% of all the refugees and asylum seekers in the world (not including internally displaced persons). Moreover, the least developed countries shoulder the greatest burden: 27% of all refugees are located there. In 2020, the governments of the global West provided the bulk of the UNHCR funds: the United States around 36% (almost two billion); the EU and its Member States approx. 27%, with the EU contributing just under 10% (522 million) and Germany around 8% (446 million) of the total. Compared with this, Russia (2 million) and China (1.76 million) contribute not even one-tenth of a percent to the UNHCR budget. The UN Refugee Agency thus remains massively underfunded: The funding gap at the end of 2020 was 41% of the budget, which is set at around 9 billion.
- 10. Outlook for 2021:** The UNHCR expects a significant increase in conflicts, extreme poverty and a heightened risk of famine, mainly in South Sudan, Syria and the Central African Republic. COVID-19 has exacerbated the situation in many ways.

For many refugees, hopes for long-term solutions, e.g. voluntary return, resettlement or integration in the host country, are fading. In light of the worsening situation, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, appeals for stronger political will to fight the root causes of flight and forcible displacement. Political solutions to long-standing conflicts are the most important factor in this context.

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