



# Refugee Fact Sheet

"The Church is ever mindful that Jesus Christ himself was a refugee, that as a child he had to flee with his parents from his native land in order to escape persecution. In every age therefore the Church feels herself called to help refugees. And she will continue to do so, to the full extent that her limited means allow."

—Pope John Paul II, *Address to Refugees in Exile at Morong*, no. 3

## What Is a Refugee?

Refugees are individuals who have fled their countries of origin and who meet the United Nations' criteria of having a "well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion."

## Refugee Problems Around the World

The *World Refugee Survey 2008* reports that there are more than 14 million refugees worldwide. As a result of ethnic, political, and religious persecution, these people have been driven from their homelands and sent to seek safety elsewhere. For example,

- In the years following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, more than 2 million Iraqi people fled to neighboring countries. Another 2.2 million people were internally displaced.
- In September 2007, following a government crackdown in Burma, hundreds of thousands of Burmese were forced from their homes and now reside as refugees in neighboring countries. Unfortunately, the political situation giving rise to the Burmese refugee situation extends at least as far back as the 1980s.
- During the 1990s, tens of thousands of ethnic Nepalis came under persecution in the country of Bhutan. Many fled the country to avoid further persecution and arbitrary detention and ended up in refugee camps in Nepal, where thousands continue to reside today.

This list can be continued indefinitely. The stories of persecution and suffering that underlie this list could be told in great detail. Many of the circumstances that led to these refugee crises are the direct result of religious, political, or ethnic persecution. Taking steps to isolate and address simmering conflicts before they erupt into more serious persecutions is an impor-

tant mechanism that will help prevent future problems from developing into refugee crises.

## What Is the Catholic Church in the United States Doing?

The Church in the United States takes very seriously the plight of refugees around the world and actively advocates for and participates in their resettlement in the United States. In 2007, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and its diocesan agency network helped to resettle 13,631 refugees, or 28% of all refugees admitted into the United States during this period. The persons resettled represented forty-one different countries, with the largest groups coming from Burma, Burundi, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Russia, Liberia, and Vietnam. Since 9/11, the United States has admitted far fewer refugees than in the past. It is important that the American people call on their leaders to reopen the United States to refugee populations, so that refugees will have the opportunity to live without fear. For more information on the activities of the Catholic Church in the United States as it reaches out to refugee populations in need, please visit [www.usccb.org/mrs/refugeeprograms.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/mrs/refugeeprograms.shtml).

## What Can You Do to Help?

Find out whether your diocese has a refugee resettlement program. If so, contact the program to see how you can assist in the process. You can find a list of resettlement agencies in your area at [www.usccb.org/mrs/resettlementoffices.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/mrs/resettlementoffices.shtml). If your diocese does not have a program, contact your bishop and ask him to start one. It is essential that dioceses across the country welcome into their communities vulnerable populations who are in need of a new home and a fresh start.

# Some Causes of Forced Migration

"In many regions of the world today people live in tragic situations of instability and uncertainty. It does not come as a surprise that in such contexts the poor and the destitute make plans to escape, to seek a new land that can offer them bread, dignity and peace. This is the migration of the desperate."

—Pope John Paul II, Message for World Migration Day 2000

A complex set of factors contributes to changing migration patterns. Isolating some of these factors, including forced economic migration and global climate change, highlights some of the pressures that contribute to the movement of people around the world.

## Poverty and Underdevelopment

As of 2008, our world was home to almost 6.5 billion people. Nearly half of them live on less than two dollars a day, and a billion others live on less than a dollar a day. Lack of economic resources makes it difficult for families to achieve adequate nutrition, viable forms of shelter, and educational opportunities that could help lift entire families out of poverty. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) recognizes that, until we adequately address the problem of underdevelopment around the world, it will be impossible to deal effectively with the problems of undocumented immigration and other forms of forced economic migration. The USCCB's Campaign Against Global Poverty actively seeks to address pervasive poverty, and it advocates for policies that will help to alleviate want and improve living standards everywhere. The bishops support trade policies that will promote development and ease economic hardship. They back foreign aid programs that will foster long-term development. They call on the developed world to eliminate the debt of the world's poorest countries. Taking the necessary steps to promote development in underdeveloped regions of the world will ease the economic pressures that help drive migration.

## Climate Change

"Global climate change poses one of the greatest threats to the most vulnerable among us. Because of poverty, age, health, and location, the poor are especially susceptible to the potential negative impacts of global climate change."

—USCCB Committees on Domestic and International Policy, *Faithful Stewards of God's Creation*

Climate change brings with it the danger of rising sea levels, increased frequency of droughts, longer-lasting heat waves, and disrupted ecosystems. With changing weather patterns and increasingly unreliable agricultural productivity, more often than not the poor and the marginalized suffer most. Without alternative modes of employment, cash reserves, or any form of insurance system, countless families now living in the developing world who depend on the land for their livelihood could face an unbearable situation. As lands become increasingly unusable due to flooding or drought, people may have no choice but to leave their land in search of work elsewhere. This dynamic has caused some people to become "environmental refugees." It is crucial that world leaders confront the problem of global climate change and assist those who are most directly affected by changing conditions.

## What Can You Do to Help?

- For more information on the problem of underdevelopment and the bishops' efforts to address climate change, please visit [www.usccb.org/sdwp/globalpoverty/resources.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/globalpoverty/resources.shtml).
- To get involved with the USCCB's efforts to deal with climate change, please visit [www.catholicsandclimatechange.org](http://www.catholicsandclimatechange.org). For more information on the problem of global climate change, please visit [www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/climate](http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/climate).

The document *Refugee Fact Sheet/Some Causes of Forced Migration* was developed as a resource by the Committee on Migration of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). It was reviewed by the committee chairman, Bishop John C. Wester, and has been authorized for publication by the undersigned.

Msgr. David J. Malloy, STD  
General Secretary, USCCB



ISBN 978-1-60137-063-1  
Publication No. M7-063

Copyright © 2008, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C. All rights reserved. Photo: David Snyder/Catholic Relief Services.