



# Internally Displaced Persons

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*“In each of these people, forced to flee to safety, Jesus is present as he was at the time of Herod. In the faces of the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, strangers and prisoners, we are called to see the face of Christ who pleads with us to help (cf. Matthew 25: 31-46).”*

— Pope Francis, “Like Jesus, Forced to Flee. Welcoming, Protecting, Promoting, and Integrating Internally Displaced Persons,” 2020 World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 27 September 2020

## Who are Internally Displaced Persons?

According to the accepted international definition, internally displaced persons (IDPs) are persons or groups of persons who have been forced to flee their homes due to armed conflict, generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or human-made disasters, but who have not crossed an internationally recognized border.<sup>1</sup> Despite being forced from their homes, IDPs remain in their country.

The reasons for IDPs not leaving their home countries vary such as (1) lack of resources, as many do not have the means to take the international journey, (2) for many, with systemic danger and community breakdown, they are trapped in dangerous areas because of violence or physical threats;<sup>2</sup> (3) fleeing one’s country is a last resort for most people and they want to exhaust all options before doing so; (4) crossing the border and being a foreigner can present serious challenges, in itself; and (5) one’s own government sometimes stops or hinders departure (e.g., exit permits). Examples of IDPs include, but are not limited to:

- Individuals who are forced to flee their homes because of the violation of human rights, including flight for the same reasons as refugees;
- Families caught between warring parties, factions etc. and forced to flee their homes due to bombardments or threats of armed attacks;
- Indigenous communities forced from their ancestral lands because of dam construction and other infrastructure projects;
- Individuals pushed to leave their homes because of harassment and assaults by local criminal gangs or armed criminal groups;
- Residents of poor neighborhoods or rural communities rendered unlivable by weather-related, geophysical hazards, such as farmers unable to make a livelihood in areas stricken by drought;
- Inhabitants of coastal, mountainous, or arid areas who have lost their land and livelihoods because of gradual environmental degradation connected to climate change.<sup>3</sup>

## How many IDPs are there currently in the world?

An estimated 50.8 million people were internally displaced at the end of 2019.<sup>4</sup> Many additional IDPs remain unaccounted for, as the figures for some countries are underestimated, while data on displacement is scarce for other countries.<sup>5</sup> Many IDPs are displaced internally due to the same kind of persecution as refugees, either by the government or by someone the government cannot or will not control. Without protection and humanitarian support, such IDPs are often forced to flee across international borders and become refugees.

## How are IDPs different from refugees?

Under international and U.S. law a “refugee” is someone outside his or her country who cannot or will not return due to a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.<sup>6</sup> Because IDPs are displaced within their own country they are not considered refugees under international law, even if they share the same reasons for their displacement and many of the same circumstances and challenges as refugees.

Most IDPs do not share the refugee’s risk of being a foreigner in a new place. Most speak the language and are acclimated to the culture of their home country and share citizenship or some other legal status and its rights and benefits. Most IDPs do not face arrest, detention,

and deportation, a typical threat facing refugees who have crossed international borders. Most refugees have left everything behind, embracing poverty to escape death. The international community promulgated the Refugee Convention and Protocol to address refugee vulnerabilities, working through UNHCR, and the member states' provision of humanitarian aid and support for durable solutions. Even with this legal and funding framework, refugees often face long years of subsistence level survival, dangers in the host countries, and a long wait for durable solutions.

On the other hand, even though IDPs are still in their country, some of them are individuals who, like refugees are seeking protection from violence or persecution. This group of IDPs must rely on their own government, which may have persecuted them or may be incapable or unwilling to provide protection against nongovernmental persecutors. Also, many IDPs are trapped in armed conflict situations or in the midst of natural disasters, making it difficult for aid organizations to reach them.<sup>7</sup> Forced to leave their belongings and their work when fleeing their homes, IDPs tend to live in extreme poverty, they often lack documentation, and face inadequate access to healthcare, due to overburdened host area health facilities, or an absence of medical facilities altogether. Most IDPs do not find their way to displacement camps, while those who do often struggle with limited access to water, energy, and sanitation in overcrowded conditions. They frequently experience displacement not once but multiple times before finally reaching some semblance of safety.<sup>8</sup> Those IDPs without support in their countries often resort to fleeing to other countries, particularly if they are fleeing persecution.

## How has the international community worked to protect IDPs?

In 1998, the UN first published the [Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#).<sup>9</sup> While the principles are not legally binding, they do set out the rights of IDPs and the obligations of governments towards them. They provide the accepted international definition for IDPs, outline the primary responsibility of national authorities to protect and assist all IDPs, regardless of the cause of their displacement, detail the important role of the international community when a national government lacks resources or expertise to stop displacement or protect IDPs, provide concrete actions that governments should take to prevent forced displacement and to protect IDPs when displacement does occur, and provide principles whereby the international community supports the national governments.<sup>10</sup>

In 2009, the [African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa](#)<sup>11</sup> (“Kampala Convention”), building on these Guiding Principles, was signed by all 55 countries of the African Union, in order to provide a framework of legal protection and humanitarian assistance for IDPs at the national and regional levels. [Thirty one of those countries have so far ratified](#)<sup>12</sup> the Kampala Convention, making them legally bound to adhere to the agreement. Various countries, such as Colombia and Kenya, have additionally become legally bound by domestic laws and policies based on the Guiding Principles, which articulate rules for the assistance and protection of IDPs.<sup>13</sup> While these are important steps, more work is needed. IDPs still lack the international, regional, and national legal and humanitarian assistance frameworks comparable to the ones for refugees.

Meanwhile, large, complex forced displacement of refugees and IDPs continues to expand and governments continue to respond at varying levels, with support from UN intergovernmental agencies, donor countries, and civil society. Governments do not always have the capacity or will to offer sufficient humanitarian protections to IDPs: the Salvadoran government, for example, has not publicly acknowledged the full extent of internal displacement in El Salvador, which in 2016 was second in the world in terms of the number of new displacements relative to population size. Since there is no government system in place for collecting information on IDPs in El Salvador, the data establishing that trend was primarily collected by NGOs and international organisations.<sup>14</sup>

Among those providing leadership on the global IDP response are the Special Rapporteur for IDPs of the UN Human Rights Council, who advocates for IDP protection, the Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs ([OCHA](#)) that coordinates much of the direct assistance, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that collaborates with OCHA and others to support IDPs when requested, leading protection efforts and co-leading camp management and emergency shelter efforts. In September 2019, the UNHCR reaffirmed its commitment to working in partnership with others at national, regional, and global levels to strengthen protection and secure solutions for IDPs.<sup>15</sup> The UN is currently coordinating to support IDPs through a [Plan of Action](#),<sup>16</sup> launched on the 20th Anniversary of the Guiding Principles, is aimed at reducing IDPs through prevention, protection, and durable solutions.

## Where are IDPs found in the world?

UNHCR works with IDPs in 33 countries,<sup>17</sup> and reports that the five countries with the highest number of IDPs are Colombia, Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Yemen, and Somalia.<sup>18</sup> Displacement caused by conflict disproportionately affects people in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, with new waves recorded in South Asia; environmentally-induced displacement associated with primarily affected East Asia and islands in the Pacific, and South Asia.<sup>19</sup>

- At the end of 2019, Colombia continued to report the highest number of internally displaced people at close to 8 million.<sup>20</sup>
- Syria, in its tenth year of civil conflict, has seen more than half of the country's pre-war population displaced. By the end of 2019, there were 6.5 million IDPs in Syria, with 1.8 million new displacements occurring that year alone.<sup>21</sup>
- In Somalia, a combination of violence, forced evictions, and disasters contributed to 2.6 million IDPs in 2019.<sup>22</sup>
- Widespread conflict and violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo led to 5 million IDPs by the end of 2019, the highest number reported by UNHCR to date.<sup>23</sup>
- El Salvador had 454,000 new displacements in 2019, primarily caused by widespread gang and criminal violence.<sup>24</sup>
- The United States has an estimated 37,000 IDPs, mostly caused by natural disasters.<sup>25</sup>

## What is the Catholic Church's teaching on IDPs?

For the 106th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2020, His Holiness Pope Francis devoted his [Message](#) to internally displaced persons, “an often unseen tragedy that the global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated.” In May 2020, the Migrants and Refugees Section of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development issued the document “[Pastoral Orientations on Internally Displaced People](#)” to inspire and encourage the pastoral work of the Church in this specific area.<sup>26</sup> His Holiness Pope Francis' message called on Christians to “see the face of Christ who pleads with us to help”: “If we can recognize him in those faces, we will be the ones to thank him for having been able to meet, love and serve him in them.”<sup>27</sup>

The Catholic Church teaches us that assisting those in need is a fundamental Christian duty derived directly from the words and the life of Christ, who himself was a migrant and part of a refugee family. “Displaced people offer us this opportunity to meet the Lord,” wrote His Holiness in his Message, “even though our eyes find it hard to recognize him: his clothing in tatters, his feet dirty, his face disfigured, his body wounded, his tongue unable to speak our language” (Homily, 15 February 2019).<sup>28</sup>

## What is the Catholic Church doing to help assist IDPs?

Catholic Churches across the world respond to IDPs and emergency situations that create IDPs, working through national Catholic bishops conferences, local dioceses, parishes, national and international religious orders, the global Caritas network, the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) (the coalition of national Bishops conferences), many national and international Catholic NGOs. In the U.S., local Catholic Charities provide emergency services to IDPs often working with FEMA and the Red Cross. Internationally, Catholic Relief Services, ICMC, Jesuit Refugee Services, and many others help to serve IDPs around the world. US Catholic agencies serve as implementing partners with the US government, working with the Department of State and with the USAID and the local Catholic Churches and NGOs to prevent forced displacement, to protect IDPs when it does occur, to repair conditions causing the displacement, and pursue durable solution for IDPs.

## What can you do?

- \***Pray** for internally displaced individuals and families;
- \***Educate** yourself and others about IDPs, including those in the United States, and those whom the U.S. serve around the world;
- \***Support** with cash and in-kind donations all the Catholic organizations responding to IDPs;
- \***Support** robust funding for State Foreign Operations International Disaster Assistance and Migration and Refugee Assistance, and learn more about this by reading our [appropriations letters](#).

## Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, (Second Edition. 2004. Page 1), OFFICE FOR COORDINATION OF HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS (OCHA), <https://www.unhcr.org/protection/idps/43ce1cff2/guiding-principles-internal-displacement.html>.
- <sup>2</sup> *Internally Displaced People*, UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/internally-displaced-people.html>.
- <sup>3</sup> *Internal Displacement*, (bullets 2-5), IDMC, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/internal-displacement>.
- <sup>4</sup> *Global Report on Internal Displacement (GRID): Summary*, (May 2020. Page 1), IDMC, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/2020-IDMC-GRID-executive-summary.pdf>.
- <sup>5</sup> *GRID 2020: Summary*, (Page 10), IDMC, (May 2019).
- <sup>6</sup> *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, UN, (Pages 13-16 ,46), <https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.html> (international definition in Convention Article 1, updated in Protocol Article 1); and 8 USC 1158 (a)(42). <https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=granuleid%3AUSC-prelim-title8-section1101&num=0&edition=prelim> (U.S. refugee definition).
- <sup>7</sup> *Internally Displaced People*, UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/internally-displaced-people.html>.
- <sup>8</sup> Alice Debarre, *The Unaddressed Plight of Internally Displaced Persons*, IPI GLOBAL OBSERVATORY, (March 16, 2018), <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2018/03/unaddressed-plight-internally-displaced-persons/>.
- <sup>9</sup> *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, UN, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/protection/idps/43ce1cff2/guiding-principles-internal-displacement.html>.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> African Union, Kampala Convention, UNHCR, (Oct 23, 2009), <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/about-us/background/4ae9bede9/african-union-convention-protection-assistance-internally-displaced-persons.html>.
- <sup>12</sup> UNHCR welcomes Ethiopia's ratification of Kampala Convention. UNHCR. February 14, 2020. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/2/5e468f7d4/unhcr-welcomes-ethiopias-ratification-kampala-convention.html>
- <sup>13</sup> See Amaya Valcarcel, et al., *Colombia: durable solutions for the forcibly displaced*, FORCED MIGRATION REVIEW, (October 2017), <https://www.fmreview.org/latinamerica-caribbean/valcarcel-samudio>. See also, Kenya: Act No. 56 of 2012, The Prevention, Protection and Assistance to Internally Displaced Persons and Affected Communities Act, 2012 [Kenya], 2013, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/511219962.html>.
- <sup>14</sup> *Temporary Protected Status: A Vital Piece of the Central American Protection and Prosperity Puzzle*, COMMITTEE ON MIGRATION OF THE UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, (October 2017), <http://www.usccb.org/about/migration-policy/fact-finding-mission-reports/upload/el-salvador-honduras-report-20171016.pdf>.
- <sup>15</sup> *UNHCR and Internally Displaced Persons: UNHCR's Role in Support of an Enhanced Humanitarian Response to IDP Situations*, UNHCR, (Sept 18, 2019), <https://www.unhcr.org/protection/idps/50f951df9/unhcr-internally-displaced-persons-unhcrs-role-support-enhanced-humanitarian.html>.
- <sup>16</sup> *A Plan of Action for Advancing Prevention, Protection and Solutions for Internally Displaced People 2018-2020*, United Nations, (May 23, 2018), <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/IDPersons/GP20PlanOfAction.pdf>.
- <sup>17</sup> *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2019*, (Page 28), UNHCR, (June 18, 2020), <https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/2020-IDMC-GRID.pdf>.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> *Global Report on Internal Displacement: Summary*, IDMC, (May 2019).
- <sup>20</sup> *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2019*, UNHCR, (June 18, 2020).
- <sup>21</sup> *Syria*, IDMC, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/syria>.
- <sup>22</sup> *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2019*, UNHCR, (June 18, 2020).
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> *El Salvador*, IDMC, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/el-salvador>.
- <sup>25</sup> *United States*, IDMC, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/united-states>.
- <sup>26</sup> *Pastoral Orientations on Internally Displaced People*, VATICAN DICASTERY FOR PROMOTING INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES, <https://migrants-refugees.va/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/1.-Read-On-Screen-A5-EN-.pdf>.
- <sup>27</sup> Pope Francis, *Message for the 106th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2020*, (2020), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco\\_20200513\\_world-migrants-day-2020.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20200513_world-migrants-day-2020.html).
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.