
THE ROLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS IN THE MANAGEMENT OF CONTEMPORARY HUMANITARIAN CRISES AND REFUGEE PROTECTION

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Abstract: *This article examines the role of the United Nations in managing contemporary humanitarian crises, focusing on the institutional mechanisms, operational frameworks, and political dynamics that shape its effectiveness. Drawing on recent case studies and official UN assessments, the study highlights the growing complexity of crises driven by protracted conflicts and large-scale displacement, which increasingly challenge the UN's capacity to deliver coherent, needs-based responses. The analysis reveals both notable contributions of the UN in facilitating protection, aid delivery, and multilateral coordination, as well as persistent structural limitations, highlighting some key aspects of the refugee concept and the corresponding international legal framework, while also examining the role of UNHCR in the management of humanitarian crises and the protection of displaced populations.*

Keywords: *United Nations, humanitarian crises, humanitarian intervention, crisis management, contemporary conflicts*

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past years, the international community has faced an important increase in complex humanitarian crises, driven by protracted armed conflicts, large-scale population displacement, and climate-related disasters. Conflicts in Yemen, Syria, South Sudan, Gaza, among others, have generated immense human suffering while simultaneously challenging the capacity of international organizations to provide timely and effective assistance.

The United Nations (UN) functions as the central actor in the global humanitarian architecture, coordinating complex action through specialized agencies such as the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the World Food Programme (WFP) (Weiss, 2016). These agencies collectively try to ensure the delivery of timely, impartial, and needs-based humanitarian assistance. However, the effectiveness of the UN system is often constrained by political disagreements among



member states, bureaucratic complexity, and limited financial and logistical resources (Binder, 2017; UN OCHA, 2019).

Recent studies also emphasize the impact of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic on international humanitarian operations, illustrating how global emergencies can exacerbate vulnerabilities and disrupt established coordination mechanisms (Lopes, Champawat & Hosli, 2025).

In addition to conflicts and pandemics, climate-induced disasters have increasingly shaped humanitarian needs. The number of people forced to flee persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations and events seriously disturbing public order rose in 2024, reaching a record 123.2 million. This is an increase of 7 million people or 6 per cent compared to the end of 2023. One in 67 people globally were forcibly displaced at the end of 2024. Slightly more than one third of all forcibly displaced people globally were Sudanese (14.3 million), Syrian (13.5 million), Afghan (10.3 million) or Ukrainian (8.8 million). According to 2025 Global Report on Internal Displacement (Internal Displacement Monitoring System, 2025), during 2024, millions of people were displaced, including an estimated 20.1 million within their own country and 5.4 million as refugees and asylum seekers. Over the last decade, the number of forcibly displaced people has almost doubled. However, the rate of increase in the number of people forcibly displaced slowed in the second half of 2024. While there was an estimated increase of 5.2 million forcibly displaced people in the first half of 2024, the increase in the second half of the year dropped to only a third of that, 1.7 million. Operational data and initial estimated for 2025 indicate that global forced displacement may begin to fall during 2025. By the end of April 2025, UNHCR estimated that total forced displacement globally has fallen slightly by 1 per cent to 122.1 million (UNHCR, 2024). Moreover, empirical research demonstrates that collaboration with local NGOs and civil society actors significantly enhances operational outcomes, particularly in complex conflict environments where access and security are limited (Elayah, Al-Mansori, 2024).

REFUGEE PROTECTION MODALITIES

A refugee is, fundamentally, a displaced person who has been compelled to cross international borders and is unable to return safely to their country of origin. Such an individual may be designated as an asylum seeker until granted refugee status by the relevant contracting state or, where applicable, by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

In English, the term "refugee" originates from the word *refuge*, derived from the Old French *refugié*, meaning "a place of concealment." It is conceptually linked to the notion of "shelter or protection from danger," tracing back to the Latin *fugere*, "to flee," and *refugium*, "a refuge, a place designated for retreat." In Western historical context, the term was initially applied to the French Huguenot Protestants, who sought a secure haven from Catholic persecution following the enactment of the first Edict of Fontainebleau in 1540 (Malkki, 1996).

International legal norms concerning the global situation of refugees, developed in the aftermath of the Second World War, gained a well-defined structure primarily through the establishment of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the adoption of the Convention in 1951. These instruments facilitated the evolution of the concept of international protection, shifting from diplomatic and consular safeguards to a more comprehensive framework dedicated to the protection of human rights.

As this system strengthened, the individual came to be recognized as a rights-holder (Goodwin-Gill, 1996), and the failure or inability of a country of origin to fulfill its obligations to ensure the protection of human rights gradually emerged as a matter of international concern as well as a legitimate subject for humanitarian intervention.

From the second half of the twentieth century, international procedures for refugee protection experienced significant development within a system established and supervised by the United Nations, closely linked to the recognition and safeguarding of human rights. Accordingly, Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted by the United Nations on 10th December 1948) asserts that "everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy asylum from persecution in other countries."

Equally noteworthy is the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, adopted on 28th July 1951, which regulates the granting of refugee status to individuals who have left their country of origin due to persecution and establishes the legal framework applicable to them in the host state.

Pursuant to Article 1, Section A, Paragraph 2 of the Convention, a refugee is defined as a person who, 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 the country of their nationality and is unable or, due to such fear, unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of their former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, due to such fear, unwilling to return. The specialized literature has indicated that the range of reasons for leaving one's country of origin can be diverse, encompassing situations such as oppression, persecution, threats to life or liberty, extreme poverty, war or civil strife, and natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, droughts, famine), among others. This leads to the conclusion that the category of refugees also includes individuals who have been compelled to leave their country due to armed conflicts and remain on the territory of another state, without having lost or renounced the citizenship of their country of origin (Moroianu-Zlătescu, 2008).

In 1967, the definition of a refugee was formally reaffirmed through the United Nations Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, thereby extending the legal framework established by the 1951 Refugee Convention. Moreover, the Convention governing specific refugee issues in Africa, adopted by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1969, further broadened the 1951 definition to include: *"Any person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, or events seriously disturbing public order, either in part or throughout their country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave their habitual residence in order to seek refuge elsewhere, outside their country of origin or nationality."*

Subsequently, the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, a non-binding regional instrument, recognized that: *"Persons who have fled their country because their lives, safety, or freedom were threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violations of human rights, or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order."*

Since 2011, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has explicitly acknowledged that, in addition to the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol, refugees also include those: *"who are outside their country of nationality or habitual residence and are unable to return due to serious and indiscriminate threats to life, physical integrity, or liberty arising from generalized violence or events that seriously disturb public order."*

This evolving legal framework underscores the progressive expansion of international refugee law, reflecting both the need for adaptive protection mechanisms and the recognition of diverse contemporary causes of forced displacement.

The precarious situation of refugees and the protection afforded to them cannot be fully understood without reference to the standards enshrined in international humanitarian law, as they constitute the category of individuals through whom violations of human rights are made more visible (Vergatti, 2009).

It is also important to underscore that, although the protection of refugees has roots in antiquity, its systematic organization at the global level can be traced to the International Committee of the Red Cross, with the framework later further developed by the League of Nations (Kissinger, 2003).

In the same time, it should also be noted that one of the most important rights enjoyed by refugees concerns non-refoulement, a principle often regarded as having the status of customary international law, constituting a general obligation binding on all states, including those that have not ratified the 1951 Convention. The principle of non-refoulement does not apply to individuals who cannot be granted refugee status on the grounds that they are considered a threat to the security of the state, have been definitively convicted of a serious crime and pose a danger to the community, or for whom there is credible evidence of having committed crimes against peace, war crimes, or crimes against humanity. Exclusion from the protection of the principle of non-refoulement also extends to those found guilty of acts contrary to the purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations (as set out in its Preamble and in Articles 1 and 2), as well as individuals who have committed serious non-political crimes outside their country of origin prior to obtaining the right of residence based on refugee status (Năstase, 1992).

On 17th December 2018, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Global Compact on Refugees, following two years of extensive consultations conducted by the UNHCR with member states, international organizations, refugees, civil society, the private sector, and various experts.

The Global Compact on Refugees provides a comprehensive framework for the more predictable and equitable sharing of responsibilities among all stakeholders, recognizing that sustainable solutions to refugee situations cannot be achieved without robust international cooperation.

UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES (UNHCR)

The international humanitarian system is organized as a complex network of United Nations (UN) agencies, national authorities, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), coordinated through specialized UN bodies to ensure the delivery of timely, coherent, and needs-based assistance. At the center of this architecture is the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which operates under the guidance of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC). OCHA's mandate encompasses the coordination of international humanitarian efforts in contexts where national capacities are exceeded or inadequate to address emergent crises (UNHCR, 2024; UN Digital Library, 2019).

Within this framework, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) holds a pivotal role. In refugee emergencies or large-scale forced displacement, UNHCR is formally designated as the lead agency. In the case of internal displacement or non-refugee humanitarian crises, UNHCR frequently assumes leadership of thematic clusters, including Protection, Shelter, and Camp Coordination / Camp Management (CCCM), and may co-lead additional clusters aligned with its mandate and operational capacity.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established by the United Nations General Assembly on 14th December 1950. The Office is entrusted with the mandate to lead and coordinate international measures for the protection of refugees. Its principal objective is the promotion and safeguarding of the rights and well-being of persons fleeing persecution. UNHCR is committed to ensuring that every individual may exercise the right to seek asylum and obtain protection in a foreign State, with the possibilities of voluntary repatriation, local

integration, or resettlement in a third country. Moreover, the Office is also mandated to provide assistance and protection to stateless persons. (UNHCR Romania, 2025).

We mention that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) operates under the authority of the UN General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The agency's biennial programs, along with the corresponding financial allocations, are subject to the endorsement of the UNHCR Executive Committee.

The UNHCR's mandate is enshrined in the 1950 Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. In 2003, the General Assembly extended this mandate for an indefinite duration, stipulating that it shall persist “until the problem of refugees is resolved.” In accordance with its governance framework, the High Commissioner is obliged to present a comprehensive annual report on the agency's operations and activities to both ECOSOC and the General Assembly.

The formulation and submission of these programs and budgets fall under the purview of the High Commissioner, currently Filippo Grandi, who is appointed by the General Assembly. He is the 11th United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and was first elected by the UN General Assembly on 1st January 2016 for a five-year term. The General Assembly has since twice re-elected him to serve, and he will now complete his term on 31st December 2025. In one of his statements, he emphasized that *“UNHCR is navigating extraordinarily difficult waters. The combination of multiple conflicts and resulting mass displacement, fresh challenges to asylum, the funding gap between humanitarian needs and resources, and growing xenophobia is very dangerous.”* (UNHCR, 2025).

Undoubtedly, the role of United Nations institutions, and in particular the UNHCR, is central in addressing humanitarian crises and managing the needs of refugee populations. Indeed, its incapacity to bring armed conflicts, such as Syria, Yemen, and most recently Ukraine, to a negotiated end is an illustration of this crisis (Hellmüller, 2021). For example, more than three years on, the full-scale war on Ukraine has taken thousands of lives, caused untold destruction, torn families apart, inflicted significant psychological trauma and devastated the country's economy and infrastructure. UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, estimates that 10.6 million Ukrainians are displaced – almost a quarter of its pre-war population. Inside Ukraine, 3.7 million have been uprooted, while 6.9 million refugees continue to receive protection abroad. More than 2 million homes across Ukraine – 10 per cent of the housing stock – have been damaged or destroyed. Repeated attacks on energy infrastructure continue to plunge people into cold and darkness, while further disrupting strained local services. The newly displaced are increasingly vulnerable – older people and those living with disabilities – who often face additional challenges in accessing services they need the most. Over the last three years, UNHCR has brought life-saving assistance to millions affected. Working hand-in-hand with the Government of Ukraine, sister agencies and local partners, UNHCR continues to respond to new attacks and fresh displacement, providing – amongst other things – a warm place to sleep in the immediate aftermath, psychological first aid and cash for basic necessities. With other UN humanitarians, UNHCR has delivered aid to 800,000 people living in hard-to-reach frontline communities (UN Ukraine, 2025). Since February 2022, the conflict has reshaped political agendas, tested solidarity among states, and triggered an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, more than seven million people have been forced to abandon their homes (Mărcău, 2025).

Regarding the situation in Gaza, an official UNHCR statement issued in February 2024 reports that UNHCR Egypt's humanitarian response has included the delivery of more than 90,000 emergency relief items, such as blankets, sleeping mats, jerrycans, and winter clothing, alongside



over 500,000 bottles of potable water. Moreover, financial assistance was extended to approximately 200 households accompanying Palestinians transferred to Egypt for medical treatment, while additional support was provided to the Government of Egypt in facilitating the care of injured patients (UNHCR Egypt, 2024). In parallel, UNHCR also contributed logistical and storage support for the pre-positioning and management of essential humanitarian supplies in Alexandria and Cairo, ensuring that critical aid could be rapidly deployed as needs intensified. In this context, we note that the conflict transcends a limited, bilateral approach between two entities. It is, in fact, part of a broader, complex system of regional divergences that significantly influence the security architecture of the Middle East (Peptan, 2025a).

In the same time, the Gaza conflict has demonstrated that strategic infrastructure- both military and civilian- is used not only as a battlefield objective but also as a tool of psychological, symbolic, and diplomatic pressure in an asymmetric context where international humanitarian law is persistently challenged (Peptan, 2025b).

Another country of particular significance in the context of contemporary conflicts is Egypt, as it is the primary host country for people fleeing the ongoing conflict in Sudan. UNHCR has maintained a presence in Egypt since 1954. Since that time, UNHCR has provided protection—including registration, documentation, refugee status determination, and resettlement—to individuals forced to flee. According to a UNHCR fact sheet from June 2025, Egypt hosts approximately 992,000 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR Egypt. Sudanese nationals constitute the largest group, followed by Syrians. The majority of refugees reside in Greater Cairo and Alexandria (UNHCR, 2025).

CONCLUSION

The successful coordination and delivery of responses to contemporary humanitarian crises depend fundamentally on a clearly articulated institutional and legal framework that underpins the United Nations' (UN) operational mechanisms. This framework integrates the formal mandates of specialized agencies, established coordination procedures, and binding international legal obligations, thereby ensuring that humanitarian interventions are conducted efficiently, impartially, and in conformity with established normative standards.

In a world increasingly characterized by violent conflicts, the management of humanitarian crises and the protection of refugees have emerged as pressing priorities for both sovereign states and international institutions. The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol constitute the foundational legal instruments delineating UNHCR's mandate. This legal framework has demonstrated sufficient adaptability to facilitate the international protection of diverse categories of individuals compelled to flee their countries of origin, notwithstanding certain inherent limitations in its scope and application.

Without any doubt, we consider that international support for refugees and their hosts is crucial for the contemporary global society. In order to manage the situation of refugees as effectively as possible, in full compliance with the applicable international legal provisions, UNHCR undertakes sustained efforts to guarantee that timely, effective, and sustainable humanitarian assistance reaches the individuals and communities most in need across the globe.

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