



75 YEARS OF THE 1951 REFUGEE CONVENTION

Protection Under Pressure

The Refugee Convention at 75—why its core promises still matter
and what it will take to preserve them for the next generation.

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The Refugee Convention at 75

Seventy-five years ago, in the aftermath of World War II and the largest refugee crisis in modern history, the international community came together to sign the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Then, like now, the world was confronting challenges of historic proportions. Across Europe, an estimated 40 to 50 million people had been uprooted by war, genocide, and political upheaval. The international community faced an urgent question: what obligations do countries owe to people forced across borders by violence? The answer became the Refugee Convention, which established that no one should be forcibly returned to a country where they face persecution, and that those who reach safety are entitled to rights and dignity.

The world is again seeing displacement of historic proportions, and the Convention's founding logic has never been more relevant. Today, more than **50 million people** have been forcibly displaced across borders. As the IRC's 2026 Emergency Watchlist¹ documents, the problem is not only that more crises are erupting, but that fewer are ending. More than **70% of conflicts** that began since 2020 have lasted longer than a year, nearly double the rate of previous decades. The countries bearing the greatest responsibility to respond are among the world's most under-resourced: **68% of refugees** are hosted in lower- and middle-income countries, even as global humanitarian funding collapsed by more than **\$31 billion in 2025**. And the international mechanisms built to share responsibility are under sustained political attack, with resettlement dropping by more than half in 2025.

The Convention remains a cornerstone of the rules-based order, but delivering on its promises requires confronting a political environment that has fundamentally changed. As multilateral cooperation and shared norms give way to what the IRC calls a "New World Disorder," some governments are betting that weakening commitments to refugees will yield political dividends at home. This is a mistake. The Convention's core commitments to protecting people from being returned to danger, enabling durable integration and sharing responsibility across borders remain essential, but their implementation must be modernized for today's challenges. Asylum systems should be updated to reduce backlogs and costs and to restore public confidence that they function. Durable integration requires secure legal status and early investment in work, education, and services that allow refugees to contribute fully to their host communities. And the global community must renew concrete commitments to responsibility-sharing, humanitarian financing, and the Convention's core principles.

01 Refugee Protection in a Time of Political Backlash



Photo: Betty Laura Zapata for IRC

In the UK, one of the original Refugee Convention signatories, Chadia's family have been able to rebuild their lives together after fleeing the conflict in Syria. Chadia's husband was granted asylum in the UK in 2016 and was able to reunite with Chadia and their two children through the now-suspended refugee family reunion program. With help from the IRC's orientation and employment programs, Chadia learned English, volunteered in her community, and ultimately found work as a catering assistant at a local school.

An enduring contribution of the Refugee Convention was providing a global definition of who qualifies for refugee protection (Art. 1) and prohibiting refugees from being returned to life-threatening dangers (non-refoulement, Art. 33). By defining a refugee as someone forced from their home by persecution on account of their race, religion, nationality, political beliefs, or membership in other protected groups, the Convention established a common baseline that has saved millions of lives. Globally, more than 30 million refugees are hosted by countries party to the Convention.² While challenges persist, asylum seekers arriving in countries like Mexico, Canada, Kenya, Germany and many others have relied on Convention protections to find safety from persecution.

But the lifesaving function of the global refugee system is increasingly threatened as countries weaken protections in the face of rising displacement, strained public services, and nationalist politics. While polling shows most people support protecting refugees, there is growing public skepticism of



Photo: Andrew Oberstadt for the IRC

In the United States, which signed the Convention's Protocol in 1968, Ahmad and his family are now rebuilding their lives together. Ahmad evacuated to the U.S. after the Taliban takeover. After receiving asylum with the help of an IRC attorney, Ahmad was able to petition for his wife to join him. She finally arrived in 2025 after four years apart. Ahmad is now on a path recovery, improving his English, and completing a computer certification course to build skills toward a new career.

how governments are running their asylum systems,³ with refugees and asylum seekers being unfairly scapegoated for structural economic and social challenges.

Broader debates around immigration policy have collapsed the distinction between refugee protection and other types of migration policy. Countries are now responding to migration pressures by turning away asylum seekers at borders and forcibly returning people to countries where they may not be safe, in violation of non-refoulement.⁴ At the same time, national asylum systems face real pressures, such as rising displacement, immigration policies that fail to address labor market needs, and budget cuts leading to insufficient reception and processing infrastructure around the world.⁵ Yet, investments in reception and integration are outweighed by long-term fiscal and economic benefits from welcoming newcomers.⁶ Conversely, when governments cut reception infrastructure, the result is longer wait times, higher support costs, loss of public trust, and barriers for refugees working to rebuild their lives.

02 The Retreat from Long-Term Integration

The Refugee Convention guarantees refugees the right to work, to go to school, and to build a stable life in their new country (Arts. 17–27, 34). Policies that uphold these obligations reflect a commitment to human dignity and equality, and allow refugees to live up to their full potential. They are also practical investments in the prosperity of host communities. Integration policies grounded in durable protection and long-term, predictable legal status create compounding benefits as refugees are supported to make decisions with the future in mind, rather than focusing solely on immediate survival. Access to education drives greater workforce participation, while secure legal status and clear pathways to permanent residence encourage deeper investment in language acquisition and professional development. Refugees bring critical experiences and expertise, put down roots, and strengthen the economic, social and cultural fabric of their new communities.

Governments around the world have shown what pro-integration policies can achieve. **Colombia** pioneered a ten-year temporary protection status with work rights for 2.8 million displaced Venezuelans, which led to more than \$500 million USD in added annual tax revenue.⁷ **Uganda's** Refugees Act of 2006 introduced a self-reliance model granting refugees land and freedom of movement, enabling 1.8 million refugees to farm, trade, and participate in local markets.⁸ In the **U.S.**, post-arrival support and a clear pathway to permanent residency have created long-term certainty for resettled refugees to invest in their futures. These investments pay long-term dividends, with refugees and asylees generating a net fiscal benefit of \$123.8 billion to the U.S. government over 15 years.⁹ **Germany's** workforce integration programs helped around 64% of refugees who arrived in 2015 secure employment, approaching the national employment rate within a decade.¹⁰ Recent German innovations to fast-track employment effectively doubled the job placement rate for Ukrainian refugees.¹¹ In **Poland**, facilitating early access to the labor market for Ukrainians contributed to an additional 2.7% annual GDP growth.¹²



Nader and his wife found refuge and belonging in Germany, an original signatory of the Refugee Convention, after fleeing Syria. They attended language and integration courses and found their place in the new neighborhood. Nader eventually founded a Syrian cultural association that hosts weekly parent support groups, building a bridge between the Syrian community and German society.

Despite these well-evidenced benefits of broad, durable integration policies, a growing number of countries are moving in the opposite direction due to political pressure. At least 55% of global refugees live in countries that significantly restrict work rights in practice.¹³ The U.S. is moving to indefinitely prohibit newly arrived asylum seekers from applying for work authorization. Germany announced new caps to its highly successful integration model. Kenya maintains bureaucratic barriers that block many from the formal job market.¹⁴ Uganda, long celebrated as a model for refugee self-reliance, passed reforms in 2023 to exclude refugees from participating in parts of the formal economy.¹⁵

At the same time, some countries are shifting toward increasingly temporary protection for refugees. In March 2026, the UK introduced reforms cutting refugees' initial leave from five years to 30 months, mandating periodic review and potential revocation, while proposing to lengthen the path to permanent residence from five to up to 20 years. Sweden has similarly moved toward less durable protection, with new legislative proposals contemplating more restrictive pathways to permanent residence. In the U.S. a new policy requires the government to re-vet more than 200,000 refugees upon their one-year mark in the country. These measures, combined with stricter asylum and family reunification rules, contribute to prolonged uncertainty, undermining integration.

03 Global Cooperation Under Strain

The Refugee Convention, currently with 149 States Parties, is both a testament to what can be achieved through cooperation and a warning about the consequences of fragmented protection systems. The core non-refoulement obligations of the Convention grew out of the world's collective failure to protect refugees fleeing the Holocaust. By establishing universal minimum standards for people seeking protection at borders, the Convention aims to never again allow countries to push refugees back to persecution. Yet, while the Convention requires cooperation on core principles (Art. 35), it merely encourages countries to work together on proactive measures like resettlement. In practice, this has shifted much of the responsibility for global protection to places closest to conflict zones, with 65% of refugees remaining in countries neighboring those they fled.¹⁶

The international community has made repeated attempts to operationalize the Convention's call for global cooperation. Shortly after the 1967 Protocol expanded the Convention's reach, the Organization of African Unity adopted the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention, which broadened the refugee definition and introduced the first binding obligation for responsibility-sharing among countries. Fifteen years later, the 1984 Cartagena Declaration expanded the refugee definition and inaugurated a process of regional cooperation across Latin America and the Caribbean. More recently, the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees sought to create a more equitable and predictable global response. Regional agreements have built on this foundation, including the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection in the Americas and the EU's Union Resettlement Framework and the solidarity framework in the Pact on Migration and Asylum.

Yet, while crises multiply, global humanitarian aid has collapsed, with major donors cutting support by 23.1% in 2025,¹⁷ including for countries hosting the majority of the world's refugees. Seventy percent of refugees face crises persisting five years or more,¹⁸ leaving millions unable to return home and without the means to sustain themselves in their countries of asylum.



Photo: Marion Chepngeit for the IRC

Kenya, which signed the Refugee Convention in 1966, provides protection to hundreds of thousands of refugees and asylum seekers. Among them is Claudine, who fled from Burundi after her mother and father died during the decades-long civil and regional conflicts. Separated from her husband, Claudine crossed into Kenya alone with her eldest child in 2017. While Kenya has provided refuge for the past eight years, Claudine and her now three children who live in the Kakuma Refugee Camp are struggling to find a stable, permanent home as humanitarian aid cuts have severely impacted services.

Meanwhile, resettlement and other third-country solutions are falling woefully short. UNHCR estimated 2.9 million refugees would need resettlement in 2025, yet countries have collectively committed to resettling only 100,000 people per year (1 million total by 2030), and even that target now looks out of reach without significant course correction.¹⁹

While there have been successes in global cooperation—such as collective recognition of tens of thousands of refugees from Venezuela and Central America under the Cartagena Declaration, the protection of millions of Ukrainians in Europe through the Temporary Protection Directive, and historic numbers of refugees resettled from the Western Hemisphere through LA Declaration initiatives—these advances have been hamstrung by political shifts. Following the change in U.S. administration, Washington shut down safe routes and much of the multilateral cooperation defined by the LA Declaration. Similarly, the first round of pledges under the new European resettlement plan saw an 83% drop from the prior two years, with EU countries committing only 10,430 resettlement and humanitarian admission places for 2026 and 2027.²⁰

04 The Path Forward: Solutions for the Next 75 Years of Convention Protection

The Convention lays the groundwork for effective and rights-respecting asylum and reception systems, durable, people-centered integration measures, and concrete cooperation and responsibility-sharing. Today's challenges of providing dignified, long-term solutions for millions of refugees are significant but can be met with the right mix of political courage, technical expertise, and smart allocation of resources. The IRC urges policymakers to:

Support Well-Functioning Asylum and Reception Systems

The core promise of non-refoulement is at risk not because the value of protecting people from danger is in dispute, but because many have lost faith in asylum systems. Trust can be rebuilt by national governments prioritizing and properly resourcing effective, humane asylum determination and coordinated reception systems.²¹

- Border and other screening mechanisms employed to differentiate protection seekers from other people on the move can promote more timely, accurate decisions, but only when legal assistance is guaranteed, processes are designed to protect vulnerable groups, and independent monitoring is required. Models that fast-track “manifestly well-founded” claims can be particularly helpful to save resources for more complicated decision-making and move refugees more quickly toward stability.²²
- Allowing applicants to work during adjudication processes lets people support themselves, eases pressure on reception systems and commands broad public support.²³
- Technological innovations, such as virtual services delivery,²⁴ AI support for case triaging,²⁵ and data-driven matching²⁶ can promote more orderly and humane responses to fluctuating arrivals, but should be designed in close consultation with impacted communities and civil society, with human oversight and transparency built in to address ethical and practical risks.
- To relieve pressure on asylum systems, governments should make alternative migration pathways available that can also meet labor, education and other policy goals.²⁷



Photo: Daniela De Leon for the IRC

Among the largest hosts of asylum seekers globally is Mexico, which joined the Refugee Convention in 2000. Bisnerdy, who fled escalating violence and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, is currently seeking refugee protection in Mexico with her six-year-old son. After health and case management support from the IRC, she was able to regain financial independence by starting a culinary business.

Make Smart Investments in Durable Integration

When refugees know they have a long-term future in a host country, they are freer to invest in their own personal and professional development. Refugee-hosting countries should reject efforts to make protections temporary, subject refugees to costly, repetitive reviews, or to exclude refugees from the social service systems that can support their path to self-sufficiency.

- Countries should invest in clear, predictable pathways to permanent residence and citizenship, which are better at promoting long-term integration, providing refugees with certainty about their futures and maximizing long-term economic and social contributions.²⁸
- Both national and subnational governments should invest early in workforce and integration support, including technology that can deliver services efficiently at scale.²⁹
- Models that combine secure, long-term legal status, freedom of movement and the right to work are most efficient in promoting self-reliance.³⁰ These should be complemented by reducing barriers to credentialing³¹ and facilitating access to credit.³²

04 The Path Forward (Cont.)

Recommit to Global Cooperation

The international community, led by UNHCR, should continue to strongly defend the Convention and its principles against efforts to weaken core protections. National governments should resist calls to revise or reinterpret Convention obligations and must ensure nobody is returned to danger. Meaningful responsibility-sharing requires concrete commitments.

- Countries in the Global North must address current imbalances by making and keeping pledges under the Global Compact and the Union Resettlement Framework. With the EU Pact entering into application, Member States should fulfill solidarity obligations through robust commitments to relocation to relieve pressure on frontline countries.
- Countries should reinvest in complementary labor, education, sponsorship and family pathways alongside traditional resettlement, learning from examples like Canada's Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot³³ and the US's Welcome Corps³⁴ that harnessed local communities' commitment to refugees.
- Donor governments must reverse drastic cuts to international humanitarian aid and work to support refugee responses and stabilization efforts in fragile and conflict-affected countries from which most refugees flee.
- The World Bank and other lenders should increase debt restructuring and concessional lending to unlock resources for communities hosting the vast majority of the world's refugees, and increase partnerships³⁵ with civil society and refugee-led organizations for more effective responses.³⁶
- **All these efforts should be driven by the refugees and asylum seekers most impacted by these decisions.**

Seventy-five years ago, the world faced tens of millions of displaced people, strained resources from years of global conflict, and profound uncertainty about the future. In that moment, the Convention's architects committed to a set of principles designed to endure beyond the crisis that inspired them. Those principles remain capable of responding to today's displacement challenges. **The question is whether the international community will choose, as its predecessors did, to meet the moment.**



Photo: Taiwo Aina-Adeokun for the IRC

In Eastern Chad, with support from ECHO, the IRC provides essential health, nutrition, protection and WASH services in 13 refugee camps through mobile clinics and camp-based programs.

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