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# 1.1. Global trends in international protection

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The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that there was a historical high of 114 million displaced people globally in October 2023 due to persecution, conflict, violence and human rights violations.4 Key hotspots for displacement included Afghanistan,5 the Democratic Republic of the Congo,6 Latin American and Caribbean countries,7 Myanmar, 8Somalia,9 Sudan10 and Ukraine.11 Taken together, these seven areas accounted for an estimated 90% of all new displacements in 2023.12

Between the end of 2022 and June 2023, 1.1 million new refugees were reported by UNHCR, representing a 3% increase for a total of 36.4 million refugees in mid-2023.13 This increase was in line with the general trend which has seen the global refugee population double over the past 7 years.14In addition, an escalation of the conflict in Gaza in October 2023, and the associated humanitarian crisis, drastically increased protection needs in the region.

In December 2023, 80% of the world's refugee population was hosted by countries that together represent only 19% of the world's income.15 Thus, more than three-quarters of globally displaced people continued to be hosted in low- and middle-income countries, which seem to bear a disproportionate share of the burden as a function of the resources at their disposal. At the face of human tragedy, many countries have opened their borders and received forcibly displaced people, offered livelihood opportunities, and accorded access to national education and health systems, despite the pressure this may entail on their own resources.16

At the same time, as noted by UNHCR's Assistant High Commissioner for Protection,17 there are justifiable concerns about protection gaps and deficiencies in the operation of asylum systems throughout the world: legal processes are often slow and burdensome; refugees may need to wait for years before their stay is regularised, and with no right to work, they rely on humanitarian assistance and are unable to use their skills for personal development and to contribute to host societies; timely determination and the effective return of those who are not

in need of protection often prove difficult; and racial discrimination in host society preventing meaningful participation and ultimately integration.[18]

Following displacement, refugees may find themselves in a precarious situation with limited prospects to access durable solutions, which include a return to the country of origin in safety and dignity, integration into the host country or resettlement to another safe country. Local integration requires substantial psychosocial and material support, including shelter, food, safe water, healthcare, access to education and employment, and overall systematic nourishing of refugee self-reliance. A return to the country of origin requires that the original cause of displacement has been addressed, which very often is difficult to achieve. A spontaneous return to the country of origin, when original sources of displacement persist, is not conducive to the safety and dignity of the returnee and has a low chance of sustainability.[19] Resettlement and complementary pathways provide safe and legal ways to protection, but the pledged spaces from resettlement countries do not suffice to address increasing needs. UNHCR estimated that for 2024 more than 2.4 million refugees are in need of resettlement compared to just over 2 million in 2023, representing a 20% increase.[20]

To sketch the landscape of migration at the global level, in January 2024, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) provided an overview of the Top 10 global trends in migration in general, most of them of direct relevance to international protection. According to the MPI analysis, key issues in migration in 2023 included: [21]

- **Emergence of new models in the externalisation of humanitarian protection alongside migration management:** Key destination countries have been pushing their borders outwards over several years to restrict irregular arrivals and limit access to asylum, which persisted in 2023. However, in parallel, some practices increased the possibilities for legal and safe pathways and extended the possibility to apply for protection in a third country.

- **New movement patterns with migrants seeking second and third destinations:** The gradual lifting of COVID-19 mobility restrictions allowed for onward travel from the first destination country to others. This occurs in part due to limited or incomplete integration in the initial destination country or due to economic considerations.

- **A new migration reality in the western hemisphere:** The barriers traditionally separating South and Central America have become increasingly porous due to factors such as uneven post-pandemic economic recoveries across countries, the professionalisation of smuggling activities and the proliferation of social media. In this reality, Central America – traditionally the origin of many migrants – is increasingly becoming a region of transit or even destination.

- **Competition among destination countries for high-skilled migrants:** Following the post-pandemic restructuring of the labour market, key destination countries increasingly

adopted policies which target high-skilled migrants.

- **Migrants may be forced back years after fleeing violence:** Millions of people who fled violence in hotspots like Afghanistan, Myanmar and South Sudan may face the prospect of having to return due to political instability and crisis in the host country.

- **Temporary protection statuses may create inequities:** The growing use of temporary statuses has allowed to offer quick and easy access to protection for millions of people (e.g. in the EU and the United States) who would otherwise be caught in lengthy asylum procedures or remain in the periphery of protection regimes. This approach, however, has also created inequities, as protection is linked to one's nationality rather than an individual assessment of one's needs.

- **Despite rigid external borders, movement within regions gets easier:** While increased focused has been placed on external border management over the past years, movement within certain regions of the world became easier, fostering regional integration, often by abolishing visa restrictions.

- **Immigration-related fears remain at the top of voters' minds:** High numbers of irregular arrivals instigated fears among the populations of receiving countries in different parts of the world who reacted by supporting politicians advocating restrictive migration policies. Migration-related anxieties have -for several years- been at the front and centre of public discourse and a key consideration during elections.

- **With climate change receiving growing attention, a potentially landmark climate migration policy was applied in 2023:** Australia offered to host 280 people from Tuvalu, a Pacific nation island which is threatened by climate change. The offer did not occur in the context of international protection considerations, because people fleeing the impact of climate change were not deemed eligible for international protection; however, the gesture was symbolically powerful, especially in a year in which natural and climate-related disasters led to the displacement of millions of people around the world.[22], [23]

- **Social media apps have been established as a tool to support migration:** Social media platforms have evolved into crucial tools in catalysing migration, including regular and irregular forms. They render information easily accessible and facilitate communication across different actors, including smugglers. Authorities also increasingly rely on social media to reach migrants.

In its 2024 Global Appeal, UNHCR identified five areas in international protection which need further action:[24]

- Tackling the challenge of internal displacement by reinforcing the primary responsibility of states to assist and protect people in accordance with humanitarian law and human rights

law, while implementing response operations in a number of hotspots throughout the world.

- Making progress toward the reduction and prevention of statelessness.
- Increasing accountability to affected people by ensuring that they can safely and confidently use their preferred channels of communication to receive information that allows them to make informed choices in their situation.
- Addressing the impact of climate change on climate-vulnerable and displaced populations, among others through the Strategic Plan for Climate Action 2024-2030.
- Working with development partners to create the conditions for displaced populations to be effectively included in host societies, socially and economically empowered, and self-reliant.

In an effort to further mobilise support for protection solutions, in September 2023 UNHCR launched the Hope Away from Home campaign, calling on world leaders to honour their legal and moral obligations to people seeking safety from war, violence and persecution. The campaign takes the message of solidarity and action to decision-makers and leaders to solve some of the most urgent challenges facing those who were forced to flee.25

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