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Different conflict, same crisis

The vast majority of refugees and asylum seekers are hosted by poorer countries and almost four million have been welcomed by countries which themselves have experienced armed violence or are in conflict. With more people fleeing violence and persecution now than at any time since records began, governments must make firm commitments at two major summits in New York to share their international responsibilities more equally, and to offer all refugees a safer future.

Record numbers of people have fled their homes to escape conflict, war, persecution and violence. In 2015, the UNHCR recorded 24.5 million refugees and asylum seekers, with 86 percent being hosted by low- to high-middle-income countries.¹ Despite the fact that many of these countries are experiencing conflict or insecurity, they have hosted large numbers of refugees who are in search of safety.²

Almost 4 million people seeking refuge are hosted by 15 countries where a total of 161,250 conflict-related deaths were recorded in 2015.

While many of the host countries try to make legal, social and economic adjustments to cater to the needs of refugees, major issues remain. Many refugees continue to have limited access to basic social services and lack decent jobs and living conditions. Some people spend decades as refugees with no prospect of formal work and no chance of a decent education.

The United Nations and US President Barack Obama have taken the unprecedented step of holding back-to-back summits to address the current crisis in New York on 19 and 20 September. Negotiations ahead of the UN summit were disappointing, with many countries unwilling to make greater commitments to share responsibility for protecting the rights of people on the move.

Yet these summits provide opportunities for countries to make firm, specific commitments to share equal responsibility and welcome and protect refugees, improve the treatment of people forced to flee, and provide them with a safe and dignified future.

Fleeing conflict....to conflict

More people have left their homes because of violence, war, persecution and conflict than at any time since records began – in total, more than 65 million people. Every conflict that has contributed to this is complex and unique – from Boko Haram in West Africa to government and armed groups fighting for control in Yemen.

While the majority of those 65 million people have stayed within their own countries, 24.5 million refugees and asylum seekers have sought safety by crossing international borders.

The majority of refugees flee to neighbouring countries and most of them, over 80 percent, find themselves in low- to middle-income countries.³ A significant proportion of people seeking refuge have fled to countries which are themselves embroiled in conflict or plagued by insecurity. While many refugees flee to other conflict-ridden countries to reunite with their families or because their security or economic outlook will improve there, others migrate to other conflicts because they have limited options and need to reach safety. Hosting refugees causes additional strain for countries experiencing conflict, where large movements of people can be especially destabilizing and resources are already too scarce to address the needs of the local population.

Case study: 'I visit people who are displaced in Iraq and I remember the displaced people in Syria' –Shireen, 26, Syrian in Iraq

Shireen was shot in the chest in Aleppo before she fled the war in Syria for northern Iraq. She is a public health promoter for Oxfam, working with Iraqi families who have fled fighting between the Iraq government and so-called Islamic State.

'I was shot when I was studying for my MA in Aleppo. For three days, or maybe more than that, my family didn't know that I was alive. I got medical treatment in Turkey and then I went back to Syria. And then I decided to travel to Iraq to find a job. Syria is a beautiful country, especially Damascus. I feel so bad about what's happening there and there's nothing I can do. I visit people who are displaced in Iraq and I remember the displaced people in Syria.'

Number of refugees and asylum seekers in countries with more than 2000 fatalities⁴

As Oxfam documented in its briefing 'A Poor Welcome From the World's Wealthy',⁵ the responsibility for providing refugees with shelter, food and healthcare, as well as jobs and education, is falling disproportionately on lower income countries. Some of these countries are themselves struggling with conflict or chronic insecurity. Oxfam looked at the countries or regions where more than 2,000 conflict-related deaths were recorded during 2015 and cross-referenced this with the numbers of refugees and asylum seekers registered there at the end of 2015.

As the table below shows, many refugees flee to neighbouring countries or at least stay within a geographic region. Many of the neighbouring countries receiving refugees in fact experience conflict or insecurity which may cause their own citizens to flee.

There is a lack of political will to provide options for refugees to reach other countries and to recognize that refugees can seek asylum in any country, not just the first one they reach after leaving home. Those options should include resettlement, humanitarian visas and family reunion. The lack of safe and legal routes for refugees may lead to separation from their families on their journey to safety, with little more than the clothes on their backs, lacking documents and identification. Others may find safety temporarily but continue to be vulnerable and may need to continue their search for protection.

Country hosting refugees	Number of conflict-related fatalities in 2015 (recorded by IISS) ⁶	Number of refugees and asylum seekers at end of 2015	Top origins of refugees fleeing there ⁷
Afghanistan	15,000	237,151	Pakistan
Egypt	3,000	250,671	Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iraq, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan Syria
El Salvador	17,000 across all three countries	49	Guatemala, Honduras
Guatemala		351	El Salvador, Honduras
Honduras		39	El Salvador, Guatemala
Iraq	13,000	285,121	Iran, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Syria, Turkey
Mexico	17,000	4,273	El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras
Nigeria	11,250	1,781	Chad
Pakistan	3,000	1,567,604	Afghanistan
Somalia	4,000	18,201	Ethiopia, Yemen
South Sudan	3,500	263,855	Sudan, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia
Sudan	3,000	322,220	South Sudan, Syria, Central African Republic, Chad, Eritrea, Ethiopia
Syrian Arab Republic	55,000	554,980	Afghanistan, Iraq, the Occupied Palestinian Territories
Ukraine	9,000	9,775	Afghanistan
Yemen	7,500	277,039	Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iraq, Somalia, Syria
3,793,110 refugees and asylum seekers, or 15.9% of the world's total⁸			

Case study: 'I had never seen the sea but I knew it held many corpses.' –Mahamadi, Burkinabe in Italy

In 2011, Mahamadi was arrested for organizing a demonstration to commemorate the death of a journalist who was murdered. He was eventually released by the police, but was wanted by the government, so he had to flee Burkina Faso to seek political asylum. He travelled through Mali, Niger and eventually reached Libya. In Tripoli, he worked as a decorator until the war broke out. When the fighting escalated, one of Mahamadi's friends was killed. Fearing for his own safety, Mahamadi sought help from a policeman who advised him to take a boat to Italy.

'I know it may sound strange to you, to be arrested for a demonstration; flee your country, fear for your life. When I left Burkina Faso I felt many sensations, I was scared. I travelled for three years. I had never seen the sea but I knew it held many corpses. I wanted to go back but I could not.'

Due to the current uneven sharing of responsibilities, refugees are forced to live in the open, or in crowded or insecure temporary camps. In some countries, refugees are still unable to work legally and have little or no access to state assistance. In some places they might be at risk of being deported or sanctioned if they are caught working, or have to go without essentials because they cannot afford to buy them.

For some countries, the arrival of a large number of refugees may further compromise their stability as they struggle to meet the needs of their own people as well as the refugee population. In Lebanon there are now so many refugees that they make up one in four of the population. In Jordan, refugees constitute 10 percent of the population and its fourth largest 'city' is a refugee camp.⁹

Existing protections for refugees

Existing protections for refugees were set out in the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol. These documents enshrine the rights of refugees and states' responsibilities to the people they host. The convention lays down minimum standards that states are obliged to provide for refugees, including access to courts and the legal system, primary education, decent employment and a form of documentation. Everyone has the right to claim asylum in a safe country where their claim should be fairly and individually assessed.

However, several states, including those hosting the world's largest number of refugees such as Jordan and Pakistan, have not ratified either or both of these documents.¹⁰ Among countries that have signed the convention, there is widespread disregard for its principles. Respect for not only the letter but the spirit of the convention and its principles has been dealt a blow with the controversial deal between the EU and Turkey earlier this year. Men, women and children have been left in disgraceful conditions in Greece, unsure of their legal status. They have become a bargaining chip traded in exchange for political concessions. In May, Kenya announced the closure of the Dadaab refugee camp, saying that if Europe could turn away Syrians, Kenya could do the same to Somalis. Deals like that between the EU and Turkey, coupled with the unambitious resettlement targets of its member states, undermine the wider principles of protection and human rights enshrined in the convention.

September summits

On 19 September, UN member states will come together for the first UN Summit for Refugees and Migrants. The first-of-its-kind meeting is a welcome acknowledgement of the seriousness and urgency of the issue. However the outcome document that heads of state will endorse at the meeting has already been negotiated and fails to demonstrate the political will necessary to address this crisis.

The summit will reaffirm international human rights, refugee, and humanitarian law, and stress governments' commitment not to return anybody to a country where they could face cruel or inhumane treatment, or persecution. This is the bare minimum to be expected. But it won't address the practice of member states to impede the right to claim asylum and it won't strengthen existing principles. The summit will also call for 'more equitable sharing of the burden and responsibility for hosting and supporting the world's refugees' and will strongly condemn xenophobia, racism and intolerance. But the document doesn't go further than these basic generalities, which is likely to mean that there will be little change for the world's refugees and for the poor countries which need help and support to host them.

A day later, US President Barack Obama is inviting all world leaders to tackle the refugee crisis. He has required those governments taking part to make specific pledges to host more refugees, provide more humanitarian assistance, or extend employment or education opportunities to refugees within their borders. World leaders must not miss these opportunities to help millions of people fleeing conflict, disaster and poverty. Heads of state attending one or both of these summits must show that they are serious about tackling this global crisis.

Ahead of the summits, Oxfam is calling on:

- wealthy countries to welcome more of the world's refugees and to substantially increase their support for middle- and low-income countries which are hosting the majority of those forced to flee;
- all countries hosting people forced to flee to provide the help and protection they need, to ensure access to education and to allow them to work;
- all countries to uphold the human rights of all people on the move, both refugees and those fleeing within their own countries, irrespective of their legal status.

Oxfam's work with refugees

Oxfam is working in more than 20 countries around the world where people have fled their homes because of violence, conflict or persecution. That includes providing clean water for refugees in Tanzania, Lebanon and Jordan, as well as providing food and access to legal advice for refugees in Greece, Italy, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia. Oxfam also works with people who have fled their homes but remained within their own country in places like Nigeria, Yemen and South Sudan. The current global refugee crisis has prompted the biggest humanitarian response in Oxfam's history, providing aid to almost nine million people last year – the highest ever number supported by Oxfam – the vast majority of whom were fleeing conflict and disaster.

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Oxfam is an international confederation of 18 affiliates and 2 observer organizations working together in more than 90 countries: Oxfam America (www.oxfamamerica.org), Oxfam Australia (www.oxfam.org.au), Oxfam-in-Belgium (www.oxfamsol.be), Oxfam Canada (www.oxfam.ca), Oxfam France (www.oxfamfrance.org), Oxfam Germany (www.oxfam.de), Oxfam GB (www.oxfam.org.uk), Oxfam Hong Kong (www.oxfam.org.hk), Oxfam IBIS – Denmark (www.ibis-global.org), Oxfam India (www.oxfamindia.org), Oxfam Intermón (www.oxfamintermon.org), Oxfam Ireland (www.oxfamireland.org), Oxfam Italy (www.oxfamitalia.org), Oxfam Japan (www.oxfam.jp), Oxfam Mexico (www.oxfammexico.org) Oxfam New Zealand (www.oxfam.org.nz) Oxfam Novib (www.oxfamnovib.nl), Oxfam Quebec (www.oxfam.qc.ca). Observers: Oxfam Brasil (www.oxfam.org.br), Oxfam South Africa.

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- 1 UNHCR (2016) '2015 Global Trends Report' 20 June 2016 p.2:
<https://s3.amazonaws.com/unhcrsharedmedia/2016/2016-06-20-global-trends/2016-06-14-Global-Trends-2015.pdf>
 - 2 For this analysis, Oxfam combined UNHCR and UNWRA statistics on the number of refugees and asylum seekers in countries listed by the International Institute for Strategic Studies as the site of conflicts with over 2000 fatalities in 2015. The UNHCR data is available here: <https://s3.amazonaws.com/unhcrsharedmedia/2016/2016-06-20-global-trends/2016-06-14-Global-Trends-2015.pdf>. UNWRA data here: http://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/unrwa_in_figures_2015.pdf. IISS (2016) 'The Armed Conflict Survey': <http://www.iiss.org/en/publications/acs/by%20year/armed-conflict-survey-2016-14e7>
 - 3 Oxfam (2016) 'A poor welcome from the world's wealthy'. <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/a-poor-welcome-from-the-worlds-wealthy-616919>
 - 4 For sources of statistics, see note 2.
 - 5 This briefing is available at <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/a-poor-welcome-from-the-worlds-wealthy-616919>
 - 6 IISS (2016) 'The Armed Conflict Survey': <http://www.iiss.org/en/publications/acs/by%20year/armed-conflict-survey-2016-14e7>
 - 7 UNHCR (2016) '2015 Global Trends Report' 20 June 2016 p.2:
<https://s3.amazonaws.com/unhcrsharedmedia/2016/2016-06-20-global-trends/2016-06-14-Global-Trends-2015.pdf>. This information comes from the Global Trends Annex Tables in tab5 under the title 'Refugees and people in a refugee-like situation, excluding asylum-seekers, and changes by origin and country of asylum, 2015'.
 - 8 Including UNHCR and UNRWA figures, there are 3,793,110 refugees and asylum seekers registered in countries with more than 2000 conflict related fatalities in 2015, representing 15.9% of the global total of 23,853,576.
 - 9 Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2015–16. http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/20151223_LCRP_ENG_22Dec2015-full-versionoptimized.pdf
 - 10 145 states are party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. There are some notable exceptions:
State parties to the 1967 Protocol only: USA, Venezuela, Cape Verde
States that have not yet acceded to the 1951 Convention and/or the 1967 Protocol: Jamaica, Cuba, Guyana, Grenada, Libya, Niger, Nigeria, South Sudan, Eritrea, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, Oman, Bahrain, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Mongolia, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Lao, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Brunei, Indonesia, DPRK, Vanuatu.