How Many Refugees in Africa?



No-one really knows how many people have been forcibly uprooted by political instability and war, but the estimated numbers of refugees hosted by African countries are shown on the map. These do not include the possibly additional thousands labelled "illegal aliens" and hounded by unfriendly hosts, or the millions of people who have been uprooted whithin their own national boundaries by the same causes. Most alarming, the numbers of uprooted people in Africa are increasing.

Why Are There So Many Refugees in Africa?

The majority of refugees in Africa are the result of the continuing struggle for self-determination and independence. The efforts of South Africa to destabilize the southern African region are producing even more refugees. The oppressive policies of so many African governments and their consequent political instability which produce refugees are directly linked with their extreme poverty and economic dependence. The escalation of arms sales to Africa exacerbates all of these problems.

Who Assists These Refugees?

Most -- at least 60% -- do not receive any direct help from refugee assistance programmes. They live by dint of their own determination to survive, with the help of their hosts who are often themselves desperately poor. There are indigenous nongovernmental agencies and religious bodies which do their best to mitigate the suffering of refugees. The host governments which give asylum to refugees bear the greatest economic burden for assisting them, by giving them access to services, providing land, and by permitting the agents of international humanitarian assistance to utilize their resources to help refugees. International humanitarian assistance is paid for by a few governments (the US is the largest donor) and private contributors who support the work of the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and international voluntary agencies. As one refugee put it, "This is a great contradiction. We are fed by the same governments which make great profits from selling the arms which made us refugees."

What Are African Refugees' Main Problems?

They are powerless. Decisions about their fate are taken by governments and international agencies without consultation. Many thousands are highly skilled, yet assistance to refugees in Africa is limited largely to helping them become self-sufficient in agriculture. In addition to the psychological sufferings associated with the trauma of being uprooted and the insecurity associated with their status, they share all the other problems of grinding poverty which affect the majority of the members of the host society. Money for all. Rather the amount of humanitarian assistance is heavily influenced by the political interests of the "club" of donors which support refugee agencies.

What Are the Solutions to the Refugee Problem?

The prevention of forced migration requires political will and radical changes in the world of economic The "solutions" which the UN High order. Commissioner promotes are voluntary repatriation, integration in the country of first asylum, and resettlement in a third country. Neither refugees nor most governments in Africa are enthusiastic about the idea of integration as a permanent solution. Europe and North America, which had a tradition of welcoming refugees, are fast closing their doors to people who seek asylum. At the moment, the greatest emphasis is on repatriation, but refugees are unwilling to return home until the political conditions in their countries have changed and security can be guaranteed.

Why Is So Little Known about Some African Refugees?

The foreign policy interests of the donor governments have an enormous influence on the extent of information available about refugees everywhere. This is nowhere more true than on the African continent. Few people in the West know much about the Sahrawi refugees in Algeria. Why? Because their war for self-determination is being fought against Morocco. When Ugandans were fleeing Obote's regime in 1982-83, information about this emergency was actively suppressed. Refugees are usually located in areas which are the most inaccessible. Furthermore transport and communication to these areas is often controlled by international agencies. Academics have neglected studying refugee issues, and when they do, they often fail to disseminate information to the general public.