

Core Activity Sheet 1.1

A refugee is a person who 'owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside of the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country'.

(Taken from the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees)

In 1951, when the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established, there were about 1 million refugees to care for, mostly Europeans. Now, the UNHCR cares for over 22 million people, of whom 12 million are refugees. Of those refugees, 80% are women and children. These refugees come from all over the world – most originate from Africa or Asia, but European numbers are increasing since the wars in the former Yugoslavia and other areas.

Being a refugee means more than just being a foreigner, it means living in exile and often having to rely on others for basic needs. People become refugees when their basic human rights are threatened or denied them. Many flee for their lives from war zones and have witnessed terrible sights in their home country. Growing numbers of young people and children are affected directly by wars as they are forced to fight in them.

Article 14 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights states that 'everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries the asylum from prosecution'. A refugee has the right to safe asylum but should also have a number of other rights including the right to fair trial and treatment by the law, freedom of thought and movement, freedom from torture and degrading treatment. They should also have the same rights to medical care, welfare services and benefits. On the other hand refugees share the same responsibilities as others in the country they arrive in, for example they have to follow that country's laws.