

Asylum, Integration, Shelter from the Storm

Asylum While the minimum obligation to refugees under international law is *nonrefoulement* (no forced return), this often means no more than keeping them in camps, their lives on indefinite hold. Asylum is protection a country may offer refugees that allows them to work and live normally. Industrialized countries typically have asylum systems, but these are increasingly restricted. Poor countries also receive refugees, although often with less formality. Here USCR highlights some who have “gone the extra mile” for refugees... and others who have not.

- The United States remained the leading receiver of asylum seekers with 134,000 new applicants, followed by the United Kingdom with 111,000. Germany and France came in third and fourth with 91,500 and 51,000 cases, respectively. On a per capita basis, Austria received the largest number of asylum seekers followed by Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and Ireland.
- Iraq produced the largest number of asylum seekers: 56,700. Yugoslavia, Turkey, China, Afghanistan, Russia, India, Nigeria, Congo-Kinshasa, and Somalia followed. Nigeria and Congo-Kinshasa were new arrivals in the top ten, while Iran and Sri Lanka dropped out.

The Good

- Impoverished themselves, Chadian villagers near Gore assisted about 1,000 refugees fleeing killing and looting by rebel forces in the Central African Republic. By year’s end, international relief agencies had not yet arrived.
- Mexico granted land titles to 12,000 former refugees from Guatemala. The National Institute of Anthropology and History also opened a museum commemorating the refugees’ experience and celebrating their contribution to culture and society.

The Bad

- The United States, citing the war on terrorism, began detaining all Haitian asylum seekers indefinitely. No Haitian is known to have committed a terrorist act on U.S. soil.
- Costa Rica restricted visas for nationals from strife-torn Colombia, closing a major avenue of escape. Asylum applications in Spain from nationals of Colombia and communist Cuba dropped 50 percent or more in 2002 as a result of visa restrictions.

The Ugly

- Malaysia imposed up to five-years imprisonment, fines up to \$2,000, and mandatory whipping for undocumented migrants—no exceptions for asylum seekers.
- After Lithuanian border police at the Vilnius train station allegedly refused to allow them to disembark and apply for asylum, several Chechen families had to jump off transit trains bound for Kaliningrad.



Asylum Seekers wait outside Red Cross center in Sangatte, France, December 3, 2002. The center was closed later that month.
Photo: AP/M. Spingler