

## Questions and Answers about IDPs

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### Who are internally displaced persons?

According to the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, internally displaced persons (also known as "IDPs") are "persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized border."

### What challenges do internally displaced persons face?

People forced to flee or leave their homes - particularly in situations of armed conflict - are generally subject to heightened vulnerability in a number of areas. Displaced persons suffer significantly higher rates of mortality than the general population. They also remain at high risk of physical attack, sexual assault and abduction, and frequently are deprived of adequate shelter, food and health services.

The overwhelming majority of internally displaced persons are women and children who are especially at risk of abuse of their basic rights. More often than refugees, the internally displaced tend to remain close to or become trapped in zones of conflict, caught in the cross-fire and at risk of being used as pawns, targets or human shields by the belligerents.

### What is the difference between an internally displaced person and a refugee?

According to the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, 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 the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it." Subsequent international instruments (such as the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees and the Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa) have expanded this definition for some states to persons fleeing the general effects of armed conflict and/or natural disaster.

A crucial requirement to be considered a "refugee" is crossing an international border. Persons forcibly displaced from their homes who cannot or choose not to cross a border, therefore, are not considered refugees, even if they share many of the same circumstances and challenges as those who do. Unlike refugees, these internally displaced persons do not have a special status in international law with rights specific to their situation. The term "internally displaced person" is merely descriptive.

### What rights do internally displaced persons have?

Like all human beings, internally displaced persons enjoy human rights that are articulated by international human rights instruments and customary law. In situations of armed conflict, moreover, they enjoy the same rights as other civilians to the various protections provided by international humanitarian law.

The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, created in 1998, restate and compile existing international human rights and humanitarian law germane to the internally displaced and also attempt to clarify grey areas and gaps in the various instruments with regard to situations of particular interest to the internally displaced.

The Guiding Principles note that arbitrary displacement in the first instance is prohibited (Principles 5-7). Once persons have been displaced, they retain a broad range of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights, including the right to basic humanitarian assistance (such as food, medicine, shelter), the right to be protected from physical violence, the right to education, freedom of movement and residence, political rights such as the right to participate in public affairs and the right to participate in economic activities (Principles 10-23). Displaced persons also have the right to assistance from competent authorities in voluntary, dignified and safe return, resettlement or local integration, including help in recovering lost property and possessions. When restitution is not possible, the Guiding Principles call for compensation or just reparation (Principles 28-30).

### Whose responsibility is it to protect and assist internally displaced persons?

As a crucial element of sovereignty, it is the Governments of the states where internally displaced persons are found that have the primary responsibility for their assistance and protection. The international community's role is complementary.

At the international level, no single agency or organization has been designated as the global lead on protection and assistance of internally displaced persons. Rather, all are called upon to cooperate with each other to help address these needs pursuant to the "collaborative approach".

### Where can I learn more?

See the links section for other sites with information on internally displaced persons.

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