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UNHCR Records First Decline in Global Forced Displacement in a Decade

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HOW

WHY IN NEWS

The **UNHCR Global Trends** report recorded the **first decline in global forced displacement in a decade**, with the number of forcibly displaced people at about **117.8 million** (roughly one in 70 people worldwide). The decline was driven by large-scale returns of refugees and internally displaced people to countries such as Afghanistan, Syria and Sudan, though the UN agency cautioned that many returns happened under difficult or unsafe conditions.

KEY FINDINGS

FINDING	DETAIL
Total forcibly displaced	About 117.8 million (one in 70 people)
Change	A decline, the first in ten years
Main driver	Returns to countries of origin
Caution	Many returns occurred under adverse or unsafe conditions

A decline in displacement is welcome, but the UNHCR stressed that it does not by itself signal that the underlying conflicts and crises have been resolved. Part of the fall reflects **coerced returns**, such as Afghans expelled from Iran and Pakistan, so a lower count may signal the **erosion of asylum space** rather than restored safety, a reminder that a falling number can mislead. (Note: the 117.8 million figure is the end-2025 stock; the 2026 report covers 2025 data.)

WHO COUNTS AS “FORCIBLY DISPLACED”?

The “forcibly displaced” total combines several categories. The 2025 breakdown:

CATEGORY	DEFINITION	NUMBER
Refugees	Fled across an international border due to persecution, conflict or violence	About 41.6 million
Internally displaced persons (IDPs)	Displaced within their own country, not having crossed a border	About 68.7 million
Asylum seekers	Those whose claim for refugee status is still pending	About 9 million
Returns in 2025	Refugees and IDPs who went back to their areas of origin (the decline's driver)	About 14.7 million

A related category is **stateless persons**, who lack a recognised nationality under any country's law, a distinct part of the UNHCR's mandate. Sudan is currently the world's largest internal-displacement crisis. The top sources of refugees include Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine and Sudan; the largest hosts include Iran, Turkey, Germany and Pakistan.

UNDERSTANDING THE UNHCR AND THE REFUGEE FRAMEWORK

ELEMENT	DETAIL
UNHCR	The UN Refugee Agency, established in 1950
1951 Refugee Convention	The core international treaty defining "refugee" and the principle of non-refoulement
1967 Protocol	Removed the geographic and time limits of the 1951 Convention
Non-refoulement	The principle that refugees should not be returned to a place where they face serious threats

INDIA AND REFUGEES

India is **not a signatory** to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, and it does not have a dedicated domestic refugee law. It nonetheless hosts **over 240,000 refugees and asylum seekers** on humanitarian grounds, dealt with mainly under the **Foreigners Act, 1946**, and case-by-case executive policy.

Major Refugee Groups in India

GROUP	APPROXIMATE NUMBER
Tibetans (post-1959)	~72,000
Sri Lankan Tamils (Tamil Nadu camps)	~58,000 in camps (more outside)
Chakmas (Arunachal Pradesh)	~47,000
Rohingya (post-2017)	~40,000
Afghans	~8,000 to 12,000

Landmark Indian Case Law

CASE	HOLDING
NHRC v. State of Arunachal Pradesh (1996)	The State must protect the life and liberty of every person, citizen or not, under Article 21 ; Chakmas could not be forcibly evicted
Mohammad Salimullah v. Union of India (2021)	The Court declined to halt Rohingya deportation, holding that non-refoulement does not bind India as a non-signatory, though deportation must follow due procedure

Together these show that non-citizens enjoy **Article 21 protection of life**, but there is **no enforceable right against deportation** in Indian law.

Why No Refugee Law?

India cites sovereignty, national security and porous borders, and argues the 1951 Convention is Euro-centric. The case **for** a law is predictability and an end to executive arbitrariness, and a clear line between refugees and illegal migrants. A **2021 Asylum Bill** (a private member's bill) and earlier model drafts remain unadopted, and the **Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019**, which fast-tracks citizenship for six non-Muslim communities from three neighbouring countries, has sharpened the debate over a needs-based versus identity-based approach.

Globally, the **Global Compact on Refugees (2018)** seeks to share the responsibility of hosting refugees more fairly, and the three "durable solutions" are **voluntary repatriation, local integration and third-country resettlement**.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims

- Global forced displacement was about **117.8 million** (one in 70 people), the first decline in a decade
- Breakdown: **refugees ~41.6M, IDPs ~68.7M, asylum seekers ~9M**; about **14.7M returned** in 2025
- **UNHCR** (the UN Refugee Agency) was established in **1950**; **World Refugee Day** is **June 20**
- The **1951 Refugee Convention** and **1967 Protocol** form the core framework; **non-refoulement** is the key principle
- **India is not a signatory**; refugees are handled under the **Foreigners Act, 1946**; key cases: **NHRC v Arunachal (1996), Salimullah (2021)**
- The **Global Compact on Refugees (2018)** promotes burden-sharing; durable solutions: **repatriation, local integration, resettlement**

Mains Angles

- ① **GS2 International Relations:** Discuss the global refugee framework and India's position as a non-signatory that nonetheless hosts refugees.
- ② **GS2 Governance:** "India needs a dedicated refugee law." Examine the case for and against, in light of the CAA, 2019.
- ③ **GS1 Society:** A falling displacement count can mask coerced returns. Critically examine, with reference to durable solutions.

FACTS CORNER

FACT	DETAIL
Total displaced	About 117.8 million (one in 70 people), end-2025
Breakdown	Refugees ~41.6M, IDPs ~68.7M, asylum seekers ~9M
Returns in 2025	~14.7 million (the decline's driver)
Report	UNHCR Global Trends; UNHCR founded 1950
Core treaty	1951 Refugee Convention + 1967 Protocol; non-refoulement
India's status	Not a signatory; Foreigners Act, 1946; hosts 240,000+
India case law	NHRC v Arunachal (1996); Salimullah (2021)
Global frame	Global Compact on Refugees (2018); World Refugee Day June 20

Sources: *UNHCR, The Hindu, PIB*

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