

People on the move

Every day, all over the world, people make one of the most difficult decisions in their lives: to leave their homes in search of a safer, better life.

Most people in the world have had the experience of leaving the place where they grew up. Maybe they will only move as far as the next village or city. But for some people, they will need to leave their country entirely – sometimes for a short time, but sometimes forever.

There are many reasons why people around the globe seek to rebuild their lives in a different country. Some people leave home to get a job or an education. Others are forced to flee persecution or human rights violations such as torture. Millions flee from armed conflicts or other crises or violence. Some no longer feel safe and might have been targeted just because of who they are or what they do or believe – for example, for their ethnicity, religion, sexuality or political opinions.

These journeys, which all start with the hope for a better future, can also be full of danger and fear. Some people risk falling prey to human trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Some are detained by the authorities as soon as they arrive in a new country. Once they're settling in and start building a new life, many face daily racism, xenophobia and discrimination. Some people end up feeling alone and isolated because they have lost the support networks that most of us take for granted – our communities, colleagues, relatives and friends.

Why do people leave their countries?

There are many reasons why it might be too difficult or dangerous for people to stay in their own countries. For example, children, woman and men flee from violence, war, hunger, extreme poverty, because of their sexual or gender orientation, or from the consequences of climate change or other natural disasters. Often people will face a combination of these difficult circumstances.

People who leave their countries are not always fleeing danger. They might believe they have a better chance of finding work in another country because they have the education or capital to seek opportunities elsewhere. Others might want to join relatives or friends who are already living abroad. Or they might seek to start or finish their education in another country. There are lots of different reasons for people to start a journey to build a life in a new country.

Definitions: What exactly is a refugee, an asylum-seeker and a migrant?

The terms “refugee”, “asylum-seeker” and “migrant” are used to describe people who are on the move, who have left their countries and have crossed borders. The terms “migrant” and “refugee” are often used interchangeably but it is important to distinguish between them as there is a legal difference.

Who is a refugee? A refugee is a person who has fled their own country because they are at risk of serious human rights violations and persecution there. The risks to their safety and life were so great that they felt they had no choice but to leave and seek safety outside their country because their own government cannot or will not protect them from those dangers. Refugees have a right to international protection.

Who is an asylum-seeker? An asylum-seeker is a person who has left their country and is seeking protection from persecution and serious human rights violations in another country, but who hasn't yet been legally recognized as a refugee and is waiting to receive a decision on their asylum claim. Seeking asylum is a human right. This means everyone should be allowed to enter another country to seek asylum.

Who is a migrant? There is no internationally accepted legal definition of a migrant. Like most agencies and organizations, we at Amnesty International understand migrants to be people staying outside their country of origin, who are not asylum-seekers or refugees. Some migrants leave their country because they want to work, study or join family, for example. Others feel they must leave because of poverty, political unrest, gang violence, natural disasters or other serious circumstances that exist there. It is important to understand that, just because migrants do not flee persecution, they are still entitled to have all their human rights protected and respected, regardless of the status they have in the country they moved to. Governments must protect all migrants from racist and xenophobic violence, exploitation and forced labour. Migrants should never be detained or forced to return to their countries without a legitimate reason.

What is Amnesty's position on migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers?

We campaign for a world where human rights can be enjoyed by everyone, no matter what situation they are in. Amnesty has championed the human rights of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants for decades. We campaign to make sure governments honour their shared responsibility to protect the rights of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants. We condemn any policies and practices that undermine the rights of people on the move.

The people are not the problem

There are about 26 million refugees globally. Many people feel overwhelmed by the numbers and see people moving across borders as a global crisis. We at Amnesty International disagree that it is a crisis of numbers. The people are not the problem. Rather, the causes that drive families and individuals to cross borders and the short-sighted and unrealistic ways that politicians respond to them are the problem.

Campaigning for people on the move

With our campaigns, we put pressure on governments to honour their responsibility to protect every single person's rights. They must make sure that refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants are safe, and are not tortured, discriminated against or left living in poverty.

We campaign for governments to properly process the asylum claims of asylum-seekers so that they don't leave them in limbo – sometimes even locked away in detention centres – for years. We also want to see migrants being protected from exploitation and abuse by their employers or by traffickers.

The individual beyond the label

Each human being has more than one identity. "Refugee", "migrant" and "asylum-seeker" are only temporary terms; they do not reflect the whole identity of women, children and men who have left their homes behind to start a new life in a new country.

When we use these labels, we need to remember that out of the many ways in which people describe themselves, these terms only refer to one experience: that of leaving their countries. But the identities of these people are made up of so many more things.

Most people seeking to live elsewhere will feel that the experience of leaving their countries doesn't fully capture who they are. Like all of us, they are complex and unique human beings and might choose to identify themselves as being from a certain country or region, belonging to a group that speaks a certain language or shares a culture. Or they might say about themselves that they are a teacher, doctor, artist, passionate football fan, father, sister, son or mother.

A person's legal status cannot express the full identity and personality of a refugee, asylum-seeker or migrant. No one can be known solely through their legal status.

Why should governments welcome refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants?

- We want to live in a world where people who are in grave danger have the opportunity to rebuild their lives in safety.
- In a globalized world, sharing global responsibility for global issues is the fair thing to do.
- Host communities benefit from the tremendous energy and drive to start new lives, which these people bring.
- Welcoming people from other countries strengthens host communities by making them more diverse and flexible in our fast-changing world.
- Some of the most inspiring and influential people in the arts, science, politics and technology have been refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants. They were allowed to rebuild their lives in a new country and they thrived as members of a new community.

Greece has always been a gateway for immigrants searching for what they assumed would be a better life in Europe. But many of those who've crossed illegally into Greece have found that they have traded one bad situation for another. Refugees from war-torn countries like Syria and Afghanistan are finding themselves stuck in a country that is not only battling an economic crisis but is witnessing a rise in anti-immigrant violence

The refugee camps in Greece are hopelessly overcrowded. Many refugees are sick and traumatized. The situation is particularly difficult for unaccompanied minors. The number of suicides is increasing.

A lack of hygiene, violence, sexual harassment, no prospects: these are the conditions under which three times as many refugees as originally planned live in the camp on Samos. And, even though the Balkan route is closed, new refugees are still coming every day. They cannot leave the island. The number of suicides is rising. The UNHCR says asylum applications should be examined more quickly and unaccompanied, underage refugees taken to the mainland to rejoin their families as soon as possible. Aid workers say they have never experienced conditions like the ones in the Greek refugee camps during their previous missions around the world. Only private aid organizations can bring hope. Some young people manage to escape to Athens. They hope to be able to leave Greece more easily from there. But many of them remain stuck in the city, begging - and in some cases, even resorting to stealing to get by.