



Ending Forced Displacement: A Plan, and Its Test in 2026

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This plan is an initial draft prepared with AI models. It is open for review by subject-matter experts and will be revised as they join the work and as world and national events change.

Introduction

At the end of 2025, 117.8 million people had been forced from their homes by persecution, conflict, violence and human rights violations, about one person in every 70 alive ([Al Jazeera](#)). Most of them never crossed a border. Of the refugees who did, seven in ten have been in exile for five years or more, and many families have now spent decades in camps or on the edges of foreign cities ([UN Audiovisual Library](#)).

Displacement belongs among the species-level problems because war, hunger, climate change and poverty all feed it and are fed by it. War produces most of it; displaced families lose land, work and savings at once, and refugee camps are among the first places where rations are cut when aid budgets shrink, as the essay on [ending starvation](#) records.

This essay sets out a plan to reduce the number of people living in displacement and to shorten the time they spend in it, then tests that plan against the events of 2025 and 2026. Education and the rights of women and girls have their own essays ([education](#); [women and girls](#)) and appear here only where they bear directly on displacement.

Where things stand

UNHCR's annual *Global Trends* report, presented on 10 June 2026, recorded the first fall in the global total in a decade ([UN News](#)). A year earlier the agency had counted 123.2 million forcibly displaced people at the end of 2024 ([Al Jazeera](#)).

Measure (end of 2025 unless noted)	Figure
Forcibly displaced people	117.8 million
Refugees and others needing international protection, including 6 million Palestinians under UNRWA's mandate	41.6 million
Asylum seekers awaiting a decision	9 million

Measure (end of 2025 unless noted)	Figure
Internally displaced by conflict and violence (IDMC)	68.6 million
Internally displaced by disasters (IDMC)	almost 13.6 million
Returns during 2025	14.7 million (4.4 million refugees, 10.3 million internally displaced)
Refugees in protracted exile (five years or more)	nearly 25 million, 70% of refugees
Share of refugees who are children	39%
Share of refugees hosted in low- and middle-income countries	nearly 68%
Stateless people	4.5 million

Sources: [Al Jazeera](#); [UN News](#); [UN News](#); [UN Audiovisual Library](#); [IDMC](#); [L'Osservatorio](#).

The largest refugee populations come from Venezuela (6.4 million), Palestine (6 million), Ukraine (5.2 million) and Syria (4.9 million), and the largest hosts are Colombia (2.8 million), Germany (2.7 million) and Türkiye (2.4 million) ([Al Jazeera](#)).

Internal displacement is much larger than cross-border flight. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) counted 82.2 million people living in internal displacement at the end of 2025, more than twice the 38.9 million of 2016. Conflict and violence caused a record 32.3 million new internal displacements during 2025, nearly 60% more than in 2024 and, for the first time, more than disasters, which caused 29.9 million. Iran and the Democratic Republic of the Congo accounted for two-thirds of the conflict displacements, and Sudan had the largest internally displaced population for the third year running, at 9.1 million ([NRC](#)).

The fall in the headline total came from returns, which rose by half on 2024: 3.6 million people went home in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 3.6 million in Sudan, 3.3 million in Syria and 2 million in Afghanistan ([Al Jazeera](#)). Some of these returns reflect real improvement, as in Syria after the fall of the Assad government in December 2024; others reflect expulsion or desperation, as in Afghanistan and parts of Sudan. IDMC cautions that a return is not the same as a durable solution and that part of the decline may reflect reduced data coverage ([IDMC](#)).

Part I: The plan

The plan aims to shorten the time people spend displaced and to reduce the share of them who depend on aid, while keeping the right to seek safety intact. It has eight elements.

1. Fund emergency protection predictably

People who have just fled need shelter, water, food, health care and registration within days, yet the agencies that provide them are funded late, a year at a time and often with earmarked money. Donor governments should give UNHCR, the World Food Programme (WFP) and the UN's pooled humanitarian funds multi-year commitments that are largely unearmarked, with a share held in reserve and released automatically when early-warning systems or border monitoring show large movements. Cash should replace in-kind aid wherever markets function.

UNHCR asked donors for \$8.5 billion for 2026 ([Swissinfo](#)). The UN's system-wide appeal for 2026 seeks \$33 billion to help 135 million people, with \$23 billion set as the immediate priority for 87 million; the 2025 appeal received \$12 billion, the lowest in a decade ([UN News](#)). At UNHCR's pledging conference on 2 December 2025, governments and private donors pledged about \$1.5 billion for 2026, some 18% of projected needs, and the unearmarked share of pledges fell to 17% from nearly 34% in 2023. A few governments made multi-year pledges running into 2027 and beyond, the practice the plan would make standard ([Donor Tracker](#)).

2. Give refugees the right to work, move and use national services

Host governments should grant work permits, freedom of movement, access to bank accounts and inclusion in national health and school systems, so that refugees earn and pay taxes instead of waiting for rations. A World Bank review of evidence from Colombia, Ethiopia, Jordan and Uganda finds "generally modest or positive labor market impacts" on hosts ([World Bank](#)).

Colombia is the largest test. Its Temporary Protection Statute of 2021 gives Venezuelans a permit valid for up to ten years that lets holders work formally, use the health system, open bank accounts and study ([Colombia One](#)), and by October 2025 more than 2.1 million permits had been delivered ([RTVC](#)). Research on an earlier, smaller Colombian amnesty in 2018 found that recipients' consumption rose by 60% and their incomes by more than 30%, formal employment rose by 10 percentage points, and effects on Colombian workers were minimal ([World Bank](#)).

Kenya is applying the same idea to camps. President William Ruto launched the Shirika Plan on 28 March 2025 to turn the Dadaab and Kakuma camps, which have existed for more than thirty years ([USCRI](#)), into settlements served by county governments, under a Refugees Act of 2021 that opens work, business and property rights to refugees. The plan runs from 2025 to 2036 in three phases, has an estimated budget of \$943 million and covered 836,907 refugees and asylum seekers at launch ([Kenya Department of Refugee Services](#)).

UNHCR's matching global target, "50 by 35," is to halve by 2035 the number of refugees in protracted displacement who depend on humanitarian assistance ([UN Audiovisual Library](#)), mainly through education, health care and financial services in low- and middle-income host countries ([UN News](#)).

3. Pay the countries that host

More than a quarter of refugees live in the least developed countries ([UN Audiovisual Library](#)). The World Bank, regional development banks and bilateral donors should pay for schools, clinics, water systems and jobs programmes that serve refugees and their hosts together, on grant or near-grant terms, and should tie the money to the policy changes in element 2.

The World Bank's Window for Host Communities and Refugees began as a \$2 billion sub-window in 2016 and keeps at least \$2.4 billion under the current IDA21 cycle, about half of it in grants, for 19 eligible countries that host at least 25,000 refugees or 0.1% of their population ([Center for Global Development](#)). The Global Concessional Financing Facility has mobilised more than \$1 billion in concessional loans for seven middle-income hosts, benefiting at least 6.6 million refugees and 8.4 million people in host communities ([World Bank](#)). The plan would roughly double these windows and restore the requirement that recipients make measurable reforms.

4. Make returns voluntary, safe and lasting

Return is the solution that reduces displacement fastest, and it lasts when people go back voluntarily to places with housing, documents, water, schools and work. The plan calls for recovery funding in areas of return before and during large movements, for restoring civil documentation and property records, and for letting families visit before moving so they can judge conditions for themselves.

UNHCR's package for Syrians gives a sense of the cost: a one-time grant of \$100 per person in the host country, up to \$300 more for vulnerable families, and a \$600 reintegration grant per eligible household inside Syria. Since 2025, 167,827 people in host countries and 200,553 returnees inside Syria have received this cash ([UNHCR](#)). The plan also requires a firm refusal to push people back into danger. The prohibition on returning anyone to a country where they face a real risk of persecution is, in the words of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Barham Salih, "non-negotiable" ([UN Audiovisual Library](#)).

5. Expand resettlement and other safe routes

For refugees who can neither go home nor stay safely where they are, such as survivors of torture or people at risk in their host country, resettlement to a third country is the only option. UNHCR projects that 2.4 million refugees will need resettlement in 2027, and

governments have set a shared target of 130,000 resettlement places by 2027 ([UN News](#)). The plan asks resettlement countries to meet that target, to add labour, study and family visas for refugees, and to expand community sponsorship, which the UK government plans to make the framework for most of its resettlement on evidence that it integrates refugees better at lower cost ([UK Home Office](#)).

6. Run fast, fair asylum systems

People who ask for protection in a rich country should get a decision within months, with a proper hearing and legal advice. Those who qualify should be allowed to work and settle, and those who do not should be returned with dignity, since slow systems leave people in limbo for years and erode public confidence. The plan asks for adequate staffing of asylum agencies and courts, a shared European system for distributing responsibility, and return agreements with countries of origin that respect human rights.

The European Union's Pact on Migration and Asylum, the largest attempt to build such a system, provides for screening of up to seven days at external borders and a border procedure of at most 12 weeks, including appeals, for nationals of countries whose EU-wide recognition rate is 20% or less ([Human Rights Watch](#)). It guarantees free legal counselling at all stages and replaces voluntary burden-sharing with a mandatory solidarity mechanism ([European Commission](#)). For 2026, member states set the solidarity pool at 21,000 relocations or €420 million in financial contributions, to support Greece, Cyprus, Italy and Spain ([EMN Belgium](#)).

7. Prepare for climate displacement

Climate change mostly displaces people inside their own countries. The World Bank's Groundswell study projected that up to 216 million people in six regions could become internal climate migrants by 2050, and that decisive action on emissions and development could reduce the number by as much as 80% ([World Bank](#)). The plan calls for adaptation finance aimed at places where livelihoods are failing, planned relocation where land will become uninhabitable, and agreements that let people move for work before disaster strikes (see the essay on [climate and the environment](#)). The Falepili Union between Australia and Tuvalu, in force since August 2024, offers up to 280 Tuvaluans a year permanent residence in Australia; the first ballot drew 2,474 registrations covering 8,750 people ([The Diplomat](#)).

8. Prevent displacement at its source

Conflict now causes most new displacement, so the most effective long-run measure is fewer and shorter wars, the subject of the essay on [ending war](#). Within the displacement field, donors should pay for the data that early warning depends on, since IDMC reports that data availability declined in 15% of the countries it monitors in 2025 ([NRC](#)).

Governments and international courts should also use sanctions and prosecutions against those who forcibly displace civilians in breach of international law.

Sequencing

The first two years should go to emergency funding, camp rations and health services, and the returns under way in Syria and Sudan. From two to ten years the work shifts to inclusion on the Colombian and Kenyan models, host-country finance tied to reform and a rebuilt resettlement system, and over a generation to short displacement, fewer wars and adaptation that keeps people on their land.

What makes it stick politically

Host countries accept inclusion when it brings money and their own citizens use the new schools, clinics and roads; rich countries accept resettlement and asylum when the systems are orderly and arrivals are seen to work. The plan therefore pairs each obligation with a benefit: development finance in return for work rights, and controlled legal routes in return for donor contributions. Refugee participation in running programmes, which USCRI says is essential to Kenya's plan, also helps arrangements last ([USCRI](#)).

Where reasonable people disagree

People disagree about how much rich countries owe. Some argue that a country's duty is best met by funding help in the region of origin, where money goes further; others hold that the Refugee Convention obliges every signatory to hear claims made at its border. A second dispute concerns the length of protection. Governments that have made refugee status temporary, such as Denmark and the United Kingdom, say it removes pull factors that draw unfounded claims; refugee organisations reply that repeated reviews harm integration. Offshore processing and the use of "safe third countries" divide opinion in a similar way: governments present them as a means of breaking smugglers' business models, and critics see them as shifting responsibility to poorer states. Aid agencies usually wait for stable conditions before encouraging return, whereas host governments under economic strain want returns sooner. Camps concentrate services in the first months of a crisis but trap people when they last for decades.

Part II: The plan in the world of September 2026

Emergency funding: the aid cliff reaches the camps

Element 1 is failing most visibly. Global humanitarian funding dropped by more than 30% between 2024 and 2025, and US support fell from about \$14 billion to \$3.7 billion after the administration's 2025 review of foreign funding ([InfoMigrants](#)). The United States had provided 40% of UNHCR's donations, and by July 2025 the agency had stopped or

suspended about \$1.4 billion of programmes and warned that up to 11.6 million people could lose access to assistance ([Al Jazeera](#)).

The cuts deepened in 2026. In a letter dated 15 May, Salih told member states that UNHCR expected just over \$3 billion for the year, about 15% less than in 2025, after a drop of roughly 30% the year before ([Reuters via CNBC Africa](#)). US contributions fell from more than \$800 million in 2025 to around \$110 million. On 28 August the agency presented a 2027 budget of \$7.14 billion, down 16% from the previous year and far below the \$10.6 billion of 2025, with budgeted posts falling from 16,126 in 2025 to 8,540; a spokesperson said actual layoffs would be smaller because many budgeted posts had never been filled ([Reuters via The Globe and Mail](#)).

The effects show up in rations. In April 2026 the Associated Press reported that the 1.2 million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, who had received \$12 a month each, would move to a tiered system under which around 17% would receive as little as \$7, with programmes for the Rohingya 19% funded ([Courthouse News \(AP\)](#)). When rations were cut to \$8 in 2023, WFP reported that 12% of children in the camps were already acutely malnourished ([WFP](#)). Agencies are rationing by triage, which makes pre-committed funding the gap to close first.

Inclusion: sound where it has been tried, short of money where it is new

Element 2 has the strongest evidence and the weakest financing. Colombia's regularisation of more than two million Venezuelans is the clearest large-scale support for the plan's claim that legal status and work rights reduce dependence without harming host workers, yet the Americas face UNHCR's steepest regional cut, almost a third of the budget ([Reuters via The Globe and Mail](#)).

Kenya shows the difficulty of starting such a policy during an aid collapse: a year after the Shirika Plan's launch, USCRI credited it with stronger coordination between national and county governments, but found that for hundreds of thousands of refugees "daily realities have yet to change," largely because donor cuts had reduced food assistance and strained services ([USCRI](#)). The same risk hangs over "50 by 35": self-reliance saves aid money over time but needs up-front spending on permits, training, schools and infrastructure, and without it the label can cover a withdrawal of aid before refugees can support themselves.

Host-country financing: intact, with weaker conditions

Development finance has held up better than humanitarian aid, and the World Bank's refugee window survived the IDA21 replenishment with at least \$2.4 billion. As part of a simplification of IDA, however, the commitment that at least 60% of eligible countries would make significant policy reforms was dropped, and 13 of 17 eligible countries examined still significantly restricted refugees' access to labour markets in 2022 ([Center for Global Development](#)).

Returns: Syria, Sudan and Afghanistan test element 4

Syria. By 31 August 2026 an estimated 1.8 million Syrian refugees had returned from neighbouring countries since the fall of the Assad government, along with more than 2 million internally displaced people ([UNHCR](#)). In March, 15.6 million people in Syria still needed assistance and 5.5 million remained internally displaced ([UNHCR](#)), and UNHCR's representative had said in December 2025 that more than a quarter of returnees lacked identity cards, property deeds or other basic documents ([Syrian Observer](#)). These are the conditions element 4 was written for, and they coincide with WFP halving emergency food aid inside Syria.

Sudan. Sudan's war, which began on 15 April 2023, displaced about 12 million people at its peak and pushed more than 4.5 million across its borders ([UN News](#)). On 21 September 2026 IOM counted 5,145,165 returnees, about 930,000 of them from abroad and half of those from Egypt, while 8,583,274 people remained displaced ([IOM](#)). IOM found homes and critical infrastructure heavily damaged in the areas of return, and some returnees cite the intolerable conditions of displacement as their reason for going back ([UN News](#)). Fighting elsewhere keeps displacing people; the violence at El Fasher in late October 2025 displaced more than 100,000 ([IOM](#)).

Afghanistan. Afghanistan is the counter-example: between mid-September 2023 and 30 May 2026, about 6.04 million Afghans returned from Iran and Pakistan, driven largely by Pakistan's repatriation plan and Iran's deportations, many without housing, work or documents ([IOM DTM](#)). In 2026 alone, 1,228,920 had returned by 22 September, of whom 506,410 were deported, 439,000 of them from Iran ([UNHCR](#)). They count toward the fall in the global total, yet they are forced returns of the kind element 4 rules out.

New displacement in 2026: the Iran war

The war that the United States and Israel began against Iran on 28 February 2026 produced the year's largest new displacement. By late March UNHCR estimated that 3.2 million people had been displaced inside Iran, and more than a million were displaced in Lebanon, nearly one resident in five ([Al Jazeera](#)). Most of the movement inside Iran proved temporary: citing Iranian government data, UNHCR reported that by 7 July all temporarily relocated people had returned home. On 17 September, 341,228 people were still internally displaced in Lebanon, and by 21 September Syria was hosting 311,500 Lebanese refugees ([UNHCR](#)).

The war also struck the world's largest refugee population: Iran hosts more than 4.4 million Afghans, and by June more than a million were at risk of deportation; the Afghan refugee response had been only 18% funded in 2025 ([NRC](#)). Since 28 February, 946,000 Afghans have returned from neighbouring countries ([UNHCR](#)), into a country already short of food because of the fertilizer shock the same war set off.

Resettlement has fallen furthest

Element 5 has gone backwards further than any other. About 37,000 refugees departed through UNHCR-supported resettlement in 2025, against more than 116,000 in 2024, and the international community is off track to reach its target of 130,000 places by 2027 ([UN News](#)). The largest single cause is the United States. Its fiscal 2026 ceiling of 7,500 was raised to 17,500 by an emergency determination on 21 May 2026 admitting Afrikaners, citing what it called incitement of racially motivated violence in South Africa ([American Presidency Project](#)). Through 31 July the United States had admitted 10,258 refugees in fiscal 2026, 10,255 of them South African, against 38,102 in fiscal 2025 and 100,034 in fiscal 2024 ([Pew Research Center](#)). On 22 September the administration proposed a fiscal 2027 ceiling of 17,500, “primarily” Afrikaners, at a cost of about \$500 million, arguing that they face discrimination at home and will assimilate without burdening taxpayers ([CNN](#)). That would leave almost no US places for refugees of other nationalities.

Asylum policy: stricter rules in Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States

The EU Pact became fully applicable on 12 June 2026; the Commission presents its mandatory solidarity mechanism as a guarantee that member states under migratory pressure are not left alone, and stricter registration as a way to reduce unauthorised movement within the EU ([European Commission](#)). Human Rights Watch warns that the Pact allows detention for up to six months, allows transfers to “safe third countries” with which applicants have no connection, and ends the automatic suspension of deportation during appeals; it notes that Poland’s suspension of asylum from March 2025 was still in force more than a year later ([Human Rights Watch](#)). The 2026 solidarity pool of 21,000 relocations was set below the Commission’s proposal of 30,000, and states may pay instead of relocating people ([EMN Belgium](#)). Whether the fast procedures are fair, and whether solidarity will move people as well as money, cannot yet be judged.

The EU also kept its separate regime for Ukrainians, which covered almost 4.4 million people in April 2026 ([European Commission](#)). On 15 July member states agreed to extend it to 4 March 2028, with a new rule that applicants from March 2027 must show they have complied with Ukrainian military obligations ([Newland Chase](#)).

The United Kingdom changed course more sharply. Since 2 March 2026, adults granted refugee status receive 30 months of protection, renewable only if they still need it, and must wait 20 years for settlement unless they move to a work or study route ([UK Government](#)). The government argues that UK asylum claims rose 18% to a record in 2024 while claims across Europe fell 13%, and that Denmark’s similar model brought claims to a 40-year low ([UK Home Office](#)). Refugee organisations reply that temporary protection damages integration and worsens mental health ([Scottish Refugee Council](#)).

In the United States, the test concerns temporary protected status (TPS), which shields nationals of designated countries from removal. On 25 June 2026, in *Mullin v. Doe*, the Court ruled 6 to 3 that the TPS statute bars judicial review of non-constitutional challenges to a termination and that the Haitian plaintiffs were unlikely to prove that race motivated the decision on Haiti. Justice Kagan, dissenting, argued that courts may still check whether the Secretary followed the procedures the statute requires and that the President's statements showed racial motive ([Supreme Court of the United States](#)). The ruling lets the Department of Homeland Security end TPS for Haiti and Syria ([Congressional Research Service](#)), which covered some 350,000 Haitians and 6,000 Syrians ([NPR](#)).

Climate displacement: a quieter year, the same trend

Disasters caused 29.9 million internal displacements in 2025, 35% fewer than in the exceptional year before, with wildfires alone causing 694,000 ([NRC](#)), and almost 13.6 million people were still displaced by disasters at the end of the year ([IDMC](#)). The next test is the strong El Niño described in the starvation essay, which threatens drought across southern Africa from late 2026, and element 7's call for anticipatory action applies directly. Mobility agreements remain small: the Falepili ballot drew registrations covering 8,750 people for 280 places.

Prevention: the wars continue

Element 8 depends on the war plan, and the record there is poor. IDMC's director, Tracy Lucas, said the centre had never recorded "such a staggering number of displacements related to conflict," and NRC's secretary general, Jan Egeland, called internal displacement on this scale "a sign of a global collapse in prevention of conflict" ([NRC](#)). The wars in Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Ukraine continued through 2026, and the Iran war added a new one.

Part III: Revised priorities for the next 6 to 12 months

1. **Protect the camps from the aid cliff.** Restore food and health budgets for the largest protracted populations, starting with the Rohingya in Bangladesh, Afghans in Iran and Sudanese refugees in Chad and Egypt, and turn annual pledges to UNHCR and WFP into multi-year, less earmarked commitments.
2. **Put recovery money behind the returns under way.** Fund housing, documents, water, livelihoods and reintegration cash in the parts of Syria and Sudan receiving the most returnees, so that the returns of 2025 and 2026 do not become renewed displacement in 2027.
3. **Press Iran and Pakistan to halt mass deportations to Afghanistan** and fund reception for those already returned, treating this as a hunger emergency as well as

a protection one.

4. **Back the inclusion models that work.** Protect Colombia's regularisation from the cuts in the Americas and give Kenya's Shirika Plan the money its transition phase needs.
5. **Restore resettlement capacity.** Other resettlement countries should expand quotas and sponsorship to offset the fall in US admissions, with priority for Afghans, Sudanese and Rohingya.
6. **Make the EU Pact work as designed,** with border procedures staffed to produce fair, reviewable decisions and relocation of people as a real part of the solidarity pool.
7. **Reattach reform conditions to host-country finance** and prepare for El Niño displacement in southern Africa with pre-positioned shelter and cash for families who move in search of water and work.

Conclusion

The fall in global displacement in 2025 was real, and much of it came from Syrians and Sudanese choosing to go home. It also rested on Afghans who had no choice and on returns into damaged cities that may not hold. The Iran war displaced millions more in 2026, most only briefly inside Iran but for longer in Lebanon, while UNHCR's funding fell by roughly 30% in 2025 and is expected to fall by about 15% more in 2026.

Tested against these events, the plan's emphasis on inclusion and development finance looks sound, since the Colombian evidence shows legal status raising refugees' incomes without harming host workers. The weakest parts are emergency funding and resettlement, where decisions in donor countries have cut capacity sharply since 2024, and prevention, which depends on ending wars that continue. The largest gain available in the next year is to make the returns to Syria and Sudan last, since 3.6 million people went home in Sudan and 3.3 million in Syria in 2025 alone.

Several situations described here, including the Iran war and returns to Sudan, are changing quickly; this essay reflects reporting available at the end of September 2026.

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