



WORLD REFUGEE DAY

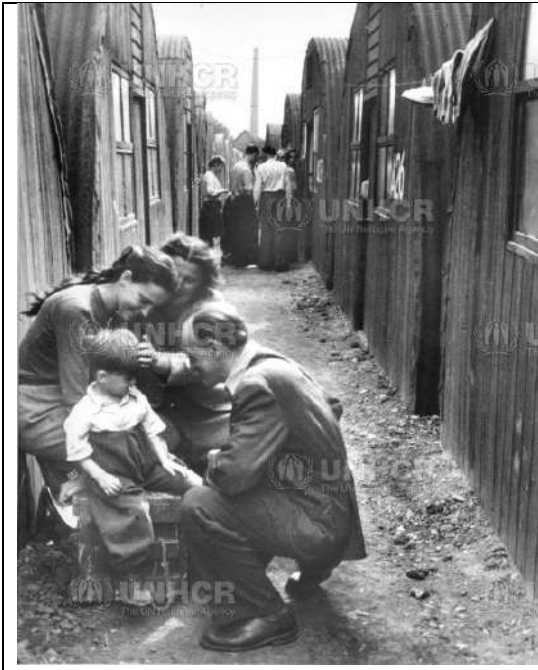
MCO PANAMA 2026

For the millions of people who have been forced to flee their homes due to war, conflict, or persecution, the right to seek protection means the difference between life and death.

Seventy-five years after the signing of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, we continue to believe in the promise of a safer world. A world where refugees can rebuild their lives with dignity, contribute to their communities, and look to the future with hope.

The exhibition “Until Everyone Is Safe” is a visual and human journey through the 75 years of the Convention and Panama’s commitment to protection, inclusion, and finding solutions for refugees and asylum seekers.

SECTION 1	
	<p>From the ashes of the Second World War, a promise emerged: that people forced to flee war, violence, and persecution would not be left unprotected.</p> <p>Seventy-five years after the adoption of the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, that promise remains as urgent and necessary as ever.</p> <p>The right to seek protection was created for people like you and me—for all humanity.</p>
	<p>1951</p> <p>In Geneva, Switzerland, States adopted the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, the cornerstone of international refugee protection and one of the most important legal instruments in the field of human rights.</p> <p>The Convention establishes the internationally recognized definition of who is a refugee and outlines the rights, protection, and assistance to which every person forced to flee their country is entitled.</p> <p>As the guardian of the Convention, UNHCR supports States in incorporating these principles into their national legislation, helping to ensure that refugees can access protection, exercise their rights, and rebuild their lives in dignity and safety.</p>

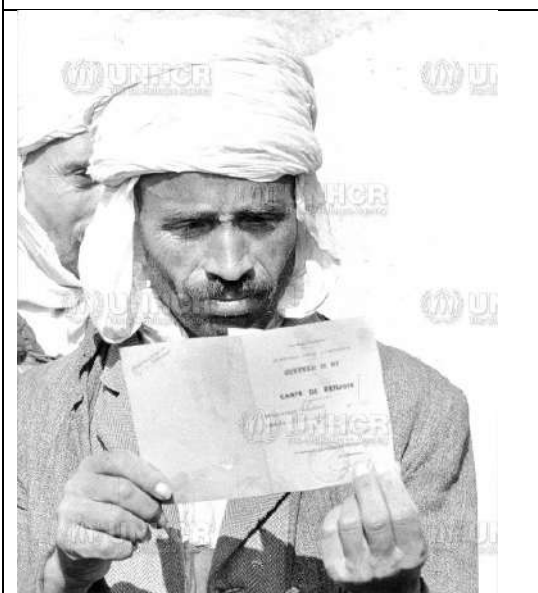


1953

In Europe, devastated by the Second World War, millions of people lost their homes. This photograph, taken in a refugee camp in Germany, shows a displaced family from Eastern Europe during a period of uncertainty and rebuilding.

At the creation of UNHCR, it was estimated that more than 1.2 million refugees fell under its mandate, with hundreds of thousands of them homeless and in urgent need of protection and assistance.

Decades later, the image took on an even deeper meaning. In 2014, a woman in Australia recognized her grandfather, Jaroslav Patetl, in the photograph, alongside his wife and children, who had fled what was then Czechoslovakia. The image documents both a chapter of world history and the memory of a family marked by forced displacement.



1961

By the late 1950s, Africa faced one of its first major contemporary refugee crises. Thousands of people fled the Algerian War of Independence from French rule, seeking safety in neighboring countries.

UNHCR was called to Tunisia to coordinate humanitarian assistance for nearly 200,000 refugees, most of them women, children, and older people who had escaped the conflict.

This crisis demonstrated that forced displacement knows no borders, reinforcing the need for international protection grounded in solidarity and shared responsibility.



1964

In the 1960s, as the African continent moved through the end of the colonial era, numerous conflicts forced thousands of people to flee their homes in search of safety.

This image shows a group of Rwandan refugees waiting for food distribution at a refugee centre in the Oruchinga Valley in Uganda.

Around 22,000 refugees relied on assistance from the international community as they awaited resettlement in northern Uganda, where they could rebuild their lives.

**1978**

Following the fall of Saigon in 1975, thousands of Vietnamese fled by sea in search of safety and a future away from conflict.

Despite the dangers of the journey, including storms, shipwrecks, and pirate attacks, tens of thousands crossed the South China Sea in fragile vessels. By 1978, the exodus had reached dramatic proportions.

This photograph shows a group of 162 Vietnamese refugees who managed to reach the shore after the small boat they were travelling in sank just a few metres from land.

**1982**

In the early 1980s, during the most intense years of Guatemala's civil war, thousands of people were forced to flee violence, political persecution, state repression, and massacres targeting Indigenous communities.

From 1981 onwards, approximately 46,000 Guatemalan refugees arrived in Mexico in large numbers, mainly in the state of Chiapas, seeking protection and safety. Many displaced communities lived for years in improvised camps, relying on humanitarian assistance while striving to rebuild their lives away from home.



In 1984, in response to the growing refugee population, the Mexican government relocated nearly half of these refugees to the states of Campeche and Quintana Roo, where several settlements were established. Over time, these evolved into communities that became fully integrated into the region's social, economic, and political life.

Following the Peace Accords in 1996, many families returned to Guatemala. Others chose to remain in Mexico, pursuing naturalization and building new lives in the communities that had welcomed them.

**1999**

The conflict in Kosovo triggered one of the largest displacement crises in Europe since the Second World War. Violence, persecution, and military operations forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes within a matter of days.

This photograph shows the arrival of refugees from Kosovo to the border area of Blace, in what was then the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. In just two weeks, more than 120,000 people crossed the border in search of safety.

	<p>Many families were forced to flee within minutes, leaving behind their homes, belongings and livelihoods, carrying only the clothes they were wearing. The speed and scale of the exodus created a humanitarian emergency that required an immediate international response to provide shelter, food, medical care and protection.</p>
	<p>2007</p> <p>The conflict in the Darfur region of Sudan triggered a severe humanitarian crisis, marked by armed violence, attacks against civilians, and mass displacement. Hundreds of thousands of people fled to neighbouring Chad in search of safety.</p> <p>This photograph, taken in Djabal camp in eastern Chad, shows school director Adam Djouma Youssouf carrying a blackboard inside one of the improvised classrooms. The open, makeshift learning spaces, exposed to wind and sandstorms, lacked basic conditions: children studied sitting on the ground, without desks or chairs.</p> <p>Education is often one of the first casualties of conflict, but it is also an essential tool for recovery and for the future of refugees.</p>
	<p>2015</p> <p>This vast mountain of life jackets in northern Greece, on the island of Lesbos, consisting of several metres high and stretching across hectares of land, became one of the most striking symbols of the refugee crisis in Europe in 2015.</p> <p>Each life jacket represents a person who risked their life crossing the Aegean Sea in fragile boats to escape war, violence, and persecution in countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Many of these jackets were counterfeit, filled with foam or plastic rather than materials capable of saving lives, reflecting the desperation and vulnerability of those undertaking the journey.</p> <p>Amid this humanitarian emergency, local residents, volunteers, and rescue teams played a crucial role in saving lives. For their tireless efforts in providing assistance and rescue during the crisis, activist Efi Latsoudi and Konstantinos Mitragas, of the Hellenic Rescue Team, were awarded the UNHCR Nansen Refugee Award in 2016, which recognizes extraordinary commitment to the protection of refugees.</p>



2019

In December 2019, world leaders, government representatives, international organizations, civil society, the private sector, and refugees gathered at the Palais des Nations in Geneva for the first Global Refugee Forum.

Co-hosted by UNHCR and Switzerland, and convened with Costa Rica, Ethiopia, Germany, Pakistan, and Türkiye, the meeting marked the beginning of the practical implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees.

The Forum featured high-level dialogues, thematic sessions and special events focused on key areas such as education, employment, inclusion, protection and durable solutions. States and a wide range of stakeholders announced pledges, contributions and good practices aimed at supporting both refugees and the communities that host them.

The Global Refugee Forum reflected a shared recognition that no single country can respond to a displacement crisis alone and that international solidarity is essential to address one of the major humanitarian challenges of our time.



2022

Russia launched a large-scale military offensive against Ukraine, triggering one of the fastest and largest displacement crises in Europe since the Second World War. Within days, hundreds of thousands of people fled to neighbouring countries such as Poland, Hungary, Moldova, and Romania, while millions more sought safety within Ukraine.

More than four years since the start of the war, millions of people remain displaced both inside and outside Ukraine. Attacks on homes and energy infrastructure have left entire communities without electricity or heating during some of the harshest winters of the conflict, while new attacks continue to force families to flee.

UNHCR and its partners continue to provide emergency assistance, support for housing repairs, legal assistance and protection to forcibly displaced people and refugees.

**1977**

Panama reaffirmed its commitment to the international protection of refugees by acceding to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. In this photograph, Ambassador Jorge E. Illueca, Permanent Representative of Panama to the United Nations, presents the instrument of accession to Erik Suy, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs.

Accession to these international instruments represented a key step in strengthening protection for people forced to flee persecution, violence, and conflict, aligning Panama with international principles on asylum, human rights, and international solidarity.

Through Law No. 5 of 26 October 1977, the Republic of Panama formally ratified the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol, consolidating the foundations of its national system for the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers.

**1998**

The procedure for recognizing refugee status in Panama was established by Executive Decree No. 23 of 10 February 1998, laying the foundations of the national asylum system and the protection framework for refugees.

This framework was subsequently strengthened with the adoption of Executive Decree No. 5 of 16 January 2018, which established the National Commission for the Protection of Refugees (CONARE) and the National Office for the Attention of Refugees (ONPAR), as well as procedures for the recognition, protection, and assistance of refugees in the country.

Panamanian legislation incorporated the refugee definition set out in the 1951 Convention and progressed towards the recognition of new forms of persecution, including those related to gender-based violence, domestic and family violence, female genital mutilation, punishment for non-compliance with social or moral norms, and discrimination against LGBTIQ+ persons, thereby strengthening a more inclusive protection approach aligned with the evolving challenges of forced displacement.



The Darién province, on the border between Panama and Colombia, has historically been a territory of transit, reception, and protection for people displaced by violence and armed conflict. Between the late 1990s and early 2000s, hundreds of Colombian families fled the armed conflict in the department of Chocó and crossed the border into Panamanian communities such as Jaqué, El Real, Puerto Obaldía, Boca de Cupe, Yape, Yaviza and La Palma in search of safety.

In response to this situation, the Panamanian State granted the Temporary Humanitarian Protection Status (PTH) to more than 800 Colombians, a special mechanism established to provide temporary protection to those forced to flee violence. While this status allowed many families to live in safety in Panama, it also highlighted the challenges in fully accessing rights such as work, health care and education during prolonged periods of displacement.

In 2011, Panama took an important step towards a durable solution with the adoption of Law 81, which enabled persons registered under the Temporary Humanitarian Protection Status to obtain permanent residence and move towards full integration in the country.



2017

Belize, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Panama adopted the San Pedro Sula Declaration and agreed to work jointly on the implementation of the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS). In 2019, El Salvador officially joined the mechanism, strengthening this regional cooperation platform, supported by UNHCR and the Organization of American States (OAS).

The MIRPS, aligned with the Global Compact on Refugees, aims to strengthen the regional response to the increase in refugees, asylum-seekers, and people displaced by violence, persecution, and insecurity, promoting shared solutions based on solidarity and responsibility-sharing.

Through the MIRPS, Panama has advanced strategies and actions to strengthen the protection, integration, and inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers, promoting access to rights, opportunities, and sustainable solutions. In 2023, Panama assumed the Pro Tempore Presidency of the mechanism, leading regional efforts.

2019

Panama took a significant step in strengthening the protection and integration of refugees by adopting Executive Decree No. 20 of 28 May 2019, which allows asylum-seekers whose applications have been admitted for processing to access formal work permits.



Access to employment represents a key tool for refugees and asylum-seekers to rebuild their lives with dignity, achieve economic self-reliance, and actively contribute to the communities that host them.

The measure strengthened access to basic rights for thousands of people and reaffirmed Panama's commitment to inclusive and sustainable solutions for those forced to flee violence, persecution, and conflict.



2021

Between 2021 and 2025, approximately 1.2 million people crossed the Darién jungle, fleeing conflict, persecution, socio-economic crises, or serious human rights violations in various countries in Latin America and other regions of the world.

In response to this complex humanitarian situation, Panama has played a key role in the regional response, maintaining reception and assistance mechanisms for people in transit through its territory. With the support of UNHCR, other United Nations agencies and humanitarian organizations, protection activities were strengthened, including the provision of information, identification of persons with specific needs, and access to essential services.

In this context, UNHCR launched the digital communication initiative “Confía en el Tucán”, which reached more than 32 million views on social media. Through real testimonies about the risks of the journey, the initiative aimed to counter misinformation about the Darién jungle and promote informed decision-making.



2024

Panama's Vice Minister of Government, Juan Francisco Borrell, participated alongside high-level representatives from Latin America and the Caribbean in the ministerial meeting of the Cartagena+40 Process, held in Santiago, Chile, in December 2024, where the Chile Declaration and Plan of Action 2024–2034 were adopted.

The adoption of this new regional framework reaffirmed the region's commitment to solidarity, protection, and sustainable solutions for refugees, displaced persons, and stateless people, while also marking the 40th anniversary of the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, one of the most important regional instruments on international protection.

	<p>The Chile Declaration and Plan of Action will guide the regional response over the next decade, promoting measures such as socio-economic inclusion, access to formal employment, strengthening asylum systems, and coordinated responses to displacement caused by conflict, violence and natural disasters.</p>
	<p>2025</p> <p>As part of efforts to strengthen the asylum system in Panama, the National Office for the Attention of Refugees (ONPAR), with UNHCR's support, resumed issuing official identification documents for asylum-seekers. This measure represents a key step in ensuring protection, security, and access to basic rights for those forced to flee war, violence, or persecution.</p> <p>Having official documentation facilitates access to essential services such as health care, education, and employment, while also reducing the risk of detention or forced return.</p> <p>Panama is home to approximately 8,500 refugees and asylum-seekers, primarily from Colombia, Cuba, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.</p>
	<p>2026</p> <p>In April 2026, Panama reached an important humanitarian milestone by supporting a process that enabled long-recognized refugees living in remote communities in Darién Province to finally obtain permanent residence. While this process could in principle be completed individually, geographic barriers, transportation costs, and limited access made it particularly difficult and time-consuming in practice.</p> <p>The intervention of the State, working together with international organizations and consular authorities, facilitated access to a durable solution for a population that had waited for years for the opportunity to rebuild their lives in the country.</p> <p>Obtaining permanent residence represents far more than a migration status: it means access to rights, services, and new opportunities, as well as the possibility of fully integrating into Panamanian society and continuing to build a life with dignity, stability, and hope.</p>
<p>SECCION 3</p>	
	<p>UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, protects people forced to flee due to conflict and persecution, working with governments and partners in more than 130 countries to provide life-saving support and safeguard their rights.</p>



Since 2004, UNHCR has been working in Panama in coordination with the State, civil society, the private sector, and host communities to strengthen the protection and integration of refugees, asylum-seekers, and stateless people.

Through these joint efforts, Panama has advanced measures to strengthen the national asylum system, promote local integration, and ensure effective access to fundamental rights, including education, health care, employment, and housing.

By creating opportunities for refugees to rebuild their lives with dignity and fully participate in society, these efforts also help strengthen the social fabric of host communities and contribute to a more inclusive and equitable future for all.



Refugees not only seek protection and safety, but also wish to contribute their knowledge and experience to the communities that host them. In Panama, many refugees actively participate in social, cultural and community initiatives that strengthen the social fabric and create opportunities for others.

Shirley Mosquera, a Colombian refugee, reflects this commitment. After fleeing violence and rebuilding her life in Panama, she established 'Mi Primera Cremita', a community kitchen that has, for several years, provided meals and support to children in vulnerable situations, regardless of nationality. In partnership with volunteer mothers, the initiative also promotes workshops, support networks, and activities that strengthen women in the community.

This year, Shirley was recognized by the Office of the Ombudsperson of Panama in the National Outstanding Women Award 2026, which highlights women who transform their communities, recognizing her contribution to strengthening community cohesion and addressing gender-based violence

In an increasingly connected world, digital safety has also become a form of protection for refugees. For those who have fled violence, persecution or conflict, the use of social media, mobile phones and the internet can be both a tool to rebuild their lives and a risk to their safety and privacy.



Refugees such as José, from Venezuela, were trained by UNHCR as part of the programme Cybersecurity for Refugees by Refugees, strengthening their capacities to protect their personal information, safely navigate digital environments and identify potential online threats. Participants have become guides and peer trainers, sharing digital protection tools within their own communities.

Through this initiative, refugees strengthen their autonomy and resilience, while actively contributing to building more informed, safer, and better prepared communities in the face of digital challenges



Since 2019, 'Hecho x Refugiados' (Made by Refugees) has promoted opportunities for integration and income generation for refugees in Panama by creating sustainable products made by refugees themselves. Led by refugees and civil society, the initiative fosters economic empowerment, skills development, and social inclusion through entrepreneurship.

In 2025, 'Hecho x Refugiados' became the first non-governmental organization led by refugees to be legally registered in Panama. Over the years, the initiative has developed collections of home goods, accessories, décor, and handicrafts, demonstrating how refugees can actively contribute to the local economy when given opportunities to rebuild their lives with dignity. The initiative also seeks to raise awareness about the realities of forced displacement and promote a more inclusive and supportive society.



In 2025, Panama launched 'Empresas con Refugiados' (Companies with Refugees), a platform that brings together companies, organizations, and partners committed to creating employment, education, and development opportunities for refugees. Promoted by UNHCR, the initiative seeks to advance socio-economic inclusion and foster more diverse, sustainable, and inclusive work environments.

Stories such as Eduardo Escalante's illustrate the impact of these opportunities. At 22, Eduardo is rebuilding his life through steady employment as a circular manufacturing operator at Clandestino Lab, a design studio that transforms recycled plastic into new products, which contributes to his talent, innovation, and resilience.



Until everyone is safe

For the millions of people who have been forced to flee their homes due to war, conflict, or persecution, the right to seek protection means the difference between life and death.

75 years after the signing of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, we continue to believe in the promise of a safer world. A world where refugee status is just one chapter in a person's life, not their entire story.

Help us keep the promise of protection alive for those who need it most. Because everyone deserves to live in safety, dignity, and hope.