Priorities for the 117th Congress: Humanitarian Engagement for Displaced Populations

Refugees International
January 2021

The U.S. Capitol. Photo by Stefani Reynolds/Getty Images.
Rebuilding U.S. Global Leadership in Humanitarian Work

In a bipartisan fashion, Members of Congress have long supported critical assistance to vulnerable communities around the world, based on a shared belief in the importance of a values-driven foreign policy and an understanding that the United States has security interests in promoting reconciliation and well-being in circumstances where despair and misery threaten stability. Roles and responsibilities include appropriating funds, mandating action and diplomatic engagement, and holding hearings and voicing statements that raise the visibility of urgent crises and humanitarian concerns.

As a new legislative session begins, Congress faces dramatic challenges on the domestic and international front. The COVID-19 global pandemic has exacerbated underlying vulnerabilities of displaced populations, and additional financial and diplomatic investments are urgently needed. The risk of outbreaks among displaced people in camps remain as access to testing, treatment, hygiene, and healthcare is minimal in these settings, and there are concerns about equitable and inclusive vaccine distribution. Furthermore, border and market closures and other movement restrictions have led to bottlenecked humanitarian supply chains, a rise in food insecurity, and a loss of livelihoods, which has impacted displaced populations both within and outside of camps.

The 117th Congress must work to support the more than 80 million people displaced globally as a result of persecution, conflict, and violations of human rights. Congress should continue to provide lifesaving emergency funding for current crises as well as essential humanitarian and development assistance more broadly, including for education and livelihood support. The rights of asylum seekers, refugees, internally displaced people (IDPs), and all who are forcibly displaced must be protected.

This issue brief provides specific policy recommendations, including legislative priorities for regional and thematic topics.
Meeting Long-term Challenges: COVID-19, Food Insecurity, and Rising Displacement

Food Insecurity

The World Food Program (WFP) warns that 270 million people across the globe are on the brink of starvation. In Yemen alone, more than 20 million people are food insecure, with 10 million of those acutely food insecure. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the situation across the globe. In the early months of the pandemic, markets closed, border access was restricted, and local economies suffered. Existing challenges, including insecurity and ongoing conflict, made an already difficult operating environment for humanitarians even worse.

From Somalia to South Sudan to Haiti to Afghanistan, the lifesaving food assistance provided by the United States and the strong investment of bipartisan leadership in emergency and protracted crises have no doubt saved countless lives. Through the support of Congress, flexibility in food assistance, in-kind food programs, multilateral support, and innovative cash assistance programs have truly made a difference. This commitment by Congress is laudable, but, as the statistics unfortunately reflect, more resources are desperately needed to help the world’s most vulnerable populations, including children. WFP is dealing with a budget shortfall of nearly $5 billion, and while the United States remains the largest donor, both the United States and the wider international donor community must step up their support.

Budget-as-Values: Expanding Humanitarian and Development Assistance

In the past year, vulnerable communities from East Africa to the Sahel to Bangladesh to Central America and beyond have been devastated by compound crises including COVID-19, climate disasters, and ongoing conflict. The pandemic has reaffirmed the importance of global leadership in times of crisis, including funding totals and the authorization of those funds.

Congress has traditionally supported funding USAID and State Department programs that include International Disaster Assistance (IDA), Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA), the Emergency Refugee and Migration Account (ERMA), the Economic Support Fund (ESF), and other core accounts supporting peacekeeping operations, food assistance, and maternal and child health.
Despite significant support from the United States, including from some of the above accounts, the United Nation’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that select 2020 international humanitarian funding appeals are currently at the following levels: the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan (39%); Syrian Refugee Response and Resilience Plan (37%); South Sudan Regional Refugee Response Plan (10%); Democratic Republic of Congo Regional Refugee Response Plan (7%). These are life-saving appeals that are drastically underfunded.

A bold vision is needed to meet these humanitarian and development challenges and support sustainable solutions. The United States needs to re-engage and commit to strengthening multilateral partnerships, including through increased funding levels. And Congress should maintain support for key bureaus that play an integral role in humanitarian diplomacy, such as the State Department’s bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM). We call for the doubling of annual bilateral and international economic, health, and humanitarian assistance by 2025. If the United States is to reassert global leadership, Congress should commit to this goal.

Refugees International recommends that the Congress:

- Increase international humanitarian and development funding, including at least $20 billion in additional emergency funding in the short term for the international COVID-19 response;
- Enact a State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs authorization bill;
- Expand U.S. financial support to multilateral institutions, including to UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency);
- Seek meaningful re-engagement with key multilateral partners such as the World Health Organization (WHO), including through financial support.

Rebuilding the Bipartisan-supported U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program

During the Trump administration, the United States’ abdication of leadership through historically low refugee admissions left refugees in harm’s way. There was little meaningful consultation between Congress and the President regarding refugee resettlement as required by the 1980 Refugee Act. The Biden administration has committed to raising the U.S. Refugee Admissions ceiling to 125,000. We hope that Congress will work together with the new administration to support this objective and ensure that those refugees in greatest need of resettlement can take advantage of the program without discrimination. The U.S. Refugee Admission Program is a humanitarian
lifeline that should be key symbol of U.S. humanitarian leadership. The program also provides support to U.S. friends and allies who bear the burden or provide temporary refuge to displaced people and welcomes people who not only gain protection but have contributed substantially to the United States.

Refugees International recommends that the Congress:

- Commit necessary funding to the repair of the U.S. refugee resettlement infrastructure;
- Support reintroduction and enactment of the Guaranteed Refugee Admissions Ceiling Enhancement (GRACE) Act (S.1088/H.R.2146 from the 116th Congress), which would ensure that the United States sets a minimum annual refugee admissions ceiling of 95,000 refugees, in line with the historic average from 1980 to 2017. It also would increase transparency by mandating quarterly reporting to Congress and would promote greater responsiveness to global needs;
- Support reintroduction and enactment of the New Deal for New Americans Act (S.3470/H.R.4928 from the 116th Congress), which would eliminate roadblocks to citizenship for eligible residents, establish a White House Office of New Americans, and provide social, economic, and civic support to refugees; this bill would also help to rebuild the capacity and infrastructure of local communities to welcome refugees.

Asylum in the United States and Protection at the U.S. Southern Border

Through regulations and policy memos, the Trump administration illegally curtailed eligibility for asylum by barring or discrediting broad categories of claims and making it extremely difficult for asylum seekers to obtain a fair or full hearing. The Trump administration’s policies made the U.S.-Mexico border a more dangerous place, and the administration used the pandemic as a pretext to eliminate access to protection there. We hope that Congress will reclaim its authority over the asylum system and ensure protection in the United States to those seeking refuge from persecution.

Refugees International recommends that the Congress support:

- The Immigration Enforcement Moratorium Act (S. 4011/H.R. 7569 from the 116th Congress), which would halt deportations and immigration enforcement activities during the COVID-19 pandemic and resume fair asylum processing at our borders;
- The Refugee Protection Act (RPA) (S.2936/H.R.5210 from the 116th Congress), a blueprint for restoring and revitalizing the asylum system;
• The National Origin-Based Antidiscrimination for Nonimmigrants (NO BAN) Act (S.1123/H.R.2214 from the 116th Congress), which would repeal all versions of the refugee, Muslim, and asylum bans, require travel restrictions to be fact-based and time-limited and prevent future discriminatory travel bans by broadening the Immigration and Nationality Act’s nondiscrimination clause to prohibit discrimination against any immigrant or visa applicant based on religion or country of origin;

• The Immigrant Witness and Victim Protection Act (H.R.4319 from the 116th Congress), which would remove barriers to protection for immigrant survivors of domestic and sexual violence, human trafficking, and other serious crimes. Among other things, it will allow survivors to work while their petitions are pending and prevent detention and deportation while their cases are pending and adjudicated.

**Thematic Areas**

The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities among displaced people and in some cases, layered crisis upon crisis. Congress can and should work towards tackling these overarching challenges.

**Women and Girls**

Forcibly displaced women and girls face enormous challenges including difficulty accessing sustainable livelihoods, educational opportunities, and healthcare. They must also endure a lack of safe and sanitary living conditions, and risks of gender-based violence (GBV). As Refugees International has highlighted, COVID-19 has made all of these problems worse. The threat of GBV in particular, has dramatically increased during the pandemic. The rise in intimate partner violence (IPV) has been especially substantial, leading the UN Secretary General to call the increase of violence against women a “shadow pandemic.”

Increases in IPV and other forms of GBV in displaced communities and humanitarian emergencies are especially harmful, because women and girls in these situations already face a number of vulnerabilities. Furthermore, limited services exist globally to address GBV, including access to sexual and reproductive health care, which is essential and often lifesaving. Accordingly, we cannot treat programs that address GBV as afterthoughts, but rather they must be a central concern and funded as the lifesaving activities they are.
The United States has remarkable influence on GBV programming worldwide, through both funding support and policy initiatives in bilateral and multilateral engagement. The new Congress needs to invest more deeply in dealing with GBV during global emergencies and displacement. Members have introduced several bills which would improve and enhance the response to GBV in some of the most vulnerable communities worldwide.

Refugees International recommends that the Congress support:

- The International Violence Against Women Act (IVAWA) (S.3037/H.R.5267 from the 116th Congress), which would ensure that addressing violence against women is a key component of U.S. foreign policy;
- The Safe From the Start of Act of 2019 (H.R.4092 from the 116th Congress), which would increase U.S. support for programs that address GBV from the onset of emergencies and would build capacity to address root causes of this violence;
- The Support UNFPA Funding Act (H.R.4722 from the 116th Congress), which would ensure annual U.S. contributions for at least five years to support this UN agency, which is responsible for programs of support for sexual and reproductive health.

**Climate Displacement**

In 2019 alone, weather-related disasters displaced nearly 24 million people—three times as many people displaced as by conflict in the same year. Studies predict that by 2050 more than 100 million people will be forced to move internally due to climate change. The international community, and especially the United States, can and must meet this challenge through innovative policy solutions.

The Global Compact for Migration, adopted by the overwhelming majority of the world’s governments, encourages states to consider sympathetically the needs of those displaced by climate change—including the possible need for temporary or permanent relocation of communities beyond borders. Members of Congress should encourage the Biden administration to make full use of existing U.S. law and other authorities, including Temporary Protected Status, to provide protection for those who may be unable to return to their countries of origin due to environmental disasters exacerbated by climate change. Moreover, members of Congress should be prepared to support legislation, such as the Global Climate Change Resilience Strategy bill (S.2565) and the Climate Displaced Persons’ Act (H.R.4732), which were introduced by Senator Ed Markey and Representative Nydia Velazquez in the 116th Congress and would provide permanent relocation opportunities in the United States for those displaced by climate.
Refugees International recommends that the Congress:

- Press the Department of State to report to the Congress on the magnitude of the need for permanent relocation options for those displaced by climate, and encourage consultation with UNHCR, the International Organization of Migration (IOM), the Secretariat of UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), and other expert organizations in the preparation of such a report;
- Support measures such as the Global Climate Change Resilience Strategy bill (S.2565 from the 116th Congress) and The Climate Displaced Persons’ Act (H.R.4732 from the 116th Congress), which establish a definition for “climate-displaced persons” and a process for applying for protection, which could annually benefit up to 50,000 people displaced by climate-related events and disasters;
- Support the appointment of a “Coordinator of Climate Change Resilience” at the State Department, which would be mandated in the legislation described above, and which would be responsible for coordinating a report to the Congress on climate change, migration, and displacement as outlined above.

Labor Market Access

Congress has provided lifesaving emergency funding for new crises as well as essential humanitarian and development assistance more broadly, including for education and livelihood support. Economic inclusion, and with it access to jobs, allows refugees to meet their basic needs, increasing their ability to cope with shocks and reducing their aid-dependency. Moreover, it allows refugees to contribute to their host country, increasing productivity and mobilizing the economy. Development actors and multilateral development banks like the World Bank are investing in programs that assist host communities and refugees in long-term labor market access and livelihoods initiatives. These initiatives contribute to local economies and help refugees find solutions to their displacement.

Congress should find ways to support development actors and work with them to increase funding to programs in refugee-hosting countries. Furthermore, through the administration and directly, Congress should press the multilateral development banks to expand their refugee programming to help and include other displaced groups, such as internally displaced people.
Refugees International recommends that the Congress:

- Increase funding for bilateral and multilateral livelihood programs and support diplomatic efforts within refugee-hosting countries targeted at promoting refugees’ economic inclusion. Congress should scale up funding through the IDA-19 window and support World Health Organization involvement in equitable vaccine distribution for refugees within host countries.

**Human Rights**

Congress also has a long record of bipartisan support for championing human rights globally. Foreign Affairs and Foreign Relations Committees, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, and the Senate Human Rights Caucus all play an important role in shining a light on cases and prompting action. Legislative action on human rights, whether case-specific or more broadly, has also been a vital tool in protecting displaced populations and preventing new displacement. The Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-441), for example, enhances early warning and response to atrocity risks likely to lead to both severe human rights abuses and mass displacement.

Refugees International recommends that the Congress:

- The Senate establish a Senate Human Rights Commission, as proposed in S. Res. 725, which would enhance these efforts and show a lasting commitment to promoting human rights in the future;
- Congress press the State Department to strengthen atrocity prevention measures through comprehensive annual updates from the State Department on current efforts as required by the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-441).
Regional Priorities

Policy towards specific crises will vary by necessity, with unique challenges and moments of progress to build upon in each region.

Latin America

Latin America is facing two large-scale displacement crises from Venezuela and Central America. More than 5 million Venezuelans have been forcibly displaced since 2015, and hundreds of thousands of Central Americans have sought refuge in the United States and Mexico over the last several years. These crises, combined with the devastating effects of COVID-19 and climate change, require both immediate humanitarian assistance as well as support for long-term measures such as providing new pathways for protection for displaced Venezuelans and Central Americans. Through diplomacy and financial support, as well as a transformation in domestic policy at the southern border, the United States needs to be a genuine partner in regional migration management.

Refugees International recommends that the Congress:

- Promote a greater focus on protection for displaced Central Americans, including support for protection frameworks in both Central America and in Mexico, and support for pathways to resettlement in the United States; the Biden administration should also provide funding to support the Mexican asylum system and funding to build up a mechanism to identify and support internally displaced people in northern Central America;
- Support Temporary Protected Status to displaced Guatemalans in the wake of Hurricanes Eta and Iota;
- Support continued and generous humanitarian assistance and long-term integration for displaced Venezuelans, working with other donor nations and organizations like the European Union to coordinate and scale up much-needed resources;
- Press for a large-scale donor conferences to raise funds to address the displacement crisis involving Venezuelans;
- Support Temporary Protected Status to displaced Venezuelans given the severity and scale of the crisis.
Rohingya Crisis

Burma’s forced expulsion of more than 700,000 Rohingya people in August 2017—marked by mass killings, rape, and burning of villages—remains one of the worst atrocities the world has seen in recent years. Some 1 million Rohingya refugees remain in camps in Bangladesh, and another 600,000 continue to face the risk of atrocities in Burma.

The State Department documented the crimes committed but has yet to make a formal determination that Burma’s attacks on the Rohingya constitute crimes against humanity and genocide. Several independent groups, including Refugees International have reached this conclusion and the U.S. House of Representatives, in H.R. 1091 (2018), declared that genocide took place. The Burma Unified through Rigorous Military Accountability Act of 2019 (H.R. 3190) and the Burma Human Rights and Freedom Act of 2018 (S. 1186) have called for targeted sanctions on Burmese military leaders responsible for atrocities, support for accountability efforts, and sustained humanitarian assistance for displaced Rohingya.

Congress has also supported vital funding for the humanitarian response to the Rohingya crisis, particularly for refugees in Bangladesh. The government of Bangladesh has done much to help the Rohingya, but has also pursued negative policies. Members of Congress in both the House and Senate have sent letters to Bangladesh’s Prime Minister raising concerns about telecommunication restrictions impacting refugees, construction of fencing around refugee camps, and relocation of refugees to an isolated island in the Bay of Bengal. The latter comes despite multiple questions from humanitarians and refugees about the safety and voluntariness of such moves.

Refugees International recommends that the Congress:

- Support the Rohingya Genocide Determination Act (S.4659/H.R. 8744 from the 116th Congress), which would require the Department of State to report its view on whether the state of Myanmar is responsible for genocide; the new Congress should reintroduce and pass legislation with these measures and continue to press the State Department to make a genocide determination;
- Continue to support the humanitarian response while engaging diplomatically with Bangladesh, to ensure that it refrains from policies negatively and unnecessarily affecting Rohingya refugees.
Refocus on Africa

Congressional leaders should renew their commitment to humanitarian support and diplomatic reengagement across the continent, and adapt strategies based on regional needs.

Horn of Africa and Great Lakes Region

The countries of the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Region face a range of challenges that, if left unaddressed, will worsen humanitarian crises and exacerbate political, security and economic problems in the region. For example, in Ethiopia, full humanitarian access is needed to Tigray to ensure that desperate populations inside the conflict zone—including internally displaced people and a long-standing refugee population—are able to receive food, medicine, fuel, and other supplies. Other parts of Ethiopia are in need of assistance as well, to respond to long-standing ethnic grievances that have caused internal displacement. Such assistance is also needed to improve conditions for refugees in Ethiopia, who have begun to benefit from positive policy developments in recent years—including efforts to improve refugee access to the labor market.

South Sudan continues to face a stalled peaceful transition even as a third of its population remains displaced. A mix of localized fighting, COVID-19, and historical levels of flooding have exacerbated an already challenging humanitarian environment. Some areas of the country are likely already reaching famine levels of food insecurity. Congress should remain engaged and push South Sudan’s leaders to consolidate peace and should ensure sustained humanitarian aid. Another issue to watch is the return of displaced people, particularly from UN-hosted Protection of Civilian sites. The United States as a key donor must ensure that any such returns are not dangerous and premature. Congress should amplify this message.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) remains one of the world’s most dire humanitarian crises, with millions internally displaced and facing a combination of violence and terror, food shortages, and climate-induced displacement. The government has been unable to protect its population against more than 140 armed groups. Thousands have been killed this year, and the violence is increasing, with ripple effects throughout the region. Congress must recommit to the DRC and the region, most critically by providing increased food aid, and urging U.S. diplomatic reengagement to quell the violence.


**Sahel**

The Central Sahel nations of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are in turmoil. With an increasingly troubled political and security landscape, displacement and humanitarian needs continue to climb. Poor governance, intercommunal violence, and attacks from armed non-states actors have forced millions to flee their homes and have left 13.4 million people in need humanitarian aid. Despite the deteriorating situation, funding for the humanitarian response is woefully low, and U.S. political action is failing to bring meaningful improvement.

Refugees International recommends that the Congress:

- Support robust funding for the unfolding Ethiopian refugee crisis in Sudan, which has received the largest numbers of fleeing Ethiopians, and is severely under-resourced to meet their needs.
- Pressure the Ethiopian government to respect the neutrality of humanitarian aid workers and allow relief groups to freely access those displaced by the fighting in Tigray, as well as other populations in need of humanitarian assistance;
- Urge South Sudan’s leaders to consolidate peace. Congress should also monitor the return of displaced people, particularly from UN-hosted Protection of Civilian sites, to ensure that these returns are voluntarily, safe, and dignified;
- Push the Biden administration to designate countries as part of Global Fragility Strategy to benefit from the whole-of-government approach set out in the Global Fragility Act of 2019 (P.L. 116-94), these countries should include Burkina Faso, Mali, and/or Niger.

**Middle East**

Although the conflict has abated in large parts of Syria, the country is far from returning to normal. Nearly half the pre-war population continues to be displaced internally or living as refugees in neighboring countries. Moreover, the situation in northern Syria remains highly volatile. In the northwest, two major offensives led by the Syrian regime and Russia in 2019 and 2020 have each displaced nearly 1 million people. And the risk of a renewed conflict persists. In the northeast, a 2019 ceasefire between the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Turkey has been repeatedly breached. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic and the country’s acute economic downturn have exacerbated vulnerabilities across Syria.

Since late 2019, the humanitarian situation in Lebanon has deteriorated dramatically. First, Lebanon was struck by the most acute economic crisis in its history. Shortly after,
the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the existing crisis. On August 4, 2020, one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history wreaked havoc on Beirut, killing more than 200 people, wounding more than 6,500, and leaving an estimated 300,000 people homeless. By August 2020, the UN estimated that more than half the Lebanese population lived in poverty. Moreover, the crisis has exacerbated the hardship of an estimated 1 million Syrian refugees, many of whom lack access to the most basic needs, including food. If it is to truly recover, Lebanon requires comprehensive reform to address decades of corruption and mismanagement.

UNRWA continues to play an essential role in providing lifesaving assistance to Palestine refugees in the West Bank, Gaza, and in neighboring countries. The United States’ 2018 decision to stop all Palestinian funding has left a massive gap and has had a corrosive effect on UNRWA’s provision of essential services to nearly 5 million Palestinian refugees. The agency ran out of cash and, in November 2020, announced that it was cutting the salaries of tens of thousands of staff, including healthcare workers and teachers.

Refugees International recommends that the Congress:

- Continue to support humanitarian groups and healthcare workers in their efforts, particularly expanding support for local NGOs in Syria and Lebanon;
- Support additional self-reliance programming in Syrian host countries for both host communities and refugees;
- Pressure Lebanon to implement significant economic, social, and political reforms;
- Support the resumption of U.S. funding for UNRWA, as well as other forms of assistance to the occupied Palestinian territories. Congress should also join forces with European and other partners to ensure an effective and comprehensive reform and transparency within the Agency.
Europe

In Europe, the United States has a partner in responding to humanitarian crises. However, reports of pushbacks at the borders of Mediterranean and Western Balkan states, a continued failure to establish a regional mechanism for responsibility sharing, and persistent—albeit declining—populist tendencies warn of a shrinking space for asylum in Europe, even as the number of people seeking protection there rises. Meanwhile, renewed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh has triggered a humanitarian crisis, sudden displacement, and instability within the region. The United States and Europe should restore a strong transatlantic partnership and mutually encourage a greater commitment to providing protection and asylum for displaced people and effective responses to humanitarian emergencies.

Refugees International recommends that the Congress:

- Support U.S. endorsement of international agreements and fora that aim to advance human rights and support displaced communities, such as the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Migration;
- Support humanitarian efforts to assist displaced communities in Europe, including in Greece, the South Caucasus, and the Balkans.

Conclusion

Bipartisan humanitarian leadership is a proud tradition and must remain so in the 117th Congress. Escalating humanitarian and development challenges and expanded global displacement requires additional funding support and new policy approaches. Members must uphold humanitarian values through direct and immediate action, but also set global expectations about the involvement and assistance of other governments.