

*[This fact sheet provides general background on internal displacement in armed conflict. It can also serve as a general basis for key messages on the topic. For context-specific guidance, please contact the Policy Branch.]*

In armed conflict, civilians are often compelled to leave their home for reasons related to the fighting. When they have fled their home and remain in their country, they are **internally displaced persons (IDPs)**. When they have fled across an international border because of conflict or persecution, they become **asylum seekers**. When a person's asylum claim is granted, that person is a **refugee**.

The terms “forcibly displaced” or “forced displacement” generally apply to IDPs, asylum seekers and refugees. In addition, the term “forced displacement” may refer more specifically to the prohibition under international law against ordering the displacement of civilians (see below).

Today 65.6 million people have been forcibly displaced worldwide,<sup>i</sup> including 17.2 million refugees.<sup>ii</sup> At the end of 2016, 40.3 million people were living in internal displacement – including 6.9 million new internal displacements – as a result of conflict and violence.<sup>iii</sup>

### Rights of internally displaced persons

In addition to their fundamental human rights, civilians enjoy safeguards specifically related to forced displacement.<sup>iv</sup> These include:

- A prohibition against ordering the displacement of the civilian population, in whole or in part, for reasons related to the conflict, except in narrow circumstances (see below).
- The right to seek safety in another part of the country.
- Freedom of movement, including the right to move freely in and out of camps or settlements.

- The right to leave their country and to seek asylum in another country.
- The right to satisfactory conditions of shelter, hygiene, health, safety, and nutrition.
- The right not to have members of the same family separated. Children should not be separated from their parents.
- The right to resettle in another part of the country or to voluntary return in safety to their home or place of habitual residence, as soon as the reasons for their displacement have ceased to exist.
- The prohibition against forcible return to or resettlement in any place where their life, safety, liberty or health would be at risk.
- Respect for property rights relating to possessions left behind, including protection against destruction and arbitrary or illegal appropriation, occupation or use.



IDPs in Western Mosul. (OCHA/Themba Linden)

### Where the security of civilians or imperative military reasons require evacuating civilians<sup>v</sup>

If civilians are exposed to danger as a result of military operations, or may be subjected to intense fighting, a party may evacuate some or all civilians from a particular area. The same is true when the presence of civilians in an area hampers military operations and overriding military considerations make it imperative to evacuate them. The term “imperative military reasons” is meant to limit cases of evacuation to a minimum. Importantly, political motives, such as displacing civilians to gain control over a dissident group, cannot constitute imperative military reasons.

### Evacuations of the wounded and sick<sup>vi</sup>

Whenever circumstances permit, parties to a conflict must take all possible measures to search for, collect and evacuate the wounded and sick (civilians and fighters alike), without delay or adverse distinction. The wounded and sick must receive, to the fullest extent practicable and with the least possible delay, the medical care and attention required by their condition, without any distinction on grounds other than medical ones.

### Protracted Internal Displacement

Protracted internal displacement” refers to IDPs who, for significant periods of time, cannot take steps to progressively reduce their vulnerability, impoverishment and marginalization, and find a durable solution.



An internally displaced family moving into a permanent home in Northern Mindanao, Philippines. (OCHA)

OCHA’s commissioned study *Breaking the Impasse: Reducing Internal Displacement as a Collective Outcome* stresses that IDPs should not have to wait until a conflict is fully resolved before they can begin rebuilding their lives and move towards self-sufficiency. The study recommends:

- Recognizing protracted internal displacement as a **development** and **political** challenge.
- Moving **early** towards **self-sufficiency** by identifying underlying causes of protracted displacement.
- Systematizing and strengthening **cooperation across humanitarian, development and political divides** to achieve collective outcomes to address/prevent protracted internal displacement.
- Encouraging and allowing **governments to lead** efforts and ensure participation of IDPs and host communities.
- Providing **multi-year, flexible funding** that transcends the humanitarian-development divide.

<sup>i</sup> See UNHCR, “Figures at a Glance.”

<sup>ii</sup> See UNHCR Global Report 2016.

<sup>iii</sup> See IDMC Global Report on Internal Displacement 2017. An additional 20-25 million are displaced internally in the context of disasters/climate change, but this factsheet focuses on conflict- and violence-induced IDPs.

<sup>iv</sup> See the 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. See also Chapter 38: “Displacement and

Displaced Persons,” ICRC Customary International Humanitarian Law Database

<sup>v</sup> Rule 129, ICRC Customary International Humanitarian Law Database.

<sup>vi</sup> Rules 109 and 110, ICRC Customary International Humanitarian Law Database.