

2026

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# BACKGROUND GUIDE

UNHCR

SOUTH SUDAN REFUGEE  
CRISIS

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# UNHCR

## SOUTH SUDAN REFUGEE CRISIS



# Introduction to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees

The United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established by the United Nations General Assembly in 1950 after World War II to help the millions of Europeans who had fled or lost their homes. Initially it was set to be terminated after its set period of three years. Yet with the unfolding of new humanitarian crisis that demanded global response, its term was extended permanently.

Throughout its history, the agency's responsibility and jurisdiction has expanded to address newly arised global migration and humanitarian issues. UNHCR is guided by the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and is responsible for protecting refugees, delivering life-saving assistance, helping safeguard fundamental human rights, and developing solutions that ensure people have a safe place to call home where they can build a better future.

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# Introduction to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees

The structure of UNHCR is similar to other agencies in the UN. It is governed by the United Nations General Assembly (GA) and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Its executive committees, whose representatives are appointed by the general assembly, established under the ECOSOC, approves budgets and annual plans. It has a High Commissioner who is appointed by the UN Secretary General and approved by the General Assembly. The High Commissioner is responsible for the functioning of the UNHCR.

Membership of the UNHCR, unlike other GA committees, is not universal. It is dependent upon membership in the Executive Committee (ExCom). ExCom members must be a party to the UN or one of its specialized committees, selected by a current ExCom member, represent a wide geographic area, and must have demonstrated interest in solving the refugee problem. By the end of 2023, there were 110 member states to the UNHCR<sup>7</sup>. Decision making in the UNHCR is similar to other agencies within the UN. The ExCom members make decisions based on consensus. Voting may occur in the ExCom or the General Assembly. In either case, each member state has one vote.

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# The South Sudan Refugee Crisis

In July 2011, South Sudan became the world's newest nation. In 2013, civil war broke out. The conflict lasted until 2018 when the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) was signed, initiating the peace process. However, South Sudan has faced instability because of intercommunal violence, and R-ARCSS has yet to be fully implemented. For example, under R-ARCSS, elections were originally scheduled for 2023; they have been pushed back to 2026. (2)

In 2023, the influx of refugees from Sudan strained the already limited resources of South Sudan and pushed the country into a humanitarian crisis. Since the start of the crisis, over two-thirds of the country's population has faced food insecurity, and a state of famine was declared. In 2024, the crisis worsened when South Sudan experienced devastating floods, destroying farmland. This worsened the famine in the country. Today, the South Sudan refugee crisis is Africa's largest refugee crisis, with nearly five million people displaced, around 2.3 million are internally displaced refugees, and 2.4 million refugees fleeing South Sudan. (3)

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## The UN's Response

The UN has issued different responses to the South Sudan crisis over the year. For over a decade, they have operated a peacekeeping mission in South Sudan. However, the UN mission, along with other aid missions in the country, faces increasing challenges due to the violence in the country.

In addition to a humanitarian crisis, there have also been accusations of violence against civilians by the South Sudanese government. The UN has also issued sanctions and arms embargos on South Sudan because of ongoing concerns about human rights violations.

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## UN Mission to South Sudan

In 2011, the UN established a peacekeeping mission in South Sudan. The stated goals of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) are to protect civilians, particularly by helping prevent “gender-based violence”, delivering humanitarian aid, supporting the Revitalized Agreement and peace process, and monitoring human rights violations. (4) Unfortunately, UNMISS faces particular barriers to carrying out its objectives, primarily violence from militant groups in the region.

UNMISS is organized to enable a flexible response structure that can address violence as needed across the country. This is a major shift from the mission’s previous structure, which focused on maintaining and safeguarding refugee camps as a part of the UNHCR’s executive strategy for South Sudan. According to UNHCR, the new strategy comes amidst massive budget cuts to South Sudan’s humanitarian aid. (5)

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## Potential Solutions and Obstacles

### *Funding & International Aid*

Funding is a large obstacle to addressing the refugee crisis. The need for refugees keeps rising while the available funds are rapidly diminishing. Globally, countries have cut funds to South Sudan. For example, the US reduced its humanitarian aid to South Sudan by 60% in 2024. (6) Lack of adequate funds has increased food insecurity and allowed diseases like cholera to become prevalent. Funding needs to be provided not only in South Sudan to address the refugee crisis, but to its neighboring countries as well, who have taken the bulk of externally displaced people while experiencing already strained resources themselves.

### *Human Rights Violations*

South Sudan faces a lack of resources because many countries have imposed sanctions on the nation due to its human rights violations. Human rights organizations highlight the encouragement of violence against civilians and reports of gender-based violence as some of the most widespread violations. (7) The UN Security Council first imposed sanctions in 2015 after the outbreak of the South Sudanese Civil War. The sanctions included an arms embargo, asset freezes, and travel bans. The Security Council reviews the sanctions on an annual basis, and each year has chosen to extend the sanctions.

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## Potential Solutions and Obstacles

### *Climate Events*

The refugee crisis in South Sudan is exacerbated by climate disasters. Between 2020 and 2021, more than 900,000 people were displaced by climate disasters, primarily flooding. Farmland was a large portion of the destroyed land, which only worsened food insecurity in the country. (8) According to the University of California at Berkeley, South Sudan is one of the most climate-vulnerable states. (9) South Sudan does not have the resources to mitigate climate change on its own. Without support from the international community, the number of climate refugees in South Sudan is only expected to increase in the coming years. How does the international community address the climate-driven aspect of the South Sudan refugee crisis?

### *Potential Solutions*

Funding is one of the most immediate concerns for addressing the South Sudan refugee crisis. In recent years, outside funding sources for humanitarian aid have dramatically decreased, while the need for aid has only increased. However, ending the refugee crisis will take a long-term commitment to peace processes in both Sudan and South Sudan, and acquiring funding to rebuild essential infrastructure, like healthcare systems and climate-mitigation strategies.

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## SOUTH SUDAN REFUGEE CRISIS



## References & Further Reading

- 1) [UNHCR | 1951 Convention](#)
- 2) [CFR | Global Conflict Tracker](#)
- 3) [UN Refugees | South Sudan Emergency](#)
- 4) [UNMISS](#)
- 5) [UNHCR | South Sudan Strategy](#)
- 6) [Oxfam | Conflict & Aid Cuts Drive Crisis in South Sudan](#)
- 7) [Human Rights Watch | South Sudan](#)
- 8) [UNICEF | Climate Change](#)
- 9) [UC Berkeley | Climate Displacement](#)

# UNHCR

## AFGHANISTAN REFUGEE CRISIS



## Countries in Committee

United States

China

South Sudan

Sudan

Democratic

Republic of the

Congo

Uganda

Central African

Republic

Chad

Ethiopia

Kenya

Rwanda

United Arab

Emirates

Japan

turkey

Nigeria

Egypt

South Africa

Canada

Australia

Germany

Saudi Arabia