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IN THE NEWS

Waves of Rohingya Refugees Highlight Refugee Problems Across Asia

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By Reid Hamel

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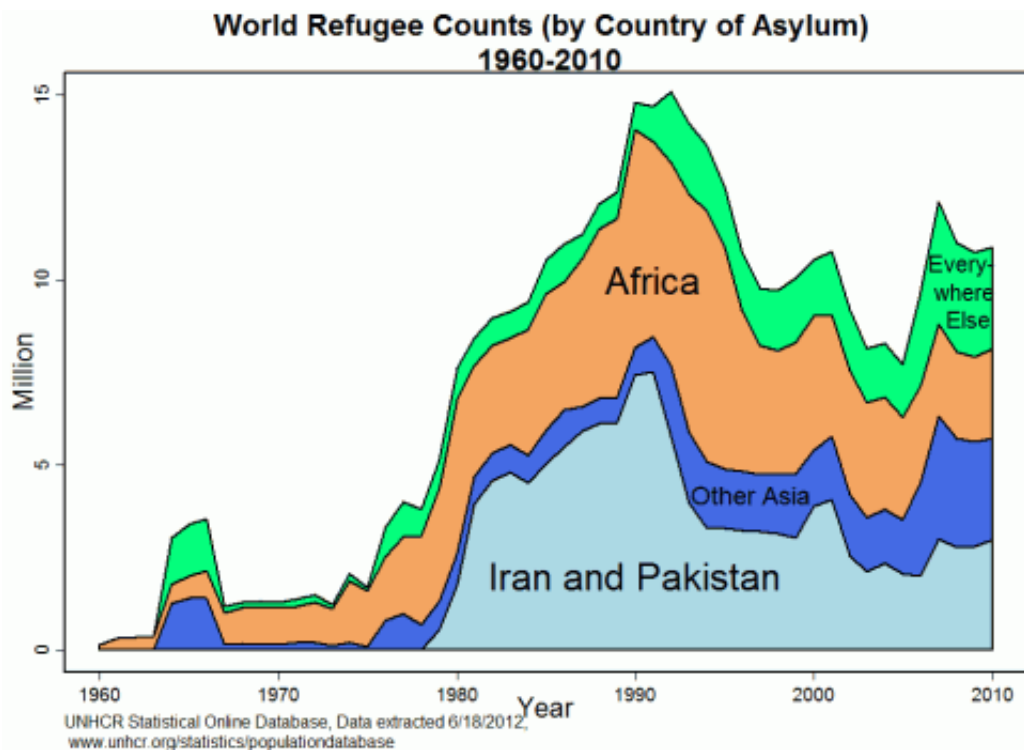
Today is World Refugee Day. This year's commemoration coincides with ongoing ethnic violence targeting **Rohingya Muslims** in western Burma (also known as Myanmar). **Ethnic clashes** in Rakhine State have left at least 50 dead and 30,000 displaced. Sparked by the rape and murder of a Buddhist woman, the violence has driven thousands of civilians into neighboring Bangladesh. In turn, Bangladesh has turned away boat loads of refugees and **arrested** scores of others with the intention of forcibly repatriating them.

It has now been 61 years since the adoption of the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and 45 years since the rights it enshrines were extended to peoples whose displacement occurred after 1951 and whose geographical origins fall beyond the territories of Europe. The **Convention** defines a refugee as someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion." It extends a broad array of rights to refugees, emphasizing non-discrimination and, centrally, *non-refoulement* (the principle that no refugee shall be returned to a country where he or she fears threats to life or freedom). Today's UN General Assembly (GA) counts 193 state members but just **147 of them** are party to either the 1951 Convention, the 1967 Protocol, or both. Of the 47 Asian state members of the GA, just 18 have signed these agreements.

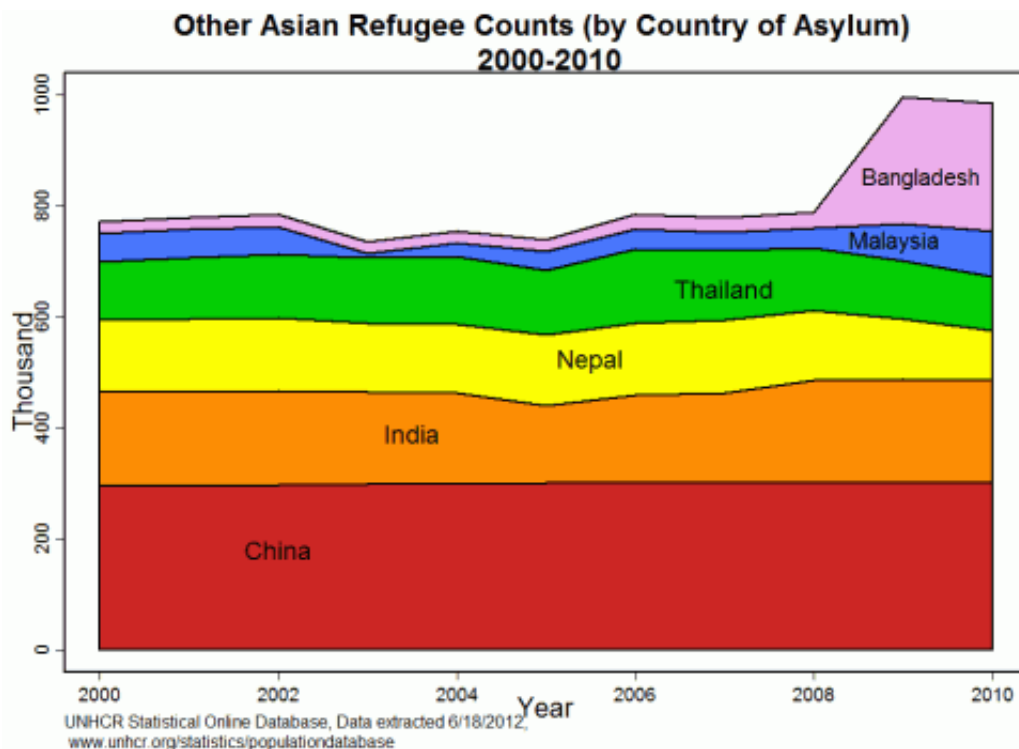
World Refugee Trends

The plight of the Rohingya is tragically common. In late 2010, there were over 10.5 million refugees worldwide. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) maintains detailed tabulations of both refugees and other populations of concern, including people in refugee-like situations, asylum seekers, internally displaced people, and stateless people. These groups aggregated to nearly 34 million in 2010, a mass comparable in size to the population of Canada. With nearly half of refugees originating in Asia, Asia outstrips all other regions in its contribution to this global crisis.

The figure below Plots UNHCR refugee counts by region between 1960 and 2010. Contrary to popular perception, there are many fewer refugees of African than of Asian origin and that has been the case for at least the past 30 years (older waves of data should be interpreted more cautiously).



Refugee flows track major historical events with morbid precision. The sharp ascent in Asian refugees during the 1980s reveals the exigencies of millions in Pakistan throughout the protracted Soviet war in Afghanistan. The years after the Soviet collapse yielded a stagnant overall trend until 9/11 spurred another uptick. Yet already in 2002 there were over 1.5 million fewer refugees than in 2001. Again, this difference is explained by the repatriation of Afghans who had fled to both Pakistan and Iran. These two countries harbored a combined total of over four million refugees in 2001. After falling to about two million by 2003, the figure crept back up by 2007 and remains at about three million today. While the equally salient struggles faced by refugee populations from other Asian countries should not be understated, the vast number of those displaced by conflict in Afghanistan dwarfs all comparable groups (see figure below).



Socio-Economic Consequences

Beyond understanding what drives refugee movements, it is important to grasp the short and longer-term implications for both the refugees themselves and for the communities hosting them. While Bangladesh has been broadly criticized for its handling of the Rohingya community, it struggles to meet the basic needs of its own impoverished population. **Javier Baez**, an economist at the World Bank, published a paper last year assessing the human capital and health consequences of hosting refugees. He found that when a region of Tanzania was flooded by 500,000 refugees, local (non-refugee) children suffered significant negative long-term consequences related to schooling and literacy as well as to health and mortality. A **working paper** by Professor Edward Miguel of U.C. Berkeley and co-authors found that children whose health was improved with de-worming drugs went on to complete more schooling, to work more hours as adults, and also to earn higher wages.

Bangladesh is already host to at least 200,000 Rohingya refugees dispersed within its society and an additional 30,000 in refugee camps. Over 40 percent of camp residents and nearly 30 percent of Bangladesh's native population are under the age of 12. If provided with basic healthcare and education, these groups could grow up to make substantial contributions to the state's development, improving the lives of both Rohingya and Bangladeshi communities along the way. Groups like **Médecins Sans Frontières** (Doctors Without Borders) are working to achieve that goal. It is in the long-term economic interest of neighboring countries, trade partners, the public and private sectors, and aid donors to increase support for such efforts.

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