



UNIVERSITY OF  
OXFORD

REFUGEE  
STUDIES  
CENTRE

# Refugee Studies Centre

## The changing world of refugees

The term 'refugee' means many things to different people. Even its formal distinction, as defined by the 1951 Geneva Convention, is regularly challenged and under perennial review by academics, governments and humanitarian agencies. According to the Convention a refugee is someone who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country".

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, nearly 60 years after this definition was enshrined in international law, there are many other forcibly displaced people around the world who do not easily fit within the formal category. They and their rights are in urgent need of protection. We live in a rapidly changing world in which human migration has a significant impact on the economic, political and social agendas of sovereign states, intergovernmental agencies and civil society groups. It is vital that forced migrants – be they refugees, internally displaced people or those who have to move for other reasons such as global warming or development projects – have their rights defined and their freedom preserved.



Myanmar, Cyclone Nargis, May 2008

## Who we are

The Refugee Studies Centre was founded in 1982. Its purpose is to build knowledge and understanding of the causes and effects of forced migration in order to help improve the lives of some of the world's most vulnerable people. It was the first academic enterprise of its kind and, as such, pioneered a new field in the study of the social sciences.

Nearly three decades after its establishment, the study of forced migration has become a recognised academic discipline, embraced by numerous educational institutions across the world. The need for independent, objective and critical scholarship on factors determining and resulting from the forced displacement of populations has never been greater, and the Refugee Studies Centre remains in the forefront of shaping the agenda in today's most critical debates.

The Centre is not only the first and premier of its kind but remains unique in the field, owing to the strength and synergy of the three interrelated activities which define its character and are the very basis of its enduring success. It is first and foremost a research centre, enhancing and deepening knowledge from a multidisciplinary perspective and leading debates in the academic field of forced migration. Its teaching programme is designed to support and develop the next generation of scholars and thinkers, as well as to foster a culture of critical reflection within the wider humanitarian community. The Centre is, thirdly, deeply committed to engaging with policy and shaping practice, in order that the knowledge it develops is relevant and has impact.



Chad, Sudanese refugees from the Darfur region, July 2004

## Our place at Oxford University

We are one of eight centres which form the Oxford Department of International Development, which in turn sits within the Social Sciences division at Oxford University.

The Department conducts high-level research to advance understanding of the complex economic, social and political processes of change in countries in the poorer parts of the world. Its contribution to the elimination of poverty and degradation worldwide is in the realm of ideas – and for this it has earned a worldwide reputation. The Department educates students to understand these processes from multidisciplinary perspectives.

The Social Sciences division is one of Oxford University's four academic divisions. It represents the largest grouping of social sciences in the UK and is home to a number of outstanding departments of international ranking. All are committed to research that develops a greater understanding of all aspects of society, from the impact of political, legal and economic systems on social and economic welfare to human rights and security.

The various migration centres at Oxford University, which include the Centre of Migration Policy and Society (COMPAS) and the International Migration Institute (IMI) as well as the Refugee Studies Centre (RSC), collaborate on research and teaching, establishing Oxford as the leading migration studies location in Europe, if not the world.



Yemen, survivors await help having crossed the Gulf of Eden, March 2007

## Our global context

The heart of our work is based at Oxford University but our networks permeate the world. Our identity is deeply rooted in academia, and yet we play a vital role in influencing international policy. We occupy an important position within the humanitarian spectrum, interconnecting with all areas of its activities, from asylum policy to international aid.

We work in partnership with other academic institutions and researchers, both in the developed world and the global south, collaborating on ideas and contributing to international knowledge and understanding on refugees and forced migration.

Among our many stakeholders are government departments, intergovernmental agencies and international lobbying and advocacy groups. Equally, international NGOs are important partners, and we work innovatively and creatively with them to ensure that our research is geared towards helping them meet needs, and that their experiences and expertise feed into our research. This combined effort helps improve the effective delivery of aid in critical humanitarian situations.



Yemen, new arrivals en route to a refugee camp, March 2007



Lives torn apart

Central African Republic, internally displaced children return to a temporary settlement, August 2007

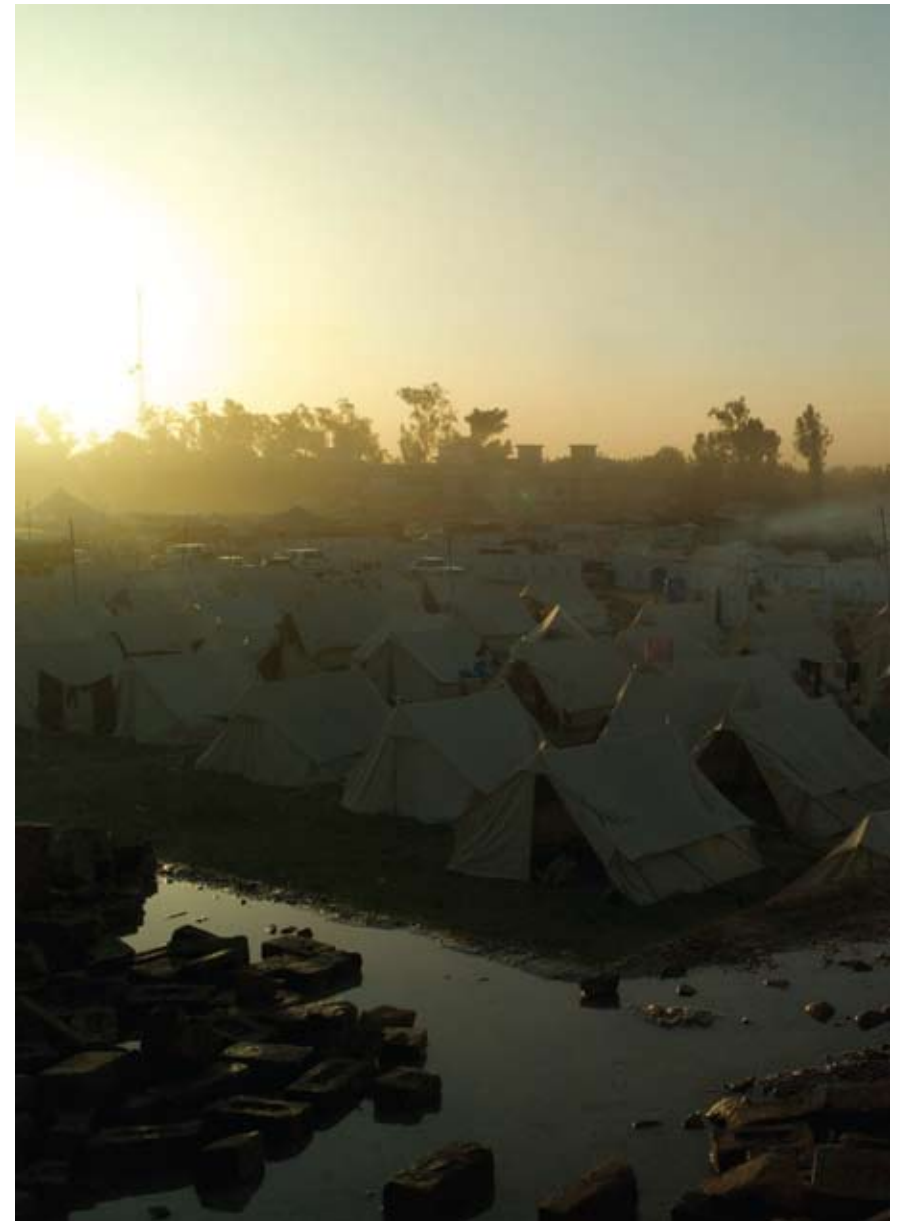
## Our research

Research is the Centre's core activity and underpins our numerous outreach enterprises. It is multidisciplinary by nature and has earned a worldwide reputation for critical power and scholarly integrity.

The strength of this research has enabled us to provide a forum for new insights and independent debate on forced migration away from the highly politicised environments in which these issues were historically examined and determined. This has in turn changed perceptions both of refugees themselves and the regimes by which they are governed.

Our research, which is far-ranging in its academic areas of investigation as well as geographical scope, aims to address the most critical issues of forced displacement in the twenty-first century, driving scholarship and social scientific debates on forced migration both through our own work and by encouraging collaboration between academics from a wide range of institutions and university departments.

Historically, we have focused heavily on the developmental and humanitarian aspects of forced displacement in the global south but more recently our work has also covered northern regimes and perspectives on asylum, and the ways in which national agendas can better respond to the increasingly complex flows of mixed migration.



Pakistan, temporary camp for displaced families fleeing the conflict in Swat and Buner, May 2009

## Our teaching

Through our teaching we promote a culture of reflective knowledge and support the next generation of scholars in our field. Each year the Centre accepts approximately 25 students from around the world for its msc in Forced Migration. This course offers a dynamic and intellectually rigorous path to the examination of forced migration resulting from conflict, repressive regimes, environmental change and development policies. It is a nine-month degree which places forced migration in a historical, global and human context, encouraging informed reflection on international and national responses to both internal and international displacement. In addition, opportunities are available for DPhil research supervised by RSC staff, frequently in collaboration with other departments in the University. At the end of each academic year we run an extremely popular International Summer School. This three-week residential course offers an intensive, interdisciplinary and participative approach to the study of forced migration for practitioners involved in assistance and policy making for forced migrants, and for researchers specialising in the study of forced migration.



UK, rejected asylum seeker, date unknown

## How we make an impact

In order for our work to have the greatest impact, we actively engage in informing and shaping both policy and practice in forced migration and humanitarian response. We do this in a number of ways. We publish our research widely in books and journals and through academic papers. We build networks, run workshops, organise international conferences and deliver policy briefings for a wide spectrum of governmental and humanitarian stakeholders. We produce *Forced Migration Review*, published three times a year in four languages and now the most widely read publication on forced migration in the world. It is distributed free of charge to a global audience of around 15,000 individuals and organisations – two thirds of which are in the global south – and is also accessible online. We have created a portal for instant online information on forced migration worldwide in the shape of *Forced Migration Online*. And we have built up a library which is a unique world resource of around 38,000 items, the largest coherent body of its kind of material, subject matter and disciplines reflecting the growth of a major new field of study in the social sciences.



Ethiopia, voluntary repatriation to South Sudan, March 2007

## Our friends and supporters

It is through the generosity of our friends and supporters that we have been able to grow from our modest beginnings into the worldclass institution we are today. We are fortunate to rely on a network of patrons, advisors, associates, alumni, partners and donors for our strategic and financial development and we are indebted to all of these for the on-going success of the Centre.

Most of our work remains reliant on external funding. We have a modest endowment which covers the cost of several posts at the Centre, and some departmental support covering the cost of several more. The majority of the 25 or so posts at the Centre, along with student support and funding for our various outreach activities, are sustained by the year-on-year funding we receive from governments, trusts and foundations, international agencies, NGOs, corporate sponsors and private individuals. We work hard to maintain and consolidate this support and are grateful to the many organisations and individuals who enable us to carry out our work.



Afghanistan, young Pashtun neighbours return from Pakistan, October 2008

# Refugee Studies Centre

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