

**THE UNITED NATIONS AND CANADA**

**WHAT CANADA COULD AND SHOULD DO  
AT THE UNITED NATIONS 2018:  
A QUESTION OF LEADERSHIP**

**Refugees: A Test of Political Will and Resilience**

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According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the number of forcibly displaced persons – over 68.5 million as of June 2018 – is higher now than at any time since the end of the Second World War. Of this total, 40 million are internally displaced persons, the number seeking safety across international borders as refugees topped 24.5 million and 3.1 million are classified as asylum seekers.

The causes are numerous. Most move to escape armed conflict: poverty, food insecurity, persecution, terrorism, or human rights violations and abuses. Still others do so in response to the adverse effects of climate change, natural disasters (some of which may be linked to climate change), or other environmental or economic factors. Many move for a combination of these reasons.

The present national or international structures are not designed nor equipped to meet the multiple surges of people seeking protection from risks to their security and wellbeing.

The geographic distribution of refugees places unequal burdens on a few UN member states. 90 percent of the world's refugees are hosted by 10 neighbouring states, most of which have scarcely the resources to look after their own people, let alone the needs of destitute refugees.

With global refugee numbers increasing around the world, political tensions are also on the rise. And political accountability for the treatment of refugees is in decline. More and more unscrupulous governments are resorting to refoulement to manage their

borders – the appalling practice of forcing refugees to return home to countries where they face persecution and physical harm.

The way the world comes to grips with the rising number of refugees needs a major reset. The institutions, practices and conventions on refugees and migration are still rooted in the post-World War II era and are inadequate to meet the demands of today. Instruments such as the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, the 1951 Refugee Convention, and in a peacekeeping context the Kigali Principles on the Protection of Civilians, are weak and/or out of date.

This year the UN is completing a process leading to two “global compacts,” a Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), under the auspices of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and a Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, through the UN General Assembly in collaboration with the International Organization for Migration. These instruments help update and pull together the strands of various international instruments and norms. While they break little new ground, they provide a useful platform for pursuing greater international cooperation.

As Canada’s Foreign Minister, I was involved in efforts like the Landmines Treaty and the International Criminal Court negotiations, which made me realize that there are limitations within UN structures to the degree of freedom to think and act outside the box. A lot of interests are at stake. Ultimately the UN needs to be the place where change happens, but it’s not the place where the best thinking is going to be done on the kinds of normative and institutional changes that are necessary.

The World Refugee Council (WRC) that I Chair -- supported by Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), the government of Canada, several North American and European foundations – is working on recommendations for significant reforms, as well as mobilizing the political will needed to implement them.

We have undertaken a series of on the ground consultations in areas where there were existing and emerging surges of refugees, provided a venue where refugee voices could be heard and have initiated a series of workshops and research papers to dig deeper into the opportunities for innovative governance, economic and technology solutions.

Importantly, we undertook to square the need for cooperative reform initiatives with the need to recognize the importance of national and regional boundary security issues.

Improvements are needed throughout the system.

- **Funding.** Ideas and options for moving beyond a system built on voluntary contributions include introducing assessed contributions, or levies on international transactions, to fostering refugee enterprise and confiscating perpetrators' assets.
- **Accountability.** We can strengthen mechanisms for holding accountable the individuals and governments whose actions cause the suffering and displacement. But at the same time, those governments and organizations with responsibility for addressing the problems but instead ignore treaty obligations, or don't honour pledges, should be named and shamed.
- **Governance reform and restructuring.** Protection and assistance for refugees needs to be recognized as a common public good and collective responsibility. A more equitable global burden sharing will be needed.

At its core, the world is not suffering from a refugee crisis, but from a leadership crisis — a deficit of vision and imagination and, most fundamentally, of humanity and solidarity.

Our report, expected in 2019, will build on the UN's Global Compacts. We want to move beyond declaratory statements and exhortations to governments and agencies, to include a basis for action and implementation.

Canada can and should contribute to a core cross-regional group of states and other stakeholders who will make the long-term commitment to resolving the plight of refugees. There needs to be an Action Network for refugee reform.