An Overview of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and the U.S. response

Who are Refugees?
According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are currently 14 million refugees. Under international and U.S. law, a refugee is someone outside his or her own country with a well-founded fear of persecution in that country based on: (1) race; (2) religion; (3) nationality; (4) membership in a particular social group and/or (5) political opinion.

Who are Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)?
There are also an estimated 26 million people who have been forced to flee their homes but have not crossed an international border. These internally displaced persons (IDPs) have frequently fled their homes and cities for the same reasons as refugees; however, they are still within their home country. IDPs do not enjoy the international protection accorded refugees under international law, so they are sometimes even more vulnerable than refugees. The vast majority of those displaced by conflict are women and children.

Why does the U.S. assist refugees overseas and through resettlement to the U.S.?
The U.S. has a long history of providing protection and assistance to persons facing persecution and fleeing violence and is a signatory to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. In the aftermath of World War II the U.S. led the assistance and reconstruction effort to help displaced persons. Part of the solution was to resettle the U.S. millions of Europeans displaced from the war who could not return home. This leadership continued throughout the Cold War period. Overseas aid and protection was expanded to Asia, Latin America, and Africa. The U.S. resettled millions of Vietnamese and Cubans. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the U.S. further expanded its obligations to protect vulnerable and displaced persons by funding programs to help victims of gender based violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo, providing educational opportunities to Burmese refugees in Thailand, helping to return home hundreds of thousands of Sudanese refugees, and providing resettlement opportunities to Liberians, Iraqis, and others.

What role does the U.S. play in helping refugees and IDPs?
The U.S. offers protection and assistance for refugees in three main ways:

Overseas Assistance: The State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) administers the Migration and Refugee Assistance account (MRA) and the Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance account (ERMA). Through these channels, the U.S. is able to support the work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and other international organizations and non-governmental organizations providing life-saving assistance and protection to refugees in both camp settings and urban centers. The U.S. also provides humanitarian assistance to internally-displaced persons. Funding for IDP programs is mainly channeled through the International Disaster Account (IDA) of the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance within the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Refugee Resettlement: Every year, the President works with Congress to determine the number of refugees overseas who will be admitted to the U.S. as a durable solution to their state of exile. The State Department works with eleven nongovernmental refugee agencies to help resettle and integrate refugees. Additional funding to help refugees become self-sufficient is provided by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), within the Department of Health and Human Services. In fiscal year 2010, 73,311 refugees were resettled to the United States.

Asylum: Persons who are fleeing persecution and who arrive at or in the U.S. are able to apply for asylum within the U.S. Upon being interviewed, if the person is found to meet the criteria of the refugee definition, then that person is afforded asylum. In fiscal year 2009 (the most recent year which data is available) 22,119 asylum seekers were granted asylum.

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Background: United States Resettlement Program (USRP)

A Durable Solution
Millions of refugees around the world are forced to flee their homes due to violence and persecution. Once they cross a border to seek safety, refugees have three options: integrate in the country to which they first fled (or country of asylum), return to their home country, or be resettled to a third country. These options are known as “durable solutions.” Often, refugees cannot stay in the country of asylum or return to their home country. For those refugees, resettlement is key to ending their limbo state. Resettlement is one of three “durable solutions.” Less than one percent of refugees are ever resettled in a third country. However, resettlement is an important tool of refugee protection, both for individual refugees and as a means of encouraging countries of asylum to keep their doors open.

History of USRP
The United States has a long history of welcoming refugees; from Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s, people fleeing from the former Soviet Union, Darfuri refugees fleeing genocide and violence, to Iraqi refugees displaced by the war. Since 1975, the U.S. has resettled approximately 3 million refugees. USRP was formalized with the Refugee Act of 1980 and since then annual admissions have ranged from a high of 207,116 in 1980 to a low of 27,100 in 2002. In fiscal year 2011 the U.S. 56,424 admitted refugees. Each year, the President, in consultation with Congress, determines the number of refugees (known as the Presidential Determination or PD) who may be admitted to the United States from overseas. The PD for fiscal year 2012 is 76,000 refugees.

How does USRP work?
The USRP is a longstanding public-private partnership. The U.S. Department of State (DOS) through the Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) oversees the admission of refugees to the United States after they have been granted refugee status through individual interviews by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials. All refugees undergo security background checks and health screenings. Funding for the identification and processing of refugees, and for initial services, is provided through the Migration and Refugee Account (MRA) account which funds PRM.

Services to refugees in the U.S. are provided by ten non-governmental organizations called "Resettlement Agencies." These agencies enter into a cooperative agreement with the State Department to provide refugees initial reception and placement services through the Reception and Placement grant. Volags provide services including locating housing, reception at the airport, orientation to the community, facilitation of health screening, follow-up on health issues, enrollment of children in school, enrollment for public services (such as Food Stamps, TANF, Medicare, etc.), and links and/or provides employment, adjustment, and English language programs for refugees.

Additional services to resettled refugees—designed to help them adjust to their new homeland and achieve self-sufficiency—are funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within the Department of Health and Human Services. Refugees receive limited cash assistance through different programs that have as a main objective that refugees obtain self-sufficiency in a short period of time, limiting dependency on welfare programs.
What benefits do refugees receive?
The DOS/PRM Reception and Placement grant is $1850 per refugee. Volags bring private resources as part of the public-private partnership. Refugees are eligible for the same social support programs as U.S. citizens and many receive Food Stamps and Medicare coverage. Volags help refugees to apply for different cash assistance programs: those eligible for TANF are enrolled in this program, refugees ineligible for TANF can receive Refugee Cash Assistance (funded by ORR) for up to 8 months, other refugees are enrolled in the Matching Grant Program, which enables refugees to become self-sufficient within 4 to 6 months without resorting to federal and state welfare programs. There are other programs designed to help refugees to receive ESL classes, healthcare, and social services that are provided by ORR, Volags, and state programs, NGOs, Mutual Assistance Associations (MAAs) and community organizations.