



## Pandemic, conflicts, and forced migration

According to UNHCR estimates<sup>1</sup>, more than 97 million people were displaced in 2021, an increase of 17 million from the beginning of 2020<sup>2</sup>. This would mean that forced migration increased by 21% during the months marked by the pandemic, in spite of widespread restrictions imposed on human movements.

Many of these forced displacements are caused by armed conflicts, some of which are long standing while others are very recent. The *Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre* (IDMC) estimates that about 9.8 million people were displaced internally by conflicts and violence during 2020, nearly 1.3 million more than the previous year<sup>3</sup>.

The pandemic has produced new political, social and economic crises in the most vulnerable regions, triggering new clashes or exacerbating ongoing conflicts, which are also generating additional largescale forced migrations.

Reflecting the Church's Social Doctrine and the teaching of the Holy Father, the Migrants and Refugees Section of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development recommends that, in this time of crisis, special attention and greater commitment be devoted to the prevention and resolution of conflicts, starting with tighter control over arms sales and the promotion of reconciliation and peace processes in the most fragile contexts.

### *Reasons*

The Covid-19 crisis has dominated the attention of most leaders, often overshadowing commitment and joint investment in peace processes. On Easter 2020, Pope Francis warned, "The crisis we are facing should not make us forget the many other crises that bring suffering to so many people."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. UNHCR, *Global Appeal. 2021 Update*, <https://www.unhcr.org/globalappeal2021/>.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. UNHCR, *Forced displacement passes 80 million by mid-2020 as COVID-19 tests refugee protection globally*, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/12/5fcf94a04/forced-displacement-passes-80-million-mid-2020-covid-19-tests-refugee-protection.html>

<sup>3</sup> IDMC, *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2021*, [www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/grid2021\\_idmc.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/grid2021_idmc.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, *Urbi et Orbi* message, 12 April 2020.

The Global Compact on Refugees<sup>5</sup>, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 17 December 2018, reaffirms the need to address the root causes of violence and armed conflicts, to find peaceful solutions for disputes and to engage in reconstruction. This is a common commitment from which no one is exempt.

Engaging in reconstruction means engaging in reconciliation. As the Holy Father explained in 2017, “violence leads to more violence, hatred to more hatred, death to more death. We must break this cycle which seems inescapable; this is only possible through forgiveness and concrete reconciliation.”<sup>6</sup>

Warfare requires weapons. At the beginning of 2019, Pope Francis stated, “It is painful to note that not only does the arms trade seem unstoppable, but that there is in fact a widespread and growing resort to arms, on the part both of individuals and states.”<sup>7</sup> Surprisingly, arms sales did not drop significantly in 2020<sup>8</sup>. Those who decide to sell arms in high-risk contexts cannot absolve themselves of moral responsibility for the consequences of their use.

### *Methods*

In this time of pandemic, and in view of the above, it is essential to focus even more on armed conflicts and the resulting displacement. Whenever possible, local churches and religious organisations are called to assist governments in humanitarian policies during conflicts and in achieving integral human development in post-conflict situations. Moreover, reconstruction should be pursued by promoting carefully negotiated procedures for the cancellation of foreign debt, combined with fairer and more sustainable economic structures.<sup>9</sup>

It is vital to restore peace process negotiations and post-conflict transition processes that have been interrupted due to the health emergency. They are essential to ending the pandemic and for creating a more united and just society.

International institutions are called to play an increasingly vigilant role in the permanent monitoring of ongoing wars and in assessing the risk of new conflicts, particularly in the

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. United Nations, *Global Compact on Refugees*, 17 December 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, *Reconciliation liturgy*, 8 September 2017

<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, *Speech to the Diplomatic Corps*, 7 January 2019.

<sup>8</sup> SIPRI, *World military spending rises to almost \$2 trillion in 2020*, 26 April 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, *Message for COP26*, 29 October 2021.

most fragile regions, with a view to proposing preventive and decisive actions to ensure peace.

There is a clear need to move from competition to cooperation in order to eliminate conflicts, with the ultimate purpose of protecting human dignity, safeguarding human life and caring for creation. Such a process of transformation necessarily requires the promotion of a concept of integral security, within which the dimension of disarmament plays a central role.

Weapons of mass destruction must be banned entirely; illegal trafficking in small arms and the use of landmines and cluster bombs should be prohibited by all possible means. Lastly, but not less important, military developments in artificial intelligence and cybersecurity technologies should be closely monitored and regulated.<sup>10</sup>

The Holy Father has invited all Countries to redirect money used for weapons and other military expenditures into a global fund against hunger and in favour of regions in the greatest need of development, “so that their citizens will not resort to violent or illusory solutions, or have to leave their countries in order to seek a more dignified life.”<sup>11</sup>

In response to large-scale displacement, it is necessary to promote national plans for reception and assistance, especially in Countries most at risk. This should be done through the allocation of resources for the construction of infrastructure and institutions, with the help of international cooperation, and includes capacity development and the promotion of appropriate programming.

In addition, investing in the education of new generations is essential, as is a strong insistence upon the importance of “the culture of care” as a path of peace, and as a common commitment to reconciliation, mutual respect and reciprocal hospitality. This is how peacemakers able to initiate healing processes and personal encounter will be trained.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Secretary of State H.Em. Card. Pietro Parolin, *Advancing Integral Disarmament in Times of Pandemic*, 23 March 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, 262.

<sup>12</sup> Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, 225.