

In July 1951, a diplomatic conference in Geneva adopted the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees ('1951 Convention'), which was later amended by the 1967 Protocol. These documents clearly spell out who is a refugee and the kind of legal protection, other assistance and social rights a refugee is entitled to receive. It also defines a refugee's obligations to host countries and specifies certain categories of people, such as war criminals, who do not qualify for refugee status. Initially, the 1951 Convention was more or less limited to protecting European refugees in the aftermath of World War II, but the 1967 Protocol expanded its scope as the problem of displacement spread

Today, the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol together remain the cornerstone of refugee protection, and their provisions are as relevant now as when they were drafted. According to their provisions, refugees deserve, as a minimum, the same standards of treatment enjoyed by other foreign nationals in a given country and, in many cases, the same treatment as nationals.

The 1951 Convention contains a number of rights and also highlights the obligations of refugees towards their host country. The cornerstone of the 1951 Convention is the principle of non-refoulement contained in Article 33.

According to this principle, a refugee should not be returned to a country where he or she faces serious threats to his or her life or freedom. This protection may not be claimed by refugees who are reasonably regarded as a danger to the security of the country, or having been convicted of a particularly serious crime, are considered a danger to the community.

Other rights contained in the 1951 Convention include:

- The right not to be expelled, except under certain, strictly defined conditions (Article 32)
 - The right not to be punished for illegal entry into the territory of a contracting State (Article 31)
 - The right to work (Articles 17 to 19)
 - The right to housing (Article 21)
 - The right to education (Article 22)
 - The right to public relief and assistance (Article 23)
 - The right to freedom of religion (Article 4)
 - The right to access the courts (Article 16)
 - The right to freedom of movement within the territory (Article 26)
- and
- The right to be issued identity and travel documents (Articles 27 and 28)

Some basic rights, including the right to be protected from

refoulement, apply to all refugees. A refugee becomes entitled to other rights the longer they remain in the host country, which is based on the recognition that the longer they remain as refugees, the more rights they need

When a State accedes to the 1951 Convention: it demonstrates its commitment to treating refugees in accordance with internationally recognized legal and humanitarian standards; it gives refugees a possibility to find safety; it helps to avoid friction between States over refugee questions. Granting asylum is a peaceful, humanitarian and legal act rather than a hostile gesture, and should be understood by the refugee's country of origin as such; it demonstrates its willingness to share the responsibility for protecting refugees; and it helps UNHCR to mobilize international support for the protection of refugees.