

THE LAW OF REFUGEE STATUS

James C. Hathaway
LL.B., LL.M., J.S.D.
Osgoode Hall Law School
York University

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The Law of Refugee Status

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Preface

A Convention refugee is a person who is outside her¹ country because she reasonably believes that her civil or political status puts her at risk of serious harm in that country, and that her own government cannot or will not protect her.

The Convention refugee definition is of singular importance because it has been subscribed to by more than one hundred nations in the only refugee accords of global scope. Many nations have also chosen to import this standard into their domestic immigration legislation as the basis upon which asylum and other protection decisions are made.

Yet this legal definition of a refugee is at odds with the ordinary, social perception of refugee status. We commonly refer to persons who have been forced to flee to another region of their country as refugees. We normally assume that a person who is prepared to abandon her home, her family, her security is a refugee, without inquiring into the accuracy of the concerns which cause her to flee. We recognize the logic of escape from natural disasters, or from generally oppressive political regimes as much as from the possibility of persecution. Too, our sense of compassion drives us to relieve the suffering of involuntary migrants without first conducting a detailed inquiry into the circumstances which gave rise to their distress, or the reasons that a return home or a prolonged stay in a country of first asylum are untenable.

This book is an attempt to explain the scope of the Convention refugee definition as drafted, and as it has evolved in practice. While this definition was not intended to, and does not in fact, address the whole range of concerns which prompt involuntary migration, a generous interpretation of the Convention can go some distance to meeting the needs of at least the most acutely at risk populations outside the borders of their own nation. It remains tragically true that international human rights law — the intended means of permitting the world community to respond to wrongs committed by a country within its own territory — has not been permitted to evolve to a state of genuine efficacy.

¹ Pronouns herein are phrased in the feminine voice in recognition of the fact that "refugee women and girls constitute the majority of the world refugee population, and that many of them are exposed to special problems in the international protection field": Executive Committee of the UNHCR Programme, Conclusion No. 39 (1985).

The Convention refugee definition may be viewed as comprising five essential elements, each of which must be established before status is appropriately recognized. Following an introduction to the development of the international refugee definition in Chapter 1, this book addresses each of these five criteria in a distinct chapter.

The first essential definitional element, comprehending a range of contextual concerns, is referred to here as *alienage*. The Convention definition includes only persons who have left their country of nationality, or in the case of stateless persons, their country of former habitual residence. This criterion raises several related questions of claims grounded in post-departure events; the relevance of official authorization to emigrate; so-called direct flight requirements which suggest a duty to seek protection in the first potential state of refuge; the implication of entry into an asylum state in contravention of applicable immigration laws; and the means by which the country of reference for a particular refugee claim is defined. Each of these concerns is examined in detail in Chapter 2.

Second, the refugee claimant must be *genuinely at risk*. It is not enough that she truly believe herself to be in jeopardy. Rather, there must be objective facts to provide a concrete foundation for the concern which induces her to seek protection in another state. Chapter 3 addresses the historical and practical reasons which underpin the Convention's focus on the prospective assessment of objective risk, and its exclusion of claims based on purely subjective apprehensions. The nature of the threshold test, as well as the means of establishing this objective risk — including consideration of human rights data, the claimant's own testimony, and evidence of harm to persons similarly situated — are canvassed in detail.

Third, the claimant's flight must be motivated by the prospect of "persecution", that is, *risk of serious harm* against which the state of origin is *unwilling or unable to offer protection*. Chapter 4 defines this serious harm as the sustained or systemic violation of core, internationally recognized human rights. The nature of both civil and political rights and socio-economic human rights is addressed, and the distinction is drawn between the violation of human rights and generalized hardship or lack of opportunity. Most important, this chapter attempts to explain the nature of a state's duty to protect its population, failure of which is at the heart of refugee protection. This leads to a consideration of state accountability for the actions of non-official persecutors, and responsibility for localized failure to protect.

Fourth, the risk faced by the refugee claimant must have some nexus to her race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. The critical question is whether but for her *civil or political status* she could reasonably be said to be at risk of serious harm. The meaning of each of the recognized forms of civil and political status is examined in Chapter 5. In particular, this chapter looks to issues of unexpressed political opinions, and of political opinion implicit in conduct. The malleability of the social group criterion is canvassed in relation to issues of gen-

der, sexual orientation, family, class or caste, and membership in voluntary associations. Finally, the compatibility of the civil or political status requirement with claims grounded in criminal status, refusal to perform military service, and flight from war or violence is explored.

Fifth and finally, there must be a genuine need for and legitimate claim to protection. The *cessation* clauses of the Convention provide that refugee status is not warranted if the refugee can either reclaim the protection of her own state, or has secured an alternative form of enduring protection. The *exclusion* clauses ensure that serious criminals and persons whose actions have exhibited disregard for basic norms of human dignity cannot invoke international protection. Chapter 6 looks at each of the cessation and exclusion clauses in detail, in an effort clearly to delineate the recognized exceptions to the duty of protection.

The examination of each of the five essential elements of the Convention definition draws on three sources. First, the drafting history of the Convention is canvassed as a means of understanding the intentions which underlie the protection regime. Second, the views of legal and other scholars who have informed the development of refugee law are presented. Third, the rich refugee jurisprudence developed in Canada since the incorporation of the Convention definition into domestic law in 1973 is employed to illustrate the Convention's actual and potential scope. The approximately 3000 judgments of the Supreme Court of Canada, Federal Court of Appeal, and Immigration Appeal Board considered in preparing this book have proved invaluable to the development of a contextual understanding of the definition. The caselaw was surveyed to January 1, 1989, with the exception of superior court judgments and decisions of the new Immigration and Refugee Board relating to exclusion and cessation (which clauses were incorporated in Canadian law only as of January 1, 1989), which have been considered to July 1, 1990. Judgments of determination authorities in other countries are drawn upon only very selectively, particularly in relation to aspects of the definition not yet adequately elaborated in Canadian law. All of these sources are extensively footnoted in response to the concerns expressed to me by many scholars, practitioners, and decision-makers, that there was a need for a consolidation in one volume of the best of the relevant international legal materials, scholarship, and caselaw.

I have benefitted from an extraordinary support structure over the several years during which this book was in preparation. The Canadian Law Information Council generously provided core research funding, supplemented by assistance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Deans John McCamus and Jim MacPherson and Executive Officer Norma Doran of the Osgoode Hall Law School were instrumental in providing me the opportunity and facilities to realize this project. The staff of the York University Law Library — in particular, Maureen Boyce, Norma Eakin, and Marianne Rogers — never failed to track down whatever obscure document or reference I needed to consider. George Gonsalves, Terri Offen, Wendy

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While preparing this book, I have been privileged to work with the members, legal staff, and hearing officers of Canada's new Immigration and Refugee Board. The somewhat intimidating, but always rewarding, experience of training those who will make the law has convinced me that the fair-minded and conscientious application of the Convention definition can go a substantial distance toward reinvigorating the highly imperfect international protection regime.

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