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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES FUNDING FOR AFRICAN AND ASIAN REFUGEES, 1960–2010

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ABSTRACT

It is an open secret that the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) is at the vanguard of bringing succor to refugees globally. Although many studies have been carried out on UNHCR funding in Africa and Asia, not many have made comparisons between the two, hence the need for this study. The paper contends that UNHCR funding of refugees in Asia surpasses that of Africa despite the fact that Africa produces the highest number of refugees than any other region in the world. Indeed, in June 2008, it was observed that UNHCR funding was about 70% in Asia while that of Africa was 20%. Could this disparity be due to the politics of funding, or are there other determinant factors? These questions and many more are addressed in this paper. The study adopts the use of primary and secondary data. Primary sources are obtained from oral interviews of UNHCR officials and some African refugees in Nigeria, while secondary sources are obtained from the critical appraisal of UNHCR documents as well as relevant literature on funding in Africa and Asia.

Keywords: Refugees, Funding, Africa, Asia, United Nations High Commission

INTRODUCTION

Across the twentieth century, marked by world wars, regional conflicts, collapsing empires, and globalization, migration and asylum flows reached unprecedented levels. According to UNHCR (2025), by the end of 2024 about 123.2 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide because of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights abuses, and events seriously disturbing public order. This represented an increase of 7 million people, or 6 percent, from the end of 2023. Although global displacement has nearly doubled over the past decade, the pace of growth slowed in late 2024. By the end of April 2025, UNHCR estimated a slight 1 percent decline to 122.1 million people, the first decrease in more than ten years. Funding shortages remain a major challenge.

Since inception on the 1st of January, 1951, the office of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees

(UNHCR) had continued to contend with the problem of underfunding. For instance, the organisation had to take care of European refugees after the Second World War (that ended in 1945) with a sum of 300, 000 USD (UNGA, 1952). Since the late 1950s, refugee problem especially outside Europe had assumed such great proportions. The situation was worsened by the global economic downturn towards the end of 2008 that made it difficult for the developed countries and donor organisations to fulfill their obligations and had to cut off or renege in their pledges to the UNHCR. The impact of the shortfall in donations was felt most by Africa which had about two-thirds of the world refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Dullien et al 2010). Al Jazeera Staff (2025) reported that Millions of children across four African countries could die of malnutrition in the next three months as emergency

food supplies dwindle as a result of international aid cuts.

The crisis is happening as global hunger reaches record highs, with 319 million people facing acute food insecurity, including 44 million at emergency level. Famine has also taken hold in Sudan and the Gaza Strip. World Food Programme (2024) expected to receive 40 percent less funding this year, resulting in a projected budget of \$6.4 billion, down from \$10 billion in 2024.

While a lot of have been written on displacements and refugees (Zolberg et al 1986; Turton 2003), adequate attention has not been given to funding especially by global body. It is against this background that this paper takes a comparative look at the disparities in UNHCR funding for African refugees and internally displaced persons (I. D. Ps) between 1960 and 2010. It is pertinent to raise some fundamental questions, why has the UNHCR been finding it difficult to cater for refugees and internally displaced persons in Africa or mobilise international funds for refugees in Africa? Why has UNHCR not complained of underfunding when it comes to refugee issues in Europe, Asia and Latin America? Why has Africa (regarded as the continent of refugees) been caught in the web of the dynamics of international relief work? How can UNHCR financial assistance improve in Africa? Are refugee funding issues not related to international politics?

These are some of the questions this paper seeks to clarity. This study is justified because of the paucity of comparative studies on UNHCR and its funding in Africa and Asia despite its massive humanitarian work that have saved millions of lives worldwide. The study adopts the qualitative method. Primary and secondary sources were relied for data collection. The primary source was an in-depth interview with a refugee in Oru camp in Ijebu Igbo while the secondary source relied on extant literature, desktop review, reports from international governmental organisation and media reports.

Concept Framework and Literature Review

According to the United Nations, a refugee is an individual who flees his country of origin because of a genuine fear of being persecuted for racial, political, religious, nationality or membership of a social group and resides outside his country without the protection of that country. The Organisation of African Unity (O.A.U) now African Union (A.U) found this definition inadequate and expanded it at its 1967 Convention to include “an individual who is compelled to flee his country due to external aggression, foreign occupation, domination or events seriously disturbing the public order. Furthermore, a group of Latin American countries adopted in 1984 the ‘Cartagena Declaration’, which added a clause to the definition of refugees as “those fleeing from massive human rights violation.” This last addition was not a treaty but it carries considerable moral force in Latin America and beyond the additions were made to accommodate their own regional conditions. It is pertinent therefore to understand the legal problems confronting refugees and those striving to protect them. Public understanding of these problems depends on collaborative efforts of governments, aid workers, academics and the media in order to be able to formulate better policies.

A lot of studies have been done on refugees globally. Akokpari (1998) aver that the Structural Adjustment Programme rather than help internal development led to external reliance and migration crises in African. Turton (2003) argues that internally displaced persons (IDPs) are among the most vulnerable categories of forced migrants. He explains that although they flee conflict, violence, or persecution under circumstances similar to refugees, they remain within their own country rather than crossing an international border. As a result, they often do not receive the same level of international legal protection and assistance that refugees receive under UNHCR mandates.

Zolberg et al (1986) in their study develops a framework explaining refugee movements, showing that international factors directly and indirectly

intensify internal conflicts, while both domestic and cross-border conflicts significantly contribute to refugee flows. Miracle Adesina et al (2022) also examined seven countries, five in East Africa, account for 66.3% of Africa's refugees (1990–2017). Trends show four phases: decline (1990–92, 1994–97), rise (1992–94), stability (1998–2011), and sharp increase (2011–2017). Drivers include climate change, disasters, poverty, and conflict. Overall numbers rise despite fluctuations, creating socio-economic and health pressures, requiring coordinated government and stakeholder interventions. Hassan (2020) posits that migration in Africa has risen across subregions, including workers, women, irregular migrants, refugees, and displaced persons adding that existing scholarship inadequately explains its complexity. The study calls for “Africanized” concepts, examining drivers, transformations, policies, and future challenges using a qualitative literature review approach.

Factors That Generated Refugees in Africa And Asia

Many factors generate refugees in Africa. The first is the effect of colonialism and the Effects of colonialism and the arbitrary delineation of boundaries that separate people of the same ethnic group and cultural identity among several countries. For instance, the Yoruba are found in Nigeria, Togo and Benin Republic, while the Hausa are located in Nigeria, Niger and Ghana. This has also led to boundary conflicts across the continent leading to refugee arising from intractable conflicts. Aside land border crises, these conflicts are also maritime and perhaps air bound. As Okafor-Yahwood and Nwarueze (2025) posits

But Africa's maritime boundaries sometimes lead to conflict, prevent cooperation on resource management and create room for maritime crimes, like illegal fishing. This is because they are often contested. Countries have overlapping claims and varying interests in resource exploration. This is common in maritime areas rich in oil, gas and fisheries, and deep seabed resources.

Aghemelo and Ibhasebhor (2006) aligns with this when they argue that during the successive phases of the Scramble for Africa, European powers hastily and often arbitrarily drew territorial boundaries to maximize control, paying little attention to the disruption of ethnic groups and indigenous political systems, although this remains a broad generalization of their attitudes.

The second is Ethnic and religious conflicts which usually cause people to flee their homes and become internally displaced within their countries (I.D.P.S.) or move outside the borders of their countries and become refugees. Adepoju (2025) notes that the major causes include inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts and communal land disputes, which are aggravated by environmental disasters including flooding, soil erosion, and droughts.

Dictatorial tendencies of African leaders which lead to violation of human rights, like torture, massacres, arbitrary arrests and imprisonment which cause people to flee en mass. These dictatorial tendencies have also affected stereotype against same sex marriages and relationships especially the lesbian, gays, bi-sexual, trans-sexual and queer (LGBTQ) group.

Ethnic and economic inequalities between the different groups in some countries, (especially during the apartheid policy in Southern Africa) unemployment and the likes.

Political confrontations such as power struggle, civil wars and coups among others have also led to conflict which has in turn led many into refugee status on the continent. There have been so much examples coming from the Great Lakes region and other parts of Africa (Brooks, 1970). This has led many in these regions spanning from Mali to Nigeria to flee their countries.

There is also the renewed foreign power rivalry on the continent through selective investments, coveted mineral resources and foreign interests on the continent. The neo-balkanization for the continent's natural resources have led to the escalation of insecurity and terrorism where the

different foreign interests have taken sides and sponsored armed groups. The consequence of this is conflict which has led many to not only flee their homes but also their countries thereby constituting refugees.

Furthermore, Natural disasters or climate change effect is also one of the causes of refugee in Africa. Climate change has become one of the major causes of human displacement in Africa (UNHCR, 2019) as it has caused a rapid increase in the population of refugees (Environmental migration, 2020) because of its devastating effects on human existence. Such effects include; limitation in natural resources, food insecurity, poor nutrition and hygiene, lack of healthcare facilities, amongst others (UNHCR, 2019). Adepoju (2025) did not mince words when she stated that Refugee numbers have risen sharply due to crises in the Central African Republic, Nigeria, South Sudan, and Burundi adding that once concentrated in the Horn of Africa, camps now span West and Southern Africa. Drivers include conflict, unrest, environmental disasters, and repression. While some causes decline, new ones emerge, increasing complexity and hindering durable solutions.

The Asian region is more prone to natural disasters because of the geographical location although other factors like the following cause refugee flows, especially in South-West and South-East Asia. Many refugees in Asia were arguably leaving due to a combination of factors, causing it difficult to categorize them and determine which of the entities would be best suited to offer assistance and safeguarding. Some were leaving in search for protection and asylum, while others were looking for economic opportunities. UNODC (2024) reports that Tens of thousands of people are smuggled every year in Southeast Asia because of conflict, corruption and a lack of options for regular travel (UNODC). The IOM (nd) reports that South-East Asia is one of the most disaster-prone subregions in the world, with millions of displacements occurring each year. Several countries in the subregion are located along the

region's typhoon belt or Pacific Ring of Fire, making people who live there extremely vulnerable to hazards such as floods and storms, tsunamis, earthquakes, among others

In 2022, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) documented more than 3,500 Rohingya refugees attempting to cross the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea by boat (UNHCR, 2022; IASFM, 2024). One in four of the 4,785 smuggled refugees and migrants surveyed said that climate-related issues — including flooding, storms, drought, extreme temperatures or livestock or crop disease — influenced their decision to migrate and use smugglers (UNODC, 2024). The demand for migrant workers in destination countries, unemployment and underemployment in countries of origin and well-organized migrant smuggling networks have resulted in significant levels of irregular migration across South-East Asia. Often related to temporary labour migration, irregular migration remains prevalent in the subregion.

Furthermore, Corruption both enables and drives migrant smuggling in the region, the research found. 25% of smuggled people surveyed reported giving officials a gift, money or a favour in return for a service. Corruption also drives demand for migrant smuggling, because people think that they need smugglers to help them deal with corrupt authorities.

Comparative UNHCR Funding in Africa And Asia

Refugee problem, especially outside Europe had assumed such great proportions from the late 1950s that Turton, referred to the 20th Century as the “century of refugees” and the UNHCR could not cope with the humanitarian needs of refugees (Turton, 2003). The situation was worsened by the global economic downturn towards the end of 2008, which made it difficult for the developed countries and donor agencies to fulfill their obligations and had cut off or renege in their pledges to the UNHCR. The impact of the shortfall in donor aid was felt most by Africa which had about 40% of the world refugees and internally displaced persons (Adebayo, 2011).

He continued that the cut in donations led to cut in budgets of about twelve UN humanitarian agencies, 9 of which were already cutting off food rations in Ethiopia and Zimbabwe (Adebayo, 2011). Little wonder then that the UNHCR's announced the downward budgetary reduction and planned closure of seven of its offices in Africa due to persistent lack of funds. The offices were in Ghana, Mali, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, Chad, Somalia and Burkina Faso (UNHCR, 2002a). High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers would say:

We have numerous protracted refugee situations there that are largely forgotten by the international community, as well as several new crises in West Africa, the Great Lakes and the East and Horn. Many of our programmes in Africa and elsewhere were already struggling because of the previous cuts (UNHCR, 2002b)

Invoking cessation of conflict clause of the 1951 Geneva Convention, some refugee camps had even been officially closed since 2008 because their countries have been declared safe by the UNHCR, but in reality, as at Dec. 2010, over 3,000 refugees were still resident in the camp-Oru Ijebu refugee camp in Nigeria (Interview, Liberian Refugee, December 2010).

The UNHCR intervention in Africa was in 1957 during the Algerian revolution, before then refugee problem was not yet an issue in Africa. However, from the 1960s to the 1990s refugee figures had reached unprecedented level. This was possibly due to political unrest and civil wars arising from the factors mentioned earlier. In 1999, the total no of refugees in Africa was over 6 million, about one third of the total figure in the world. UNHCR (nd: 1127) notes:

The main refugee groups on the continent included half a million Sierra Leoneans in West Africa, 280,000 Burundians in the United Republic of Tanzania and 180,000 Congolese who had fled from the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to various countries. More than 370,000 Sudanese were still refugees in Ethiopia and Uganda; 165,000

refugees from Western Sahara were in camps in Algeria and other countries; and 150,000 Angolan refugees were mostly based in the DRC. Guinea continued to host more than half a million refugees. The situation in the east and Horn of Africa continued to be dominated by the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

As at 2010, the figure had risen to about 13 million, almost half the world refugees scattered all over Africa.

ASIA

The UNHCR had spent massive amounts of money on refugees in Asia which had suffered major humanitarian crises. This ranged from major floods in the Philippines and Pakistan. It had also handled major humanitarian crisis in Kyrgyzstan as a result of political violence. In Sri Lanka, the UNHCR also provided assistance to IDPs and supported voluntary repatriation of refugees from India.

UNHCR budget for Asia and the Pacific increased even more significantly in 2009 due to the large supplementary programmes to assist IDPs in Pakistan and Sri Lanka which continued into 2010. Two new supplementary programmes were established in 2010 for the Kyrgyzstan crisis and also for emergency assistance to flood victims in Pakistan. This expanded the initial budget of 470M USD to well over 500M USD during the third quarter of the year. The UNHCR is not without some challenges in funding and budgeting for refugees.

UNHCR Challenges in Funding and Budgeting

Budgeting in a government or private sector connotes an indication of resources already located but the anomaly in the case of the UNHCR is that the execution of her budget depends entirely on donor response to appeals. Although the advent of satellite communication has projected the plight of refugees, particularly mass movements of refugees to public awareness, even these wider sources have not yielded sufficient funds to complete UNHCR's planned activities let alone do more.

The Annual Programme Budget (AB) include the activities approved annually by the Executive Committee as well as Operational Reserve while the Supplementary Programmes (SP) are the activities that arise after the approval of the Annual Programme Budget (AB) which cannot be accommodated in the Operational Reserve. These are funded through donations in response to appeals. During the budget planning process, the UNHCR considers two factors. One, some needs that may be classified as the costing of programmes which it needs to undertake in order to fulfill its responsibilities under the mandate in a manner that meets internationally accepted standards. Two, the availability of resources viewed from the experiences of previous years.

Other factors that influence the effectiveness of UNHCR utilisation of voluntary contributions are:

Earmarking of contributions: This limits the use of such contribution to a single country or sector activity. This restricts UNHCR ability to respond flexibly to unpredictable refugee situations which by definition have an international dimension. This also limits the flexibility within a country operation and can lead to uneven response in meeting basic needs. Consequently, the UNHCR encourages un-earmarked contribution from donors so as to ensure the complete implementation of its programmes.

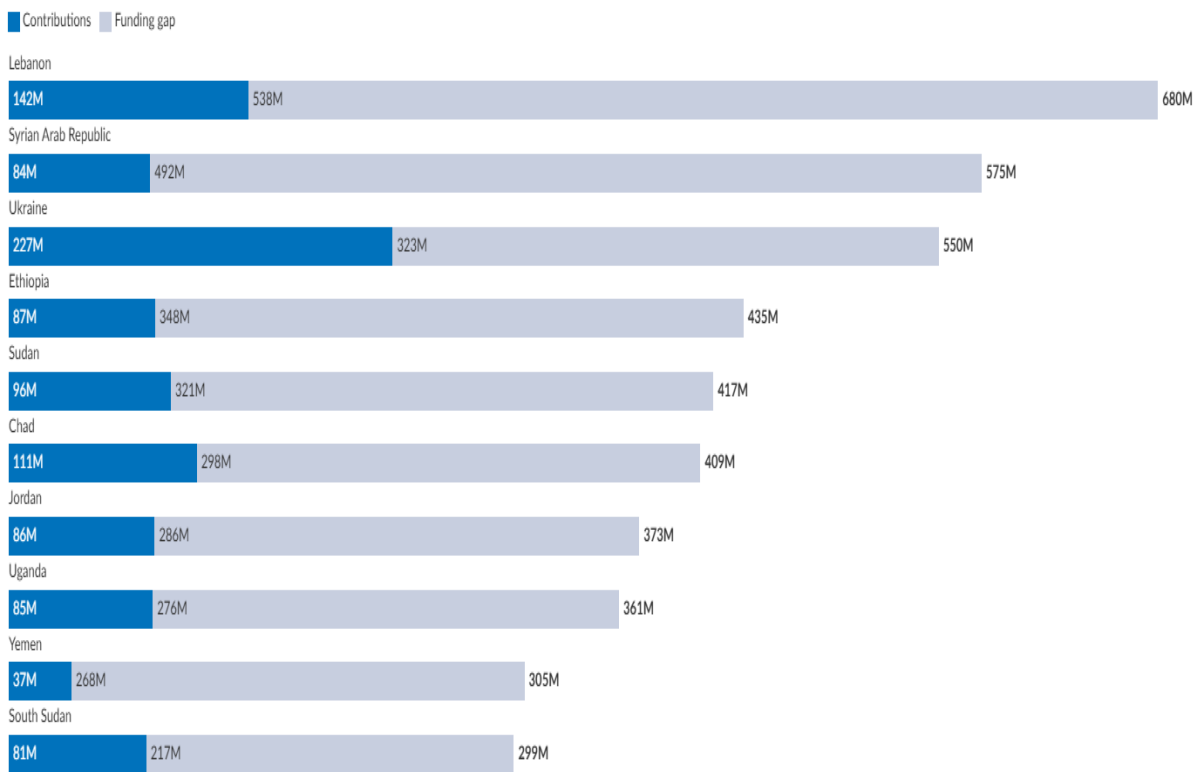
The timing of contributions-contributions made early in the year ensures confidence in UNHCR's negotiations of operational agreements with host governments and implementing partners. Resources can also be effectively applied during the year they are intended. Late contributions may not permit effectiveness.

Predictability of contributions allows the funds to be included in a process of projection, which estimations of cash flow throughout the year are made.

The United States of America contributes more to the UN than any other country – about 22% of the regular UN budget and 27% of the peace keeping budget, although she receives significant return on

her investment since the UN advances many US national policies. Also, as the highest donor to the UNHCR, the US exerts substantial influence in world politics – a case of the popular adage that “he who plays the piper dictates the tune.” Some of these influences include the use of her veto power to block UN security resolutions against “friendly states” which could hurt her political and or economic interests. Other major donors include Japan, the European Union, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, United Kingdom and Germany. Some other smaller donors include, Italy, Canada, Switzerland, Austria, Finland, Belgium, Ireland, Spain, Luxemburg and private donors

Figure 1: Financial overview top 10 Operations | USD



Source: UNHCR (2025)

Similarities Between African and Asian Refugee Problem

Some refugee situations in Africa and Asia are both on a large scale and protracted – 1.7m Afghan refugees in Pakistan and 1m in Iran. The liberation struggle of the Tamil Tigers and Sir Lanka lasted for 26years. Same goes for the struggle for independence of the Southern Sudanese people which is ongoing. TA total of 14.3 million Sudanese people remained displaced at the end of 2024. This was 3.5 million more people than 12 months prior and represents nearly one in three of the national population.

- 1) Some refugees live in designated camps in both Africa and Asia.
- 2) Many of the conflicts that generated refugees and IDPs originated from repressive governments in both Africa and Asia.
- 3) Some of the refugees were products of the struggle for self-determination in both continents.
- 4) Natural/Environmental disasters caused refugee flows in Africa and Asia.

- 5) Economic difficulties arising from political instability also caused people to leave their countries to become refugees.

Differences In African and Asian Refugee Situations

- 1) Statelessness is higher in Asia than in Africa-such places as in Turkmenistan in Central Asia and Myanmar in South-East Asia.
- 2) The use of detention facilities to hold asylum seekers and refugees including children and other vulnerable persons is rampant in Asia while that is not the case in Africa.
- 3) Many more refugees and IDPs in Asia arose from environment and natural disasters than in Africa.
- 4) UNHCR response to disaster situations in Asia had been quicker than response to African disaster. In fact, UNHCR response to crisis in Africa had been lukewarm.

UNHCR budgets year in and year out have not favoured Africa even though she had had the highest number of refugees and IDPs for some time. The following tables speak for themselves.

Table 1: Global View of UNHCR Funding in Africa and Asia up to 2010

Aspect	Africa	Asia
General Funding Disparity	Funding consistently lower compared to Asia	Higher funding levels compared to Africa
2008 Funding Observations	20% of total UNHCR funding	70% of total UNHCR funding
Refugee Numbers (1999)	Over 6 million refugees	Not specified for 1999, but substantial
Refugee Numbers (2010)	About 13 million refugees	Significant, with major humanitarian crises
Key Factors Generating Refugees	Colonialism, ethnic/religious conflicts, dictatorships, economic inequalities, natural disasters	Natural disasters, repressive governments, self-determination movements, political/economic instability
Major UNHCR Challenges	Persistent underfunding, especially during economic downturns, impact of shortfalls (e.g., office closures)	Increased funding due to crises, quicker response to natural disasters, supplementary programs
Funding Allocation Issues	Limited flexibility due to earmarked contributions, unpredictable donation timing, and political influences	Higher funding, often more predictable, but still influenced by geopolitical factors
Response to Crises	Slow response to crises, reduced aid during economic downturns, offices closure due to lack of funds	Quicker response, with significant funding increases during crises (e.g., floods, political violence)
Notable Quotes	Kurt Waldheim (1974): "Humanitarian relief is politics"	Not directly quoted, but similar challenges noted
Future Recommendations	Diversify donor base, increase un-earmarked contributions, focus on preventive diplomacy	Continue to improve response efficiency, address geopolitical influences on aid distribution

Source: Researcher's Compilation.

The total percentage of funds expended on African refugees from 1975 to 1981 was 22.2% as against 26.1% for Europe, 51% for Asia, 6% for the Middle East.²⁷ UNHCR refugee assistance had been politicised, indeed, Kurt Waldheim, former UN Secretary General was quoted to have remarked in 1974 that "Four years ago (1974) I believed that humanitarian work was above politics. Now I know that humanitarian relief is politics" (Halder, 1999). While the situation may have remained unchanged for a long time, it appears the case is changing in recent times. To be sure, of around \$2.1billion required for UNHCR programmes in Middle East and North Africa, \$1.2 billion in Europe, \$957 million in Asia and the Pacific, and \$815 million in the Americas and Across the African continent, \$2.1 billion is needed in East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes, \$1.2 billion in West and Central Africa and \$451 million in Southern Africa (Mishra, 2024).

Conclusion

The disparities in UNHCR funding between Africa and Asia reveal a complex interplay of geopolitical, economic, and

operational factors that have shaped the organization's response to refugee crises. Despite Africa's status as the continent with the highest number of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), its funding from UNHCR consistently lags behind that of Asia. This paper has illustrated that while both continents face significant humanitarian challenges, the allocation of resources has not always reflected the scale of need.

Several key observations emerge from this comparative analysis. First, there is a clear pattern of disproportionate funding. Evidence suggests a persistent discrepancy in funding levels between Africa and Asia, with Asia receiving a larger share of UNHCR's budget. This disparity raises questions about the underlying reasons for such imbalances. Factors such as political influence, strategic interests of major donor countries, and the relative visibility of refugee crises in different regions appear to play crucial roles.

Second, the impact of geopolitical dynamics is evident in the funding patterns. Major donors like the United States

and the European Union often direct their contributions based on geopolitical considerations, which can skew resources away from regions with the most pressing needs. This political dimension underscores the broader challenge of ensuring that humanitarian aid is distributed equitably.

Third, operational challenges further complicate the UNHCR's ability to respond effectively to crises. Constraints such as the earmarking of funds, timing, and predictability of donations are significant hurdles. These challenges are compounded by the varying nature of refugee situations in Africa and Asia, from protracted conflicts to natural disasters, which require different types of support and interventions.

Lastly, there is a critical need for reform to address the funding imbalance. Strategies should include diversifying the donor base, advocating for un-earmarked contributions to allow greater flexibility, and fostering preventive diplomacy to mitigate the root causes of displacement.

In summary, while the UNHCR has made significant efforts to address refugee crises across the globe, the disparities in funding between Africa and Asia highlight systemic issues that require attention. Bridging this gap will not only enhance the effectiveness of UNHCR's interventions but also ensure that aid reaches those who need it most, regardless of their geographic location. Future research and policy efforts should focus on addressing these disparities, improving transparency, and fostering a more equitable distribution of resources to support refugees and IDPs worldwide.

The closing observation of this paper is that the discrimination in UNHCR funding for Africa as against Asia or any other continent for that matter shows the continuation of neocolonialism to render Africa perpetually dependent and underdeveloped.

The study makes the following recommendations:

- 1) The UNHCR should intensify search for additional sources of funding in both governmental and private sectors in order to broaden the donor base and help bridge the gap between UNHCR budget and resources available from traditional "humanitarian" sources.
- 2) Funding should be focused on the solution-oriented "4Rs"- Repatriation, Rehabilitation, Re-integration and Reconstruction. These will form a bridge to longer term developmental activities in partnership with organisations such as the UNDP and the World Bank.
- 3) There should be preventive diplomacy and mediation before conflicts explode and generate refugees. This is a smart investment even in times of austerity.

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