

**Contact: Emily Arnold-Fernandez**  
**[emily@asylumaccess.org](mailto:emily@asylumaccess.org)**  
**+1.415.601.3896**

## **UNHCR Implements Major RSD Reforms** **Asylum Access Continues Policy Advocacy**

Asylum Access today welcomed reports of substantial improvements in the way that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) decides the fates of tens of thousands of asylum-seekers every year.

A new analysis by RSDWatch.org (a project of Asylum Access) found that over the last five years UNHCR offices around the world have dramatically increased their willingness to protect asylum-seekers. The recognition rate of refugee status applications climbed from 46 percent between 1999 and 2002 to 81 percent over the last three years.

In human terms, more than 10,000 refugees received protection last year who might have been rejected five years earlier. This change occurred as UNHCR committed itself to improving the fairness of its RSD procedures.

"These numbers mean refugees who might have been at risk in the past are now getting protection," said Asylum Access Policy Director Michael Kagan. "This is about as concrete an indication as you can get that improving fairness saves people from persecution."

UNHCR is the world's largest decision-maker in refugee status determination (RSD), known in many countries as "asylum applications." RSD is a legal adjudication process, deciding whether an asylum-seeker meets the legal criteria for refugee status. This process determines whether refugees get protection from detention and deportation.

Asylum Access has been a leader in promoting RSD reform. Since the mid-1990s, UNHCR's process has been criticized by activists for failing to meet basic standards of fairness, and for being prone to reject *bona fide* refugees. In response, UNHCR officials have promised "ambitious" reforms, and in 2003 UNHCR for the first time issued global procedural standards for its RSD operations.

In addition, 11 of the 15 largest UNHCR RSD operations in the world will for the first time be providing rejected applicants with written, individualized reasons for denial of refugee status. Though not yet fully implemented, this reform will improve procedures for more than 90 percent of the applicants who depend on UNHCR RSD around the world.

UNHCR RSD procedures still fall short of established standards of fairness, especially in disclosing evidence to applicants and in providing for an independent appeal system. Each procedural gap can increase the risks of mistakenly rejecting a person in danger of persecution.

"The reform process seems already to have saved a lot of people from danger, and UNHCR has clearly made some very substantive improvements," says Kagan, who has been campaigning for RSD reform since 1998 and helped found Asylum Access in 2005.

UNHCR officials have shown interest in developing ideas for improving appeals, but have resisted liberalizing rules on disclosing evidence to applicants. Asylum Access recently issued a report calling on UNHCR to revise policies that prevent its offices from giving applicants copies of their own interview transcripts and hinder the disclosure of other evidence.

"We do have to remember that close to 10,000 people a year are still being rejected in procedures that are still not completely fair, and thus are riskier than they should be. But UNHCR is clearly headed in the right direction, and we hope it continues," Kagan said.

**Through on-the-ground legal advice, representation and advocacy, Asylum Access empowers refugees in Africa, Asia and Latin America to assert their human rights, so they can live safely, work, and rebuild their lives.**