A third non-governmental GAP influence that is emerging as a major issue of concern is the unregulated and forced flow of refugees and migrants. For a variety of multi-dimensional and inter-related reasons large sections of humanity are currently on the move. In 1951, the year that the UNHCR was first established, there were approximately 1.5 million refugees around the world. By 1975, the figure was 2.4 million, increasing to 8.2 million by 1980. In early 1997, the UNHCR estimated that there were roughly 13.2 million refugees globally, representing an increase of 880 per cent over 44 years. Added to this are the millions of people that are either internally displaced within their own country of origin each year or forced to flee across national boundaries for reasons other than political, racial, ethnic or religious persecution (who are not considered refugees under international law – see note 1). Overall, the UNHCR estimated the total population of concern in 1998 at 22.4 million people, a figure that includes refugees as well as those driven from their homes (either internally or externally) by famine, war, natural disasters, environmental degradation and general societal breakdown.

Mass movements of people are connected to problems of national and international security and the conduct of international relations in general in a number of ways. Not only do large-scale migrations create and exacerbate conflict between states; they also have the potential to challenge the integrity of both sending and receiving states. Refugees have been used as pawns in the armed and political power plays of competing regional states while displaced diasporas have, on occasions, formed a crucial overseas support network for insurgencies and terrorist movements. Mass migrations also send powerful messages to the international community regarding the political legitimacy of
sending states and can, if left unchecked, feed into suspicion, resentment and outbreaks of xenophobic violence in receiving states.

This chapter concludes the section of the book dealing with non-governmental GAP processes and influences by examining the many ways in which unregulated migrant and refugee flows impact on national and international security. While concern with mass population movements is not new, most work that has been done has tended to look at the issue either within a narrow national context or as a strictly humanitarian problem. As Gil Loescher observes, the question of how refugee and migrant flows are linked to wider geo-strategic considerations remains largely unexplored. If one is to gain a true appreciation of the extent, nature and dimension of security issues facing policy-makers in the contemporary era, it is vital that this analytical lacuna is filled.

The chapter begins by examining the chief causes of contemporary refugee and migration flows, focusing especially on war and conflict, environmental degradation, the effects of natural disasters, economic dislocation and persecution. It then goes on to provide an overview of the consequences of this displacement for both sending and receiving states as well as international security in general. Throughout, the focus of the chapter will be on people who have been forcibly uprooted due to violence, persecution or disaster, irrespective of whether they are recognised as refugees under international law or the governments of their home or host countries.

Factors that contribute to mass refugee and migration flows

War and conflict

There can be little doubt that war and conflict have been at the root of most population displacements since the end of the Cold War. Indeed, the International Committee of the Red Cross has gone so far as to argue that the prevention of population movements corresponds ‘essentially to the prevention of armed conflict and ... abuses during armed conflict’. Most of the new and ongoing conflicts in the post-Cold War era have been notoriously bitter and difficult to control, involving deliberate assaults on defenceless civilian populations. Typically termed as complex humanitarian emergencies, these have combined either inter- or intra-state war with large-scale displacements of people, mass famine, and environmental destruction (see below).

Three types of conflict have been associated with generating population flows since the end of the Cold War. The first and most