

**GUIDELINES ON INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION:  
Application of the Exclusion Clauses: Article 1F of the 1951 Convention relating to  
the Status of Refugees**

UNHCR issues these Guidelines pursuant to its mandate, as contained in the 1950 *Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, in conjunction with Article 35 of the 1951 *Convention relating to the Status of Refugees* and Article II of its 1967 *Protocol*. These Guidelines complement the UNHCR *Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees* (Reedited, Geneva, January 1992). These Guidelines summarise the [Background Note on the Application of the Exclusion Clauses: Article 1F of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees](#) (4 September 2003) which forms an integral part of UNHCR's position on this issue. They supersede *The Exclusion Clauses: Guidelines on their Application* (UNHCR, Geneva, 1 December 1996) and *Note on the Exclusion Clauses* (UNHCR, Geneva, 30 May 1997), and result, *inter alia*, from the Second Track of the Global Consultations on International Protection process which examined this subject at its expert meeting in Lisbon, Portugal, in May 2001. An update of these Guidelines was also deemed necessary in light of contemporary developments in international law.

These Guidelines are intended to provide interpretative legal guidance for governments, legal practitioners, decision-makers and the judiciary, as well as UNHCR staff carrying out refugee status determination in the field.

## **Application of the Exclusion Clauses: Article 1F of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

#### **A. Background**

1. Paragraph 7(d) of the 1950 UNHCR Statute, Article 1F of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (hereinafter “1951 Convention”) and Article I(5) of the 1969 Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (hereinafter “OAU Convention”) all oblige States and UNHCR to deny the benefits of refugee status to certain persons who would otherwise qualify as refugees. These provisions are commonly referred to as “the exclusion clauses”. These Guidelines provide a summary of the key issues relating to these provisions – further guidance can be found in UNHCR’s Background Note on the Application of the Exclusion Clauses: Article 1F of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (hereinafter “the Background Note”), which forms an integral part of these Guidelines.
2. The rationale for the exclusion clauses, which should be borne in mind when considering their application, is that certain acts are so grave as to render their perpetrators undeserving of international protection as refugees. Their primary purpose is to deprive those guilty of heinous acts, and serious common crimes, of international refugee protection and to ensure that such persons do not abuse the institution of asylum in order to avoid being held legally accountable for their acts. The exclusion clauses must be applied “scrupulously” to protect the integrity of the institution of asylum, as is recognised by UNHCR’s Executive Committee in Conclusion No. 82 (XLVIII), 1997. At the same time, given the possible serious consequences of exclusion, it is important to apply them with great caution and only after a full assessment of the individual circumstances of the case. The exclusion clauses should, therefore, always be interpreted in a restrictive manner.
3. The exclusion clauses in the 1951 Convention are exhaustive. This should be kept in mind when interpreting Article I(5) of the OAU Convention which contains almost identical language. Article 1F of the 1951 Convention states that the provisions of that Convention “shall not apply to any person with respect to whom there are serious reasons for considering” that:
  - (a) he [or she] has committed a crime against peace, a war crime, or a crime against humanity, as defined in the international instruments drawn up to make provision in respect of such crimes;
  - (b) he [or she] has committed a serious non-political crime outside the country of refuge prior to his [or her] admission to that country as a refugee; or
  - (c) he [or she] has been guilty of acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

## **B. Relationship with other provisions of the 1951 Convention**

4. Article 1F of the 1951 Convention should be distinguished from **Article 1D** which applies to a specific category of persons receiving protection or assistance from organs and agencies of the United Nations other than UNHCR.<sup>1</sup> Article 1F should also be distinguished from **Article 1E** which deals with persons not in need (as opposed to undeserving) of international protection. Moreover the exclusion clauses are not to be confused with **Articles 32 and 33(2)** of the Convention which deal respectively with the expulsion of, and the withdrawal of protection from *refoulement* from, recognised refugees who pose a danger to the host State (for example, because of serious crimes they have committed there). Article 33(2) concerns the future risk that a recognised refugee may pose to the host State.

## **C. Temporal scope**

5. Articles 1F(a) and 1F(c) are concerned with crimes whenever and wherever they are committed. By contrast, the scope of Article 1F(b) is explicitly limited to crimes committed outside the country of refuge prior to admission to that country as a refugee.

## **D. Cancellation or revocation on the basis of exclusion**

6. Where facts which would have led to exclusion only come to light after the grant of refugee status, this would justify **cancellation** of refugee status on the grounds of exclusion. The reverse is that information casting doubt on the basis on which an individual has been excluded should lead to reconsideration of eligibility for refugee status. Where a refugee engages in conduct falling within Article 1F(a) or 1F(c), this would trigger the application of the exclusion clauses and the **revocation** of refugee status, provided all the criteria for the application of these clauses are met.

## **E. Responsibility for determination of exclusion**

7. States parties to the 1951 Convention/1967 Protocol and/or OAU Convention and UNHCR need to consider whether the exclusion clauses apply in the context of the determination of refugee status. Paragraph 7(d) of UNHCR's Statute covers similar grounds to Article 1F of the 1951 Convention, although UNHCR officials should be guided by the language of Article 1F, as it represents the later and more specific formulation.

## **F. Consequences of exclusion**

8. Although a State is precluded from granting refugee status pursuant to the 1951 Convention or the OAU Convention to an individual it has excluded, it is not otherwise obliged to take any particular course of action. The State concerned can

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<sup>1</sup> See, UNHCR, "Note on the Applicability of Article 1D of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees to Palestinian Refugees", October 2002.

choose to grant the excluded individual stay on other grounds, but obligations under international law may require that the person concerned be criminally prosecuted or extradited. A decision by UNHCR to exclude someone from refugee status means that that individual can no longer receive protection or assistance from the Office.

9. An excluded individual may still be protected against return to a country where he or she is at risk of ill-treatment by virtue of other international instruments. For example, the 1984 Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment absolutely prohibits the return of an individual to a country where there is a risk that he or she will be subjected to torture. Other international and regional human rights instruments contain similar provisions.<sup>2</sup>

## II. SUBSTANTIVE ANALYSIS

### A. Article 1F(a): Crimes against peace, war crimes and crimes against humanity

10. Amongst the various international instruments which offer guidance on the scope of these international crimes are the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the four 1949 Geneva Conventions for the Protection of Victims of War and the two 1977 Additional Protocols, the Statutes of the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, the 1945 Charter of the International Military Tribunal (the London Charter), and most recently the 1998 Statute of the International Criminal Court which entered into force on 1 July 2002.
11. According to the London Charter a **crime against peace** involves the “planning, preparation, initiation or waging of a war of aggression, or a war in violation of international treaties, agreements, or assurances, or participation in a common plan or conspiracy for the accomplishment of any of the foregoing”. Given the nature of this crime, it can only be committed by those in a high position of authority representing a State or a State-like entity. In practice, this provision has rarely been invoked.
12. Certain breaches of international humanitarian law constitute **war crimes**.<sup>3</sup> Although such crimes can be committed in both international and non-international armed conflicts, the content of the crimes depends on the nature of the conflict. War crimes cover such acts as wilful killing and torture of civilians, launching indiscriminate attacks on civilians, and wilfully depriving a civilian or a prisoner of war of the rights of fair and regular trial.
13. The distinguishing feature of **crimes against humanity**,<sup>4</sup> which cover acts such as genocide, murder, rape and torture, is that they must be carried out as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against the civilian population. An isolated

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<sup>2</sup> For further details, see Annex A of the Background Note accompanying these Guidelines.

<sup>3</sup> For instruments defining war crimes, see Annex B of the Background Note.

<sup>4</sup> For instruments defining crimes against humanity, see Annex C of the Background Note.

act can, however, constitute a crime against humanity if it is part of a coherent system or a series of systematic and repeated acts. Since such crimes can take place in peacetime as well as armed conflict, this is the broadest category under Article 1F(a).

## **B. Article 1F(b): Serious non-political crimes**

14. This category does not cover minor crimes nor prohibitions on the legitimate exercise of human rights. In determining whether a particular offence is sufficiently **serious**, international rather than local standards are relevant. The following factors should be taken into account: the nature of the act, the actual harm inflicted, the form of procedure used to prosecute the crime, the nature of the penalty, and whether most jurisdictions would consider it a serious crime. Thus, for example, murder, rape and armed robbery would undoubtedly qualify as serious offences, whereas petty theft would obviously not.
15. A serious crime should be considered **non-political** when other motives (such as personal reasons or gain) are the predominant feature of the specific crime committed. Where no clear link exists between the crime and its alleged political objective or when the act in question is disproportionate to the alleged political objective, non-political motives are predominant.<sup>5</sup> The motivation, context, methods and proportionality of a crime to its objectives are important factors in evaluating its political nature. The fact that a particular crime is designated as non-political in an extradition treaty is of significance, but not conclusive in itself. Egregious acts of violence, such as acts those commonly considered to be of a “terrorist” nature, will almost certainly fail the predominance test, being wholly disproportionate to any political objective. Furthermore, for a crime to be regarded as political in nature, the political objectives should be consistent with human rights principles.
16. Article 1F(b) also requires the crime to have been committed “outside the country of refuge prior to [the individual’s] admission to that country as a refugee”. Individuals who commit “serious non-political crimes” within the country of refuge are subject to that country’s criminal law process and, in the case of particularly grave crimes, to Articles 32 and 33(2) of the 1951 Convention.

## **C. Article 1F(c): Acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations**

17. Given the broad, general terms of the purposes and principles of the United Nations, the scope of this category is rather unclear and should therefore be read narrowly. Indeed, it is rarely applied and, in many cases, Article 1F(a) or 1F(b) are anyway likely to apply. Article 1F(c) is only triggered in extreme circumstances by activity which attacks the very basis of the international community’s coexistence. Such activity must have an international dimension. Crimes capable of affecting international peace, security and peaceful relations between States, as well as serious and sustained violations of human rights, would fall under this category. Given that

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<sup>5</sup> See paragraph 152 of the UNHCR *Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status*, Geneva, reedited 1992.

Articles 1 and 2 of the United Nations Charter essentially set out the fundamental principles States must uphold in their mutual relations, it would appear that in principle only persons who have been in positions of power in a State or State-like entity would appear capable of committing such acts. In cases involving a terrorist act, a correct application of Article 1F(c) involves an assessment as to the extent to which the act impinges on the international plane – in terms of its gravity, international impact, and implications for international peace and security.

#### **D. Individual responsibility**

18. For exclusion to be justified, individual responsibility must be established in relation to a crime covered by Article 1F. Specific considerations in relation to crimes against peace and acts against the purposes and principles of the UN have been discussed above. In general, individual responsibility flows from the person having committed, or made a substantial contribution to the commission of the criminal act, in the knowledge that his or her act or omission would facilitate the criminal conduct. The individual need not physically have committed the criminal act in question. Instigating, aiding and abetting and participating in a joint criminal enterprise can suffice.
19. The fact that a person was at some point a senior member of a repressive government or a member of an organisation involved in unlawful violence does not in itself entail individual liability for excludable acts. A presumption of responsibility may, however, arise where the individual has remained a member of a government clearly engaged in activities that fall within the scope of Article 1F. Moreover, the purposes, activities and methods of some groups are of a particularly violent nature, with the result that voluntary membership thereof may also raise a presumption of individual responsibility. Caution must be exercised when such a presumption of responsibility arises, to consider issues including the actual activities of the group, its organisational structure, the individual's position in it, and his or her ability to influence significantly its activities, as well as the possible fragmentation of the group. Moreover, such presumptions in the context of asylum proceedings are rebuttable.
20. As for ex-combatants, they should not necessarily be considered excludable, unless of course serious violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law are reported and indicated in the individual case.

#### **E. Grounds for rejecting individual responsibility**

21. Criminal responsibility can normally only arise where the individual concerned committed the material elements of the offence with knowledge and intent. Where the **mental element** is not satisfied, for example, because of ignorance of a key fact, individual criminal responsibility is not established. In some cases, the individual may not have the mental capacity to be held responsible a crime, for example, because of insanity, mental handicap, involuntary intoxication or, in the case of children, immaturity.

22. Factors generally considered to constitute **defences** to criminal responsibility should be considered. For example, the defence of superior orders will only apply where the individual was legally obliged to obey the order, was unaware of its unlawfulness and the order itself was not manifestly unlawful. As for duress, this applies where the act in question results from the person concerned necessarily and reasonably avoiding a threat of imminent death, or of continuing or imminent serious bodily harm to him- or herself or another person, and the person does not intend to cause greater harm than the one sought to be avoided. Action in self-defence or in defence of others or of property must be both reasonable and proportionate in relation to the threat.
23. Where **expiation** of the crime is considered to have taken place, application of the exclusion clauses may no longer be justified. This may be the case where the individual has served a penal sentence for the crime in question, or perhaps where a significant period of time has elapsed since commission of the offence. Relevant factors would include the seriousness of the offence, the passage of time, and any expression of regret shown by the individual concerned. In considering the effect of any pardon or amnesty, consideration should be given to whether it reflects the democratic will of the relevant country and whether the individual has been held accountable in any other way. Some crimes are, however, so grave and heinous that the application of Article 1F is still considered justified despite the existence of a pardon or amnesty.

#### **F. Proportionality considerations**

24. The incorporation of a proportionality test when considering exclusion and its consequences provides a useful analytical tool to ensure that the exclusion clauses are applied in a manner consistent with the overriding humanitarian object and purpose of the 1951 Convention. The concept has evolved in particular in relation to Article 1F(b) and represents a fundamental principle of many fields of international law. As with any exception to a human rights guarantee, the exclusion clauses must therefore be applied in a manner proportionate to their objective, so that the gravity of the offence in question is weighed against the consequences of exclusion. Such a proportionality analysis would, however, not normally be required in the case of crimes against peace, crimes against humanity, and acts falling under Article 1F(c), as the acts covered are so heinous. It remains relevant, however, to Article 1F(b) crimes and less serious war crimes under Article 1F(a).

#### **G. Particular acts and special cases**

25. Despite the lack of an internationally agreed definition of **terrorism**,<sup>6</sup> acts commonly considered to be terrorist in nature are likely to fall within the exclusion clauses even though Article 1F is not to be equated with a simple anti-terrorism provision. Consideration of the exclusion clauses is, however, often unnecessary as suspected

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<sup>6</sup> For instruments pertaining to terrorism, see Annex D of the Background Note.

terrorists may not be eligible for refugee status in the first place, their fear being of legitimate prosecution as opposed to persecution for Convention reasons.

26. Of all the exclusion clauses, Article 1F(b) may be particularly relevant as acts of terrorist violence are likely to be disproportionate to any avowed political objective. Each case will require individual consideration. The fact that an individual is designated on a national or international list of terrorist suspects (or associated with a designated terrorist organisation) should trigger consideration of the exclusion clauses but will not in itself generally constitute sufficient evidence to justify exclusion. Exclusion should not be based on membership of a particular organisation alone, although a presumption of individual responsibility may arise where the organisation is commonly known as notoriously violent and membership is voluntary. In such cases, it is necessary to examine the individual's role and position in the organisation, his or her own activities, as well as related issues as outlined in paragraph 19 above.
27. As acts of **hijacking** will almost certainly qualify as a "serious crime" under Article 1F(b), only the most compelling of circumstances can justify non-exclusion. Acts of **torture** are prohibited under international law. Depending on the context, they will generally lead to exclusion under Article 1F.
28. The exclusion clauses apply in principle to **minors**, but only if they have reached the age of criminal responsibility and possess the mental capacity to be held responsible for the crime in question. Given the vulnerability of children, great care should be exercised in considering exclusion with respect to a minor and defences such as duress should in particular be examined carefully. Where UNHCR conducts refugee status determination under its mandate, all such cases should be referred to Headquarters before a final decision is made.
29. Where the main applicant is excluded from refugee status, the dependants will need to establish their own grounds for refugee status. If the latter are recognised as refugees, the excluded individual is not able to rely on the right to family unity in order to secure protection or assistance as a refugee.
30. The exclusion clauses can also apply in situations of **mass influx**, although in practice the individual screening required may cause operational and practical difficulties. Nevertheless, until such screening can take place, all persons should receive protection and assistance, subject of course to the separation of armed elements from the civilian refugee population.

### III. PROCEDURAL ISSUES

31. Given the grave consequences of exclusion, it is essential that rigorous procedural **safeguards** are built into the exclusion determination procedure. Exclusion decisions should in principle be dealt with in the context of the **regular refugee status determination procedure** and not in either admissibility or accelerated procedures,



so that a full factual and legal assessment of the case can be made. The exceptional nature of Article 1F suggests that inclusion should generally be considered before exclusion, but there is no rigid formula. Exclusion may exceptionally be considered without particular reference to inclusion issues (i) where there is an indictment by an international criminal tribunal; (ii) in cases where there is apparent and readily available evidence pointing strongly towards the applicant's involvement in particularly serious crimes, notably in prominent Article 1F(c) cases, and (iii) at the appeal stage in cases where exclusion is the question at issue.

32. **Specialised exclusion units** within the institution responsible for refugee status determination could be set up to handle exclusion cases to ensure that they are dealt with in an expeditious manner. It may be prudent to defer decisions on exclusion until completion of any domestic criminal proceedings, as the latter may have significant implications for the asylum claim. In general, however, the refugee claim must be determined in a final decision before execution of any extradition order.
33. At all times the **confidentiality** of the asylum application should be respected. In exceptional circumstances, contact with the country of origin may be justified on national security grounds, but even then the existence of the asylum application should not be disclosed.
34. The **burden of proof** with regard to exclusion rests with the State (or UNHCR) and, as in all refugee status determination proceedings, the applicant should be given the benefit of the doubt. Where, however, the individual has been indicted by an international criminal tribunal, or where individual responsibility for actions which give rise to exclusion is presumed, as indicated in paragraph 19 of these Guidelines, the burden of proof is reversed, creating a rebuttable presumption of excludability.
35. In order to satisfy the **standard of proof** under Article 1F, clear and credible evidence is required. It is not necessary for an applicant to have been convicted of the criminal offence, nor does the criminal standard of proof need to be met. Confessions and testimony of witnesses, for example, may suffice if they are reliable. Lack of cooperation by the applicant does not in itself establish guilt for the excludable act in the absence of clear and convincing evidence. Consideration of exclusion may, however, be irrelevant if non-cooperation means that the basics of an asylum claim cannot be established.
36. Exclusion should not be based on **sensitive evidence** that cannot be challenged by the individual concerned. Exceptionally, anonymous evidence (where the source is concealed) may be relied upon but only where this is absolutely necessary to protect the safety of witnesses and the asylum-seeker's ability to challenge the substance of the evidence is not substantially prejudiced. Secret evidence or evidence considered in camera (where the substance is also concealed) should not be relied upon to exclude. Where national security interests are at stake, these may be protected by introducing procedural safeguards which also respect the asylum-seeker's due process rights.