

**Statement of the Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on
Internally Displaced Persons, Dr. Francis M. Deng**
to the OSCE Informal Briefing on
The Role of National and International Protection in Internal Displacement
Vienna, 27 October 2003

Mr. Chairman,
Madam Moderator,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to begin by expressing my deep appreciation for the privilege and honour of having been invited to address this important briefing. Mr. Chairman, your country, the Netherlands, as Chair of the OSCE, is to be commended for initiating this event and focusing attention on an often overlooked group of people in need -- the internally displaced. I would also like to recognize the role that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has played in organizing this meeting and, in particular, to pay tribute to the important contribution that UNHCR has made over the past decade in responding at field-level to the plight of many internally displaced populations in Europe and elsewhere in the world.

Today's meeting constitutes an important follow-up to the Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Migration and Internal Displacement convened in Vienna in 2000 and to OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meetings, the most recent of which was held in Warsaw earlier this month. These meetings have drawn attention to the plight of internally displaced persons in Europe. Throughout the world, there are some 25 million persons uprooted within their own countries by conflict, civil strife, persecution and serious violations of human rights. Indeed, internal displacement is a global crisis, affecting some fifty countries, and in all regions of the world. My continent of Africa is the worst hit region, with over half of the world's internally displaced. And my own country, the Sudan, has the unenviable distinction of being the country in the world with the most internally displaced persons, numbering over four million. Within the OSCE, where there are an estimated three million internally displaced persons, it is a broad-based phenomenon with a scope that extends across 13 countries in the region. Over the course of my mandate, I have undertaken missions to nine OSCE countries, specifically: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Georgia, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkey and the former Yugoslavia. My participation in a sub-regional seminar on internal displacement in the South Caucasus, held in Tbilisi in 2000, and a seminar on internal displacement in the Russian Federation convened in Moscow in 2002, has provided further opportunities to learn about the situations of internal displacement in the region and to engage in solutions-oriented dialogue with the Governments concerned as well as with civil society and regional and international partners.

Before focusing on some of the patterns, trends and challenges of internal displacement that I have observed in the OSCE region, allow me to briefly describe the approach that has guided me in carrying out my mandate. As the starting premise, it must be recognized that internal displacement, by its very nature, is an internal problem falling within state sovereignty. Indeed, in my dialogue with Governments, I always begin by underscoring my respect for state sovereignty and then explain that, in my view, sovereignty is a positive concept entailing

responsibilities for a Government to protect the rights and welfare of all those under its territorial jurisdiction, if need be with assistance from the international community. The responsibility to protect and assist the internally displaced therefore lies first and foremost with the national authorities, with the role of the international community being complementary.

This theme of sovereignty as responsibility underpins all areas of the work of my mandate. It is expressly evident in the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* -- the first international standards for internally displaced persons -- which we developed, working with a team of international legal experts and broad consultation, at the request of the UN Commission on Human Rights and the General Assembly. The Guiding Principles and their application will be addressed in more detail in a later session today. Here, I would only want to note that all OSCE Governments have supported United Nations resolutions that have acknowledged the Principles and that have called for their wide dissemination and application. Indeed, since their presentation in 1998, and despite their non-binding nature, the Principles have gained important standing and recognition by UN as well as regional bodies around the world as an important standard and a tool for the protection of the internally displaced. In Europe, I also would note that the Principles have proven helpful to the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in dealing with situations of displacement. In addition, the Council of Europe and the European Union as well as many local groups have been using the Principles in their work. Most significantly, an increasing number of Governments have been turning to the Principles for guidance in developing policies and legislation. The more than thirty languages into which the Principles have been translated, sometimes at the initiative of the Governments concerned, include Albanian, Armenian, Azerbaijani, Georgian, Macedonian, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, and Turkish. I sincerely hope that the OSCE will acknowledge and use the Guiding Principles as a framework for work in the area of internal displacement in the same way the United Nations does.

Turning to some of the trends, patterns and current challenges of internal displacement in the OSCE region, I will focus my remarks today on four inter-related themes. The first is the need to devote special attention to the plight of internally displaced persons. In the OSCE region, awareness of this particular category of persons has sometimes been very weak. During my visit to one country in the region, where the displaced had essentially blended into the urban poor and there was little awareness at either the national or the international level of their unique needs, they were described to me as the "forgotten people". In other countries, the displaced have been considered under the larger category of "forced migrants", of which certainly they are a part, but which is a description that does not adequately capture the particular needs of the various groups, whether these be refugees, internally displaced persons, or victims of trafficking, for instance. Indeed, it was said that the internally displaced "got lost among the other categories of forced migrants".

The question sometimes arises as to why internally displaced persons should be identified as a distinct category of persons of concern. The fact of the matter is that even though internally displaced persons are in their own countries, they have special needs *because* of their displacement. This is true whether they are in camps, have merged into urban slums or prefer to be anonymous. Uprooted from their homes, separated from their community support networks and their families, and shorn of their resource base, internally displaced persons suddenly find themselves stripped of the most basic sources of security and survival. Many lack adequate food, water, shelter and medical care. They may also remain caught in areas of armed conflict and under threat of attack. The purpose of paying special attention to their plight is to ensure that their unique needs are addressed, alongside those of other populations at risk and in need.

I am pleased to note that in recent years the plight of internally displaced persons has begun to attract attention in the OSCE region, from both the concerned Governments and the OSCE itself. Today's briefing is a clear sign of this positive development. And so are the invitations that many Governments in the region have extended to me to visit and dialogue with the relevant authorities on the plight of their own internally displaced populations. I should also mention the specific policies, pieces of legislation and programmes that a number of Governments in countries affected by this problem have been developing at the national level. This is a most encouraging trend and one that I very much hope will continue.

A second theme is the protracted nature of internal displacement in a number of countries in the OSCE and the challenges that this raises. I am most familiar with this phenomenon in the South Caucasus, where I have undertaken several missions in recent years, though certainly it also is a feature in Cyprus and for many displaced persons in the Balkans as well. In the South Caucasus, on which I will focus my remarks, internal displacement has been the result of both international and internal conflicts in the region with the peak of hostilities in the early 1990s. Since that time, for nearly a decade, cease-fires have been in place. Yet, durable solutions to these so-called "frozen conflicts" and the plight of the more than one million uprooted persons remain elusive.

Today, too many displaced persons in the South Caucasus live in conditions of deprivation and dependency. Shelter conditions in particular are substandard: dilapidated and overcrowded collective centers, aluminum containers, worn-out tents and even abandoned railway cars -- none of which were ever intended as long-term residences. Poor sanitary conditions make these locations breeding grounds for sickness and disease. Few displaced have access to arable land to supplement the rations of food assistance on which they are dependent, but are inadequate. The Government of one of the countries reports that one in three displaced children below the age of 5 suffers from malnutrition and that infant mortality among displaced children is three to four times higher than the national rate. Moreover, international donors, after so many years of providing strictly emergency humanitarian assistance, have indicated that this palliative approach cannot be sustained indefinitely. During my visits to the South Caucasus, I felt strongly that so many years after the original displacement had occurred, the time had come to usher in a shift from these conditions of dependency and deprivation toward a more dignified and productive life for the displaced.

This brings me to the third theme, which is the need to ensure smooth and timely transitions from emergency relief to development. To begin with, there was an urgent need to improve the living conditions of displaced persons, especially as regards shelter. With the passage of time, however, the importance of supporting greater self-reliance among the displaced, in particular by ensuring their access to cultivable land, skills training, income-generating activities and micro-credit, became increasingly apparent. This was a point I emphasized during my missions in the region. Having discussed these issues with Government officials at all levels, I was particularly encouraged to learn in my discussions with the respective Presidents that they agreed such an approach was necessary.

Important steps have since been taken in that direction. For instance, the Government of Azerbaijan has established a new \$75 million "IDP fund" from state oil revenues, to improve shelter and socio-economic conditions for the displaced, including resettling several thousand internally displaced families from the camps into new sites. Another important initiative is the multi-million dollar social investment fund created by the World Bank, UNHCR and the UN Development Programme (UNDP), in partnership with the Government. Also of note is the National Poverty Reduction Strategy for 2003-2005, which will target internally displaced persons as a vulnerable group. The strategy includes plans for: new housing outside of the

camps; upgrading infrastructure in camps; addressing the employment problems of the displaced; and improving their access to education and health care. This program is a positive step, signaling an important recognition of the need to give internally displaced persons the opportunity to escape a situation of perpetual dependency and resume their lives as productive citizens.

Similarly, in Georgia, I very much welcomed the initiative of the “New Approach to IDP Assistance” adopted by the Government in 2000, in partnership with UNDP, UNHCR, the World Bank and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). A key component of the New Approach is the Georgia Self-Reliance Fund, which is a pilot-project offering micro-credit and employment opportunities to internally displaced persons in their current place of residence. While implementation of the New Approach has faced several delays, such that to date the number of internally displaced persons to have benefited is still relatively small, it nonetheless remains an innovative initiative that should be encouraged and expanded, with the required financial support from the international community.

The international community, it must be said, generally has not done well in ensuring a smooth and timely transition from emergency relief to more development-oriented programmes. Bridging this “relief to development” gap remains a significant challenge today. In reality, what is required is not an abrupt shift from relief to development, but an integrated approach in which attention continues to be paid to basic needs, while also supporting reintegration and development. In this respect, funds for transitional strategies, capacity-building initiatives as well as the early engagement of development actors are essential.

The final theme I would call attention to is the need for durable solutions for the displaced. Concretely, this means either return to their areas of origin or resettlement elsewhere and their effective social, economic, legal and political reintegration into the community. OSCE Participating States have undertaken important commitments to facilitate the voluntary return of internally displaced persons in conditions of safety and dignity as well as their reintegration. Indeed, the importance which Governments attach to this commitment has been a key focus of our dialogue during my missions in the region. This was the case, for instance, during my recent visit to the Russian Federation, where voluntary, safe and sustainable returns in the case of Chechnya were a major subject of discussion. The principle of voluntary return in safety and dignity, which necessarily includes non-discrimination against minorities, also remains critically important to uphold for the more than one million persons displaced from and within the Balkans who are still seeking a durable solution. In several OSCE countries, Government programmes to support the return of the displaced and the reconstruction and rehabilitation of their areas of origin are being developed, if not already underway, including in Armenia, the Balkans and Turkey.

In those cases in the OSCE region where safe return is not yet possible due to ongoing conflict, the conflict-resolution role of the OSCE and its on-site presence remain most relevant. Moreover, for those internally displaced who do not feel that conditions are ripe for return, it is critical to respect their choice and support them with interim solutions of improved living conditions, including temporary resettlement, local integration and opportunities for income-generation. Doing so in cases of protracted crises of displacement would not only enable internally displaced persons to live in dignity and lead productive lives in their current place of residence, but would help develop their capacity to be agents of development when they are able to return. Experiences around the world underscore that when internally displaced persons return or resettle willingly and in a way that builds on their own capacities, these solutions are the most sustainable and effective.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate my support for the attention that the OSCE is giving to the problem of internal displacement. While responsibility for internally displaced persons lies first and foremost with their Governments, regional strategies can also be valuable. The OSCE, more than most regional organizations, has the capacity to assist Participating States in carrying out their commitments to their displaced populations, and thereby set an example for other regions with internal displacement crises. In recent years, the OSCE has taken a number of important steps in this regard. However, the scope and magnitude of the problem of internal displacement in the OSCE region surely warrants its being given higher priority and more systematic attention as a human dimension issue. Strategies will need to be developed for promoting assistance, protection and durable solutions for internally displaced populations as well as for preventing further internal displacement, by addressing root causes. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement should prove valuable in this respect.

As we consider today the ways the OSCE might move forward, I would encourage us to think creatively and constructively, in a spirit of partnership, with our eyes firmly on the goal of improving the lives of the people with whose plight we are concerned. Statistics, after all, while useful for underlining the magnitude of a problem, at the same time run the risk of numbing one to the fact that we are talking about human beings, fellow citizens, whose plight calls for not only our compassion and understanding, but our engagement and response, and at all levels, from local to regional to global.

Thank you for your attention.