

**Statement of the Representative of the Secretary General on
Internally Displaced Persons to the 56th Session of the General
Assembly November 9, 2001**

Mr. Chairman
Distinguished Delegates
Ladies and Gentlemen

It has now been nine years since the Commission on Human Rights decided to request the Secretary-General to appoint a representative on the issue of internal displacement, and I was honoured with the assignment. In recent years, I have tended to lay emphasis on the progress made by the international community in recognizing and responding to the global crisis of internal displacement. My reports in this regard have focused on the development of normative and institutional frameworks for protecting and assisting the internally displaced and my dialogue on their behalf with governments and all those concerned with their plight.

This year, I want to highlight the gap between the established legal and institutional frameworks and the rhetorical commitment on the one hand, and the persistent need for protection and assistance for millions of internally displaced persons around the world on the other hand. It is true that awareness about the crisis has been significantly raised and the foundation for effective action has been laid. But it is even more evident that in many parts of the world, protecting and assisting masses of people in desperate situations is still a neglected concern or an unfulfilled aspiration at best.

In over forty countries, on virtually all of the continents, internal conflicts and egregious violations of human rights and other human-made or natural disasters continue to displace people in

astounding numbers. Often times, these populations are entrapped in the zone of conflict and worse than being neglected, are suspected and even persecuted on all sides. While they move across internal borders in search of security and sources of survival, they often remain victims of prejudice, discrimination, degradation and destitution, and that is if they manage to escape the physical dangers of the conflict.

The logic that only refugees who have crossed state borders need international protection is turned on its head. Internally displaced persons, although within their own countries, often receive little or no protection and assistance from national authorities. In many ways, crossing international borders provides the safety that crossing internal borders may not. A stark reminder of this is the situation of those displaced within Afghanistan. More than one million men, women and children are displaced within the country and the numbers are growing daily. Many face immanent starvation, deplorable health and shelter conditions, and their need for protection is acute. However, these needs are going largely unaddressed, and access to this needy population is being impeded.

Mr. Chairman, when it comes to protecting and assisting persons inside their own national borders, some progress has been made. To begin with, an appropriate normative framework, namely the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, has been developed as a result of a creative and cooperative process. Increasing numbers of governments, international and regional organizations, and non-governmental organizations have been widely disseminating the principles. Secondly, at the institutional level, the collaborative approach that utilizes the collective capacities of the international system has been agreed upon as the preferred option, and meaningful efforts are being made to improve the collaborative approach in humanitarian and human rights emergencies. The Emergency Relief Coordinator charged by the

Secretary-General with the responsibility of ensuring that the internally displaced do not fall into the cracks of the UN system is diligently discharging his mandate. And increasingly, many governments with significant displacement problems are opening their doors to international interlocutors in the dialogue on behalf of the displaced and are allowing access for the delivery of assistance to their needy populations.

These developments, however, reflect the bright spots in a situation that generally continues to be dismal and challenging. While the Guiding Principles have been well received at the rhetorical level, their implementation remains problematic, at best rudimentary. In addition, some governments, admittedly a minority, question the manner in which the Principles were developed, even though they acknowledge their sources in human rights law, humanitarian law, and analogous refugee law as authoritative. Institutional arrangements appear well conceived at the Headquarters of the United Nations and at the relevant agencies and, to a degree, in the capital cities of the affected countries. The recently established Interagency Network and the Unit on Internal Displacement at OCHA are certainly promising. But they still have to operationalize the collaborative approach in a manner that delivers both effective protection and assistance to the needy populations on the ground. And while my mandate and other pertinent organs of the UN and the international community engage in constructive dialogue with governments on behalf of their affected populations, some governments deny access not only to the displaced, but also to their countries altogether.

Mr. Chairman, this cursory overview indicates that there is still an urgent need for the international community to take the crisis of internal displacement very seriously and to respond commensurately. This is not only a human rights and humanitarian problem; it is a security problem that threatens the core of the affected countries, their sub-regions, and ultimately, the

international community. Domestically, internal displacement is a symptom of serious national problems. The identity crisis that often characterizes the causes and consequences of displacement, as well as the responses to them, represents a major challenge to the unity and integrity of the nation and indeed to its long-term viability. The crisis of displacement should be viewed as a wake-up call and a warning about the underlying challenges of nation building. At the regional and indeed the international level, internal displacement is the first leg of the refuge across national borders. And, although the right to seek asylum abroad must never be compromised, it is in the interest of all concerned that conditions be created internally that would ensure respect for human rights and humanitarian standards, which would thereby promote security, stability and prosperity not only for the country, but indeed for the region.

Mr. Chairman, we cannot afford to be complacent in the face of this challenge. We must go beyond congratulating ourselves for what has so far been achieved—although it is important to appreciate the progress made as a foundation for more vigilant action. The international community is called upon to consolidate and strengthen its support for the Guiding Principles as a document that builds credibly on existing standards. To the extent that the Principles postulate the primary responsibility of the state in the context of international partnership for the affected communities, they signify the overriding norms of sovereignty as a positive concept of state responsibility, which is increasingly recognized and upheld as a cardinal principle of the international system. We need to support and reinforce the initiative of those governments that have endorsed the Principles, utilized them in their national legislation and administrative reforms, and disseminated them widely, including in the local languages. We also need to support the work of regional organizations, several of which are beginning to integrate internal displacement and Guiding Principles into their policies and programs.

Institutionally, the collaborative arrangement and the coordinating role of the Emergency Relief Coordinator and OCHA also need to be made more effective in mobilizing the operational agencies to deliver protection and assistance to the needy populations. The real significance and long-term prospects of the Network and the soon to be established Unit can only be judged by their effectiveness in operationalizing coordination among the agencies that have the capacity to deliver assistance and protection, and to make sure that this is tangibly manifested on the ground.

Mr. Chairman, it is important to emphasize that my dialogue with governments on behalf of the internally displaced is premised on my sincere respect for national sovereignty and the value of international cooperation with national authorities on behalf of their internally displaced populations. However, as I have repeatedly argued, national sovereignty should not be viewed negatively as a means of barricading a country against the outside world. Rather, I see sovereignty as a positive concept for ensuring the security and general welfare of citizens and all those under state jurisdiction. Our task is to assist governments in appreciating the problem and in promoting the role of the international community to collaborate with them in providing assistance and protection for their displaced citizens and all those under their control. This notion of sovereignty as responsibility needs to be restated authoritatively and postulated by the relevant organs of the United Nations system as an overriding norm of the international system.

Mr. Chairman, since the Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, suggested to me the need to conduct research into problems of displacement through an independent research institution, policy-oriented research and analytical studies have been a vital pillar in the work of my mandate. The Brookings (now Brookings –CUNY) Project on Internal Displacement initially undertook the

research that produced the two-volume study on displacement—*Masses in Flight* and *Forsaken People*—which, on the request of Secretary-General Kofi Annan were abridged into a more popularized version, *Exodus Within Borders*. Since then, the Brookings-CUNY project has conducted a series of studies on various aspects of internal displacement, and has occasionally been called upon by other UN agencies to undertake research projects and studies that are more appropriately carried out by an independent research institution. In this context, I would like to extend our deep appreciation to those governments and foundations that have generously supported our work through the Brookings-CUNY Project on Internal Displacement. Without their support we could not have done much of what we have been able to do, including the development and promotion of the Guiding Principles.

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Delegates, let me conclude with a thought which always both guides and haunts me on my missions to affected countries. When I go to the displaced populations in the name of the Secretary-General and The United Nations, I feel conscious of the moral authority and hope for international support that my visit signifies; but I also realize that I may be raising expectations beyond what I can deliver. This is a moral dilemma which I resolve by trying to do the best I can under the circumstances to ensure that something is done by the local, national and international actors to make the visit meaningful and fruitful.

The fact that the international community has now been seized with the global crisis of internal displacement raises comparable dilemmas. The expectations of the displaced populations around the world are being raised by the increasing awareness of their plight on the part of the international community. To guard against hope turning into despair, the United Nations, which is the ultimate guarantor of human dignity on a global scale, needs to live up to its

image and ensure international cooperation on behalf of the millions of internally displaced persons around the world, for whom there is no credible alternative. This is my plea, my hope, and my optimistic expectation.

Thank you Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Delegates for your kind attention.