

The Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement

INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT IN KENYA

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While the issue of internal displacement has been touched upon by our speakers this afternoon, I'd like to conclude the formal presentations with a quick update on the IDP situation in Kenya.

In just three months, as many as 600,000 Kenyans have been displaced from their homes by political violence. Some 12,000 have crossed the border to Uganda as refugees; about 300,000 have been displaced to 300 IDP camps; and up to another 300,000 are estimated to have left their homes to stay with friends and family.

At the height of the violence international organizations were unable to deliver aid to IDPs in the Rift valley because of insecurity. There were reports of several thousand IDPs living under trees without even basic shelter; and of some IDP women resorting to transactional sex to obtain money and food.

In the camps three main problems have been reported. First, some camps have been vulnerable to attack, with over-extended police forces unable to protect IDPs from local gangs. There have been particular concerns about the safety of unaccompanied children in the camps. Second, there are reports of sexual violence against women. And third the incidence of certain diseases is high within camps, particularly diseases associated with poor sanitation and cramped conditions.

Even before the power-sharing agreement was brokered in late January, the Kenyan government started closing IDP camps in an effort to prompt people to go home. Most did not, instead turning to friends and family for shelter. On Wednesday this week President Kibaki encouraged IDPs to go home, reportedly saying: 'Don't fear going back.'

Such things happen in the world, but they should not deter you', and dismissing as propaganda reports that it was still unsafe for IDPs to return. Although there are no accurate data on the return of IDPs in Kenya, it appears that the majority still has not gone home. The Kenyan Human Rights Commission and various international organizations have voiced concerns that IDPs may encounter insecurity if they return too soon, and also immediate obstacles to reinstating their livelihoods. Problems will be particularly acute for those IDPs wishing to resettle in their 'tribal areas' in view of land shortages and rural poverty.

Finally, against the backdrop of efforts to return people displaced by the post-election violence, there have been reports of new displacements in Kenya arising from tensions that pre-date the current political unrest. Several hundred people are reported to have fled their homes after a recent Kenyan army offensive against the rebel group the Sabaot Land Defense Force.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that finding durable solutions for the displaced in Kenya will be a necessary prerequisite for achieving lasting peace and stability there.