

The Scouting Report – Humanitarian Crises in Iraq and Darfur
Elizabeth Ferris and Fred Barbash
March 25, 2009

12:30 Fred Barbash-Moderator: As co-director of the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, Beth Ferris focuses on the international community's response to humanitarian crises, with a particular emphasis on the human rights of internally displaced persons. Beth is here to take your questions on Darfur and Iraq. Welcome Beth. Can you start by bringing us up to date on the situation there and the latest developments?

12:31 Elizabeth Ferris: Hi Fred. I'm glad to be here.

12:32 Elizabeth Ferris: With respect to Darfur, as you know the Bashir government has expelled 13 international aid agencies and 3 national NGOs and there is growing concern about the humanitarian consequences for Darfur's 2.9 million displaced people.

12:32 Elizabeth Ferris: And yesterday, Sudanese president Bashir visited Egypt -- and the Egyptian government didn't turn him over to the ICC as called for in the arrest warrant.

12:33 [Comment From Jason] Can you explain the extent of the crisis in Iraq? About how many people are currently displaced in Iraq?

12:34 Elizabeth Ferris: About 4 million people have been displaced in Iraq -- about 2 million have fled to neighboring countries and over 2 million are displaced within the country. It's a major humanitarian crisis that deserves more attention than it is receiving.

12:34 [Comment From Iain Adams ISCI-USA] How can the Obama Administration help expedite the resettlement of not only Iraqi refugees in countries like Syria and Lebanon, but also those IDP's in Iraq?

12:35 Elizabeth Ferris: Resettlement is a complicated process and although the US government has introduced measures to expedite the movement of Iraqis from the region -- in Syria and Lebanon, but also Egypt and Jordan -- resettlement will be a solution for only a small number of Iraq's refugees. The target for the next year is some 17,000.

12:36 Elizabeth Ferris: And Iain, resettlement of IDPs is particularly tricky. There are now provisions for processing resettlement applications inside Iraq, but most of those resettled in the US will come from neighboring countries. I don't expect resettlement to be a solution for more than a handful of Iraqi IDPs.

12:36 [Comment From Melissa] Do you foresee refugees and displaced persons in Iraq returning to their homes in the near future?

12:38 Elizabeth Ferris: Return is the major issue of the day when it comes to Iraqi refugees and IDPs. Our best estimates are that between 200 and 300,000 have returned so far -- but their experiences haven't been particularly good.

12:38 Elizabeth Ferris: In fact, most are returning to neighborhoods where their sect is in a majority -- there have been few minority returns to date. And many are returning to find their property occupied by others -- which means that they are often displaced again.

12:38 [Comment From Jen] Was it a mistake for the U.N. court to bring charges against Bashir. Seems like this has produced a very predictable backlash and the chances of bringing him to justice in the near future were slim to none.

12:40 Elizabeth Ferris: This brings up the question of the relationship between peace and justice. Some have argued that the indictments make it more difficult for the peace process to yield results. Others say that the need for justice should take precedence. Good arguments on both sides.

12:41 Elizabeth Ferris: But the situation as it's developing is really troubling. The humanitarian consequences are enormous, the already-troubled peace process in Darfur is stalled, there are fears of an impact on the CPA - the peace agreement in the South -- and there is little that Western governments can do.

12:41 [Comment From Ron] Sudan's government has expelled international NGOs from Darfur as a result of the indictment by the ICC. What does this mean for those who depend on international assistance?

12:43 Elizabeth Ferris: It's important to underscore that the United Nations is still present and active in Darfur. But agencies such as the World Food Program depend on NGOs, such as CARE and Save the Children to actually deliver food relief in the IDP camps. Without the NGOs, food distribution becomes much more difficult -- so there are fears that the humanitarian crisis will become worse. And then there are concerns about medical care and safe water and the many other relief items which NGOs distribute.

12:43 [Comment From Iain Adams ISCI-USA] Even with the decline in the types of threats and violence that drove Iraqis from their home the obstacles posed by the inadequacies of the Iraqi Judiciary and other factors seem to hinder the process of returning those who were displaced. What steps can be taken by the Iraqi government to alter this and relieve some of the pressure?

12:45 Elizabeth Ferris: It is the responsibility of the Iraqi government to create the conditions to allow for the refugees and IDPs to return to their home. As you point out, there are serious questions about the capacity of Iraqi institutions -- the ministries and the judiciary -- to provide the necessary support to returnees. For example, the question of property restitution is a huge issue which will require much more effective response by the Iraqi government than we've seen so far.

12:45 Elizabeth Ferris: At the same time, the Iraqi government's budget is being cut as a result of plummeting oil revenues. The government will have to make some hard choices if it's to comply with its obligations.

12:46 [Comment From Sally] Should we be talking more seriously about resettling Iraqis in the United States?

12:47 Elizabeth Ferris: Yes, the US should commit to resettling more Iraqis in the future, but should also support governments in the region -- and press the Iraqi government to create conditions to enable return. Resettlement should be part of a comprehensive solution. It will never be a solution for most of Iraq's 4 million displaced.

12:47 [Comment From Alanna] When the troops are out of Iraq, what will happen in Iraq and Darfur? and what can be done to prevent the crisis from getting worse?

12:49 Elizabeth Ferris: The simple answer, Alanna, to the question of what will happen in Iraq when the troops are gone is that we don't know. If the security situation continues to improve, if people are able to return in safety and dignity, if the Iraqi security forces are able to fill the gap, then there could be peace and stability in the country.

12:49 Elizabeth Ferris: But the situation in Iraq is quite fragile and continued attention is needed -- to the humanitarian needs of Iraq's displaced, but also to the security situation and to the challenge of ensuring the capacity of the Iraqi government is able to provide for the needs of its citizens.

12:50 [Comment From marv steinberg] What do you think the Obama administration should do to help provide more humanitarian aid and facilitate the peace process? What do you think about the establishment of a no-fly zone by NATO?

12:51 Elizabeth Ferris: Darfur is one of the largest humanitarian operations in the world -- mobilizing over \$1 billion in assistance every year and staffed by over 14,000 humanitarian workers. I don't think the answer is more assistance. Rather a political solution is needed.

12:52 Elizabeth Ferris: I worry about the consequences of implementing a no-fly zone -- this would mean a tremendous military commitment, would likely entail conflict with the Sudanese armed forces, and would drag us into yet another conflict with a Muslim country. I don't think this is the answer.

12:52 [Comment From Dan] What politically can we do that would have success in Darfur?

12:53 Elizabeth Ferris: Well, Dan, our options are fairly limited. Sanctions have been in place since 1997. While diplomacy is the answer, it's slow. I think we've got to put Darfur high on the agenda of our diplomacy with Russia and China. And then there are countries like Egypt and other members of the Arab League which have a role to play in finding a solution. But it's not easy. And meanwhile people are suffering on the ground.

12:53 [Comment From Tom] Going back to Darfur, what can an interested American really do? I see "Not on Our Watch" or "Save Darfur" banners everywhere. But what concrete steps can I take?

12:55 Elizabeth Ferris: Keeping the issue alive is important. So is continuing to ask questions of our government. There aren't easy answers, to be sure, but in today's climate where the economy seems to dominate everything, it's important to keep the pressure on with respect to Darfur.

12:55 [Comment From Erin]

Is there a linkage between what's happening in Darfur and the peace agreement in Southern Sudan?

12:57 Elizabeth Ferris: This is a major concern. The peace in southern Sudan is also quite fragile -- with unresolved questions about the border demarcation, distribution of oil revenues, timing of elections, etc. There wasn't prior discussion with the SPLM of the move to kick out the international NGOs. I think we should be paying much more attention to the peace process in the South.

12:57 [Comment From Joe (DC)]

What do you think about the Olympic champion speed skater Joey Cheek and the stance he's taken on Darfur and China?

12:58 Elizabeth Ferris: The involvement of celebrities and personalities in advocacy on Darfur has yielded amazing results in terms of increasing awareness of the situation in Darfur. That's good.

12:59 [Comment From Rebecca] What kind of impact have refugees had on neighboring countries and regions?

1:00 Elizabeth Ferris: In the case of Iraq, the refugees in neighboring countries -- especially Syria and Jordan -- have had a significant economic and social impact. These are also countries which have hosted Palestinian refugees for more than 50 years.

1:00 Elizabeth Ferris: And in the case of Darfur, there are already 250,000 Darfurian refugees in Chad -- and one of the concerns about this present situation is that if the humanitarian situation worsens for IDPs in Darfur, there could be new movements of Darfurians into Chad -- also a very fragile political situation.

1:01 [Comment From Iain Adams ISCI-USA] The UN response to the Iraqi Refugee crisis has increased over the couple of years, what plans/shifts in policy do you see the UN making for 2009?

1:02 Elizabeth Ferris: One of the major concerns about the international response is the need to raise resources from countries other than the US. Many traditional donors see the Iraqi problem as a US responsibility and funding of UN appeals has been low.

1:04 Elizabeth Ferris: And apart from the question of funding, there are major issues about how and when the UN will be able to be more active inside Iraq. The UN, you know, doesn't have a good reputation in Iraq -- it's history is linked with sanctions, oil-for-food scandals and weapons inspections. In order to restore its own credibility, the UN has got to be able to deliver assistance inside Iraq. But the security situation makes that very difficult.

1:04 [Comment From Melissa] Can you comment on our country's handling of those displaced by Hurricane Katrina? I don't think we have a terrific record on these issues either.

1:05 Elizabeth Ferris: Over a million people were displaced as result of Katrina and, you're right, Melissa, our country's handling of the emergency was poor. In fact, by

international human rights standards, we fell far short of good practice -- in measures to prevent displacement, in assisting and protecting those affected by the storms, and in supporting long-term recovery.

1:06 [Comment From Tim] In addition to Iraq and Sudan, which areas trouble use the most in terms of internal conflict and displaced families?

1:08 Elizabeth Ferris: Right now, we're particularly worried about Sri Lanka and the effects of the military campaign on unarmed civilians. But there's also Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic, Colombia, Gaza and then there's Zimbabwe -- which is a humanitarian nightmare. No shortage of humanitarian problems and displaced families.

1:08 [Comment From marv steinberg] Comment--Gabriel Stauring of Stop Genocide Now is in Chad and is sending back daily reports from the camps. Can be seen on the Stop Genocide Now web site.

1:09 Elizabeth Ferris: Yes, the situation in Chad is quite serious -- the camps are strung out along the border and there are questions about the capacity to respond if large numbers of Darfurians were to cross over. By the way, there are also 40,000 or so Chadian refugees in Darfur. There are always regional dimensions to these crises.

1:11 Elizabeth Ferris: And displacement in Darfur continues -- there were 318,000 newly displaced last year, and some 36,000 recently displaced in the last few weeks from Southern Darfur.

1:11 [Comment From Jeff] To what extent is the situation in Darfur "their problem?" It seems like the problems there run so deep that an effective resolution would have to come from within Darfur itself. Can international intervention really make a difference?

1:12 Elizabeth Ferris: I think international pressure and diplomacy can play a positive role in bringing the parties to the negotiating table in Darfur. But the situation has become much more complex in the last couple of years -- there are at least 50 armed groups in Darfur now.

1:13 Elizabeth Ferris: And there are questions about the sustainability of this massive aid operation in Darfur -- it's been going on for 5 years or so, representing a tremendous commitment of resources. Darfur has become a protracted displacement situation, making solutions more difficult. Actually this crisis is raising questions about the way we respond to humanitarian crises and our reliance on international agencies.

1:14 [Comment From Iain Adams ISCI-USA] What effect will a continued autonomous Kurdistan have on Iraq's IDP situation?

1:15 Elizabeth Ferris: Displacement has a long history in the northern part of Iraq. We're still seeing the consequences of Saddam Hussein's forcible displacement of Kurds through his Arabization policy. There are possibilities of more people being displaced as a result of conflicts over the disputed territories, particularly around the Kirkuk referendum. It's hard to predict.

1:16 [Comment From Dave]

Did former president Bush do anything about refugees in Iraq? Did he do anything that worsened or improved the situation?

1:17 Elizabeth Ferris: Well, the decision to invade Iraq certainly was a major factor in the displacement of millions of Iraqis. Later, after considerable pressure, yes, the Bush administration took some steps to increase the number of Iraqis resettled to the US and has contributed to relief efforts.

1:17 [Comment From Nancy] You say we should support governments in the region on Iraqi resettlement. Do you mean we should encourage them to accept Iraq refugees?

1:19 Elizabeth Ferris: I think we should support governments who have hosted large numbers of refugees to continue to do so. They face their own host of economic, social and political problems and their response overall has been incredibly generous. The countries in the region expect the refugees to go home, but the reality is that there will be some refugees who are unable to return. We need to recognize the commitment that countries in the region have made.

1:19 [Comment From Laurie] In one of your papers, you say that displacement is not just an "accidental by-product of the conflict, but is both an objective and strategy in the armed struggle." Can you explain this?

1:20 Elizabeth Ferris: In Iraq, displacement was a deliberate strategy in the sectarian violence, where militias tried to gain territory by displacing people. In Darfur as well, displacement was used by armed groups to control land, resources, and territory. Forced displacement has become a strategy of war.

1:21 [Comment From Melissa W.] Since Bashir has expelled the major NGOs in Darfur, how has the international community compensated for their absence, and do you think the NGOs will be let back into Darfur any time soon?

1:22 Elizabeth Ferris: UN agencies have taken some measures to distribute food, for example, directly to camps. And UN agencies -- assuming the international NGOs aren't able to return quickly -- can gear up to do more. You know, the UN's role is traditionally one of coordination, but the situation in Darfur may force the UN to take on a more operational role. I don't think the NGOs, at least those who have been expelled, will be back soon. But there are still over 70 international aid groups on the ground.

1:24 Elizabeth Ferris: And Bashir has said that all international organizations should leave the country within a year. I hope that he'll change his mind -- and international pressure here could be effective -- because the humanitarian consequences could be grave indeed.

1:24 [Comment From Jason] What has been the effect of these conflicts on women in both regions and are there any programs in place to support them.

1:25 Elizabeth Ferris: In both countries, women have faced particular obstacles. In Darfur, the levels of sexual violence against women reached very high levels -- particularly when they left the camps to collect firewood. In fact, this was one of the main factors leading to the decision to deploy the peacekeepers.

1:26 Elizabeth Ferris: And in Iraq, women have faced problems in host countries with reports of women turning to survival sex to feed their children. And there are alarming reports of increased so-called "honor killings" of women. There are some programs in place -- but not nearly enough.

1:27 Fred Barbash-Moderator: Beth: Thanks so much for taking all this time. This was a great chat. And thanks to all of our guests. These were terrific questions.

Have a good afternoon.

1:27 Fred Barbash - Moderator: And don't forget to check out next week's chat with Steven Pifer and Fred Barbash, who will be taking questions on the upcoming NATO Summit. you can read about it here:
http://www.brookings.edu/events/2009/0401_nato_summit_chat.aspx

1:27 Elizabeth Ferris: Thanks everyone -- bye.