

# **Addressing Internal Displacement in Africa**

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**Annual Meeting of the Ethiopian Community Development Council  
20 June 2000**

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First I would like to thank Tsehaye Teferra and the Ethiopian Community Development Council for bringing together the refugee community in the United States to focus on Africa.

The latest statistics in the US Committee for Refugees' *World Refugee Survey* list 3 million refugees in Africa and between 10 and 11 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). As you can see, the numbers of IDPs, or those forcibly displaced WITHIN their own countries, are sharply growing so that they now outstrip refugees by 3 to 1 in Africa. The ratio in fact may even be higher. According to the Organization of African Unity, there are 20 million IDPs in Africa.

But whatever the precise statistics, internally displaced persons receive second class treatment in humanitarian emergencies in Africa and other parts of the world. Although humanitarian emergencies produce both refugees and internally displaced persons, there is a tremendous gap in the international response system when dealing with these two groups. The reason is that the international system set up after the second world war focused on protecting persons who crossed a border to escape persecution. As a result, refugees have an international legal instrument—the Refugee Convention, and an agency—UNHCR, to turn to. But in keeping with traditional notions of sovereignty, no predictable international system was put in place to provide persons displaced in their own countries with protection and assistance when they are at risk. IDPs may be uprooted from their homes for the same reasons as refugees, but unlike refugees, they often do not receive minimum food, shelter, medicine, or protection because they remain under the jurisdiction of governments which may be unwilling or unable to provide them with security and welfare or there may be no government at all.

Richard Holbrooke, the United States Ambassador to the United Nations, took a trip to Angola at the end of last year and was horrified by what he saw. Ninety percent of the uprooted people were IDPs, yet he told the UN Security Council that "for the most part, they were out of the reach of the international community's assistance." To the extent they had any support, he reported, it came from the World Food Programme and this was insufficient.

This finding is hardly unique to Angola. There is an institutional gap in the international response to forced displacement. Although there is an array of international humanitarian, human rights and development agencies that have come forward in recent years to

provide protection, assistance and development aid to IDPs, the system is ad hoc: the different organizations basically pick and choose the situations in which they will become involved on the basis of their mandates, resources and other considerations. For UNHCR, about 1 1/2 million IDPs in Africa are of concern out of 10 to 11 million on that continent. These are primarily IDPs who are mixed in with returning refugees. If they are not mixed in, and most are not, they receive little or no attention from UNHCR, in keeping with its core mandate for refugees. Nor does UNICEF or the ICRC deal with many of the internally displaced persons in Africa. The selectivity and unpredictability of the international system could be modified if there were an effective central point within the UN system to routinely and rapidly assign responsibilities to different agencies. But there is no effective point. There is an Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) who in the past few years has been taking the plight of IDPs seriously and is trying to strengthen coordination among the different agencies.

But in Angola, Holbrooke found coordination not to be working well. Consequently, he urged the international community not to fall back on what he said was the worst of all euphemisms—that we are coordinating closely. In Angola, coordination, he said, was a physical impossibility "since the UN agencies are scattered in 10 different buildings in a city without good working telephones or good infrastructure." In other situations, agencies simply do not want to be coordinated. They have far greater budgets and wield more power than the coordinator so they do not readily fall into line.

The OAU Secretary-General Salim Salim echoed Holbrooke's concerns in 1995, in pointing to the discrepancy in treatment between refugees and IDPs in Africa. "We in the OAU," he said, are concerned . . . about the silent millions of displaced persons whose suffering is no different from those of refugees and who seem to have attracted the least attention of the international community." International attention basically focuses on one side of the border. Just remember Rwanda after the genocide: most donor funds went to the refugee camps outside the country whereas only a fraction went to assistance and development needs within Rwanda.

Such unequal treatment can spawn conflict which is just the opposite of what UN assistance is intended to accomplish. In Burundi, for example, in 1993, the Representative of the Secretary-General on IDPs, Francis Deng, found that the conditions in UNHCR camps for refugees were so much better than the conditions in the camps for IDPs, which were just up the road. As a result, resentments and violent incidents occurred. During returns, too, IDPs often suffer neglect as well. Unlike returning refugees, they are often not provided with seeds, tools and other service packages to facilitate reintegration. This has been found to be the case in Angola, Mozambique and other African countries.

What is needed is a definite locus of responsibility in the field for the internally displaced. Holbrooke would like to see one agency assume a global mandate for IDPs. And he, like others earlier, has called upon UNHCR to assume that responsibility because of its expertise with refugees and with protection issues. IDPs, it should be underscored, need more than food, medicine and shelter; they generally need protection of their

physical safety and human rights, which few international organizations other than UNHCR and ICRC have the expertise to provide.

Although UNHCR is not ready to take on the entire responsibility for IDPs, it has expressed willingness to do more. Already, UNHCR is considering extending its activities for IDPs in Angola. But is it ready to also become involved with IDPs in Burundi, Congo, Congo Brazzaville, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Eritrea, not to speak of the Sudan? In all of these countries UNHCR's role has been limited or non-existent, sometimes for good reason, but I believe we have to encourage the organization to do more.

Other international organizations also have to do more. But there still remains the question of who's in charge in the field. In our book *Masses in Flight*, Francis Deng and I recommended that one operational agency on the ground be tasked with monitoring the conditions of IDPs, identifying their protection and assistance needs and working with a coordinating mechanism to promote a division of labor to address these needs. Holbrooke has also called—in the absence of a single agency for IDPs—for a lead agency to take responsibility for the overall response in each emergency. Meanwhile the Office of the Emergency Relief Coordinator, taken aback by Holbrooke's remarks, is trying to strengthen coordination and demonstrate that a system based on coordination can work. But it remains to be seen how effective this will actually prove on the ground or whether there will continue to be need for outsiders to press for lead agencies or one overall agency for IDPs.

Of course greater involvement on the part of the international community with IDPs will require additional resources, but unfortunately resources are limited when it comes to Africa. Although Africa is the continent with the most IDPs and also the continent the least equipped to deal with the problem, politics and also racism intervenes. A recent New York Times editorial (6\17\00) pointed out that the average refugee from Kosovo received more than \$1 a day from the international community whereas the average refugee in Africa gets 11 cents. And as for the internally displaced, the editorial remarked, "most often get nothing." So IDPs in Africa are disadvantaged twice—to begin with because they are IDPs, and then because they are **African** IDPs. Greater pressure from the humanitarian community and in particular from the African-American community in the United States would certainly be in order to try to promote a more equitable distribution of international resources in emergency situations. But as Roger Winter recently pointed out in the World Refugee Survey, the African-American community is "largely disengaged from addressing humanitarian issues in Africa."

Public support must also be mobilized to press the U.S. Government to assume more of a commitment to IDPs in general. Jim Kunder, the former director of the U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, wrote a report several months ago on the U.S. Government and internally displaced persons, entitled *Present But Not Accounted For*. Jointly published by the U.S. Committee for Refugees and the Brookings Institution, the report calls upon the U.S. Government to bring its humanitarian response system in line with the needs and realities of today's emergencies. While the US has long shown leadership in regard to refugee situations, its response to situations of internal displacement, the report

finds, needs to be more forthright, integrated and effective. It uses the Sudan, which houses 4 million IDPs, as one of its main examples.

How national interest is defined is also a critical determinant of how much attention will be paid to IDPs in Africa. The Sierra Leone Ambassador to the United States captured the problem well: "Sierra Leone is small, the economy is tiny . . . It's just not important to them," he said (The New York Times, 6/5/00). But donors are shortsighted if they do not see that conflict and displacement in Africa rarely remain confined within borders. Indeed, conflict and displacement often undermine both national and regional stability and ultimately affect markets and international peace and security. Defining national interest more broadly and humanely around concepts of human security is something our neighbor to the north in Canada is innovatively championing.

Reflecting this more encouraging point of view is the attention recently being paid by the UN Security Council to African concerns. A Presidential statement in January, drafted by the U.S. Ambassador, linked humanitarian emergencies in Africa to international peace and security, noted that there is a shortfall in funding for both refugees and internally displaced persons in Africa, and observed that there is no comprehensive protection regime for IDPs. The statement also made reference to the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, the first international standards for such populations, introduced into the UN by Francis Deng. The Council then went on to adopt in April a resolution which for the first time expressed willingness to take steps when refugees and IDPs are vulnerable to the threat of harassment, or where camps are vulnerable to infiltration by armed elements, and where such situations may constitute a threat to peace and security. It is also encouraging to note that this coming July, the UN Economic and Social Council will for the first time devote part of its session to internally displaced persons, and to this end, will discuss case studies on Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In the case of Burundi, UN agencies worked out a joint strategy this year to protest the regroupment policies of the Government, which forcibly moved hundreds of thousands of Hutu civilians into camps without any attention to their basic needs. Repeated demarches and visits were made by heads of agencies, one after the other, including the Representative of the Secretary-General, with the result that the Government has now announced that it will close the camps.

At the same time, Sierra Leone, like Rwanda, is an all too tragic example of international negligence. The unwillingness and inability of the international community to act effectively in these and other African emergencies has made many argue that Africans should play a stronger role in addressing the problems in their region. To be sure, they should, whether in the form of a more activated OAU or a more well funded and disciplined ECOMOG. After all, the international community is not going to defeat the RUF but African forces might. Backing up African initiatives should be a UN ready to expend the energy and resources to contain crises in Africa and with the capability of a rapid deployment force that can be sent in to protect large numbers at risk.