

**Eighth National Conference of the Ethiopian Community Development Council**  
**Panel on African Refugees and IDPS: The Enduring Search for Durable Solutions**  
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**Remarks by Roberta Cohen**

I am very pleased to join Sylvain Ngung of the Organization of African Unity and Guenet Guebre-Christos of UNHCR on this panel on African refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Special thanks must go to Dr. Tsehay Teferra and the Ethiopian Community Development Council for convening this eighth national conference and bringing together refugee advocates from all parts of the United States to focus on Africa. This conference has become an important event in stimulating better refugee policies and programs, in particular with regard to Africa.

As you know, my work concentrates on internally displaced persons – those forcibly displaced *within* the borders of their own countries by conflict and human rights violations. According to a recent report of the Global IDP Database, the African continent has more IDPs than the rest of the world put together. The number of IDPs in Africa during the second half of 2001 was more than 13 million out of a worldwide total of about 25 million. This number has been steadily increasing over the past 3-4 years, mainly because of protracted and brutal conflicts, in particular in the Sudan, Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sierra Leone.

The impact, it should be underscored, extends well beyond the actual persons affected. Conflict and displacement disrupt whole communities and societies. Indeed, the areas left behind by the displaced suffer depopulation and neglect. The areas to which the displaced flee suffer damage as well. In Rwanda, the World Bank estimates that the destruction done to national parks and forests will have long-term economic effects. In Angola and Liberia, there has been an overloading of urban infrastructure, quickening its deterioration. Few African countries can afford such destruction. Ten of the African

countries with significant internally displaced populations are among the thirty poorest countries in the world.

Conflict and displacement also spill over borders into neighboring countries. The Great Lakes region of Africa is a good example of how conflict and displacement in one country can inflame the situation in others. Similarly in the Horn of Africa and West Africa, conflict and internal displacement in one country have spilled over borders and helped destabilize neighboring countries.

The ensuing humanitarian tragedy combined with the national and regional instability caused have spurred the United Nations Secretary-General and the international community to focus increasingly on developing legal and institutional frameworks to address and resolve the problem of internal displacement.

Before turning to the steps taken by the international community, I would like first to emphasize the importance of national responsibility. Internally displaced persons, unlike refugees, are within their own countries and should enjoy the protection and assistance of their own governments. Indeed, governments regularly insist that they have the primary responsibility for the welfare and security of their uprooted populations. But too often they prove unwilling or unable to assume that responsibility. It is here that a far greater international effort should be made to hold governments accountable to protecting and assisting their own displaced populations. Take a few examples in Africa. The Sudan, for example, has more than 4 million internally displaced persons, more than any other country of the world. In his latest report, the Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons has had to urge the government to develop a national policy for IDPs and to hold a national seminar on the subject. A national policy would mean governmental assumption of responsibility for *all* ethnic and religious groups in the country and the taking of steps to address the needs of the displaced. Angola is another case in point. It is a wealthy country, rich in oil and natural resources. Yet it has largely channeled those resources into arms purchases rather than address the desperate needs of its uprooted populations who constitute about one-third of its population of 12 million.

Donors in fact have been reluctant to support increased humanitarian assistance to Angola without greater commitment on the part of the government to its needy populations.

Of course, governments are not the only ones to be held responsible. In Africa, insurgent groups are plentiful and also have responsibilities toward displaced populations under international law. Indeed, large numbers of IDPs live in areas controlled by insurgent groups, not by governments. In the Sudan, Operation Lifeline Sudan, an international assistance program, innovatively negotiated with both the government and the rebel groups in an effort to channel needed relief to both sides in the conflict. UN staff also developed codes of conduct to try to hold the rebel forces accountable to basic standards of human rights. In other countries, by contrast, either because of the politics of the situation or the danger involved, humanitarian agencies have had little contact with insurgent forces and sometimes no structured dialogue at all about humanitarian aid. As a result, little information is often known about the plight of IDPs in insurgent areas and little or nothing is done to try to reach them. In Angola, the Representative of the Secretary-General found that those living under UNITA control were largely written off by the international community. It is only now, with the cease fire, that we learn about the starvation and sickness plaguing these populations. Indeed, according to Doctors Without Borders, one in three Angolan children leaving war zones is starving. It is extremely critical therefore for international agencies and NGOs to devote more time and effort trying to collect information about IDPs living under insurgent control in Africa. One way to do this is through stronger international partnerships with local organizations and church groups that sometimes do have access. Another way is to promote greater international attention to the problem so that international actors feel compelled to find ways to address their plight. We cannot allow these IDPs to remain forgotten people; they must be on the international agenda.

When we turn to the international community's role with internally displaced persons, we find that it has increased substantially over the past decade. Indeed, in most instances, internal displacement is no longer considered a strictly national problem under the

exclusive sovereignty of the government. An emerging international responsibility has become evident. First a legal framework has been developed, the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, presented to the United Nations in 1998 by the Representative of the Secretary-General. The Principles set forth the rights of IDPs and the responsibilities of governments, insurgent groups and others toward these populations. The UN, regional organizations and non-governmental organizations have been very supportive of these Principles. In Africa, it is noteworthy that the governments of Uganda, Burundi and Angola are developing policies and also legal frameworks based on the Guiding Principles in cooperation with the international community.

At the institutional level, a large number of international organizations and NGOs have become involved in helping internally displaced persons. But there is no one international agency with a global mandate for IDPs. Over the past ten year years, a number of prominent people, most recently US Ambassador Richard Holbrooke in 2000, called upon the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to assume this responsibility because of the similarities between refugees and IDPs and because the internally displaced needed a more predictable and targeted response. But neither the UNHCR nor the international community was prepared for UNHCR to take this on. Instead, the UN promised to strengthen its existing system -- the collaborative approach, by which all the different international agencies in the field work together, or are supposed to work together, under the coordination of the Emergency Relief Coordinator. Because this ad hoc and untargeted system regularly proved deficient for IDPs, the UN sought to bolster the system by appointing a Special Coordinator for IDPs in 2000; and in January 2002, the UN created a special IDP Unit, attached to the Office of the Emergency Relief Coordinator. This is the very first unit for IDPs the UN has ever had. You will recall that the Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons, Dr. Francis Deng, who was appointed in 1992, is a voluntary position held by a single individual. Now there is an actual office within the UN with a staff of 8, seconded from the different international agencies – UNHCR, UNICEF, the World Food Program, UNDP and the International Organization for Migration, as well as the NGO community – to focus exclusively on IDPs.

To be sure, the office is a small one, but its agenda is tall. It is supposed to improve the UN's response to situations of internal displacement by undertaking country reviews to identify gaps in UN performance, providing expertise, training and guidance to UN agencies in the field, creating better frameworks for the protection of IDPs, and deploying field advisers in some countries to directly enhance the UN response.

The Unit has already shown keen interest in Africa. It has said that it would pay special attention to major displacement crises such as in Angola and Sudan, to protracted crises such as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and to forgotten situations such as in Somalia. Indeed, the Unit and its advisory body, the Inter-Agency Network on Internal Displacement, which preceded it, have already paid visits to 8 African countries, in each case making recommendations for an improved response and trying to follow up to ensure that the recommendations are carried out by staff on the ground.

But one small non-operational unit can hardly be expected to significantly change conditions on the ground without the active support of the larger operational organizations which actually have the staff on the ground. It is, after all, these organizations that will have to directly address IDP concerns. But this may not always happen effectively. In Africa, for example, UNHCR is only marginally involved in protecting and assisting IDPs. If this remains the case, it will not be in a position to support the Unit's programs in Africa, even though IDPs outnumber refugees three to one on that continent. The IDP Special Coordinator has called upon UNHCR to expand its role, but because of an increasingly narrow interpretation of its mandate and because of funding shortfalls, the organization appears to be pulling back. Indeed, UNHCR is not involved in any significant way with internally displaced persons in the Sudan, Angola, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo or Sierra Leone – where the IDP problems are most severe. UNHCR, it can be said, risks becoming largely irrelevant to IDPs in Africa. Yet its role, presence and expertise are critically needed. IDPs need not only food, medicine and shelter. They need protection of their physical safety and human

rights. UNHCR is one of the only agencies with protection skills and expertise with uprooted populations.

One most unfortunate case is in Angola where a sorely needed UNHCR protection program for IDPs is coming to a close, partly as a result of UNHCR's own failure to actively look for support for it, partly because of the United States Government's withdrawal of funds. I have written up this tragic and short-sighted case in the March 2002 issue of the *African Refugee Network*. Does anyone really find it acceptable that in Angola UNHCR will continue to take care of 12,000 refugees but will not make its services available to the several million IDPs in the country who for the most part go without protection and assistance?

I believe it is important that refugee and IDP advocates come together to promote a more comprehensive international system that is both relevant to and effective to today's humanitarian emergencies. Needed too is a more equitable distribution of international resources in emergency situations. Large amounts of funds seem to be found for Afghanistan, but emergencies in Africa remain largely under-funded. This contributes to the fractured response to refugee and IDP emergencies. Most importantly, the international community needs to expend the energy and resources to contain crises in Africa and seek to resolve them. Without a concerted focus on conflict resolution, forced displacement will continue to grow.