

WEAKENED U.S. SUPPORT ENDANGERS ANGOLA'S INTERNALLY DISPLACED MASSES

By ROBERTA COHEN

As the United States and its allies pour aid into Afghanistan for the return and reintegration of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), support for refugees and IDPs in Africa is diminishing. The case of Angola is particularly acute. The long-running civil war in that country has uprooted one-third of the population. With the death of UNITA rebel leader Jonas Savimbi, the conflict could be coming to an end, but more than four million Angolans, out of a population of 12 million, are IDPs, and the number has been steadily rising. Each month, an additional 30,000 people become internally displaced. Yet a UN appeal for \$233 million has brought in less than half of that amount, and the U.S. is withdrawing its support from a promising UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) program to protect and assist Angola's internally displaced.

This U.S. decision merits reconsideration:

- There are in today's world an estimated 25 million internally displaced persons, the majority of whom (13 million)

can be found in Africa.

With the collapse of the Lusaka accords at the end of 1998, conflict and displacement have made Angola

one of the world's worst affected countries, one out of every three Angolans being an IDP.

- Many of the IDPs are in desperate straits, some without sufficient food and medicines, others without adequate shelter, having to take refuge in transit centers, derelict buildings, bombed out warehouses, or in and underneath train carriages.

- Protection problems abound: armed attacks, uncontrolled banditry, the continued laying of landmines, the kidnapping and trading of children, forced conscription, sexual violence.

The plight of Angola's internally displaced was brought to international attention by the former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Richard Holbrooke. After a visit to Angola in 1999, he harshly criticized the international community's failure to provide sufficient humanitarian aid to internally displaced populations, noting that refugees in the country fared far better. He called on UNHCR to expand its operations beyond 12,000 refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to also include the internally displaced and in particular to take steps to address IDP protection concerns. While most humanitarian agencies on the ground focused on food deliveries, too little attention was paid to health, sanitation or to enhancing personal safety for IDPs.

The UNHCR program was introduced in 2000 for a year and a half, with U.S. support. It targeted 200,000 IDPs in the northern provinces of Uige and Zaire and around the capital, Luanda. Not only did it help to build houses and improve sanitation, health and education, but it played a key role in developing an

overall UN strategy to enhance protection for the displaced through presence, monitoring, training, and the establishment of provincial human rights committees—to be carried out in collaboration with the government and local organizations. It also helped draft and advocated for the legal enactment of minimum standards on the resettlement of internally displaced persons -- which the government adopted, based on the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

When the NGO Refugees International reviewed the project in 2001, it found that UNHCR had "significantly improved" the conditions of IDPs under its care. Indeed, it warned that a "serious gap" would develop if UNHCR departed. Others also strongly urged UNHCR to remain and expand its activities, most notably the UN Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator and the Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons, Francis Deng. In a report to the UN in 2001, Deng pointed out that UNHCR had a "comparative advantage in protection," and encouraged it "to examine further possibilities

for an enhanced presence and the development of nationwide inter-agency protection strategies in regard to IDPs."

UNHCR's own headquarters evaluation of its activities at the end of 2001 came to the same conclusion, even though the trend at headquarters at that time was to cut back IDP activities because of budgetary constraints. Indeed, staff with expertise in protection recommended an expansion of UNHCR's program in Angola so that it could encompass IDPs in other parts of the country. A "Strategy for Operationalizing Protection for IDPs in Angola" was put forward, to be carried out over the next two years by UNHCR staff in collaboration with other UN agencies, NGOs and local authorities. The program's aim is to create a sustainable protection system for the country's IDPs. It would:

- train UN and NGO field staff in protection skills and advocacy efforts.
- set up a country-wide IDP monitoring system, composed of mobile protection officers and a local NGO protection network to ensure regular protection presence on the ground;
- develop local capacity by training community leaders, local officials, police and military; strengthening provincial human rights committees and courts as well as community-based services for IDPs, including counseling and radio programs to enable IDPs to better understand their rights; and
- provide identification documents to IDPs to help them avoid harassment by security forces and gain better access to employment and land. To accomplish this, UNHCR proposed the deployment of five UNHCR protection officers, three of whom were already on the ground.

As UNHCR's protection project faces a funding shortfall, 30,000 people are newly displaced every month.

The United States, however, has indicated that it does not plan to fund this program. The State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) seems to be moving from an expansive view of UNHCR's role in humanitarian crises to a more narrow one. UNHCR, it contends, should leave the protection and assistance of internally displaced persons to other organizations and concentrate on refugees. It bases its position on two premises:

- the U.S. cannot justify a large UNHCR presence in Angola to work with IDPs when UNHCR programs for refugees are being cut back in other parts of the world for budgetary reasons; and
- other agencies working in Angola should be capable of undertaking the activities that UNHCR proposes.

Neither argument takes into account the reality of today's humanitarian emergencies. Today's civil wars generally produce more internally displaced persons than refugees and in many cases the IDPs are in worse straits than the refugees. In Angola, there are 12,000 refugees who are being taken care of, but there are several million IDPs who go without protection and assistance and the number is growing. Involvement with IDPs is a matter of relevance to the crisis at hand, not to speak of a humanitarian imperative.

Moreover, the idea that closing down programs for IDPs in Angola will help refugees somewhere else overlooks the fact that the IDP program in Angola is also helping refugees. The provinces in which the IDP operations are based are also areas of refugee return and areas where new refugees come. Both returning refugees and new refugees are being assisted by UNHCR under the IDP program and that includes many refugees who become internally displaced upon return. Knowledge of these areas will help UNHCR plan for future refugee repatriations: an estimated 400,000 Angolan refugees are expected to return, many to these locations.

Despite its 1951 mandate, UNHCR has long been engaged with internally displaced persons because IDPs are so often intertwined with refugees that it would make little sense to assist one group without the other. The new High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers, upon assuming office, gave a lower priority to IDPs than his predecessor, but in 2002 he fought to have UNHCR play the lead role for IDPs and refugees in Afghanistan. UNHCR, moreover, remains actively engaged with IDPs in Sri Lanka, Colombia, Chechnya, the South Caucasus and the Balkans. Angola's IDPs, according to UNHCR staff, are a "textbook case" for UNHCR involvement.

The argument that others can take over from UNHCR also misses the mark. In Angola, protection cannot simply be turned over to "other" organizations on the ground because they sim-

ply do not have the experience or expertise in designing and implementing effective programs to protect uprooted populations. Most of those present in Angola are skilled in water treatment, sanitation, delivering food, or vaccinating children, but not in protection.

To their credit, several UN agencies have begun to contribute to protection: UNICEF (with regard to displaced children), the UN Human Rights Division in Angola (which is training local justice officials) and most notably the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which has now dispersed 17 field staff to 18 provinces to help monitor IDP conditions. But OCHA field staff, whose main function is coordination, have too many other demands placed on them to give the attention to protection that is required. Moreover, they are not protection experts with extensive experience in advocacy with governments over human rights and humanitarian concerns. Although some have been trained by UNHCR, the training hardly creates protection experts overnight. Oversight is needed

as well as targeted presence, which UNHCR mobile teams can provide, and a more sustainable system needs to be set up in the provinces composed

of NGOs, civil society and local authorities.

Shutting down UNHCR's Angola protection program for IDPs will endanger the protection of large numbers of persons and require UNHCR staff to ignore the plight of millions of victims of one of the worst humanitarian crises. The cost of the program is quite low: \$3.3 million per year, money well spent. The U.S. should become proactive in finding the funds to cover it – either from less meritorious parts of its own budget or from other donors; and senior management at UNHCR should actively encourage donors to support the program. Surely it is time for the international community to begin to address the totality of humanitarian crises so that the needs of both refugees and IDPs are met comprehensively.

The U.S. has a special responsibility to Angola and to its millions of internally displaced citizens. Although today Washington supports the Luanda government, for more than a decade during the cold war era, it helped fan the flames of the civil war that lies at the origin of today's massive internal displacement. In that time it poured tens of millions of dollars into backing UNITA and a war that devastated the country. Surely it can now find a few million to support the continuation of a successful program that is helping to protect today's innocent victims.

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