
Internal Displacement in Africa: Where does the Responsibility Lie?

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Africa is the continent with the most underreported and neglected humanitarian emergencies. There are 3 to 4 million refugees in Africa and 13 million internally displaced persons, uprooted by civil war, internal violence, ethnic cleansing, genocide and other serious human rights abuses. Indeed, Africa has more IDPs – people forcibly displaced within their own countries -- than any other part of the world, the worldwide total being 25 million. Of the 13 million IDPs, five million can be found in Sudan where the UN says that the world's greatest humanitarian disaster is currently taking place in the western region of Darfur. Large numbers can also be found in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda, with substantial numbers as well in Liberia, Ivory Coast, Burundi and Somalia – all countries that have experienced protracted and brutal conflicts.

Where does the responsibility lie? To begin with, the colonial powers' artificially created states, with a multiplicity of ethnic groups with little sense of national identity, generated a great deal of conflict and displacement in Africa. This was later exacerbated by the Cold War with the two superpowers funneling arms to client governments with little regard for how these governments treated their own people. Today, however, it is African governments that must bear the responsibility. Whereas democratic and pluralistic governments could mitigate some of the problems afflicting their societies, many African states are under military rule or the rule of dominant ethnic groups that exclude or marginalize others. When it comes to internally displaced persons, African governments will rightfully insist that they have the primary responsibility, but they often prove unwilling or unable to exercise that responsibility. In Darfur right now, in western Sudan, we are seeing a good example of what national responsibility should not be. We are witnessing government blockage of international humanitarian aid from reaching three uprooted black African ethnic groups. Indeed, up to 400,000 deaths are predicted unless the government allows in food and medicine before June when the rainy season makes roads impassable.

This is not to suggest that governments that exercise their national responsibility and turn to the outside world for help always receive it. Take the case of Liberia in West Africa. The World Food Program reports that it has received less than half of the \$77 million it requested to feed IDPs and other affected persons in the area. This means that WFP will soon have to start cutting food rations to already malnourished IDPs. Similarly, the World Food Program reports that it has received only \$35 million of an appeal for \$253

million for its operation in Angola aimed at resettling IDPs and returning refugees. As a result, returns will be less sustainable, which will undermine stability in the country.

Insufficient donor response to Africa can largely be explained by donor preoccupation with other parts of the world where national security interests are considered more compelling. The idea for an international fund for emergencies whose criteria would be human need and vulnerability deserves revisiting. At the same time, African governments are more likely to attract international funding if they show themselves ready to invest more heavily in helping their own displaced populations. Countries with lucrative natural resources, such as oil, should be expected to place more of their own funds into helping displaced populations. One potentially promising new trend in Africa is that governments have begun to develop national laws and policies to deal with IDPs. While laws and policies alone are hardly sufficient, they do demonstrate willingness on the part of the government to address the problem and also give a lever to others to hold the government accountable. The government of Angola, for example, has adopted a law on the returns of IDPs to which it should be held accountable, especially now that millions of Angolans are returning to their home areas. The government of Uganda has developed a national policy on IDPs, although it has not yet adopted it, which the Representative and others are encouraging it to do. This could prove important to the more than 1 million displaced persons in the country, a large number of who are children, extremely vulnerable to violence and human rights abuse.

Beyond national responsibility, regional and sub-regional organizations have an important role to play. Conflict and displacement, after all, do not always remain contained within borders. They often spill over into neighboring countries, helping to destabilize them, as can be seen in the Horn of Africa, West Africa, and the Great Lakes region. In recent years, the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development have begun to acknowledge the problem of internal displacement as a regional one, have organized seminars on the issue, and have pledged to use the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement -- the first international standards for IDPs, as a guide and framework for action. Currently, the African Union is considering drafting a protocol on IDPs to its refugee convention. It also has pledged to play a more vigorous effort with conflict prevention and resolution. It should be noted as well that some African sub-regional organizations, such as ECOWAS, have sent troops to restore law and order and protect displaced populations in three West African countries. Of course, this can be a double-edged sword. Some of the ECOMOG soldiers looted and abused civilians, especially women and children, but other reports show they did a relatively good job of protecting displaced populations. Certainly, the deployment of African peacekeepers reflects the increasingly active role Africans are beginning to play in protecting civilian populations and putting out the fires in their own region.

At the international level, the United Nations is showing a marked interest in developing an effective international system for IDPs. For more than a decade, the Representative of the Secretary-General has pressed UN agencies and departments involved with IDPs to create such an international system. The UN's new top official for humanitarian issues,

Jan Egeland, has recently taken up this challenge and has been speaking out on the issue and encouraging the different international agencies like the World Food Program, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNDP, as well as partner NGOs, to work together more closely under the coordination of his office so as to make the international response to IDPs more predictable and inclusive of both assistance -- food medicine and shelter -- and protection of personal security and human rights. To help him in this endeavor, the UN's IDP Unit, set up in 2002, will soon be upgraded to a division, headed by a special adviser on IDPs. The division will be working closely with the Representative and our Project as well as with the Global IDP Survey in Geneva to bring more cohesion to the UN's approach to IDPs.

Of course, I should note that questions nonetheless arise about the effectiveness of the collaborative approach. Its critics point out that while the different agencies support coordination in theory, none likes to be coordinated in fact. In too many cases, the collaborative approach has failed to effectively address the needs of IDPs. "Co-heads," it is said, "are no heads." As a result, some leading experts continue to recommend that it would be far more effective to assign responsibility for IDPs to an existing agency like UNHCR or to create a new agency for all forced migrants. This way IDP needs would be more predictable and better targeted and the discrepancy that now exists between assistance to IDPs and to refugees would be reduced. But, it must also be underscored that the UN has an energetic and committed humanitarian coordinator in place on this issue, and it behooves us all to try to help make the collaborative approach work better while at the same time remaining honest enough to acknowledge it if the approach does not succeed in doing the job in the field. We must therefore press for strengthened international, regional and national efforts to help reduce the displacement crisis in Africa. If these systems begin to operate well, it will make the lives of countless displaced persons far better.

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