

Internally displaced persons – a multifaceted dilemma

Refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Horn of Africa are a disparate group. Some have been displaced for many years, while others are hoping to soon return to their communities, and still others were forced to flee their homes last week. The situation of displacement in the region is a dynamic and complicated one. While there is considerable awareness of the situation of those displaced by the violence in Darfur, few people outside the region are aware that there are still Ethiopians displaced from the 1998 Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict – even after the peace agreement was signed almost seven years ago – or that over 150,000 Somali refugees have been living in Kenya for more than five years.

The displacement of Somalis reflects the political realities in that country, but also complicates relations between governments in the region. For example, when the number of Somalis fleeing into Kenya increased dramatically in late 2006, the Kenyan government closed the border and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees had to appeal to the Kenyan government not to send them back to Somalia.

The establishment of peace and security in Somalia is a prerequisite for solutions for both IDPs and refugees. And yet even if a political settlement is reached, there are many long-term obstacles to IDP and refugee return. For example, unresolved property issues are one of the core obstacles to IDP returns, and resolution of those claims not only require an effective judicial system, but also records of land ownership.

Displacement of people in Ethiopia also stems from several sources: ethnic conflicts, drought, the government's regionalization policy, and the 1998-2000 war with Eritrea.

About 100,000 people were killed in the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict and over 360,000 were internally displaced. At that time, Ethiopia deported tens of thousands of persons identified as Eritreans, while Eritrea did the same with Ethiopians living on its territory. While most Ethiopian IDPs returned home after the ceasefire of June 2000 and the December 2000 Algiers Peace Agreement, an estimated 62,000 people remain displaced in the Tigray region.

The Ethiopian-Eritrean war displaced more than one million of Eritrea's 3.8 million people, most of whom returned to their communities after the 2000 ceasefire. By 2005, the number of IDPs was estimated to have dropped to around 45,000 and a year later, the Eritrean government decided to return the large majority of IDPs to their villages or areas of origin near the Temporary Security Zone. But return to border regions is difficult given the deadlock over demarcation of the border and the presence of landmines.

Displacement – both internal and external – in Sudan is Africa's largest uprooted population and, as in the other countries of the Horn, includes several groups of people. Those displaced by the civil war between the central government and the Sudan People's Liberation Army number some 3.2 million, of whom 2 million are southerners living in and around Khartoum – also the world's largest urban displaced population.

In response to the 2005 peace agreement, some 1.2 million Sudanese have returned to their homes in the southern part of the country. But returns are slow, in part because of the lack of infrastructure and public services for the returnees. Almost all of the IDPs who have returned have done so spontaneously without waiting for UN assistance. However, return is problematic and there are cases where IDPs living in Khartoum have gone home, only to return to Khartoum as conditions are better there than in their home communities. As if the situation weren't complicated enough, incursions by rebel-armed groups from both Chad and Uganda have further threatened security in the south.

The conflict in Darfur flared up in early 2003 and since then has claimed some 450,000 lives and displaced almost 2 million people. The violence has spilled over into Chad. Not only are there 220,000 Darfurian refugees in Chad, but there are

Chadian refugees in Sudan and growing numbers of internally displaced persons within Chad. In spite of a peace agreement in May 2006 (signed by only one of the rebel factions) and the presence of an African Peacekeeping Force, the violence has continued, and the Sudanese government has resisted UN efforts to establish a hybrid UN-African Union force to stabilize the region.

The displacement of people in the Horn of Africa is the human consequence of the conflicts and political repression taking place in the region. It can only be resolved by negotiating and implementing peace agreements. In the meantime, governments in the region have a responsibility to protect those who are displaced, whether they are internally displaced or have fled across borders in search of protection.

Ultimately, of course, the solution for displaced people in the Horn of Africa depends on the establishment of peace, justice, and security. But this is a long-term process and until those conditions are achieved, there is an urgent need to ensure that the basic human rights of the millions of uprooted people in the region are addressed. This is a fundamental responsibility of governments – whether the task is protecting the human rights of one’s own displaced citizens or upholding the basic right of all human beings to seek asylum in another country.

Elizabeth Ferris

Senior Fellow and Co-Director of the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, Washington, DC, USA

NEWS AND EVENTS

Church leaders rage against visa denial for UN Mission

– The All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) is outraged by the Government of Sudan’s denial of visas to members of the High Level Mission, established by the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva, to assess the situation in Darfur, says AACC General Secretary, Rev. Mvume Dandala in a recent statement.

AACC has noted that the Government of Sudan welcomed the decision of UNHRC to establish a High Level Mission to assess the Human Rights situation in Darfur. The Government also expressed its willingness to co-operate with the mission.

However, the mission did not have access to Darfur due to the non co-operation of the Government of Sudan. AACC has written to the Heads of States, whose Governments are represented in the Council, urging them to vote in favour of the report of the High Level Mission and its recommendations.

In January, the AACC supported the decision of the African Union (AU) Assembly of Heads of States in denying the AU Chairmanship to the President of Sudan due to the crisis in Darfur.

AACC now urges African Heads of States to demonstrate their commitment in defending “the God given rights of the Darfur people” and calls upon them to show their solidarity by voting favourably for the High Level Mission report.

– As Church Leaders, we consider it our duty and responsibility to speak out against atrocities, no matter who the perpetrator is. We believe that it is our responsibility as Africans and members of the International Community to protect our own people against injustice, says the AACC General Secretary.

Peaceful responses to the violence in Western Ethiopia

In September and October last year the areas around Jimma (Illubabor) and Beghi-Gidami (Wollega) experienced episodes of violent uprisings between Muslim and Christian communities, resulting in huge loss of property, destruction of places of

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Editorial principles

The Horn of Africa Bulletin (HAB) is an international newsletter, compiling analyses, news and resources primarily in the Horn of Africa region. The material published in HAB represents a variety of sources and does not necessarily represent the views of the Life & Peace Institute (LPI) or the cooperating partners, the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) and the Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches in the Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa (FECCLAHA). Writers and sources are normally referred to, although in exceptional cases, the editors of the HAB may choose not to reveal the real identity of a writer or publish the source.