Internal displacement

Imagine: There is a war in your country, an attack on your village or town is imminent and, in order to save your life, you decide to flee with your family to a region not yet touched by the conflict. There is little space to carry personal belongings with you and you have to leave your house, apartment, or farm behind, hoping that no one will break the carefully locked doors, enter your property, take it away, or destroy it. After the conflict is over and you plan to return home, you discover that your property has been destroyed, or that it was taken over by another family who with the agreement of the local authorities refuses to leave.

This is the experience of many internally displaced persons ("IDPs") all over the world. They are persons who are forced to leave their homes, villages, or towns and find refuge in another part of their country. Unlike refugees, they do not flee to another state but find refuge within their own country. With an estimated 25 million persons displaced within their own countries by armed conflicts, the number of internally displaced persons outnumbers refugees by more than two to one.

Internal displacement: some facts and figures

Notion: Internally displaced persons ("IDPs") “are persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border".1

Facts and Figures: An estimated 25 million persons have been displaced by armed conflict in more than 40 countries. In Africa, the number of IDPs reaches 13.2 million, in Central and South America 3.7 million, in Asia
3.3 million, in Europe 3 million, and in the Middle East 2.1 million. In 2004, the largest internal displacement situations were Sudan (5–6 million IDPs), Colombia (2–3 million), DRC (2.3 million), Uganda (up to 2 million), and Iraq (over 1 million). Sudan, Uganda, Colombia, Iraq, Somalia, and Nepal were the scene of major new displacements during the same year, whereas DRC, Angola, Southern Sudan, Liberia, Burundi, and Central African Republic saw major return movements.²

The number of persons displaced by natural disasters is unknown, but the three major disasters since the end of 2004 (the tsunamis of 26 December 2004, hurricane Katrina of 29 August 2005, and the earthquake of 8 October 2005 in northern Pakistan and adjoining areas in India and Afghanistan) alone displaced around 2 million victims.

Development projects such as large dams, new airports or highways built in densely populated slum areas are another cause of displacement, affecting large numbers of persons all over the world.³

As persons who left their homes involuntarily, internally displaced persons, like refugees, confront specific problems and needs that are different from those who can remain at home. While in flight, they may be attacked or cross into mine fields in areas they do not know. Families might become separated, with members losing contact with one another. Once they arrive at their destinations, they need food, shelter, and access to health services. Often, they are not welcomed by the host population but suffer discrimination. Their children may encounter difficulties in getting a proper education. IDPs in many countries run higher risks than those remaining at home of having their children forcibly recruited, of becoming victims of gender-based violence, or of remaining without jobs and other means of livelihood.

Loss of property

One particular risk internally displaced persons and refugees face is the loss of property left behind and the inability to recover it. In fact, destruction of property has become an instrument of warfare or even ethnic cleansing in many civil wars, and resistance to return often takes the form of refusal to evict persons who have taken over their houses or apartments, or to refuse compensation for destroyed property.

An example: displacement and destruction of property in Kosovo

Kosovo provides a good illustration of how destruction of property is used as a means to displace members of unwanted minorities and make their return difficult.

In 1999, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reported the following about the events that took place in Kosovo after NATO troops had started air attacks and Serb troops forced Kosovo Albanians out of their homes, villages, and towns: “Following military offensives, villages with predominantly Albanian populations were systematically burnt down by Serb troops. In many cases, interviewees observed from hiding places in the hills Serb troops entering villages and setting houses on fire. Along with houses,
barns with hay, remaining tractors, and agricultural equipment were burnt as well. Villagers who returned after the withdrawal of Serb forces found livestock killed or disappeared, while corpses were sometimes thrown into wells to contaminate drinking water. Many Kosovo Albanians had their personal documents torn apart by Serb troops during the eviction, at police checkpoints, at the border or elsewhere in the course of searches by police, army or paramilitary forces. It appears that all of these acts of destruction were aimed at preventing Albanians from returning to and resuming life in their places of residence. The destruction of property was apparently not solely an act of vandalism but an attempt at wiping out signs of the presence of the Albanian population in Kosovo, as well as its national and cultural identity. The majority of interviewees also reported confiscation of property by Serb forces. Confiscation took place during raids into Albanian homes: Serb troops went from house to house in villages and towns, people present in the houses were searched and deprived of money and other valuables, and cars and tractors were confiscated.

In 2004, it was the Serb minority that became the target of displacement and destruction of property after anti-minority riots broke out in several parts of Kosovo. The International Crisis Group reported the following events of 18 March 2004: “In late afternoon, elements of the same mob that attacked the South Mitrovica church descended upon the Serb village of Svinjare, within 600 metres of Camp Belvedere, the principal French KFOR logistics base outside Southern Mitrovica. Several UNMIK police vehicles tried to get ahead of the mob and block its progress, as did a truck with Moroccan soldiers who were guarding the northern entrance of the village next to the base. The mob set fire to several houses at the north end of the village before the make-shift police / military roadblock deterred it from advancing. It pulled back, and security reinforcements arrived: twenty more soldiers and 50 Polish riot police. However, instead of consolidating their position, they were ordered to evacuate the villagers to the base and depart. During the evening and night, Albanian mobs were able to return unimpeded, and loot and burn every Serb house and annex in the village.

South of Mitrovica, in the town of Vucitrn / Vushtri, two mobs converged to lay waste the Ashkali neighborhood. A crowd that included KLA veterans attacked and burned the St. Elias Orthodox church, whose Moroccan KFOR guards departed. The mob desecrated the cemetery, even disinterring human remains and joined with another mob, led by local criminals, that was attacking, looting, and burning Ashkali houses. KPS [Kosovo Police Service] officers reported they evacuated an Ashkali butcher, who was firing a gun at the mob, and his family. Ashkali representatives later claimed the KPS arrested them, acting in complicity with the mob. Later in the afternoon, the local CIVPOL (UN Civilian Police) commander sent KPS to evacuate all Ashkali (more than 200) into the grounds of the police college (the OSCE facility at Vushtri/Vucitrn that trains the Kosovo Police Service). More than 70 Ashkali houses were burned.”
Property issues become especially important at the end of the conflict when return of internally displaced persons and refugees becomes possible – at least in principle. Experiences in many parts of the world show that three elements must be in place to make returns possible and successful: First, safety of the life and limb of returnees must be ensured, i.e. violence must have come to an end, those who caused the displacement must have left the area or agreed to refrain from violent acts in the future, and the police and judiciary must be able to protect returnees from remaining threats and dangers. Second, property left behind by those displaced must be returned to them and, where necessary, repaired or in cases of total destruction reconstructed, or returnees must be compensated for damages. Third, the political, social, and economic environment in the area of return must allow returnees to stay and to start a life under normal conditions. Returns cannot be sustainable if returnees do not have jobs or other forms of livelihood, are denied access to health, education, and other social services to a different extent from the non-displaced population, and face other kinds of discrimination.

Thus, the issue of property rights is a crucial element in finding solutions to internal displacement. In many cases, particularly where displacement is prolonged, returning IDPs find others living on and using their lands. In some cases, these “secondary occupants” have themselves been displaced from their original homes. In others, those occupying the lands have been helped to do so by the authorities or the forces that drove the original owners or occupants away. Laws discriminating against returnees, the absence of a corruption-free and independent judiciary or the loss of land titles and other relevant documentation can render a just resolution of resulting property disputes difficult to achieve. Moreover, even where the laws or judicial institutions are adequate to address the task, authorities sometimes resist their implementation.

Bosnia and Herzegovina are a good example of these problems. During the conflict of 1992–1995 members of all ethnic communities were forced to leave areas where they constituted a minority or became victims of “ethnic cleansing.” Many found refuge in areas controlled by their own ethnic group and were allowed, by local authorities, to use empty houses and apartments that belonged to persons who were members of ethnic communities who were forced out of the area or had decided to leave on their own. At the end of the conflict, many returnees faced grave problems in recuperating their property as legislation about abandoned property had been adopted in the meantime, giving the right to use these houses and apartments to those who took them over during the war. When returnees tried to recover their property, they did not receive any support from the authorities who took the side of the later occupants.
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The 20 Gradiska cases: Decision of the Human Rights Chamber for Bosnia and Herzegovina

“The applicants are citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, all except one of whom are of Bosniak descent. They are owners of real property in the Gradiska area in the Republika Srpska which they were forced to leave during the war. The great majority of these properties are occupied by refugees and displaced persons of Serb origin. Most of the applicants have now returned to the area. The cases concern their [unsuccessful] attempts before various authorities of the Republika Srpska to regain possession of their property. (…) The old Law did not enable a person seeking to re-gain possession of his or her property to establish what actions he or she must take to do so. The law also did not provide any safeguards against possible abuse, but was in itself a source of arbitrariness and abuse. (…) the old Law serves to protect the persons of Serb origin who now occupy property which was considered abandoned under the old Law. Accordingly, the effect of the old Law is two-fold: it prevents minority return and protects the position of persons of Serb origin who now occupy the properties concerned in the applications.”

In Afghanistan, refugees and internally displaced persons often found it difficult to return to their villages because some had sold their land before leaving, while others had land holdings that were no longer sufficient to sustain their families, which had grown in size during the many years in exile. In some cases, land was occupied and confiscated by powerful local commanders or – in the case of minority returnees – by members of the dominant ethnic group. Where property rights to agricultural land or to houses had changed during the long years of continuous wars, owners often had different land titles issued by successive regimes or sales were not officially registered because of the collapse of administrations; this created disputes and legal insecurity. In urban areas, returnees were sometimes evicted, without compensation, by influential commanders and other powerful personalities claiming that they had acquired the property.

Property-related problems also arise in the context of natural disasters. There may be competing property claims over specific plots, particularly where a natural disaster has wiped out landmarks used for demarcation. After the 2004 tsunamis, for example, it became clear that in some areas, residents such as fisher folks and other traditional communities, never had obtained formal title or other evidence of land ownership in the first place. In other instances, property records, both individual and those maintained by authorities, were destroyed as a result of the disaster.

Internally displaced women often face particular problems if their husbands were killed in an armed conflict or natural disaster. Applicable legal norms or rules of customary law on registration and inheritance may discriminate against such women, for instance by declaring them unable to inherit land or buildings. Even where the law is non-discrimina-
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tory, women may experience difficulties in regaining their homes and property in practice.

**The guiding principles on internal displacement**

What are the rights of internally displaced persons, and do these rights protect their property-related needs? There is no specific convention on the human rights of internally displaced persons and none of the many guarantees contained in these treaties addressed the protection of internally displaced persons. International humanitarian law applicable in times of armed conflict contains a few scattered provisions on the treatment of the displaced but does not create a comprehensive legal regime for this group of persons. Finally, international refugee law has a lot to say about persons in flight but it only applies to those who, unlike internally displaced persons, have left their country of origin and crossed an international frontier. Thus, at first glance, one might think that internally displaced persons are largely without legal protection.

At the same time, it is clear that internally displaced persons remain citizens of the country in which they normally reside and, as such, are entitled to be treated in accordance with all the international human rights and humanitarian law guarantees that apply in any given situation. Still, what is necessary is to determine which of these many provisions are relevant to internally displaced persons and what the general guarantees mean in the specific context of displacement. The task of doing this was given to the then Representative of the Secretary General on Internally Displaced Persons, Dr. Francis Deng, who in the early 1990s was asked, by the UN Commission on Human Rights, to develop a normative framework to enhance the protection of internally displaced persons. He set out to identify those guarantees and concepts implicit in the rich body of existing international law that respond to the special needs of internally displaced persons, and to make this protection explicit.

The result of these efforts were the “Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement,” which Dr. Deng presented to the UN Commission on Human Rights in 1998. This document details, in 30 principles, the specific meaning of the general human rights and humanitarian law guarantees for IDPs. It covers all three phases of internal displacement: the pre-displacement phase, the situation during displacement, and the phase of return or resettlement and reintegration. Thus, the Guiding Principles explicitly recognize a right not to be arbitrarily displaced and spell out in detail the rights of those who are displaced. The Principles stress that a government cannot deny access by international humanitarian organizations to IDPs if it is unable or unwilling to provide the necessary assistance itself. Finally, the document underlines the right of IDPs, either to return voluntarily to their homes (if this becomes possible), or to resettle in another part of the country.

The Guiding Principles are in and of themselves not a binding instrument, but they reflect and are consistent with international human rights law and interna-
tional humanitarian law; at the same time they spell out in detail guarantees that are particularly relevant for internally displaced persons but are only implicit in general human rights law. They have achieved a high degree of authority, and in September 2005, the Heads of State and Government gathered at the World Summit in New York “recognize[d] the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement as an important international framework for the protection of internally displaced persons.”

Property-related rights of IDPs

As regards property, the Guiding Principles restate, in Principle 21, paragraph 1 the basic provision that no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of property and possessions. This text reflects Article 17 of the 1948 “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” according to which “Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.” Regional human rights conventions contain similar guarantees. They guarantee in similar words (a) free access to property, i.e. the freedom to acquire property, and (b) the right to the peaceful use and enjoyment of available property, i.e. protection against infringements of property by the State or private parties. In contrast, there is no human right directly connected with the ownership of property. The regional conventions permit the State to take property or to limit its use, if such limitations to the right of property are provided for by law and are necessary for the protection of legitimate public interests (e.g. the protection of the environment) or of the rights of others (e.g. to be protected against noise or unhealthy fumes from a neighboring factory). Authorities are obliged to pay adequate compensation for confiscations and other forms of the lawful taking of property. Mainly due to the ideological conflicts of the Cold War period, none of the universal human rights conventions adopted by the United Nations incorporates equivalent rights. However, the right to adequate housing (Art. 11 of the 1966 Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) which contains a prohibition of unlawful evictions, as well as the right of women to have equal property rights as men (Art. 15) of the 1979 “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women” address specific aspects of property-related rights of great significance for IDPs.

During times of war, international humanitarian law strictly prohibits pillaging of private property and its destruction as a reprisal. Occupying powers are not allowed to destroy private property, except where such destruction is imperative due to the exigencies of war. Very serious violations of property rights during armed conflicts can be punished as war crimes. This law is reflected in Principle 21, paragraph 2, stating that the property of IDPs shall be protected in all circumstances against acts such as pillage, direct military attacks, reprisals, or collective punishment.

Finally, paragraph 3 of the same Principle makes clear that property and possessions left behind by internally displaced persons should be protected against de-
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The guiding principles on internal displacement and the protection of property rights

Principle 21
1. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of property and possessions.
2. The property and possessions of internally displaced persons shall in all circumstances be protected, in particular, against the following acts:
   A. Pillage;
   B. Direct or indiscriminate attacks or other acts of violence;
   C. Being used to shield military operations or objectives;
   D. Being made the object of reprisal; and
   E. Being destroyed or appropriated as a form of collective punishment.
3. Property and possessions left behind by internally displaced persons should be protected against destruction and arbitrary and illegal appropriation, occupation, or use.

Principle 29
2. Competent authorities have the duty and responsibility to assist returned and/or resettled internally displaced persons to recover, to the extent possible, their property and possessions which they left behind or were dispossessed of upon their displacement. When recovery of such property and possessions is not possible, competent authorities shall provide or assist these persons in obtaining appropriate compensation or another form of just reparation.

Restitution of property
What happens when the right to property is violated and the property of internally displaced persons is taken by others or destroyed? Is there a right of IDPs to get their property back once the conflict has ended or to receive compensation for lost or destroyed property? Principle 29, paragraph 2 states in this regard a duty of competent authorities “to assist returned and/or resettled internally displaced persons to recover, to the extent possible, their property and possessions which they left behind or were dispossessed of upon their displacement” and, where restitution of property is not possible, to “provide or assist these persons in obtaining appropriate compensation or another form of just reparation.” This rather careful and weak language reflects the fact that, at the universal level, none of the human rights conventions contains a full-fledged guarantee of property (Art. 17 of the 1948 “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” is in principle non-binding), and the regional guarantees can be limited.

The weakness of property protection in current international human rights law is not satisfactory when it comes to protecting the legitimate wishes of many if not most internally displaced persons to return to their homes and recover their houses, apartments, farms, and other property. Without housing and real property restitution, the voluntary, safe, and dignified return of IDPs to their homes and original places of residence often becomes impossible. This is why in recent times international efforts to strengthen the right of internally displaced persons
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and of returning refugees to restitution of their property have been stepped up.

A particularly interesting example is Bosnia and Herzegovina. Annex 7 of the “Dayton Peace Agreement for Bosnia and Herzegovina” of December 14, 1995 grants refugees and internally displaced persons “the right to have restored to them property of which they were deprived in the course of hostilities since 1991 and to be compensated for any property that cannot be restored to them.” As mentioned above, the implementation of this right was very difficult for a long time. In order to determine property disputes, Annex 7 of the “Dayton Peace Agreement” established the Commission for Real Property Claims of Displaced Persons and Refugees. This body had the task of deciding, in a final and binding manner, any claims for real property where the property had not been sold voluntarily or otherwise transferred during the war period from 1991 to 1995. The Commission, which started to render decisions in 1997, was quite efficient in solving disputes and identifying the rightful owners. However, it lacked any mechanism to implement its decisions and did not address the issue of secondary occupants and their eviction; moreover, the laws in the two entities that make up Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as the attitudes of local authorities made it difficult to recover property in practice. The Human Rights Chamber, established by Annex 6 of the “Dayton Peace Agreement” and empowered to decide claims of violations of human rights, decided in many cases that non-implementation of the decisions of the Commission violated the

right to property as enshrined in Article 1 of Protocol 1 to the “European Convention on Human Rights,” but these findings, too, were often not implemented. The situation improved slowly when in 1999 the High Representative started to impose amendments to the property laws of the two entities and the international agencies present in the country adopted a Property Law Implementation Plan (“PLIP”) in 2000. Considerable progress was made in 2003, and by the end of 2004, 93% of property claims lodged by pre-war owners were resolved.

In Kosovo, Article 3.4 of the Constitutional Framework for Provisional Self-Government of May 15, 2001 provides that “All refugees and displaced persons from Kosovo shall have the right to return to their homes, and to recover their property and personal possessions.” In order to implement the right to property restitution, UNMIK set up the Housing and Property Directorate as well as the Housing and Property Claims Commission. These organs are mandated to decide property claims of individuals who (a) lost occupancy rights as a result of discriminatory laws and practices after March 23, 1989, (b) entered into voluntary, but informal transactions of residential property between March 23, 1989 and October 13, 1999, or (c) lost physical possession of their properties after March 24, 1999. Today, almost all of the approximately 29,000 claims are decided, but repossession of claimed property has taken place in less than 2,000 cases, namely because houses are destroyed or their owners have not yet returned to Kosovo.
While Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are the cases with the biggest international involvement in the area of property restitution, other countries such as Croatia, Guatemala, Rwanda, Burundi or Turkey have set up post-displacement property restitution and compensation programs on their own. In Afghanistan, for example, the President of the Afghan Interim Administration issued a Decree on the Dignified Return of Refugees in 2001 which, in Article 5, states that the “recovery of movable and immovable properties such as land, houses, markets, shops, sarai, apartments and others will be effected through relevant legal organs.” As the ordinary courts proved to be unable to handle all property claims expeditiously, a Special Property Dispute Resolution Court was set up by Presidential Decree on October 30, 2003 in order “to hasten the process of resolving property disputes.” Here, too, implementation seems to be difficult.

Towards a universally recognized right to return and recover property

At the universal level, the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, a subsidiary body of the UN Human Rights Commission, has undertaken important work to strengthen the property-related rights of IDPs and refugees. Its Special Rapporteur on housing and property restitution in the context of the return of refugees and internally displaced persons, Brazilian diplomat Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, prepared “Principles on Housing and Property Restitution for Refugees and Displaced Persons” (“UN Restitution Principles”) which were finalized in 2005. Principle 2.1 provides that refugees and IDPs “have the right to have restored to them any housing, land and/or property of which they were arbitrarily or unlawfully deprived, or to be compensated for any housing, land and/or property that is factually impossible to restore as determined by an independent, impartial tribunal.” The principles extend these rights to “tenants, social occupancy rights holders and other legitimate occupants or users of housing, land, and property” and stresses that such claimants should, “to the maximum extent possible,” be “able to return to and re-possess and use their housing, land and property in a similar manner to those possessing formal ownership rights” (Principle 16.1). As regards the difficult issue of “secondary occupants,” i.e. persons (often refugees or IDPs themselves) who were allowed to use property left behind by IDPs, the Restitution Principles are based on the premise that the rights of the original owners are stronger than those of such occupants. At the same time, they call upon States to ensure “that secondary occupants are protected against arbitrary or unlawful, forced eviction” and that evictions which are unavoidable to return property to the original owners “are carried out in a manner which is compatible with international human rights law and standards,” i.e. with “an opportunity for genuine consultation, adequate and reasonable notice, and the provision of legal remedies, including opportunities for legal redress” (Principle 17.1). As regards the relationship between restitution of property and compensation, the Resti-
stitution Principles give clear priority to restitution when they state “that the remedy of compensation is only to be used when the remedy of restitution is not factually possible or when the injured party knowingly and voluntarily accepts compensation in lieu of restitution, or when the terms of a negotiated peace settlement provide for a combination of restitution and compensation” (Principle 21.1).

While these Principles are not legally binding and while they leave certain issues open (for example the problem of restitution after decades of absence), they reflect, to a large extent, existing or emerging international law on the protection of property of persons who were forced to abandon their property because they had to flee or were coerced to leave their homes and places of residence. They are an important tool for strengthening the rights of IDPs. It remains to be hoped that these principles will be incorporated into peace agreements or domestic laws in countries faced with displacement and ultimately recognized as expression of a binding and universal right of internally displaced persons to return and to recover their property or receive, where this is not possible, full compensation for their lost possessions.
Internal Displacement and the Protection of Property

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3 On development-induced displacement, see www.displacement.net with links to the World Bank and other international financial institutions.


8 2005 World Summit Outcome, para. 132, UN Doc A/60/L.1.


10 Art. I, par. 1 of Annex 7 of the Dayton Peace Agreement for Bosnia and Herzegovina, De-
December 14, 1995. Art. 2, par. 5 of the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina guarantees the same right and adds “Any commitments or statements relating to such property (i.e. property of which they were deprived in the course of hostilities since 1991) made under duress are null and void.”

11 Originally named Commission for Displaced Persons and Refugees.

12 The Republika Srpska (“RS”) and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (“FBiH”).

13 For details, see Profile of Internal Displacement: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Compilation of the information available in the Global IDP Database of the Norwegian Refugee Council (as of March 24, 2005), at: www.idpproject.org.


15 Lumpp et al. (n. 7) p. 167.