



Refugees and the Internally Displaced: Helping those Uprooted by Conflict



A displaced mother and her children await assistance in Colombia.

In 2007, there were 34 active conflicts in 25 locations throughout the world.¹ In each case, innocent people are forced to flee from their homes. At the end of 2007, there were 14 million refugees in over 60 countries² and more than 26 million internally displaced persons worldwide.³ According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), these numbers represent an increase for the second year in a row. The number of urban refugees is also a new and growing trend; half of all refugees now live in cities.⁴ These statistics represent a global humanitarian crisis.

Sectarian and other violence in Iraq led to the largest refugee crisis in 2007, causing the exodus of 2.5 million⁵ Iraqis to Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and Turkey, and leaving another 2.5 million displaced within Iraq's borders.⁶ Together with Afghan refugees, they make up more than 50 percent of the world's total refugees.⁷

The circumstances surrounding uprooted peoples are different today than when the international community first came together under the United Nations to create a framework to guarantee their protection. The UNHCR was created when conflicts were mainly between two or more countries.

The 1951 Refugee Convention mandating UNHCR's creation clearly defines the rights of refugees and lays out the minimum standards for their



A Georgian woman shows her UNHCR card, proving that she is a displaced person.

treatment. The document defines a refugee as a person who, “owing to well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”⁸

The increase in civil conflicts, however, led to new crises in which civilians became displaced within their own countries. Unfortunately, the Refugee Convention does not cover such persons even though they have fled their homes for the same reasons as refugees. These uprooted peoples have come to be identified as “internally displaced persons” or IDPs.

The critical needs of IDPs required a separate mechanism to guarantee their protection. In 1998 the UN agreed upon the “Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement,” which set out international standards to guide governments as well as international humanitarian organizations in giving assistance and protection to IDPs.⁹

Challenges for Refugees and IDPs

Refugees and IDPs face many of the same challenges and hardships. They have been forced from their homes and have lost their livelihoods. They may have witnessed extreme violence and have, in many instances, lost family members. Women in particular face a host of risks and dangers, suddenly finding themselves heads of household with all the requisite responsibilities but lacking the skills or opportunities for suitable employment, as well as facing the risk of gender-based violence. Children’s education is interrupted and they are at risk of becoming malnourished because

food is unavailable or unaffordable. Perhaps the most devastating consequence for people forced from their homes is losing control over their lives and facing an uncertain future.

In some ways IDPs are in a more precarious situation than refugees. They may be forced to flee from violence multiple times. Often, they are discriminated against by their own governments, particularly if they belong to an ethnic group that stands in opposition to the government. According to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, the situation of IDPs is “arguably the most significant humanitarian challenge that we face.”¹⁰

Whether or not a country has signed the Refugee Convention, it has a responsibility under international law to treat all persons within its borders humanely (if not necessarily equal to its own citizens). In reality, however, host countries’ approaches to refugees in their midst varies greatly. They may tolerate and even welcome the refugees, or they may be openly hostile. Many governments discriminate against citizens of certain ethnic groups or minorities. In cases of internal conflict, even when governments are not upholding their responsibilities to IDPs, donor countries may be reluctant to intervene so as not to risk being accused of violating state sovereignty.

The influx of refugees and IDPs into areas of safety creates many secondary repercussions. One key issue is differential treatment. Refugees and IDPs may receive specialized and sometimes substantial assistance, while the local communities, who may be equally poor, do not, which can lead to resentment. This situation is beginning to change and many donors are now allowing NGOs to include local communities in their assistance.

Another repercussion is the effect on local populations that suddenly have to shelter large numbers of outsiders through no choice of their own. The host communities often have very limited resources themselves and an influx of refugees creates an



A refugee from the Central African Republic receives seeds from an IRD worker in Cameroon.

added burden which can also lead to resentment and hostility. The term “host communities,” therefore, may be misleading, as it implies willingness, participation, and contribution. In some cases, the influx can cause the conflict to spill over to the receiving country, such as when the refugees have similar ethnic backgrounds as the host communities or when combatants shelter among refugee populations. Humanitarian organizations must take all of these factors into account in planning and implementing their programs.

Assisting refugees extends beyond the duration of a conflict. When conflicts end, there must be permanent solutions for the displaced. Thousands of refugees and displaced will want to return home. Sometimes it will be possible for them to go back to their original homes. Sometimes, they may be able to return to their home countries, but not to their original towns or villages. Others have no wish to return at all; either the situation in their home countries has changed so drastically they do not feel conditions will ever be conducive to returning or they have been become established in their new communities, their children attend local schools, and they have no wish to uproot their families again. Governments need to recognize this and assist in permanently resettling them instead of continuing indefinitely to regard them as refugees or IDPs.

IRD’s Efforts to Support Refugees and IDPs

Since 1998, when it was founded, IRD has worked with refugees and the displaced through two different, but related types of programs: support to the displaced during displacement and support for reintegration when people return home or resettled permanently. IRD currently implements programs in Iraq,¹¹ Jordan, Sudan, Chad, Cameroon, and Nepal. Programs in Mozambique, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka help IDPs who have been displaced by environmental disasters.

IRD's support covers all areas of refugee assistance:

- Provision of emergency relief commodities to affected communities
- Creation of potable water and sanitation facilities
- Provision of shelter support
- Support of primary healthcare services
- Creation of child friendly spaces
- Development of income-generation opportunities
- Support to reestablish food production
- Support for training and capacity building
- Provision of legal aid and protection
- Monitoring and reporting
- Facilitating return of populations to their homes and communities.



An Iraqi girl receives health information in a camp for internally displaced persons.

Georgia

When the tension between Russia and Georgia broke out in armed conflict in August 2008, thousands of people were displaced. At the height of the violence, there were as many as 156,000 IDPs, mainly from South Ossetia, within the rest of the country. About one-third of the IDPs sheltered with local families, while the remainder was housed in various Collective Centers, which are government buildings, such as schools, that are not equipped for residential use.

In collaboration with the United Nations, IRD organized a series of quick needs assessments and concluded that shelter was the most urgent priority. Although many IDPs have already returned home, 26,000 are not expected to return due to fear of insecurity in their home areas and will need shelter through the winter. In response, IRD is working to modify and upgrade the buildings being used as Collective Centers to accommodate multiple families. Financial and material support will be given to households hosting IDPs. Each household will be able to determine its own particular needs for items such as household supplies, firewood,

bedding, or materials to fix windows and roofs and other upgrades to their homes.

IRD was already working in Georgia before the current crisis. Over 80,000 families (more than 200,000 people) have been sheltering in Georgia, many since earlier civil conflicts in 1993. These “long term” IDPs have been living in Collective Centers much like those housing the most recently displaced—public buildings in poor condition and lacking basic facilities. IRD is implementing a program to upgrade these buildings using an innovative multi-pronged approach. Woven into the physical improvements are a variety of skills training, including how to form resident committees so that the IDPs can advocate for themselves and make joint decisions. Housing officials will learn how to administer and manage the buildings. The benefit to local and national officials is that the buildings can be turned into decent public housing, something urban centers in the country lack, thus contributing to the broader physical and cultural recovery of Georgian communities.



A Georgian woman keeps her baby warm in a shelter for displaced persons.

The new conflict and the rush of humanitarian aid to the IDPs present a significant dilemma to policy makers in Georgia. Thousands of internally displaced have been already languishing in the country for more than a decade, their futures in limbo, and the government had just finalized a long awaited action plan for IDPs. The question facing the Georgian authorities now is one of priority, whether to focus first on new IDPs or on those who have been displaced for years.

Chad

Chad is an example of the spillover effect sometimes created by large numbers of refugees seeking shelter across national borders. The local communities to which they flee are often struggling economically themselves. They can find themselves ignored as the international community focuses humanitarian assistance on the refugee population. In 2004, thousands of Darfurians began crossing into Chad, forming camps along its harsh eastern border. A severe drought coincided with the refugees' arrival, leading to water shortages, absence of pasture for livestock, and degradation of the environment. The Chadian host population, whose main assets are agriculture and livestock, felt a severe impact from the drought and the influx of refugees.

IRD gives agricultural support to address these poor conditions through a range of programs, including training animal health agents, restocking small livestock in female-headed households, building rainwater harvesting structures to store water for livestock, and training members of butcher associations. Local varieties of seeds are distributed for the planting season. Fruit and forest trees are planted for environmental protection. Villagers and refugees contribute their labor to build wells and ponds for irrigation and drinking water, and local committees are established to manage water usage. Despite the challenges presented by security and environmental issues, development activities are critical for encouraging self-reliance and for helping to prevent friction between the two populations.

Southern Sudan

As the long war between northern and southern Sudan has eased, war-displaced populations are voluntarily returning to their homes in the South. The local communities to which they are returning have few resources and inadequate basic services to accommodate the returnees. One example is in the city of Malakal, the capital of South Sudan's Upper Nile state,



Residents allow their livestock to drink at a water hole in Chad.

“What we have with the partnership model of IRD is really capacity-building,” according to John Lwong, the executive director of Fashoda Youth Forum, one of IRD’s local partners in Southern Sudan.

Now Malakal has homegrown expertise to keep the traffic-stopping mud at bay. “The community-based organizations will get other smaller organizations and help them to create small groups of people who can do things,” explains Bucheko Aliongo, IRD’s construction supervisor, “Not only in Malakal, but in towns outside, to help sanitation and build infrastructure.”



A woman working on the drains construction project in Malakal.

where the poor condition of the roads has made them impassable during the rainy season. IRD and the local government have hired 500 workers, many of whom are returnees, to construct a network of drainage ditches, culverts, and footbridges to allow water to flow quickly off the road so that transportation can proceed.

Along with the technical aspects of improving the road, the project has successfully engaged the community in planning and implementation. IRD has trained staff from local organizations in financial and grants management, proposal development, and other organizational skills so that they can manage projects on their own.

Nepal

In Nepal, the decades-long conflict between Nepal’s government and an indigenous Maoist movement resulted in many internally displaced persons. While a peace agreement reached in May 2006 put the country on the path to rebuilding, there are still up to 50,000 displaced throughout the country. Many of them may never return to their original homes, either because they are not able to recover their land or because they have gotten settled in their current communities. Others have returned to find their homes and livelihoods destroyed, while another group is still displaced. The shift in populations affects the need for basic services like water as well as education and employment opportunities.

IRD is working with a leading Nepali non-governmental organization (NGO), SAATHI, to give critically needed basic services and livelihood opportunities for IDPs, returned IDPs and conflict affected communities in western Nepal. To increase livelihood opportunities, IRD is providing vocational skills, business development training, helping with job placement, and raising awareness about micro-credit possibilities within the community. To improve drinking water supply, sanitation, and hygiene, IRD is constructing water systems in 12 villages.

Key to any resettlement process is assuring that programs are transparent, and are conceived and implemented fairly in collaboration with the affected people and communities. In partnership with SAATHI, IRD is devoting significant effort and time to ensure that activities such as trainee and water point selection processes are participatory, free of conflict, and based on actual needs.



Residents map out community water resources in Nepal.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the only way to reduce the number of refugees and internally displaced people worldwide is to find political solutions to conflicts. Humanitarian relief is but a stopgap measure and cannot substitute for the political settlements needed to resolve the conflicts that produce displacement. This requires sustained political will on the part of the warring parties and a sustained commitment from the international community.

An increased focus on the plight of refugees and the internally displaced is urgently needed. Funding pledges from governments to organizations such as UNHCR, other UN agencies and international NGOs should be honored. In the meantime, groups like IRD will continue to give lifesaving humanitarian aid and assistance to help refugees regain their dignity and to prepare for their resettlement, whether it be inside or outside their home country.

Policy Recommendations

The United States government should:

- Work with the international community to assist countries to resolve conflicts, which ultimately will alleviate the reason civilians flee their homes.
- Support ongoing efforts to develop more comprehensive international laws to address the needs of refugees and IDPs.
- Ensure adequate support for UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations to enable them to provide the vital assistance needed by vulnerable populations worldwide.

The international community should:

- Work toward creating a single international entity devoted to protecting and assisting internally displaced persons.
- Establish policies regarding long-term displacement and permanent resettlement.



Iraqi boys play in a center for refugees in Jordan.

Endnotes

1. Harbom, Melander, and Wallensteen. "Dyadic Dimensions of Armed Conflict, 1946-2007." *Journal of Peace Research*, September 2008, Vol.48, No.5.
2. U.S.Committee for Refugees and Immigrants. *World Refugee Survey 2008. The numbers reflect an increasing trend.*
3. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, www.idmc.org.
4. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "2007 Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum-seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced and Stateless Persons," June 2008.
5. PBS interview with Khalid Khoser, Deputy Director of the Brookings Bern Project on Internal Displacement, July 3, 2008
6. Current estimate by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the IDP Working Group on Iraq.
7. Khalid Khoser, Ibid.
8. United Nations. Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. 1951.
9. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. "Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, 1998." http://www.reliefweb.int/ocha_ol/pub/idp_gp/idp.html.
10. International Displacement Monitoring Centre press release, "Global internal displacement crisis grew in 2007." April 17, 2008.
11. In Iraq, IRD implements one of the largest programs assisting Iraqi IDPs, Humanitarian Assistance Intervention (HAI). Active in 10 out of the 18 governorates, HAI repairs essential services and provides relief supplies, water and sanitation facilities, primary health care services, income generation activities, training, and local capacity building, shelter and legal assistance and protection.(see IRD policy brief "Displaced Iraqis and Refugees" at www.ird.org)