The forced displacement of civilians has become one of the major humanitarian problems of our time, affecting tens of millions of people around the world. Well over half of this population are internally displaced persons (IDPs), defined as: "persons who have been forced to flee their homes suddenly or unexpectedly in large numbers, as a result of armed conflicts, internal strife, systematic violation of human rights or natural or man-made disasters; and who are within the territory of their own country".¹

Since the mid-1980s, the number of IDPs in the world has increased dramatically, rising at least five-fold between 1984-1994. Although the quality and availability of data vary, the number of IDPs appears to have peaked in 1994 at above 25 million, declining somewhat since then. Depending on definitions and sources, IDPs are currently estimated as at least 19.7 million, and possibly as high as 25 million. This is in addition to the 14-16 million global refugees. A large number of IDPs are women, often widows or single mothers; children, many of whom are unaccompanied by their families; and elderly people.²

The largest numbers of IDPs are found in Africa, with substantial populations in Europe and South Asia as well. In 1996, more than 10 per cent of the total populations of Angola, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Lebanon, Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Sudan were internally displaced. (See map XII, pages 100 and 101.)

While the needs of IDPs are much like those of other poor and isolated social groups, they have special vulnerabilities as a result of being dislocated from their homes: low mobility, weak social networks and limited wage-earning opportunities. For these reasons, in those countries where the proportion of internally displaced is high, IDPs place an unusually heavy burden on social and economic systems.

The causes and categories of internal displacement

Over the past decade, it is the rising number of internal conflicts compounded by natural disasters and/or weak state structures that have been the primary cause of increasing internal displacement. Civilians are forced from their home locales and become internally displaced for a number of reasons:
• **Victims of ‘ethnic cleansing’**. If a place of origin comes to be identified by the parties to a conflict with a particularly political, ethnic, religious or other communal affiliation, the residents may be targeted for removal. In this situation, they may be obliged to flee to regions controlled by the government, where they will be subject to attacks by opposition forces, or to areas occupied by the opposition, where they will be considered adversaries by their government and denied access to humanitarian assistance. In recent internal conflicts, ethnic cleansing - removing entire communities from their home locations - has become an increasingly common way to deal with land pressures, economic scarcities, religious differences or perceived historical injustices. The former Yugoslavia, the Caucasus, the Great Lakes region of Central Africa and the Rift Valley in Kenya are recent examples.

• **Victims caught up in armed conflict**. If their places of origin become strategically important in an internal conflict, non-combatant civilians may simply become caught in the cross-fire and seek safety, often illusory, in a less turbulent part of the country. When, in the course of their flight, such involuntary migrants cross a national frontier, they can become refugees. By not crossing into another state, however, their vulnerability can be seriously exacerbated simply by their prior geographic association with the conflict area. When internal conflicts are accompanied by political breakdown and governing authority ceases to exist, the displaced populations are marginalized even further.

• **Victims of natural disasters and the environmentally displaced**. Natural disasters and environmental deterioration arising from pressures on resources can cause substantial population displacements if they deny residents their livelihoods and means of subsistence. The line between natural and human-induced destruction is often difficult to draw, particularly in the case of long-term environmental degradation, since human actions can greatly exacerbate the effects of such natural disasters as drought, floods and desertification. Damaged areas must be restored before the residents can return, and when home areas are completely destroyed, alternative receiving areas need to be made ready to meet the long-term needs of the displaced.

**The special problems of IDPs**

Whatever the cause, the status of IDPs may, in some instances, be only a phase in the process of expatriation. In the first stage before leaving their country, IDPs may be potential refugees unable to cross the border. They may also be reluctant to expatriate due to political, social or personal reasons, and may seek sanctuary inside their country of origin before choosing to flee into exile. Alternatively, repatriating refugees may become internally displaced while attempting to return to their home areas, especially in the case of unorganized return or when places of origin have been occupied by other groups of uprooted populations. Mixed population movements along interstate borders further blur these various groups.

Compared with refugees, however, IDPs have significantly less access to international protection. Since IDPs have not crossed international boundaries, they are not legally entitled to the internationally recognized civil and social rights ensured by the refugee status as defined by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol thereto. Since IDPs live under the sovereign authority of their
Governments, which have the legal responsibility to provide them with protection, they are particularly vulnerable to pressures from these Governments, whether at the national or local level.

Under this circumstance, international intervention is limited, in principle, to supportive actions undertaken with the consent of the country in question. However, in instances where Governments are unable or unwilling to provide protection to their displaced populations, humanitarian organizations have sought to assist IDPs: grounding their right to provide assistance on existing provisions of international humanitarian law to war victims and on human rights treaties. In these cases, humanitarian assistance is given to IDPs despite their Governments, rather than with their Governments' support.

While the scope for the international community to provide protection to the displaced is often restricted, the protection of IDPs is a critical issue. It is not unusual for governments to deny, or at least downplay, their internal displacement problems. At the same time, the displaced are typically highly vulnerable social groups with limited ability to articulate their needs for assistance and protection. Both factors complicate the international community's ability to help them.

Over the past few years, however, IDPs have become more visible on the humanitarian scene, for several reasons. First, as internal conflicts and consequent population displacements became more widely recognized in the early 1990s, the humanitarian community has moved the problem of IDPs to the top of its agenda. Second, internal displacement has become more visible to the general public: some of the recent humanitarian crises that have captured the mass media's attention pinpointed mass migrations, such as in the Great Lakes region of Central Africa and in former Yugoslavia. Third, the magnitude of the phenomenon implies that internal displacement cannot be seen anymore as a minor side-effect of a refugee problem, although situations of internal and external displacement are often mixed.

**Institutional developments**

There is no single humanitarian agency with a comprehensive global mandate to assist and protect IDPs. There is also no institutionalized system to coordinate assistance to IDPs, either at the headquarters level or in the field. Given this situation, in the 1990s, United Nations agencies and other humanitarian partner organizations have aided the growing number of IDPs, both by actively pursuing their traditional mandates and by expanding their capacities to meet these needs.

Among the United Nations agencies:

- **UNDP** responds to the needs of internally displaced persons primarily in the prevention and resettlement phases: earmarking resources for countries beset by disasters or complex emergencies which have substantial displaced populations.
- **UNHCR** becomes involved with IDPs in conflict situations, depending upon a case-by-case extension of its mandate to include the problem of IDPs. It acts by limiting outflows as far as possible and encouraging their return to home communities.
UNICEF assists children wherever they are rendered vulnerable, whether because they are refugees, internally displaced, affected by conflict or natural disasters, inequity or poverty.

WFP assists IDPs with relief food distribution, rehabilitation, recovery and/or development programmes provided through governments or NGOs.

WHO, at the request of governments or the United Nations, furnishes emergency health services and facilities to particular groups, including IDPs. Among non-United Nations organizations:

ICRC plays a key role, since IDPs are at the core of its mandate to protect all victims of armed conflict. In carrying out its mandate to such victims, including IDPs, the ICRC provides the following kinds of assistance: protection of the civilian population; visits to detainees; health and medical services, including the supply of potable water; food aid; the provision of shelter and clothing; and the restoration of family ties, including tracing missing persons and arranging for family reunification.

IOM’s mandate, which explicitly mentions assistance to internally displaced persons, is to ensure the orderly migration of persons in need of migration assistance. Through an internal task force established in 1994, IOM has gathered information from its missions around the world on assistance to IDPs, and is currently reviewing a set of policy and operational guidelines to derive basic principles for all IOM activities relating to IDPs.

Numerous international NGOs also assist IDPs in all sectors of humanitarian assistance: food, health, water and sanitation, shelter, etc.

Although rich and variegated, the overall response of the humanitarian community to IDPs has been fragmented and ad hoc. In recognition of this major challenge, several steps have been taken towards a more systemic approach.

In resolution 92/73 (1992), the Commission on Human Rights asked the United Nations Secretary-General to appoint a representative to look into the legal and institutional requirements for more effective assistance and protection to IDPs. Ambassador Francis Deng was appointed to this post in 1992 and serves as the United Nations' primary advocate for IDPs. His assignment is to raise awareness about their plight; highlight unmet needs; suggest ways to improve responses in particular countries; develop an appropriate normative framework; and strengthen institutional arrangements.

In December 1994, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee requested the ERC to serve as the United Nations reference point for internal displacement. Shortly thereafter, in July 1995, the Economic and Social Council called upon the United Nations humanitarian system to review its capacity to respond to humanitarian crises and disasters including, inter alia, a detailed review of a number of issues relating to IDPs. The IASC, in reviewing this matter through a Task Force on IDPs, has recommended that additional work is needed to ensure a comprehensive and coordinated approach to IDP problems. While deciding that no uniform model can be applied and that the precise structures for assisting IDPs should be determined on a case-by-case basis, the IASC has attempted to clarify the focal points at the headquarters and field levels, as well as operational arrangements, for assisting IDPs.
Measures being considered to strengthen humanitarian response to IDPs include the following:

- The ERC, as Chairman of the IASC, remains the focal point at United Nations Headquarters for the inter-agency coordination of humanitarian assistance to IDPs. Subject to IASC agreement, he is responsible for:
  - global advocacy on both assistance and protection requirements;
  - resource mobilization and the identification of gaps in resources;
  - management of global information on IDPs; and
  - support to the field on IDP-related humanitarian issues, including negotiation of access to IDP populations.

- The Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator, in consultation with inter-agency country teams, is responsible for coordinating assistance to IDPs, including:
  - addressing IDP's humanitarian requirements before, during and after an emergency;
  - serving as an advocate for the assistance and protection of IDPs;
  - recommending to the ERC a division of operational responsibilities among the agencies; and
  - on a case-by-case basis, also recommending to the ERC that the IASC confirm a lead agency to assume operational responsibilities for IDPs, including camp management where appropriate.

- With regard to operational coordination, there is a continuing need to clarify how agencies divide or mesh their responsibilities for IDPs. In such crucial areas as food aid, rehabilitation programmes, transport and logistics, protection, and human rights, coordination is often addressed through bilateral memoranda of understanding signed by two or more agencies. For example:
  - UNHCR, UNICEF and WHO agreed in a recent Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that UNICEF and WHO will, respectively, assist displaced women and children and provide health care to IDPs. UNHCR will also be involved, when requested by a competent organ of the United Nations.
  - UNHCR and WFP agreed in a MOU revised in 1997 to divide their responsibilities for food assistance to IDPs.

In carrying out their operational responsibilities, agencies must take care to distinguish among the needs of differing groups of displaced people. Some IDPs are mixed among resident communities; others gather in camps; still others simply disperse throughout a territory. Interventions in these various settings will tend to have different costs and impacts.

In countries emerging from protracted conflict, one special category of IDPs of great concern to the humanitarian community is demobilized soldiers. (See chapter 8 on demobilization in Angola and Liberia) Their displacement is not only from their homes, but also from the basic fabric of society, since they are all too often socially and psychologically alienated from their traditional communities, livelihoods and skills. A large proportion of demobilized soldiers never return to their traditional homelands and, unless they receive targeted reintegration and rehabilitation assistance, they can threaten public security even after the conflict has ended.
While a number of steps have been taken along these lines to strengthen the international institutions aimed at assisting IDPs, much still needs to be done. The challenge which now faces the humanitarian community is not only to ensure that IDPs’ basic needs of survival are met, but also to broaden the efforts to prevent human rights abuses, improve governance and promote equitable development practices. Both adequate early warning systems and reintegration measures addressed to all vulnerable groups in the community are needed in order to improve the conditions of life for IDPs.

Notes:


3 The Inter-Agency Task Force on IDPs was established in 1992, with the aim of improving inter-agency collaboration, and subsequently revised its terms of reference in 1995. The Task Force, in addition to the regular IASC membership, has included the Representative of the Secretary-General on IDPs and the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The Task Force has been meeting monthly in Geneva, with secretariat support from DHA.