

INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS: FRAMING THE ISSUES

By Lance Clark

INTRODUCTION

Around the world today more than 30 million persons have been forced to leave their homes because of the effects of human conflict. Most have fled from warfare or other types of violence, repression or persecution. More than half of these individuals still remain inside their own countries. It is this particular sub-group of the overall category of internally displaced persons, that is, those who have been internally displaced because of human conflict, who are the subject of this international Symposium.

Your work in the next few days is to identify why these people continue to fare so badly and to suggest ways to better help them. My job this morning is to provide you with information that can facilitate your work.

I will present three types of information. First, I will talk about the background of these persons who are internally displaced by human conflict -- who are they? where are they? how many are there? and why should they be the focus of this Symposium? Second, I will review the guidelines that have been suggested for our discussions here. Lastly, I will suggest a number of key questions and issues that this Symposium should address.

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THE PROBLEM OF INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT

The Causes of Displacement

Around the world today there are tens of millions of persons who have been forced from their homes by events beyond their control. Some have ended up crossing an international border. However, the majority of these uprooted persons remain inside their own country and are therefore referred to as "internally displaced persons."

Such internal displacement has been caused by a wide range of different factors -- earthquakes, disease, industrial accidents, the construction of dams, civil war, and environmental degradation, just to name a few. How do we sort these various situations into different categories?

Unfortunately, there is no agreed upon typology that neatly divides all of these causes of displacement into a few clear categories. Lacking such a typology, what has happened in practice is that particular sub-groups of internally displaced persons have been defined according to the needs of those making the definition. This kind of approach leaves many "gray zones" and overlapping areas between these categories. However, it has often proven the most practical approach in order to move on with the job of helping those in need.

One such category that is often used is that of persons displaced by natural disasters. Some of these natural disasters

occur suddenly, as in the case of earthquakes or hurricanes. In other cases the onset is slower, and is often integrally tied to environmental changes. For example, many famine situations result from a lack of rainfall combined with environmental degradation due to the actions of man.

Another category that is sometimes used is displacement caused by development programs. In some cases this displacement is planned for, as when the Aswan dam was built and it was clear that people living in the areas to be flooded would have to move. In other cases, the displacement is a consequence that was not dealt with, or often, even acknowledged, by those planning the development program.

However, the main focus of this Symposium is on another category -- a category of persons that has repeatedly been extremely difficult to assist and protect. This category are those internally displaced persons for whom human conflict was a major factor in their displacement.

The underlying origins of human conflicts are familiar to all of us in this room. They include such things as racial, ethnic and/or religious intolerance, disputes between nation-states, and many others. However, the existence of these underlying problems alone is not sufficient to cause human displacement. Just the fact that your neighbor dislikes or even hates you is not enough to cause you to leave your home. However, when

he leads a mob of people to burn your house you are likely to do so.

What are examples of the main ways that human conflict is expressed which actually force people from their homes? This is an important question, since the answer defines the kinds of situations that should be the focus of our work in this Symposium. Let me answer this question briefly now and return to it later in more detail when I discuss the specific parameters of this Symposium.

The most obvious examples are persecution, gross human rights violations, or the effects of armed conflict. These are also, it should be noted, the main reasons that drive the great majority of international refugee flows.

It is clear that a situation of people fleeing the effects of warfare should be included in this category. However, other cases require careful judgement in deciding whether to include them or not. One example would be famine situations. Cases in which large amounts of crops were destroyed in the course of the conflict, or in which politics determined who received lifesaving relief aid and who did not, should be included in our core concern group. However, determining when politics has been responsible for aid not reaching those in need is not always easy. Another "gray area" where judgement calls are difficult to make are cases of involuntary relocation of people by their government. If such relocations were carried out primarily for political purposes, such as has happened to many

black South Africans, they should be included as well.

Numbers and Characteristics of the Displaced

What is it about this class of people, that is, those persons displaced because of human conflict, that makes them the valid subject of an international Symposium such as this one? There are three reasons:

- ◆ they are not restricted to any one area of the world, but exist around the world;
- ◆ their numbers are massive; and
- ◆ their level of suffering is intolerable.

The listing of countries with major populations of persons internally displaced by human conflict is extensive. It includes such places as Afghanistan, Angola, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Mozambique, Nicaragua, the Philippines, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, and the Soviet Union. Clearly, this is not a problem that is limited to any one region, but rather is a worldwide one.

How many people fall into this category? This is not an easy question to answer. Not only are there problems in deciding which situations to include, but also the statistics on these groups are often quite poor. Often the range in the estimates that have been made of the numbers in any particular country is quite wide. However, an effort at establishing a

reasonable first approximation of their numbers was done by the Refugee Policy Group at the end of 1988. This review put the worldwide number at between 15 and 20 million persons.

Such estimates would mean that the number of people in this category equals or exceeds the total number of the world's internationally displaced refugees. The comparison between these two groups is especially striking in Africa. Our estimates indicate that the same human conflicts that have driven millions of African refugees across international borders have probably produced twice that number of internally displaced persons.

It is not just the massive numbers of these persons around the world that commands our attention -- it is also their level of suffering. Too often, relief efforts to help them are slow in starting and far too inadequate. For example, epidemiologists continue to record death rates of over 30 times the normal level for the country in question in one internally displaced persons camp after another. Sanctuary often means little to these people, as armed attacks and other forms of violence continue even at the sites to which they have fled. And too often, too little is done to help these persons get back on their feet even once the conflict has ended, a failure that institutionalizes the impoverishment that was created by their displacement in the first place.

Constraints in Providing Assistance and Protection

Why does such suffering continue to occur? There are numerous answers to this question. In many situations, lack of resources is a major problem. For example, most of these situations occur in developing countries that are hard put to meet their normal development needs, much less to find the resources to address the relief needs of these displaced persons or to address their longer term needs.

Logistics is another reason this suffering continues, especially for relief efforts. Many of these displaced persons are located in areas where logistics problems are a nightmare. Fighting may still be going on in the area where they now reside, or they may be located in remote areas of countries which themselves lack the transportation infrastructure in terms of roads, trucks, fuel, etc. needed to move aid to them.

While these factors are important, and others could be mentioned as well, the real core of the problem of why such internally displaced persons continue to suffer at such high levels lies in two main problems:

- ◆ the active opposition of those with a political stake in the conflict; and
- ◆ the lack of an international system to help assist and protect these people.

In almost every such displacement to date, some of those with a political stake in the conflict in question have placed major obstacles in the way of assistance and protection efforts. For example, in most armed conflict situations, key portions of both the government and the opposition forces view many of the internally displaced persons as sympathizers or even active supporters of the other side. Too often, humanitarian aid, such as food, is used as a weapon by both sides in the conflict. Another variation of this problem that is seen in longer-term situations is the unwillingness of some officials to allow these displaced persons to be integrated into the areas where they have been displaced to, and to use some of the nation's development funds to meet some of their longer-term needs.

A fundamental aspect of this problem of political opposition is the "sovereignty question." When portions of a government are themselves key players in the conflict that is causing the displacement, they often move to block outside assistance by insisting that such aid would constitute "external interference" in the internal affairs of the country, thus violating its sovereignty.

The second major reason why this suffering continues is that unlike the case for international refugees, there is no international system in place to provide these internally displaced persons with special aid and protection. Because they remain inside their country, these persons fall outside of the coverage of UNHCR,

the main institution for assisting and protecting international refugees. UNHCR has only become involved with internally displaced persons in very special cases, e.g., when requested to use its "good offices" by the UN Secretary-General, and in some cases of repatriation of international refugees to areas where displaced persons exist as well.

Most of the international structures that exist to aid internally displaced persons deal with those who are displaced due to natural disasters. However, it should be noted that in some cases it has been proven useful to blur the distinction between manmade and natural causes for a disaster, and to therefore use some of these structures to provide assistance to the broader group of persons in need.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) does have a limited mandate to assist persons who flee from armed conflict. However, ICRC not only has run repeatedly into major problems gaining access to those in need, but has also generally limited itself to assisting only a portion of the total target population.

It is important to note that despite these obstacles, there are numerous examples of assistance and protection still reaching those in need. Often this has been due to the courage and initiative of individuals and organizations who have received little notice or publicity. This has often been the case regarding the work of such groups as local indigenous organizations and non-governmental agencies, and of

the International Committee of the Red Cross. Other times, a higher profile approach has proven effective, such as that being taken by Operation Lifeline Sudan.

It is essential that we learn from and build on these efforts. However, it is also essential that we recognize that the general pattern of response to the needs of these internally displaced persons has been slow and inadequate, and that tremendous unnecessary suffering and death have resulted from this failure.

There is one last point that I would like to make regarding the context of this Symposium -- there is not going to be any "quick fix" for this problem. For example, it is extremely unlikely that any institution comparable to that of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees can be established with the same kind of broad mandate for meeting the needs of these internally displaced persons. Instead, the best approach for making improvements in this regard is probably to look at how different pieces of this problem can best be addressed by those organizations and institutions who are best constituted and positioned to do so.

CLARIFYING THE PARAMETERS OF OUR DISCUSSIONS

Given the overall context that I have just outlined, let me now talk about the parameters for discussion that have been suggested by those who have convened this Symposium. I hope that the reason

that we need to set these parameters is clear and acceptable to you. Too often I've had the experience, as I'm sure you have, of going to a meeting in which the focus of the meeting was not clearly spelled out at the onset. The result was that most of the meeting was spent arguing about what the subject should be, and therefore little useful work got done.

The first parameter has already been stated in general terms -- that the main population of concern to us are those internally displaced persons for whom human conflict is the main, or a major, factor in their displacement. Using this definition, which displaced persons populations should be included in our deliberations? Which should be excluded? And which fall into the gray area in between?

The largest category in terms of numbers are probably those who have fled from the effects of armed conflict. While some of these conflicts are international ones, such as the Iran-Iraq war, most are what in legal terms are considered non-international conflicts. While some of these non-international conflicts involve civil wars, in which the opposition to the government is well-defined and well-organized, others involve less formally organized conflicts, such as race riots. It is important to note that most of those who flee armed conflict situations are not actually fleeing from direct attack. Instead, they are fleeing from the threat of attack or of related human rights violations, or they are fleeing because the economic base on which they depend has

been seriously damaged or destroyed by the conflict.

Those famine situations in which a major reason for the food shortage is that crops or animals have been destroyed in the course of an armed conflict, or because people are unable to go to their fields because of fear of attack, should be included. So should situations in which people are forced to leave their homes after a disaster has occurred, not because of the effects of the disaster itself, but because they are not allowed to receive the relief aid they need because of political reasons.

One type of situation that should be included as a general category, but which requires careful judgment as to which particular instances qualify, is that of forcible relocation of people by their government. When such forcible relocation is carried out primarily to enhance the political goals of the government it is an expression of human conflict. Examples include forcing people into "protective hamlets" so that the government can more easily conduct a counter-insurgency campaign, or the forcible relocation of black South Africans into the so-called "Bantustans."

One especially "gray" area are those cases in which people are forcibly relocated because of the implementation of development schemes by their government. Critics of some of these programs have argued that they are primarily a subtle but nonetheless very powerful form of ethnic conflict, intended to impoverish one ethnic group to the

benefit of another. This argument contends that it is no coincidence that many projects that create such displacements, such as dams, are implemented by governments made up primarily of members of certain powerful ethnic groups while the great majority of those displaced belong to less powerful ethnic groups. The history of the treatment of many indigenous populations around the world shows that there is some basis for making this argument in some cases.

What kinds of internal displacements are clearly excluded from the focus of this Symposium? A major category that we should exclude are persons who have been displaced by natural disasters, unless politics played a major role in their displacement as well. Displacements because of accidents, such as those at nuclear power plants or chemical factories, would also be excluded. Movements of people which are based primarily on economic factors, which includes most rural-urban migration, would be excluded as well.

One final distinction regarding what kind of people are of concern to us should be made. This regards international refugees, i.e., those who have crossed into another country. As the subject of this Symposium is internally displaced persons, such international refugees are not a main focus as long as they remain in their country of asylum. However, there are a number of very important instances in which assistance and protection to refugees who have been returning home has been integrally mixed with helping internally displaced persons as well. Such

cases, and the mechanisms involved, should clearly be part of our deliberations here.

The second parameter has to do with the countries where these internally displaced persons reside. Such persons exist both in developing and industrialized countries. However, the suggestion is that the main focus of this meeting be on those persons that reside in developing countries. This reflects the fact that it is in developing countries where the needs are greatest. This in turn reflects the much lower level of material resources available within these countries to be directed towards helping these persons, as well as the fact that the marginal economic status of many of the residents of the area to which these persons are displaced makes them especially vulnerable to the negative impacts of hosting such populations. These impacts include competition for scarce resources, such as water, food, land, and jobs, and to the assistance that is provided through the government infrastructure, such as schools and health posts.

The third parameter is the chronological phases of the displacements that we should deal with. Such displacements can be seen along a continuum starting with early warning of the possibility of the movement through emergency relief efforts, extended (or care-and-maintenance) type relief efforts, and longer term efforts that include the return and reintegration of these people back home, or their integration into the places to which they have moved.

Any recommendations for how early warning could be improved, as well as suggestions for ways that actions could be taken to alleviate the problems that cause the displacement in the first place, would be useful contributions to this Symposium. However, our main focus will probably be on what should be done to help people once displacement has actually begun.

This certainly gives a wide range of issues to be discussed.

To review, then, the suggested parameters of our deliberations are that:

1. The focus is on those persons who are internally displaced because of human conflict.
2. We will concentrate on those persons within this group who reside in developing countries.
3. We will discuss issues that run the continuum from the emergency relief phase to longer term assistance, including the interrelationship between aid to these internally displaced persons and the development efforts of the host country.

Let me hasten to say that defining these parameters does not mean that anyone who dares raise any points outside of them will immediately be gavelled down by our Chairperson. For example, there are certainly important lessons that can be learned from experiences with displacement situations other than those

caused by human conflict. However, it is hoped that anyone making such a point would also spell out how it relates to the main subject at hand. In addition, if it becomes clear during the course of our work that these guidelines should be altered, it is my understanding that there is certainly flexibility to do so.

QUESTIONS TO BE ADDRESSED AT THIS SYMPOSIUM

As the final section of this presentation, I would like to now suggest a number of questions that might be useful starting points for our discussions. I will divide these questions according to the stages from relief to development, as well as noting some that cut across more than one phase.

There are two main questions we need to examine in the emergency relief phase. The first is how can relief operations get started faster? The second is how can we get better access to those who are in need?

In terms of starting relief efforts quicker, what can be done to get the story of the suffering of the displaced persons and their need for assistance out faster? What are the most effective ways to build awareness of the need for relief efforts not only within the "international community" at large, but more specifically, in the minds of key decision makers? And just who are these key decision makers with the authority and responsibility for getting relief operations under way?

In terms of gaining access to those in need, what are the factors and approaches which in the past have led the governments in question to allow relief operations to proceed? What lessons can we learn from these experiences? What models exist that might be used in future situations?

Many of the displacements that we are concerned with are caused by conflicts between a central government and opposition forces that sometimes term themselves liberation fronts. In many instances, large numbers of displaced persons, and in some cases, the majority of them, live in areas under the control of these fronts. Most of the assistance approaches taken in the past have failed to reach these people. However, there are some less well known approaches that have, most notably working with the humanitarian relief wings of the front in question. How can these mechanisms be better utilized? What steps can be taken to ensure that such humanitarian aid does not get used for military or political purposes? And what alternative approaches exist for meeting the needs of these people in areas outside of the control of the central government?

After the immediate emergency relief phase ends, many displacement situations move into a period of extended relief that is often called the care and maintenance phase. I would suggest that the most important task question regarding this care and maintenance phase is "What steps can be taken to avoid it in the first place?" These extended relief situations create a very artificial life for people

which, combined with the creation of dependency conditions, make it very hard for people to return to their former position of self-sufficiency.

However, in situations in which this phase cannot be avoided, how can assistance be provided in ways that are as developmental as possible? This includes looking at programs such as training and education and trying to find at least some ways to build some kind of economic activity into the lives of these people.

In terms of longer term assistance, one of the important questions is how can assistance efforts move into this phase, and out of a relief mode, as quickly and effectively as possible? Too often the kinds of agencies involved in the relief phase simply don't know much about longer term, developmental approaches. The result is that the relief phase is extended unnecessarily, and with very negative impacts, until other agencies finally take over. This division between relief and development institutions is found within almost all of the categories of major players – the local government, the UN agencies, the non-governmental organizations, and the major donors. A related problem is how to get these displaced persons integrated into the development planning and programs of the country and its government.

There are a number of important issues that we should address that cut across more than one phase. Let me mention five of those.

The first is how to deal with situations in which the emergency has become chronic.

There are some countries in the world in which emergency relief is not a short term problem, but rather one that has persisted for years, and for over a decade in some cases. Countries such as Lebanon and Mozambique continue to face this kind of problem. How can the country in question best operate, and through what structures, in order to deal with these emergency needs at the least cost to development efforts? How can other key players, such as United Nations agencies and major donor governments, best help in this difficult balancing act?

Coordination of assistance is another cross-cutting problem. In each phase there are a range of different institutions who have a role to play in assistance efforts. Which agency or agencies should play the lead or coordinating role in each phase? Does this change between phases, and if so, how can this transition be done most effectively? How can we avoid gaps in programming while also avoiding wasteful duplication of effort?

The third cross-cutting area is that of the relevant legal instruments. What has been the experience with those legal instruments that already exist? To what extent have they been useful and effective? Are new instruments needed? For example, is there language that might be included in the Convention on the Rights of the Child that is now being developed that might have an important impact on meeting the needs of internally displaced children (who usually make up 50% or more of the total displaced population)? Would a Convention on the Rights of the Environmental Refugees,

such as is being discussed within UNEP, be useful in situations such as famines in which the distinction between natural and man-made causes for the displacement are blurry?

A fourth area is the relationship between internal displacement and peace processes. How can assistance and protection be provided to the internally displaced population in ways that facilitate the attainment of peace, or at least do not impede it?

Last, to come full circle, what is the relationship between under-development and displacement? In situations in which under-development is a major or contributing factor to the conflict that caused the displacement, how can development efforts best be targeted and facilitated to address this problem?

These questions are offered as possible starting points for discussion, and certainly not as the exhaustive list of questions that should be dealt with in this very large and complicated area.

In closing, let me return to my very first point – that the reason that we are all here today is concern for our fellow human beings. Each of us I'm sure has some particular situation that puts a human face on our subject today. For myself, as the father of a small boy, one such story happened at a therapeutic feeding center at a relief site last year – a place where the people in the story had fled to expecting to find help.

"The kids assemble outside a gate. The gate opens and the kids rush in. The stronger ones push and scratch and kick to get to the front and get their bowls filled. All the while parents are crying out from behind the fence, begging their children to try to get up and make it to the front. Perhaps 500 get fed. Perhaps 200 don't. Around the outside are the kids that didn't make it today. They won't make it tomorrow either. They are already dead."

Whatever our disagreements and differing points of view, and I'm sure there will be many, we must keep in mind the urgency of the situation – even as we speak, people are continuing to suffer, and even die, unnecessarily. Ways to help them better do exist. It is our job to find them.

Thank you and good luck.