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The Plight of Internally Displaced Persons

by Sandra Yin

(October 2005) Americans perched on punctured rooftops in the blazing sun for days. Others slogged through rising floodwaters. And many others rushed inland before the storm hit, only to remain homeless weeks later, unable to return to their ruined homes.

Lacking food, water, and shelter at the beginning of their forced migration, the approximately 1 million people displaced by Hurricane Katrina in late August and September scattered to all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. The failure of government agencies to quickly address the needs of these evacuees sparked debate over the readiness of the United States to deal with major disasters or terrorist attacks.

Such failures, however, are not uncommon on the international stage. At least 25 million people in some 40 countries worldwide have been forcibly displaced within their own countries by violent conflict or environmental disasters such as hurricanes or earthquakes.¹ But these populations—known in the international community as *internally displaced persons* (IDPs)—don't receive the attention or services accorded refugees who *leave* their countries because of persecution.²

The problem, say experts, is a lack of dedicated resources, both monetary and organizational. IDPs often languish in bureaucratic limbo, a subclass of the displaced for which few countries plan or devote resources. Even worse, some governments such as Sudan and Nepal have sponsored attacks on their IDPs.

"IDPs are probably the most vulnerable of those forced for whatever reason from their homes," says Susan Martin, director of the Institute for the Study of International Migration at Georgetown. "The current international system just isn't equipped to deal effectively with those displaced in their own countries."

Only a Border Separates Them

Not surprisingly, many IDPs are located in the world's conflict zones—including 6 million in Sudan and 200,000 in Afghanistan (see table). But not all IDPs in these zones were displaced by conflict. For instance, 450,000 of the 800,000 IDPs now in Sri Lanka were forced to move by the devastation of the December 2004 South Asian tsunami. (The other 350,000 have been displaced by the ongoing civil war there.)³

Number of Internally Displaced Persons in Select Countries

Country	Number of IDPs	Estimate date
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Afghanistan	200,000	June 2005
Angola	91,000	Aug. 2005
Azerbaijan	575,000	Jan. 2004
Democratic Republic of Congo	2,170,000	June 2005
Indonesia (Aceh Province)	533,000	Dec. 2004
Iraq	1,000,000	Nov. 2004
Lebanon	600,000	Feb. 2005
Peru	60,000	June 2004
Commonwealth of Independent States	339,000	Dec. 2004
Sri Lanka	800,000	June 2005
Sudan	6,000,000	March 2005
United States	1,000,000	Sept. 2005

Sources: Global IDP Project, IDP Estimates (www.idpproject.org, accessed Oct. 6, 2005); Global IDP Database: Sri Lanka Country Information Page (www.db.idpproject.org, accessed Oct. 6, 2005); EM-DAT: The OFDA/CRED International Disaster Database (www.em-dat.net, accessed Oct. 6, 2005); and Reuters, "Katrina Numbers Illustrate Storm's Toll" (www.alertnet.org, accessed Oct. 7, 2005).

Regardless of the reason for their displacement, however, IDPs are often not treated as well as *refugees*, who by the UN's definition are those who have been forced to migrate across international borders. International law mandates that refugees receive food, shelter, and safety in their host countries as well as international support.

But the internally displaced—who have few legal or physical protections—face a less certain fate. Unlike refugees who can turn to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for assistance, IDPs have had no single UN organization with an express mandate to help and shield them. The numbers highlight this disparity in treatment: While UNHCR programs had helped 54 percent of the approximately 9 million refugees worldwide by the end of 2004, they assisted only 23 percent of IDPs.⁴

"The way the system has been set up, it assumes people can rely on their own governments for help," says Kathleen Newland, director of the Migration Policy Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based research organization.

National Governments Often Can't or Won't Protect IDPs

But in many cases, this reliance on national response actually puts IDPs in jeopardy.

In at least 13 countries in 2004—ranging from Burma to Zimbabwe—governments have supported direct attacks against IDPs.⁵ In Burma, an estimated 650,000 IDPs, most from the Karen minority, continue to be the target of forced relocation to depopulate ethnic minority areas and deny insurgents a civilian support base.⁶ In Sudan, the government or government-backed militias were also the main agent of displacement for an estimated 2 million people in 2004.⁷

In other instances, governments are not stable or strong enough to protect the displaced. In Somalia, 400,000 people remain IDPs after 13 years of total state collapse in a country controlled by warlords and freelance gunmen. IDPs have also proven difficult to protect in such places as Burundi, Georgia, and East Timor. Finally, as of late 2004, more than one-half of the countries affected by internal displacement lacked even a basic strategy for dealing with IDPs.⁸

A Lack of Focus and Coordination Among International Agencies

While individual UN agencies and NGOs have worked to pick up the slack, the overall response in many countries to IDPs has remained patchy, slow, and unpredictable.⁹ Although the Darfur crisis in Sudan broke out in 2003, it took the UN's refugee agency a year to get help to those displaced.

Indeed, it was not until 1998 that international standards for dealing with the internally displaced were developed in response to the rising number of IDPs generated by the breakup of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Known as the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, these guidelines define the responsibilities of governments or nonstate authorities to IDPs, including protecting the displaced from violence, rape, and lawlessness as well as preventing or mitigating the conditions that lead to displacement.¹⁰ When governments are not able to meet their responsibilities, the guidelines say those governments must call on the international community for help.

Some countries such as Angola and Liberia have adopted laws or policies based on the principles, and UN authorities refer to the principles as the international norm. But the guidelines have yet to be incorporated into national law in many countries, including the United States.

Meanwhile, a lack of coordination among UN agencies regarding IDPs has hamstrung efforts to reach these populations. "One of the big issues has been who at the UN is in charge," says Ken Bacon, president of Refugees International, a nonprofit organization that aids displaced people. "They have not had a particularly coherent approach."

Instead of devoting a single UN agency to the displaced, the international community opted in the late 1990s to develop what it calls a "collaborative response" to IDP situations. This effort drew on the expertise of a range of international aid and humanitarian organizations, including UNHCR. But UNHCR's main mission does not include IDPs, and many analysts say there is not enough funding among international organizations to cover the needs of refugees, much less those of IDPs.¹¹

A New UN Scheme Sparks Optimism

More recently, the UN has taken steps to be more responsive to IDP crises, says Roberta Cohen, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and principal adviser to the Representative of the UN Secretary General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons. (Cohen helped write the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.)

Up until September 2005, UN agencies could choose the situations they

wanted to help, resulting in large numbers of IDPs going without adequate attention. But UN agencies finally agreed in early September to a division of labor intended to streamline the IDP response mechanism and to ensure accountability.

Under this scheme, UNICEF is tasked to handle water and sanitation issues, the World Food Programme handles nutrition issues, and the United Nations Development Programme deals with early recovery efforts. UNHCR will assume primary responsibility for the protection of IDPs, camp management, and emergency shelter.

"Assigning UNHCR responsibility for IDP protection was an important and logical move," says Bacon. "Now we all have to work to make sure that UNHCR has the funding to meet its new responsibilities."

Some observers would argue that those uprooted by Katrina might have fared better had the United States followed the guiding principles. Indeed, Cohen says that the U.S. Agency for International Development calls for applying the guidelines overseas.¹²

"Well, good—now apply them at home, too," says Cohen. "You can't prevent a hurricane, but you can prepare a response that can mitigate the impact."

Sandra Yin is associate editor at the Population Reference Bureau.

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