

# Changing Patterns of Flight: Refugees in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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This summer I visited Somali refugees at Dadaab camp in Kenya. Conditions were rough, and familiar from the news coverage we have all seen: people lined up for food rations in the blistering heat; very rudimentary housing, health clinics and latrines; and an atmosphere pervading the camp that had components of both restlessness and relief at finding safe haven.

But these classic, even iconic images of refugees, and the relief they receive from international donors, belie the way refugee issues are changing around the world. International migration has soared, and not just from poor countries to wealthier ones. The Internet and other advances have made communication and travel easier for all sorts of people. Without a Cold War balance of power, the nature of conflict has changed and refugee flows have grown increasingly diverse and complex. As we confront threats of terrorism around the world, distinguishing those who would harm us from those who need our protection has become crucial.

As I see it, three major trends are emerging as forces creating new dynamics in the refugee world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

- ◆ First, the distinction between those who have fled across an international border and those who have sought refuge from conflict within their own country has blurred. In some areas, such as the area where Chad, Sudan, and Central African Republic meet, some of the displaced people have crossed an international border, and some have not. But they have similar needs. The global number of people who have fled abuses and become internally displaced far exceeds the number who have crossed international borders and become refugees. But unlike the refugee regime, the international architecture to protect internally displaced persons (IDPs) is fragmented—each state applies its laws without a framework of international law specific to IDPs, and there is no single humanitarian agency or unified system for responding to IDP needs.
- ◆ Second, more refugees find themselves in protracted situations that occasionally flare into emergency situations, as festering conflicts explode into violence, and then subside. How do we provide assistance to displaced people in areas that are still very unsafe—both for the refugees and the humanitarian aid workers trying to help? We face this challenge in protracted crises in Gaza and the West Bank, Lebanon, Colombia, Pakistan, the Caucasus, and elsewhere.
- ◆ Third, as globalization fuels international migration, refugees are increasingly caught up in the midst of so-called “mixed flows,” along with economic migrants, smugglers, victims of human trafficking, traffickers, stateless persons, tourists and

other travelers—some with valid documentation, some with fraudulent documentation, and some without any documents at all.

At the end of 2007, there were over 16 million refugees worldwide, out of an estimated 200 million international migrants. Palestinian refugees constitute over a quarter of this global refugee population, with over 4.6 million registered in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza. Other refugee populations include: Afghans, Iraqis, Sudanese, Congolese, Central Africans, Burundians, Somalis, Burmese, Bhutanese, Tibetans, North Koreans, Eritreans, Sahrawis in North Africa, Liberians, Mauritians, and others in the Balkans and Caucasus. These refugees fled their countries because they feared persecution on the basis of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group, and their own government was either unable or unwilling to protect them.<sup>1</sup> Having fled persecution and often violent conflict, refugees need international protection.

They are not alone. When refugees cross an international border, they often leave behind relatives and friends who also need protection. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Center estimates that today there are over 26 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the international community began to grapple with the principles of non-intervention and sovereignty that had constrained responses to conflict and atrocities occurring within a country's borders, and to strengthen our resolve to act when such "internal" abuses threatened international peace and stability. In looking beyond the borders that refugees had crossed, we began to consider more seriously the whole picture of flight from conflict and human rights abuses—that families are often displaced several times within their own country before seeking refuge in a neighboring country; that these families are likely to turn first to relatives and neighbors for help before seeking "external" assistance, which can obscure their strain and suffering; that internally displaced persons often need international protection, like refugees, but lack international laws and institutions like those that have protected refugees since the end of World War II.

We see this dynamic relationship between refugees and IDPs in Iraq and many other places. Roughly two million Iraqi refugees have sought protection in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and other countries in the region, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates there are even more displaced inside Iraq. In Burma, military operations against civilians, forced relocations and other abuses have displaced over 500,000 ethnic minorities within their own country, as well as over 270,000 refugees and up to two million migrants in Thailand, Bangladesh, Malaysia and other countries. Atrocities in the Darfur region of Sudan have caused over 250,000 refugees to flee to eastern Chad, while nearly 2.5 million remain displaced within Darfur. Even in post-conflict settings where peace has taken hold, the "big picture" of displacement remains important. In Southern Sudan, for example, thousands of people are returning from decades of displacement in Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as from other regions within Sudan. As Sudanese refugees and IDPs return

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<sup>1</sup> Palestinian refugees are an exception to this definition and are registered under the mandate of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

home to villages and towns destroyed by years of war, reconstruction strategies must empower them to rebuild their communities and minimize competition over scarce resources.

Refugee returns to Southern Sudan are a success story in resolving a protracted crisis. After a quarter century in exile, almost 300,000 Sudanese refugees have returned since the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, and thousands more are preparing to repatriate. Unfortunately, nearly ten million—over 60 percent—of the world’s refugees continue to live in exile after fleeing their homelands more than five years ago. Although refugees often encounter the hospitality of hosting countries whose people are the first responders, the majority are hosted by developing countries with limited resources that strain over time, and many refugees live in camps with dim prospects for returning home in safety and dignity. Already struggling to sustain their families after fleeing their homes, these refugees suffer doubly when their fragile host communities erupt in violence. Palestinian refugees live in the world’s longest protracted situation, where the recent conflict in Gaza has disrupted essential deliveries of food. In Colombia, where nearly three million people have been internally displaced for as long as a decade, guerilla fighting is causing hundreds of thousands of families to flee anew, with a particularly devastating impact on indigenous communities and increasing refugee flows to neighboring Ecuador, Panama and Venezuela.

For refugees and IDPs in protracted situations, aid strategies that support their self-reliance are essential, especially their ability to earn a livelihood and for their children to attend school. But durable solutions are the key to unlocking protracted refugee situations. As in Southern Sudan, intense diplomatic efforts and peace negotiations can resolve the root causes of conflict and create the foundation of safety and stability that enables refugees to return home. For the vast majority of refugees, voluntary return is their durable solution.

In some cases, however, other durable solutions may be used strategically to resolve a protracted situation. The United States, for example, has begun to resettle Bhutanese refugees living in a protracted situation in Nepal as part of a comprehensive plan to achieve durable solutions for this refugee population with the Governments of Bhutan and Nepal, and other donors.

The Bhutanese join over 60,000 refugees who have arrived in the United States over the past year through the US Refugee Admissions Program. Resettlement to third countries, including the United States, is considered for refugees in urgent need of protection as well as for those for whom other durable solutions are not feasible. For some refugees, resettlement is the best, or perhaps only, alternative. The United States resettles more refugees each year than all other resettlement countries combined, reflecting American compassion for some of the world’s most vulnerable people. As Secretary Rice has said, “the commitment of the United States to protecting and assisting refugees is deep and abiding. This commitment is a part of our nation’s history and it goes to our very core values.”

During its 28-year history, the US Refugee Admissions Program has responded to changing refugee circumstances. The end of the Cold War dramatically altered the context in which the program operates worldwide, allowing us to shift its focus from geopolitical interests to a more diverse range of resettlement needs. Having shifted its focus away from large groups concentrated in a few locations (primarily refugees from Vietnam, the former Soviet Union, Ethiopia, and the former Yugoslavia), the program now offers resettlement to refugees of over 50 nationalities each year.

The US Refugee Admissions Program has continued to adjust in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. We have worked closely with the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Justice, the Congress and others to balance our national security interest in barring US admission to aliens who support terrorist organizations and our humanitarian interest in admitting refugees in need of protection and the important durable solution of refugee resettlement. Over the past year, new legislation has broadened the discretionary authority of the Secretaries of State and Homeland Security to determine that certain terrorism-related bars to admission are not applicable to deserving refugees who pose no threat to the United States.

Distinguishing refugees in need of protection amidst a vast mixture of other motivations for international migration is a broad emerging challenge. The global number of international migrants continues to increase as population growth meets advances in transportation, communication, and education. While the vast majority of people migrate for economic reasons, others may be seeking to reunite with family members, victimized by human traffickers, or fleeing persecution or conflict. We are made acutely aware of this phenomenon when overloaded boats capsize and cause the death of many migrants in the Mediterranean, Caribbean, or Gulfs of Aden and Bengal, and off the coast of West Africa—but mixed migration flows are happening everywhere. The challenge is for governments to identify those in need of protection and provide access to asylum. The South African government is facing this challenge acutely as Zimbabweans who may have migrated to South Africa for economic reasons now fear returning to Zimbabwe where they may be at risk of persecution or harm.

The United States leads the international community in addressing global refugee challenges. In addition to managing the US Refugee Admissions Program, the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) provides protection and humanitarian assistance to refugees, conflict victims, vulnerable migrants, victims of trafficking, and stateless persons overseas by leveraging US diplomatic resources in concert with financial contributions to international and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). With a budget exceeding \$1.4 billion in fiscal year 2008, PRM is the leading donor to the UNHCR, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). These multilateral organizations are essential to US humanitarian leadership. The scope of humanitarian needs is so vast that no single government can meet them alone. For this reason, PRM leads American engagement in the governing bodies of these multilateral organizations and has been instrumental in bringing about management reforms that build a strong international humanitarian

infrastructure and ensure accountability on behalf of beneficiaries and American taxpayers. Our contributions seek to address the legal and physical protection needs of refugees as well as their basic assistance needs for water, sanitation, food, health care, shelter, education, and other services. The Bureau's work provides humanitarian assistance as an important US foreign policy objective, and strives to uphold the core humanitarian principles of universality, impartiality, and human dignity by providing funding on the basis of need.

PRM's origins lie in the Indochinese refugee crisis of the 1970s, and the Bureau has evolved significantly to meet new challenges since then. With approximately 130 staff in Washington and posted in US embassies overseas, PRM continues to play a major role in shaping the international refugee regime. Although the problem of refugees is in some sense as enduring as humankind, we have sought to build on the lessons of history to craft an approach that does not simply respond reflexively according to the last emergency but instead anticipates the challenges ahead. Providing protection to both refugees and IDPs, resolving protracted refugee situations, and managing mixed migration flows to identify those in need of protection have emerged as major challenges for our time, whether for Iraqis, Afghans, Burmese, Somalis, or the millions of others around the world driven from their homes by conflict or persecution.