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Masses in Flight: The Global Crisis of Internal Displacement

Brookings Institution Press, Washington D.C., 1998, 414 pages

Masses in Flight provides a comprehensive and detailed analysis of the causes and consequences of internal displacement, the current political, normative and institutional frameworks for addressing the problem, and numerous recommendations to improve the current response. It draws on a number of other studies and contributions, notably in the context of work within the United Nations environment and in relation to the companion volume *The Forsaken People: Case Studies of the Internally Displaced*,¹ which examines the situation in ten countries affected by internal displacement. The two co-authors have been very closely involved in guiding research in this area, and are particularly well placed to handle the complex and politically sensitive humanitarian problem it represents. Besides being a scholar, Dr Francis M. Deng has a background as a former diplomat and Minister of State of the Sudan, and has been the Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on internally displaced persons since the mandate was established in 1992. Roberta Cohen has held senior human rights positions in NGOs and in the US Government, and for a number of years has advocated an increased awareness of and improved response to internal displacement. The book thus combines a balanced and policy-oriented approach with, at times, more proactive proposals.

The first chapter starts by briefly highlighting some of the features of internal displacement. It explains the dramatic increase in the

¹ Brookings Institution Press, Washington D.C., 1998

phenomenon as being largely due to the end of the Cold War, which has resulted in a proliferation of internal conflicts. At the same time, improved international relations have led to greater assertiveness in addressing a problem which in the past would have been considered as falling within the scope of national sovereignty. The chapter outlines some of the serious dangers and deprivations faced by the victims and the negative impact on affected societies. Recognizing that the international response has been largely inadequate, the authors advocate the need for far more decisive international action. The stated purpose of the study is to guide actions by governments and operational agencies, through a broadly recognized framework of normative standards and institutional arrangements.

The second chapter contains a very good and thorough discussion on who internally displaced persons are, underlying causes of tension in affected countries, and external factors that come into play in the event of internal displacement. Without seeking to give the internally displaced a privileged status, the purpose in framing a definition is to identify all those in a similar situation, so as to ensure that their particular needs are not left unanswered. It is worth noting that the definition is neither exhaustive nor intended to be a legal one. The chapter further provides worldwide estimates of numbers of internally displaced persons over the past few years, and discusses some of the problems in obtaining reliable data. A comprehensive regional overview analyses primary causes of displacement on different continents, resulting patterns of displacement, as well as regional capacities and domestic willingness to address the issue. As is the case throughout the book, the section is very well researched and documented. The points made are almost systematically substantiated by practical examples, both in the main text and in some 84 pages of end notes.

The third chapter, entitled "Legal Framework", highlights the need to clarify the legal status of internally displaced persons. Although they are entitled to the protection provided by international human rights and humanitarian law, it is often difficult for governments, organizations and the displaced themselves to identify the guarantees that apply in specific situations. The chapter presents the international normative protection against forced displacement, points out the multiple problems faced by the internally displaced, and analyses corresponding provisions of human rights and humanitarian law. Refugee law is covered as well for

purposes of analogy. A review of the law relevant to the provision of international assistance and practice of the Security Council in this respect is also included. Noting that the law is complicated and incomplete, and that the rights of internally displaced persons are often disregarded simply for lack of awareness, the authors argue that it would be useful to restate general principles of protection in more specific detail, and to address grey areas and gaps in the law by establishing a body of principles. A set of *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, which are intended to give authoritative guidance to all those confronted with internal displacement, is appended to the study.² The Guiding Principles, which largely reflect legally binding standards, were presented to the 1998 session of the UN Commission on Human Rights.

Chapter IV, "Institutional Arrangements", reviews the mandates and capacities of seven humanitarian and development agencies playing a role with regard to internally displaced persons. It examines their institutional strengths, weaknesses and constraints, emphasizing inadequate attention, expertise or capacity to address protection concerns. It also stresses the insufficient coordination between the actors concerned, and reviews options for improvements in this respect. As regards the country level, the authors present some of the challenges facing UNDP officials. These include an inherent tension between their role as resident representatives of that organization and their task as resident coordinators of the United Nations, which may lead them to neglect protection issues relating to the internally displaced. A very good entry into the question of coordination at headquarters level is made through a presentation and analysis of the problems encountered by the former Department of Humanitarian Affairs, — the review still being considered relevant since it is deemed that the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs could face similar problems. The main problems are very well presented and comprehensively analyzed, but "steps to improve the current system" are vaguely formulated. This matters less, since both the problems identified and the recommendations put forward stimulate the reader to draw his own conclusions and shape his own views.

Chapter five starts by underlining the fundamental role that non-governmental organizations have come to play in contemporary crisis

² Text also reprinted in *IRRC*, No. 324, September 1998, p. 545.

situations. On the basis of a survey carried out among 13 major organizations involved with internal displacement, the authors identify the challenges facing these organizations and offer recommendations for strengthening their role, particularly with regard to protection. The analysis reviews a number of issues that are of general interest to all those concerned with internally displaced persons. An important observation is that needs of internally displaced persons which fall outside the traditional activities of organizations often fail to be identified, and are therefore not addressed by anyone.

In chapter six, "Regional Responses", the authors note that in a number of crisis situations, the United Nations response has been minimal, and regional organizations are increasingly expected to assume some responsibility in addressing emergencies in their geographic areas. However, regional initiatives remain at a rudimentary stage of development, with many organizations lacking experience, expertise and often the political will and resources to deal with humanitarian emergencies. In particular, regional and sub-regional bodies in Africa, the Middle East and Asia have been constrained by a strong tradition of non-interference in domestic affairs. The authors emphasize the need for close monitoring of operations such as that undertaken by the Economic Community of West African States in Liberia, to ensure that relief operations are not held hostage to political or strategic objectives. They acknowledge the role played by European institutions to protect democracy and to address conflicts as an important means of averting mass displacement, but advocate more systematic attention to situations of internal displacement. The work of the Organization of American States to protect democracy is also recognized, but it is noted that too little has been done in practice to deal with internal displacement, in spite of the acknowledgment that it requires special attention. It is observed that while the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has appointed a special rapporteur on internally displaced persons, his task, as that of the Commission in general, is constrained by insufficient resources.

In the last chapter, entitled "Strategies and Recommendations", the authors recapitulate the findings of the study and underline the necessity for a comprehensive approach. Beyond improving the response to emergency needs, the importance of preventing the conditions which lead to displacement and of finding durable solutions is also stressed.

Among the measures to prevent displacement, the authors suggest various steps to strengthen the early warning capacity of the United Nations system, including the development of closer links with regional bodies. They emphasize the usefulness of establishing a reliable information system on internal displacement, and consider the initiatives taken to this end by the Norwegian Refugee Council to be particularly promising. Other measures include good governance, such as effective national institutions to regulate relations among sections of the population, for the protection of human rights and minorities. In order to promote a well-functioning civil society, the authors advocate the need to strengthen local NGOs. They also propose articulating a right not to be arbitrarily displaced and stepping up regional and international capacities to prevent conflict.

A second category of recommendations is aimed at improving protection and at integrating it more effectively with humanitarian assistance, with emphasis on protection strategies for women and children. In particular, the authors propose that gender-specific information be collected as a routine part of assessments and that additional female staff be deployed in camps and settlements to better provide counseling, collect evidence and identify preventive measures in consultation with the women concerned. The authors state the need to strike a more equitable balance between, on the one hand, the principle of non-interference in internal affairs and, on the other, the obligation to provide humanitarian assistance and to promote the observance of human rights. They recognize that primary responsibility for the security, welfare and liberty of populations must remain with the State and also underline its duties in this respect, both towards its own population and towards the international community. Where a State fails to meet its obligations and refuses to accept outside assistance, the international community should assert its concern and step in, using diplomatic negotiations, public exposure or economic and political sanctions as strategies for gaining access. In the most serious cases, outside intervention is required.

In situations where displacement has been caused by conflict, a durable return can be secured only through the restoration of peace accompanied by rehabilitation and development programmes. The authors recommend that humanitarian organizations more forcefully advocate the need for political solutions, both vis-à-vis the international community and vis-à-vis affected governments. They stress the importance of provid-

ing visible signs of progress at an early stage. They further emphasize the need to go beyond rebuilding physical infrastructure and to address also the loss of human skills and disintegration of the fabric of society that long-standing conflicts typically entail. Particular emphasis is placed on the integration of women in this respect.

Masses in Flight is a unique, well-written and very well researched study on the phenomenon of internal displacement. With the comprehensive approach taken by the authors, it may at times be difficult to distinguish between recommendations to meet the specific needs of internally displaced persons and general problems relating to humanitarian action. However, the approach adopted places internal displacement in its proper perspective, without which the issue cannot be effectively addressed, and it permits a thorough review of all the major questions that arise when internal displacement occurs. The book is a must for anyone wanting to acquire a full understanding of internal displacement, and constitutes a solid basis for those who are to formulate appropriate policies and strategies for handling specific situations. Consequently, it deserves a prominent place in any collection dealing with humanitarian assistance in complex emergencies.

For those interested in an overview of the issues dealt with in the study, it should be noted that a shorter (147 pages) and simplified version is available. Based on *Masses in Flight* and issued by the same publisher, David A. Korn has written *Exodus within Borders: An Introduction to the Crisis of Internal Displacement*,³ which is illustrated by a number of photographs and also reproduces the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

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³ Brookings Institution Press, Washington D.C., 1999