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"Who has counted the refugees?" UNHCR and the politics of numbers

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"It is no wonder that the salvos of cruise missiles into Yugoslavia have been accompanied by salvos of sanctimonious justifications by Clinton, Blair and co. But how feeble their justifications sound. Tony Blair and Defence Secretary George Robertson rabbit on about a 'humanitarian catastrophe'. Figures are airily brandished of 250,000 Kosovan refugees, with 20,000 leaving their homes in the past few days. Where is the hard evidence for this? Who has counted the refugees?"

Corelli Barnett, *The Daily Mail* (London), 26 March 1999

Introduction

It is almost impossible to think or write about refugee-related issues without some reference to statistics.¹ When studying complex emergencies, for example, the analyst is immediately prompted to ask: how many people have been displaced; what proportion of that number have remained within the borders of their own country; how many have sought asylum elsewhere; and to which destinations have they gone?

In more stable refugee situations, numbers play an equally important part in any analytical endeavour. The scholar, like the practitioner, will want to know: how many refugees live in camps and how many have settled elsewhere; what is the ratio between refugees and local residents; how many of the refugees have become self-sufficient; how many continue to receive assistance from the UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies; and what is the demographic structure of the refugee population?

When it comes to examining the resolution of refugee problems, statistical issues continue to feature prominently. How many refugees have repatriated to their country of origin? At what rate are they returning? How many have been accepted for resettlement in third countries? And how many have become integrated in their country of asylum?

Finally, in the context of the industrialized states, statistics constitute a necessary foundation for the examination of many key refugee issues. How many asylum applications have been submitted in a given state or region? How have those numbers varied on a year-by-year basis? From which countries do the asylum seekers originate? And what proportion have been successful in their requests for refugee status? Without addressing questions such as these, and without having access to the figures needed to answer them, it is impossible to do any meaningful analysis of refugee policies in North America and Western Europe.

Despite the centrality of statistics to the field of refugee studies, scholars working in this area have been remarkably inattentive to the issue of quantitative data. While all of the standard works on refugees are replete with numbers, few even begin to question the source or accuracy of those statistics. Scholars have generally been content to rely on figures offered by the two leading producers of refugee statistics - UNHCR and the US Committee for Refugees (USCR) - despite the fact that the figures presented by the two organizations very often differ! The existing literature on refugee statistics is itself extremely meagre, much of it focusing on the technical and methodological dimensions of the issue.² To the best of the author's knowledge, no substantive article has ever been published on the politics of refugee numbers.

The utility and uses of refugee numbers

There is a school of thought which questions the whole notion of refugee enumeration, especially when it is linked to the distribution of material assistance. As one scholar has written, "since the time international humanitarian agencies became involved in assisting refugees in

1 This paper is written in a personal capacity and does not represent the views of UNHCR. An earlier version of the paper was presented at a workshop on 'Building a better understanding of the social dimensions of forced migration: seeking relationships among practitioner needs, policy sensitivities and social science expertise', at the Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies, Brown University, Providence RI, April 1999. The paper will also appear in a forthcoming occasional paper to be published by the Watson Institute.

2 Some limited discussion of the politics of refugee numbers can be found in the following works: G. Kibreab, *The State of the Art Literature Review on Refugee Studies in Africa*, Uppsala University, Uppsala, 1991, pp. 8-15; R. Gorman, *Mitigating Misery: an Enquiry Into the Political and Humanitarian Aspects of US and Global Refugee Policy*, University Press of America, Lanham MD, 1993, pp. 143-5; *The State of the World's Refugees: In Search of Solutions*, UNHCR and Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, pp. 244-6; H. Reed, J. Haaga and C. Keely (eds), *The Demography of Forced Migration: Summary of a Workshop*, National Academy Press, Washington DC, 1998, pp. 9-12.

developing countries, this seemingly entirely reasonable requirement - the need to count the refugees - has, to a significant extent, dominated policy, planning, implementation and evaluation." Setting out to expose the "underlying ideological assumptions" of enumeration, the author argues that "the requirement to count refugees leads to highly undesirable, oppressive consequences for refugees. It forms a central component in an ideology of control which is part and parcel of most assistance programmes."³

While it would be wrong to dismiss every element of this argument (because assistance programmes *are* informed by an ideology of control, however benign the motivations of the individuals responsible for implementing them) it is difficult to envisage a situation in which the task of collecting refugee numbers could simply be ignored by the actors which constitute the international refugee regime. UNHCR, for example, needs 'caseload statistics' to fulfill its mandatory task of refugee protection, to plan its programmes, to draw up its budgets, to allocate its resources, to procure essential assistance items, to establish logistical systems, to raise money from donor states and to account for the organization's expenditure. Registration is also in the interests of refugees themselves. As Médecins sans Frontières has observed, "without registration, refugees have no rights and families cannot be reunified. Without registered names, the numbers of refugees are easy to manipulate and assistance is difficult to monitor."⁴

Within the donor states, those ministries responsible for funding relief and development activities need refugee statistics to justify the resources that they receive from the treasury and taxpayer. Host governments need statistics for security purposes, to anticipate the social and economic impact of a refugee influx and to ensure that the refugees' presence is taken into account in the formulation of local, regional and national development plans. And the media (which, if not a part of the international refugee regime, is used by and exerts a considerable influence upon it) need statistics to provide their audience with information about the refugee movements, mass displacements and asylum flows taking place throughout the world. The precise nature of the statistics required by these different actors evidently varies. Journalists and advocacy groups, for example, are most likely to be concerned with easily-digested 'headline' figures: the size of a refugee influx; the total number of refugees to be found on the territory of a given state; or the relative number of asylum applications received and recognized by different governments in the same region.

For UNHCR and its operational partners, however, the level of statistical detail required is normally much greater. To provide a refugee population with effective protection and assistance, it will normally be necessary to know something about the composition of that community in terms of gender, age, ethnic origin and household structure. And in situations where an exiled population wishes to return to its homeland, statistical data on the refugees' place of origin, educational background, skills and occupational status is an obvious prerequisite for effective repatriation and reintegration planning.

During the past 10 to 15 years, the requirement for such statistical data has been strengthened by the recognition that refugee populations are not simply an undifferentiated mass of people with identical needs and capacities. Rather, such populations consist of many different (and overlapping) social groups: males and females; elderly people, adults, adolescents and children; the able-bodied and the disabled; female-headed households and unaccompanied children. The collection of accurate data on these different social groups not only provides an important basis for effective programming, but also contributes to the all-important task of mobilizing financial resources. As UNHCR's registration guidelines point out. "it is easier to

3 B. Harrell-Bond, E. Voutira and M. Leopold, 'Counting the refugees: gifts, givers, patrons and clients', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3/4, 1992. Similar arguments can be found in J. Telford, *Counting and Identification of Beneficiary Populations in Emergency Operations: Registration and its Alternatives*, Relief and Rehabilitation Network, Overseas Development Institute, London, 1997.

4 'UNHCR must take full responsibility for all of the Kosovo refugees', MSF press release, 9 April 1999.

raise funds for the needs of particular groups within a population when there is detailed information available on the beneficiaries.”⁵

Constraints on accuracy and consistency

While statistics are central to the functions of the international refugee regime, it has long been recognized that the collection of accurate data on displaced populations is confronted with some formidable obstacles. Writing in 1985, for example, Gaim Kibreab pointed out that “there is a cloud of uncertainty and unreliability surrounding African refugee statistics.”⁶ Six years later, a report issued by the US State Department’s Bureau for Refugee Programs noted that “counting refugees is at best an approximate science.”⁷ And a recently-published International Labour Office volume on the collection of international migration statistics observes that “much of the information available on refugees and persons in need of protection is tentative at best.”⁸

UNHCR has also acknowledged its own limitations in this area. In the words of the agency’s flagship publication, *The State of the World’s Refugees*:

“the press and the media, NGOs and research bodies make constant demands on UNHCR for facts and figures, especially when major refugee movements or repatriation operations are taking place. All too often, however, UNHCR finds it difficult to answer such queries with any real degree of accuracy. Moreover, the figures collected by UNHCR frequently diverge from those reported by journalists, voluntary agencies, host governments and donor states.”⁹

Why exactly is it so difficult for UNHCR and other elements of the international refugee regime to produce accurate and consistent figures in relation to displaced populations? This section begins to answer that question by focusing on the definitional and operational obstacles to effective enumeration, while the following section looks at the way in which political considerations impinge upon refugee statistics.

Definitional problems

Any form of enumeration exercise must be based upon a clearly defined unit of measurement if it is to produce reliable, usable and comparable data. In the case of refugee statistics, however, such clarity does not always exist. The word ‘refugee’ is itself subject to quite different definitions and interpretations. Under the terms of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, the refugee concept is used to describe those people who are outside of their own country and unable to return to it because they have a “well-founded fear of persecution” there. That continues to be the definition used by the industrialized states. In less-developed regions such as Africa, Central and South America, however, the concept has been formally broadened (through the Organization of African Unity Refugee Convention and the Cartagena Declaration) to include people who have sought refuge in other countries as a result of aggression, occupation, generalized violence and events seriously disturbing public order. As a result of these different approaches, an individual who would be counted as a refugee in one part of the world might not qualify for that status in another.

The USCR, which publishes an influential annual survey of refugee affairs, employs yet another approach, counting those refugees and asylum seekers who are deemed to be “in need of protection and/or assistance.” The distinguishing characteristic of such refugees, the USCR has explained, is “their inability to repatriate due to continued fear of persecution in their

5 UNHCR, Registration Guidelines, on Refworld CD-Rom, UNHCR, Geneva, 1998, pp. 2-3.

6 G. Kibreab, *African Refugees: Reflections on the African Refugee Problem*, Africa World Press, Trenton NJ, 1985, p. 10.

7 US Department of State, *World Refugee Report*, Washington DC, 1991, p. 85.

8 R. Bilborrow et al, *International Migration Statistics: Guidelines for Improving Data Collection Systems*, ILO, Geneva, 1997, p. 227.

9 *The State of the World’s Refugees*, op cit, p. 244.

homelands and the absence of permanent settlement opportunities in their countries of asylum or elsewhere.”¹⁰ The result of this approach (which has been subject to some criticism by UNHCR’s senior statistician) is to exclude some sizeable groups of refugees who have settled in regions such as Western Europe, North America and Australasia.¹¹

Conversely, while the USCR includes in its global refugee statistics the three million Palestinians who are registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), UNHCR does not include this group of refugees as they fall outside of the agency’s mandate. Scholars and journalists who make use of the USCR and UNHCR figures almost invariably fail to recognize these important definitional differences.

The general level of confusion surrounding the issue of refugee statistics is compounded by the fact that many commentators on international affairs (especially those in the popular press) use the refugee concept to denote anyone who has been forced to leave their usual place of residence, whether or not they have crossed an international border. Media reports about Afghanistan, Angola, Somalia and Sudan, for example, frequently refer to the large number of ‘refugees’ living in those countries, when they are actually referring to internally displaced people (IDPs).

The enumeration of internally displaced populations is characterized by its own set of definitional and methodological difficulties. Unlike the refugee concept, the notion of an ‘internally displaced person’ has never been defined in international law. Many humanitarian organizations and advocacy groups make reference to IDP statistics in their publications. But a number of important questions usually go unanswered. In the absence of a clear criterion such as the crossing of an international border, how far does a person have to move to be considered ‘internally displaced’? When do internally people cease to warrant that status: when they return to their original place of residence, or when they have achieved a certain degree of physical and socio-economic security in the place to which they have fled? Given that a large proportion of the world’s IDPs are thought to live in towns and cities, how can they be differentiated from other rural-to-urban migrants? How does one distinguish a refugee from an IDP in situations such as former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union, where international boundaries have changed? And in countries which are engulfed by armed conflict, does it make any sense to distinguish IDPs from ‘war-affected populations’ who are besieged in their own homes?

The difficulties associated with the IDP concept are symptomatic of a broader problem confronting the international refugee regime: the extent to which established categories and definitions are being undermined by operational realities. In a number of countries around the world, UNHCR has become involved in emergencies of such complexity that it is very difficult to make a meaningful distinction between ‘refugees’, ‘returnees’, ‘internally displaced people’ and ‘local residents’. And even if such distinctions can be made in strictly legal terms, they are irrelevant in terms of human needs and humanitarian assistance. This point is brought out neatly in a review of UNHCR’s operations in Ethiopia, which states that “categorizing people as refugee or returnees did not in this situation have a strong social validity. Most of the refugees and repatriants were nomads or semi-pastoralists who traditionally crossed borders. Discrete categories of beneficiaries could not be confidently established in many situations. ‘Refugees’

10 United States Committee for Refugees, *World Refugee Survey*, Washington DC, 1995, p. 41.

11 B. Hovy, ‘The demography of refugees: discussant notes’, comments presented at the Population Association of America Annual Meeting, Washington DC, March 1997; ‘The state of the world’s refugee statistics’, paper presented at the Thomas J. Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University, November 1997. My thanks to Bela Hovy for making these papers available to me.

and 'returnees' were often living amongst local residents, and, on the basis of clan and family ties, were indistinguishable from them."¹²

The former Soviet Union provides another interesting example of the way in which established categories of displaced person (and thus established units of data collection) have been reconsidered in recent years. In 1996, an international plan of action was established to address the problem of displacement in the former Soviet Union. Rather than confining itself to the traditional vocabulary of the international refugee regime, the plan identified no fewer than eight categories of person whose situation had to be addressed: 'refugees', 'persons in refugee-like situations', 'internally displaced people', 'involuntarily relocating persons', 'repatriants', 'formerly deported peoples', 'illegal migrants' and 'ecological migrants'. According to UNHCR's latest statistical report, the number of 'involuntarily relocating persons' in the Russian Federation stands at 957,000 – a significant proportion of the 22.3 million people of concern to the organization throughout the world.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that problems of definition and categorization occur only in situations where refugees are mixed up with other groups of displaced person or migrant. For even in conventional refugee situations, different figures may well be given with regard to the size of the same refugee population, depending on the source of those statistics and their means of calculation. The government may produce one figure while UNHCR reports another. One statistic may refer to the number of people who are supposed to be receiving assistance from the international community, while another statistic may refer to the number of people who are actually receiving such assistance.

Operational problems

According to a recent paper presented to UNHCR's Executive Committee, the world's most affluent states, with all of their resources and technological sophistication, "have great difficulty in answering or are not able to provide an answer to the simple question, 'how many refugees are living in the country'." "Similarly," the paper continues, "information is generally lacking on essential characteristics of the refugee population, for example, country of origin and sex."¹³

If it has proved so difficult for the industrialized states to provide a comprehensive statistical picture of the refugees on their territory, then it should come as no surprise to discover that refugee statistics in developing regions of the world are also lacking in detail and reliability. The only real exception to this rule is to be found in South-East Asia, where the majority of Vietnamese boat people were kept in closed camps and carefully counted from the day of their arrival to the day of their resettlement or repatriation. Many of the world's largest refugee and returnee populations are now to be found in poor and unstable states such as Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Zaire. In such societies, the authorities simply do not have the capacity to collect high-quality refugee statistics. And while UNHCR has sought to fill this gap, the organization is poorly equipped and inadequately resourced for this task, especially in emergency situations.

In several recent refugee crises, very limited numbers of UNHCR field staff have been confronted with movements of half a million refugees or more, across large geographical areas and in some of the most remote, weakly administered and environmentally hostile territories on earth. In such circumstances, the obstacles to effective enumeration are legion. Refugees may enter a country of asylum at numerous different points along a border. They may arrive in such large numbers that they can scarcely be counted. The influx may take place in an area where UNHCR has no access, due to insecurity or governmental obstruction. Some refugees may prefer not to be identified or counted. And UNHCR and its partners may well consider that their

12 C. Sokoloff, 'Review of the cross-mandate approach in Ethiopia', UNHCR, Geneva, 1995, p.1.

13 'Refugee registration and statistics', UNHCR Executive Committee paper, EC/48/SC/CRP.35, August 1998.

limited resources are best spent on the provision of life-saving assistance, rather than on counting the potential beneficiaries.

As a refugee influx levels off and relief operations become more organized, the potential for the collection of accurate statistical data evidently improves. Once refugees are concentrated in specific locations and assistance programmes have been established to provide them with food, water, shelter and medical services, then reliable demographic data begins to come on-stream. At the same time, however, the establishment of such programmes provides local residents with greater incentives to register as refugees, thereby distorting the accuracy of any statistics collected. The operational constraints on effective enumeration do not end there. In order to survive and to prepare for their eventual repatriation, refugees have to be mobile. To an extent that is often neglected, refugees come and go across international borders and move around within their countries of asylum. They may go in and out of a camp to take advantage of seasonal agricultural opportunities or move to a town to trade or look for work. In many situations, some family members will remain in the country of asylum and continue to receive assistance, while others visit their country of origin in order to tend their farm or to assess the prospects for a longer-term return.

Refugees may also be mobile - and consequently less countable - because they continue to be subjected to persecution and violence in their ostensible country of asylum. As UNHCR has reported:

“Forced population movements are becoming more complex. Movements of refugees and internally displaced people now often criss-cross each other, collecting and discarding people on the way. At the same time, there would appear to be a growing number of situations in which people are repeatedly uprooted, expelled or relocated within and across state borders, forcing them to live a desperately insecure and nomadic existence.”¹⁴

An additional operational constraint to effective enumeration derives from the fact that refugee populations, like any other population, are dynamic social entities. Refugees die, get married and give birth. Refugee households may split up or regroup. However accurate they may have been at the time of their collection, statistical data about the size and composition of a refugee population can quickly become outdated. Updating this information is not a straightforward exercise either, especially when the refugee population or host country concerned records births, deaths, ages and family relationships in ways that do not correspond with standard demographic practice.

The most obvious way of dealing with some of the difficulties identified above - namely for UNHCR to conduct periodic registrations or revalidations of refugee populations - is easier said than done. Such exercises are expensive - around a dollar per head in Africa, a sum that excludes indirect costs such as staff time and travel costs.¹⁵ Registrations and revalidations are logistically complex and can only be undertaken if the necessary skills and experience are available. Such exercises can lead to discomfort and even danger for the refugees concerned, especially when they require large numbers of people to gather in a single location or to queue up for long periods in exposed areas.¹⁶ Finally, experience has demonstrated that registration exercises may be actively resisted by the host government, by the refugees themselves, and even by UNHCR's operational partners. As one report on this issues has observed:

“In some situations, staff and officials may not merely neglect registration, but oppose it. In one recent emergency, for example, voluntary agency officials are cited as having repeatedly refused to ‘get involved with registration’ as being against their humanitarian principles. In yet another, officials of a major donor organization are reported to have criticized efforts towards

14 The State of the World's Refugees: A Humanitarian Agenda, UNHCR and Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, p. 33.

15 J. Telford, op cit, p. 57.

16 For a first-hand account, see B. Whitaker, ‘Faces in the crowd: counting heads and deciding fates in a camp for Rwandan refugees’, Princeton Alumni Weekly, October 23, 1996.

accurate enumeration, and urged that generous overestimates would suffice. In still another case, UNHCR field staff attempting a sample survey have been criticized by voluntary agency staff for their 'intrusive bureaucracy'.¹⁷

The politics of refugee numbers

How does politics impinge upon the collection of comprehensive, reliable and up-to-date statistical data on refugees and other groups of displaced people? The simple answer to this question is: in many different ways and at many different levels of the international refugee regime. Before going on to substantiate that assertion, it should be made clear that this paper uses the notion of 'politics' in its broadest sense, to denote the efforts of individuals and institutions to pursue their own interests and to influence the behaviour of others. In the context of refugee situations, those actors fall into a number of conventional categories: countries of origin; countries of asylum; donor states; refugee populations and humanitarian organizations. This section uses such categories as a convenient (if somewhat simplistic) framework to examine the politics of refugee numbers and to introduce some illustrative case studies, drawn mainly from the author's personal experience over the past 15 years.

Countries of origin: the Horn of Africa and Uganda

Refugee movements are in many senses a symbol of political failure. Few states like to acknowledge that their citizens have been obliged 'vote with their own feet' by leaving their country of origin, even if that state has deliberately engineered their departure. In some situations, governments address this issue by claiming that the 'refugees' who have left the country are not refugees at all, or that they are not even citizens of that state. The Bhutanese government's explanation of the ethnic Nepali exodus in 1991-92 and the Burmese government's interpretation of the Rohingya refugee movement of the same period both conform to this general model, as does (to a lesser extent) the Vietnamese explanation of the boat people's departure in the 1970s and 1980s.

It is also common practice for countries of origin to suggest that their citizens have departed at the behest of opposition movements and with the specific intention of conducting military activities against them. In a considerable number of cases, moreover - the movement of Namibian refugees into Angola and Zambia, the Afghan exodus into Pakistan, and the more recent 'evacuation' of Rwanda's Hutu population to Zaire and Tanzania - such suggestions have some validity.

Another common tactic pursued by countries of origin (and one that is more directly germane to the subject of this paper) is to challenge the refugee statistics reported from the country of asylum, and to suggest that those figures have been deliberately inflated by the government of that state. Such was the case in the Horn of Africa throughout the 1980s, when Ethiopia and Somalia were involved in a constant wrangle concerning the respective number of Somali and Ethiopian refugees they had admitted. In situations such as this, where refugees cross an international border in both directions, it can be very difficult for UNHCR to place any statistics in the public domain without offending at least one of the states involved.

Countries of origin encounter some evident credibility problems when it comes to making pronouncements about the number of their citizens who have fled to another state. Without actually being present on the other side of the border, how can they pretend to be in possession of more accurate data than UNHCR or the country of asylum? When it comes to repatriation movements, however, the boot is very much on the other foot.

Unlike refugees, returnees are a symbol of political success. When people decide to go back to their country of origin, the leaders of that state can claim that its citizens are expressing some kind of confidence in its government. At the same time, large-scale repatriation movements enable countries of origin to seek large-scale international assistance, both in the form of short-

17 P. Romanovsky and R. Stephenson, 'A review of refugee enumeration: proposals for the development of a unified system', UNHCR, Geneva, September 1995, p. 3.

term relief and for longer-term reintegration and rehabilitation activities. In these circumstances, it is not surprising to find that refugee-producing countries are inclined to exaggerate returnee numbers.

A particularly blatant act of this kind took place in 1984, when the government of Milton Obote claimed that between 300,000 and 400,000 Ugandan refugees had repatriated from Sudan and Zaire, while UNHCR's statistics indicated that the Ugandan refugee population in those countries was actually increasing. Despite this evidence, UNHCR and UNDP endorsed the government's claim, included the figure of 300,000 returnees in a report submitted to the Second International Conference on Assistance to Refugees in Africa (ICARA 2), and invited donor states to contribute \$17.1 million dollars towards the social and economic reintegration of the non-existent returnee population.¹⁸ The Sudanese and Zairean submissions to ICARA 2 requested donor funding to assist exactly the same group of people in their countries of asylum!

War-torn states: the case of Bosnia

One of the most important trends in the work of UNHCR over the past decade can be seen in the shift from a 'refugee-centric' approach, which concerned itself only with displaced people who had crossed an international border, to a 'holistic' approach which provides protection and assistance to other groups of vulnerable people. According to the organization's most recent statistical review, little more than half of the 22.3 million people of concern to the organization are now refugees in the conventional sense of the word.

One manifestation of this trend can be seen in the extent to which UNHCR has become involved in war zones, working on behalf of internally displaced people and conflict-affected populations. As Mark Cutts demonstrates in a recent paper on the issue of 'negotiated humanitarian access', the organization's new role in situations of armed conflict has drawn it into a new (and particularly problematic) form of the 'numbers game': that of determining the relative amounts of assistance to be provided to the different parties involved in a vicious communal conflict.¹⁹

According to Cutts, about 30 per cent of all food aid provided by UNHCR during the war was delivered to Bosnian Serb areas - a figure which reflected the questionable claim that 30 per cent of Bosnia's pre-war population consisted of Serbs. But this allocation ignored the fact that the *needs* of the Muslim population were much greater, given that many members of that community were to be found in the besieged enclaves of Sarajevo, Srebrenica, Zepa and Gorazde, where they were largely dependent on humanitarian assistance for their survival.

In Bosnian government areas, Cutts also recounts, the allocation of food for Muslims and Croats again reflected pre-war population figures rather than relative needs of the two communities. "Indeed," he writes, "because of pressure from the Croat authorities of Herzeg Bosna, who controlled the main route into central Bosnia - large quantities of UNHCR food were distributed to Croat areas in the far south of the country which had hardly been affected by the war at all, and where there was no real need for humanitarian assistance."²⁰ Thus by exploiting UNHCR's efforts to pursue an ostensibly 'impartial' approach to the question of population figures, the Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat authorities were able to further their political and military objectives.

18 J. Crisp, 'Ugandan refugees in Sudan and Zaire: the problem of repatriation', *African Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 339, 1986; J. Crisp, 'Finding the funding and then the returnees', *African Business*, November 1984.

19 M. Cutts, 'The humanitarian operation in Bosnia, 1992-95: dilemmas of negotiating humanitarian access', *New Issues in Refugee Research*, Working Paper No. 8, UNHCR, Geneva, 1999.

20 *ibid*, p. 15.

Countries of asylum: an African perspective

Within the humanitarian community, discussions of the 'politics of numbers' almost invariably turn to the way in which countries of asylum in developing regions make exaggerated claims about the number of refugees present on their territory. According to the conventional wisdom, they do this for a number of reprehensible reasons: to embarrass the government of the country of asylum and to besmirch its human rights record; to attract large amounts of humanitarian assistance into the country, which can then be siphoned off to members of the political, military and business elite; to provide employment to large numbers of bureaucrats and refugee camp workers, many of whom would otherwise be without work or an income; to ensure a generous supply of food and other relief items to exiled groups which are engaged in political and military campaigns against their country of origin; to maximize the amount of foreign exchange brought into the country by humanitarian agencies, which can subsequently be converted at rates favourable to the government; and to cast the most favourable light possible on the country's commitment to humanitarian norms, thereby bolstering its international reputation and external support.

While the truth of such allegations may be beyond dispute in certain cases, the notion that 'host countries always cheat with the figures' is a crude and, given its prevalence in expatriate circles, perhaps even a racist one. Rather than simply repeating the well-worn stories of exaggeration, corruption and statistical sleight of hand (the most lurid of which almost invariably relate to Somalia and other countries in North-East Africa) this section of the paper considers the role of the asylum country in a different, and to some extent more positive perspective.

While much attention has been given to those countries in which refugee statistics appear to have been inflated, far less attention has been devoted to those situations in which the 'politics of numbers' leads host country governments to report artificially low refugee statistics. As Yash Tandon pointed out in an article 15 years ago, according to official statistics, there were some 2,000 Ugandan refugees living in Kenya in October 1983. But, he continues, "any Ugandan in Kenya would argue that there are at least five times that number." Reflecting upon this glaring discrepancy, Tandon observes that "in a situation where two countries are reasonably friendly, or wish to avoid antagonizing each other, it is in the interests of both to play down the numbers... This is the case with Uganda and Kenya. Official figures have to take into account these niceties of diplomacy."²¹

Similar arrangements were reported in the 1980s with respect to Somali refugees in Djibouti and refugees in Gabon from several states in Central Africa. During the same period, a number of the front-line states are known to have under-reported the number of South African exiles on their territory, for the eminently reasonable reason of discouraging military reprisals from the country of origin.²²

Even if African officials and governments have reported refugee statistics which appear to be inflated, their reasons for doing so might in some situations not be so reprehensible as they appear to the external observer. First, as noted in an earlier section of the paper, the constraints to effective registration are such that considerable numbers of legitimate beneficiaries may actually be excluded from the statistics collected by UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations. Such was the case in the Ethiopian camp of Hartisheik in 1990, when a hard-hitting television documentary revealed that refugees from Somalia had been denied the assistance to which they were entitled because of a long delay in the implementation of a UNHCR re-registration exercise.²³

Second, the criticisms made of African governments are often based on the false assumption that the international community provides a full and timely supply of food for the total number of

21 Y. Tandon, 'Ugandan refugees in Kenya: a community of enforced self-reliance', *Disasters*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1984.

22 G. Kibreab, *The State of the Art Review*, op cit, p. 14.

23 J. Telford, op cit, p. 26.

refugees reported by UNHCR. In fact, this is rarely the case. In Somalia, for example, much has been made of the fact that in the mid-1980s, after lengthy negotiations, UNHCR agreed to a 'planning figure' of 700,000 Ethiopian refugees - even though the agency and the World Food Programme (WFP) believed the real figure to be in the region of 450,000. But as Waldron and Hasci have revealed, the amount of food delivered after the planning figure had been agreed "was only 59 per cent of that required to feed 700,000 persons."²⁴

A UNHCR report on refugee enumeration confirms that the tendency of governments to report inflated refugee statistics is linked to the unreliability of the food aid pipeline. The relevant passage of the report deserves to be quoted in full, explaining as it does the humanitarian rationale for a certain degree of numerical manipulation:

"As the initial burden of administration falls on local government officials, they may suddenly be called upon to cope with an impossible situation. Officials in three countries, who had experienced a mass refugee influx, have described in almost the same words the uncoordinated flow of information from police, army and other sources, hopeless understaffing and pressing requirement for food and water for refugees. In such a situation, estimates of total daily arrivals are quoted as, for example, 2000 to 3000, on the basis of a visual examination of a crowd gathered at one place. And officials unanimous in declaring that they would 'not dare' to base emergency relief requests on the lower guess, because it might result in a fatal insufficiency of relief."

"The belief of *all* staff and officials involved, that emergency relief shipments, at least of bulk commodities such as wheat, are likely to take weeks rather than days, leads officials to further generous overestimates of numbers. For example, one official declared that he usually doubled the figures that he had estimated, in the knowledge that by the time deliveries were made, there might well be a shortfall in quantities delivered and a significant increase in the grand total seeking relief as inaccurately assessed numbers of daily arrivals continued to accumulate. In a sense, this may be described as contingency planning..."²⁵

A final explanation - and to some extent a justification - for the inflation of refugee statistics in developing countries is to be found in the functioning of the international refugee regime. It is well known that in many emergency situations, the initial assistance provided to the refugees comes not from UNHCR or WFP, but from the local population and authorities. It has also been established (although more research remains to be done on this matter) that the local population, particularly its poorer members, may be adversely affected by the sudden arrival and continued presence of a large-scale refugee population. And yet the needs of local residents are frequently neglected or accorded a relatively low priority in the design and implementation of refugee assistance programmes. In such circumstances, it is not really surprising that some citizens of the asylum country should register as refugees, or that government officials should seek to gain some kind of compensation for the areas they administer by exaggerating the figures on which internationally-funded refugee assistance programmes are (theoretically) based.

Donor states: western Europe, eastern Zaire and post-Dayton Bosnia

As suggested in the preceding section, asylum countries in the developing world have traditionally come off worst in discussions of the politics of refugee numbers. It is therefore of some importance to identify some of the ways in which the donor states bring their own interests to bear on the production and use of refugee statistics.

First, when it comes to their own refugee and asylum statistics, governments and politicians in the industrialized states have a tendency to be very selective in their presentation of statistical

24 S. Waldron and N. Hasci, *Somali Refugees in the Horn of Africa: State of the Art Literature Review*, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala, 1995, p. 26.

25 P. Romanovsky and R. Stephenson, *op cit*, pp. 3-4.

data. An administration which is seeking to justify the introduction of a more restrictive asylum policy, for example, may refer to statistics which demonstrate a sharp increase in the number of people submitting requests for refugee status. But it may neglect to point out what proportion of the total have been recognized as refugees or offered some other form of protection. Indeed, the governments of Western Europe appear far happier to talk about the number of asylum applicants who fail to qualify for refugee status, a tactic which helps to reinforce the public perception that there is no essential difference between an asylum seeker, an economic migrant and an illegal immigrant. Similarly, one would have to look long and hard for any official statement that acknowledged or explained the fact that refugee recognition rates in Western Europe (around 24 per cent) are less than half the rate recorded in North America (around 63 per cent).²⁶

Second, the industrialized states have a self-evident political interest in playing down the number of refugees who have fled from countries which are considered to be useful friends and allies, and in playing up the number who have escaped from hostile states. This was particularly the case during the Cold War years, when the exodus of refugees and asylum seekers from communist countries such as Afghanistan, Cuba, Ethiopia, Viet Nam and the Soviet Union itself provided the western bloc with a valuable form of propaganda. At the same time, by establishing generously-funded assistance programmes for such refugee populations, the main donor states could also provide active support to exiled opposition movements which were struggling to oust or destabilize Soviet-backed regimes. Thus the very high figures which Pakistan claimed for its Afghan population (more than three million in total) did not come under very serious scrutiny from the donor states until the Soviets had withdrawn and the strategic importance of the Afghan exiles had diminished.

As the final section of this paper will suggest, the end of the Cold War has in certain respects facilitated the collection and dissemination of accurate refugee statistics, relieving UNHCR of some of the political pressures to which it was subjected during that period. Even so, events in eastern Zaire in 1996 seemed to demonstrate that the geopolitical interests of the USA and its allies can still impinge very directly upon the question of refugee numbers.

In November 1996, after more than two years in exile, around half a million Rwandans trekked out of eastern Zaire and returned to their country of origin. Within a matter of days, the mass repatriation was over, encouraging some commentators (including representatives of the US government and the Rwandan authorities) to declare that the refugee crisis in the Great Lakes region of Africa had effectively been resolved.

It soon became clear, however, that the story of the repatriation was less straightforward - and a great deal more tragic - than it first appeared. Contrary to the claim that all of the Rwandans had gone home, there was evidence to suggest that between 500,000 and 700,000 remained in eastern Zaire, where they were being hunted down and killed by the rebel forces linked to the government in Kigali.

At a press conference in Kigali on 23 November 1996, the US military dismissed such suggestions, claiming that their satellite photos had located only one significant cluster of Rwandans in eastern Zaire. That group, moreover, consisted not of *bona fide* refugees, but of soldiers and militia members who had been responsible for the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. The political advisor to the Rwandan president adopted a similar position, stating, "we challenge the UNHCR to give us proof of where those refugees are. Nowhere do the American satellite photographs show up any significant refugee concentrations."²⁷

26 Refugees and Others of Concern to UNHCR: 1997 Statistical Overview, UNHCR, Geneva, 1998, pp. 72-74.

27 J. Pottier, 'The 'self' in self-repatriation: closing down Mugunga camp, eastern Zaire', in R. Black and K. Khoser, *The End of the Refugee Cycle: Refugee Repatriation and Reconstruction*, Berghahn Books, Oxford, 1999, p. 148. See also S. Massey, 'Operation Assurance: the greatest intervention that never was', *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, <<http://www-jha.sps.cam.ac.uk>>, posted 15 February 1998.

These statements were in turn refuted by a senior official from Oxfam UK, who stated that on 20 November 1996 - three days *before* the press conference took place - his staff had been shown the US military's satellite and aerial photos, which "confirmed, in considerable detail, the existence of over 500,000 people, distributed in three major and numerous minor agglomerations." "On the basis of the quality and authority of the information received by Oxfam on 20 November," he concluded, "we feel bound to conclude that as many as 400,000 refugees and unknown numbers of Zairean displaced persons have, in effect, been air-brushed from history." A UNHCR statement which was consistent with the Oxfam position was angrily rejected by the Rwandan authorities. According to one commentator, "Kigali officials retorted that UNHCR had a habit of exaggerating its figures, so why would anyone want to believe them this time round."²⁸

Third, the interest of donor states in refugee statistics can be strongly conditioned by the desire to limit their expenditure on refugee assistance programmes and to bring an early halt to longstanding humanitarian operations which have outlived their political usefulness. That was clearly the situation in Bosnia in 1996, shortly after the conclusion of the war. As a WFP/UNHCR report on the Bosnian food distribution programme concluded:

"Intensifying efforts to target more precisely became an issue almost immediately after the signing of the Dayton Peace Accord. The overriding factor was donor pressure, which was inspired by a strong desire to reduce rations. The simple logic was that peace should bring stability and economic recovery, and that people would return to their places of origin, and hence large reductions in food aid would be both possible and necessary. Further justifications for reductions of humanitarian assistance were offered, including the usual arguments about avoiding the creation of food aid dependency and disincentives to agricultural production. In any case, what seemed clear was that a policy decision was made, calling for a reduction in the quantities of food aid to be delivered, and hence the need for a reduction in the number of beneficiaries to be assisted."²⁹

Interestingly, the report concluded that the steps taken as a result of such pressure from the major donors had not been in the interests of people trying to recover from the war. "There are difficulties in the process of scaling down the programme. The reduction exercise is now being undertaken quite rapidly, allowing the authorities little time to either make a reliable census and to establish structures to assist people who will no longer appear on the beneficiary lists... [The] scaling down exercise is being carried out more rapidly than the government can set up viable and sustainable safety nets."³⁰

Finally, as indicated by the quotation at the very beginning of this paper, refugee statistics may fulfill the political function of legitimizing action (military action in the case of Yugoslavia) against a country of origin which is responsible for the displacement or expulsion of its citizens. In this respect, the situation which emerged in Kosovo in the first half of 1999 was not entirely unique. Indeed, some significant similarities can be found with the Kurdish refugee crisis of 1991, in that that both situations involved gross violations of human rights and mass population displacements, deliberately provoked by authoritarian regimes which had challenged the US and its allies. What seems to have been different in the case of Kosovo is that military action was not mandated by the United Nations (and was opposed by two permanent members of the Security Council), that public support for the airstrikes appeared to be somewhat shaky, and that the country of origin concerned had a relatively effective military capacity.

28 J. Pottier, *op cit*, p. 149. At the end of 1997, UNHCR reported that "some 173,000 Rwandans remain unaccounted for." *Refugees and Others of Concern to UNHCR*, *op cit*, p. 13.

29 'WFP/UNHCR joint evaluation mission: emergency food assistance to returnees, refugees, displaced persons and other war-affected populations in Bosnia-Herzegovina', WFP/UNHCR, Rome, 1997, p. 23.

30 *ibid*, pp. 25-6.

At the time when this paper was drafted (the end of March 1999) refugee statistics and projected refugee movements had become the central component of the political and public relations strategy which NATO was using to maintain support for its action. According to media statements made by the alliance's representatives, Europe was confronted with "the greatest humanitarian disaster since the end of world war two."³¹ Some 250,000 Kosovo Albanians were said to be on the move, heading towards friendly but fragile political entities such as Macedonia and Montenegro. And at least a million more were threatened with displacement. While such statements and statistics may well have been reasonably accurate, there is little doubt that they were very consciously used as a means of relaunching and legitimizing the doctrine of 'humanitarian intervention'.

UNHCR and the professionalization of refugee statistics

The preceding section attempted to provide some concrete examples of the way in which political interests impinge upon the issue of refugee statistics. But a great deal more work remains to be done in this area. First, it should be possible to identify a much broader range of case studies, particularly from regions which have been neglected in this paper: the Caucasus, Central America and West Africa, for example.

Second, the kind of analysis which the paper has applied to countries of origin, countries of asylum and the donor states must evidently be extended to other relevant actors, most notably humanitarian organizations and refugee populations themselves.

With regard to the former, it would be instructive to examine the extent to which aid agencies exaggerate refugee and returnee statistics in the hope of boosting their fundraising efforts and their international reputation.³² It would also be interesting to analyse the way in which different lobby groups within the humanitarian world - those who act as advocates for women and children, for example - manipulate refugee statistics in order to gain greater attention and resources for their particular 'client' group. With regard to latter, a systematic analysis of the way in which refugees and their leaders attempt to manipulate, obstruct, influence or facilitate the processes of registration and enumeration would be of considerable value.

Additional thinking is also required with regard to the role which policymakers, practitioners and social scientists can play in improving the accuracy of refugee statistics. In this respect, a tentative hypothesis can be presented.

On one hand, the end of the cold war seems to have contributed to the task of depoliticization. At the international level, refugee statistics have generally become a less sensitive issue and are less frequently used as a weapon of propaganda. At the same time, countries of asylum in the developing world (especially Africa) which previously enjoyed the support of the superpowers have become economically and politically weaker. Donor states are now less willing to turn a blind eye to inflated refugee numbers, a situation which has in turn enabled UNHCR to collect and disseminate more realistic figures.

On the other hand, there is some evidence to suggest that the struggle over refugee numbers has intensified at the local level. As witnessed in a number of recent wars - Bosnia, Kosovo,

31 NATO spokesperson Jamie Shea, on CNN, 29 March 1999.

32 UNHCR has often asserted, for example, that 1.7 million Mozambican refugees returned to their homeland between 1992 and 1995 'in the context of a UNHCR repatriation programme'. This formula tends to obscure the fact that only 375,000 of the returnees were provided with transport and reception facilities by UNHCR. See J. Crisp, 'From social disarticulation to social reconstruction: a critical review of the UNHCR reintegration programme for returning refugees and displaced people in Mozambique', paper presented to the conference 'Reconstructing livelihoods: towards new approaches to resettlement', Oxford, September 1996. For an example of the way in which statistics can become a source of dispute between different humanitarian agencies, see L. Payne, *Rebuilding Communities in a Refugee Settlement: A Casebook from Uganda*, Oxfam, Oxford, 1998.

Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone - population displacements and humanitarian assistance have both become key variables in the political and military strategies of the warring parties. As well as being a product of armed conflict, refugee camps and emergency relief programmes have become an arena of conflict themselves. As John Telford rightly points out, such circumstances have inevitable consequences for the registration and enumeration of refugees:

“Good communication with and among all those involved in an assistance programme is a *sine qua non* for the reliable collection, analysis and processing of information on individuals, groups or populations. In turn, trust, based on an absence of real or perceived threats to interests, is essential for good communication... Increasingly in humanitarian operations, a mutually trusting environment does not seem to exist. This may reflect as much the politics into which humanitarian assistance delivery is becoming drawn, as the poor management of some of its programmes.”³³

Practical steps and improvements

To return to the principal theme of this final section, some useful lessons might be learned from the practical measures which UNHCR has taken in recent years to improve its performance in the area of refugee statistics. As a staff member of the agency, the author is poorly placed to offer an impartial evaluation of such initiatives. The following paragraphs will thus be primarily descriptive in nature.

Prior to the 1990s, UNHCR's capacity and commitment in the area of refugee statistics was by any standard weak. Statistics were collected at the country level, but this function was undertaken in an unsystematic manner and with little supervision from headquarters. While statistics had to be presented to the organization's Executive Committee on an annual basis, the figures were prepared on a desk-by-desk basis, and did not conform to a standard format. The Public Information Service published an annual refugee map and statistical table, but this simply contained a single figure for each host country in the world, without any explanatory notes or any indication as to the national origins of those refugees.

When UNHCR's evaluation unit undertook a detailed review of the statistical function in 1985, the severity of the situation was revealed. Because the data at its disposal was so poor, the review concluded, UNHCR was losing control of its programmes and losing credibility in the eyes of donors. “As confidence in the statistics provided starts to decline,” the review stated, “numerous ad hoc and costly re-enumerations have been embarked upon, but with little consideration of lessons learned in other countries and with little understanding of the limitations of the techniques.”

Looking further into the function, the review identified a range of other problems. First, the organization was in some situations “totally dependent on host governments for the numbers on which assistance programmes are based.” Second, its efforts lacked consistency and continuity. At headquarters, several different UNHCR units were producing their own statistics, but without making any real attempt to coordinate their activities. In the field, enumeration systems were being “reinvented again and again by different staff of different levels of competence.” “In a few countries,” the report observed, “there is no way whatever to be certain about *any* figure.” Third, the report concluded, there was a general lack of seriousness in the way that statistics were handled. “Refugee enumeration is generally recognized as the foundation of effective relief and assistance programmes, but it is almost inevitably given the lowest ranking in an emergency... In some situations, staff and officials may not merely neglect registration, but oppose it.”³⁴

Seven years later, in 1993, a member of the earlier evaluation team conducted a follow-up review of UNHCR's policies and practices with regard to refugee enumeration and statistics. He was not able to report a great deal of progress:

33 J. Telford, op cit, p. 17.

34 All the preceding quotations are from P. Romanovsky and R. Stephenson, op cit.

“Over the past decade, UNHCR has devoted considerable time and resources to the collection of statistical data on large refugee populations. The results of such efforts, however, have often proved to be inaccurate and inconsistent. In many countries, host government figures differ widely from UNHCR’s own statistics and estimates. There is confusion both within and outside of UNHCR about the various categories of people who can be considered and counted as refugees... Some UNHCR staff... see no value in risking a confrontation with the host government authorities and prefer to restate unvalidated official data in their own reports.”³⁵

Since those words were written, several initiatives have been taken to professionalize (perhaps a more useful word than depoliticize) the statistical function within UNHCR. First, 1993 witnessed the recruitment of the agency’s first professional statistician, an expert in population and migration statistics with previous UN experience. The post has since been upgraded to the title of Senior Statistician and has been given ‘specialist’ status, allowing the staff member concerned to remain in post in Geneva - an arrangement which, according to the incumbent, provides the function with a valuable degree of authority and independence.

Second, since 1994, UNHCR has published an annual statistical overview of ‘refugees and others of concern to UNHCR’. As well as an introductory essay which discusses concepts, definitions, sources and major trends, the review provides an increasingly broad and detailed set of statistical tables, including a number on the demographic structure of refugee populations. Thus in 1994, the review consisted of 32 pages and included 15 tables. By 1998, the publication had grown to 104 pages and included 32 tables. As well as being widely distributed in hard copy, these tables are available on the UNHCR website and the *Refworld* CD-Rom. The annual statistical review also forms the basis of all the figures which appear in UNHCR publications such as *Refugees* magazine, *The State of the World’s Refugees* and the annual *Global Appeal*. Recognizing the fluidity of many refugee situations and the constant need for up-to-date figures, efforts are now being made to collect refugee statistics on a quarterly, rather than an annual basis.

Third, a variety of different steps have been taken over the past five years to enhance UNHCR’s capacity in the area of refugee registration. In 1994, the organization’s *Registration Guidelines* were published. As well as pooling much of the experience gained by UNHCR, the guidelines (which are periodically updated and refined) provide field staff and operational partners with a variety of different registration tools and approaches which can be adapted to the situation at hand.

These measures have been taken in parallel with a number of other measures: the establishment of an expanded registration training programme for UNHCR, WFP, NGO and government staff; the stockpiling of registration kits, including items such as registration cards and forms, wristbands, tokens, computer software and the registration guidelines themselves; the appointment of two regional registration officers in Africa, responsible for providing UNHCR offices with technical expertise and coordination; and the establishment of a roster of UNHCR staff who have proven skills and experience in the area of registration. In accordance with its Statute, UNHCR continues to undertake the function of “obtaining from governments information concerning the number and conditions of refugees in their territories.” And in support of that function, the organization also undertakes periodic registration exercises in all field operations where refugees are provided with material assistance.

Conclusion

As this paper has attempted to demonstrate, the collection of accurate and consistent refugee statistics is an extremely difficult task. A wide range of practical obstacles stand in the way of effective registration and enumeration. At the same time, because of the way they impinge upon the interests of host countries, countries of origin, humanitarian agencies and other actors, refugee statistics will always be a source of controversy and dispute. Recognizing these

35 R. Stephenson, ‘Refugee enumeration and statistics: a review of UNHCR policies and practices’, UNHCR, Geneva, 1993, pp. 1-2.

realities, UNHCR has not sought to depoliticize the issue of refugee statistics, but it has attempted to professionalize its approach to this important function.

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