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INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS:  
THE ROLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

1. The subject of UNHCR's role with respect to internally displaced persons has been under discussion in a number of fora over recent months. The attached position paper produced by UNHCR in March 2000, provides a review of its policy and role with the internally displaced. It is accompanied by a summary (Annex 1) of current UNHCR operations, by geographical regions.
2. This document is made available to the Standing Committee for information .

# **Internally Displaced Persons:**

**The Role of the United Nations High Commissioner  
for Refugees**



**UNHCR  
6 March 2000**

## **Internally Displaced Persons: the Role of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees**

### **Summary of the Position Paper**

*Large numbers of internally displaced persons remain without effective protection or assistance, underlying not only the enormity and complexity of the problem but the selective, uneven and, in many cases, inadequate response of the international community. Notwithstanding significant initiatives, the United Nations must continue to explore more effective ways to address the problem of internal displacement.*

*As a contribution to that effort, UNHCR has reviewed and refined its policy on and role with the internally displaced. The Office is fully committed to co-operation and co-ordination with its sister agencies and other partners and believes that clarifying its interest in and involvement with the internally displaced will help to strengthen co-ordination by promoting a better understanding of respective roles and responsibilities.*

*The key points of UNHCR's policy are:*

- *UNHCR has an interest in the protection and welfare of persons who have been displaced by persecution, situations of general violence, conflict or massive violations of human rights, because of their similarity to refugees in terms of the causes and consequences of their displacement and their humanitarian needs.*
- *This interest, arising from the Office's humanitarian mandate and endorsed by successive General Assembly resolutions, places upon UNHCR a responsibility to:*
  - *advocate on behalf of the internally displaced;*
  - *mobilise support for them;*
  - *strengthen its capacity to respond to their problems; and*
  - *take the lead to protect and assist them in certain situations.*
- *In view of the growing linkages between refugee problems and internal displacement, UNHCR is committed to greater engagement with the internally displaced within the parameters of its principles and pre-requisites for operational involvement. The pros and cons of involvement will be assessed carefully in light of the need for effective international humanitarian action and the relevance of UNHCR's expertise, as well as the impact on UNHCR's humanitarian mandate and responsibility towards refugees.*

- *The fundamental objective of UNHCR's interest in and involvement with internally displaced persons is to promote their protection and pursue solutions, through operational activities as well as advocacy based on the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.*
- *UNHCR's involvement in a specific operation will require:*
  - *a request or authorisation from the Secretary General or a competent principal organ of the UN;*
  - *consent of the state concerned, and where applicable, other entities in a conflict;*
  - *access to the affected population;*
  - *adequate security for staff of UNHCR and implementing partners;*
  - *clear lines of responsibility and accountability with the ability to intervene directly on protection matters; and*
  - *adequate resources and capacity.*
- *Where humanitarian action on behalf of the internally displaced is constrained by political or operational factors, UNHCR will work with other relevant actors to mobilise support to overcome the obstacles to its involvement and that of other organisations.*
- *The precise nature of UNHCR's role in a specific operation will depend on an assessment of the needs of the internally displaced, the presence and activities of other organisations, and the political and operational environment.*
- *UNHCR will be ready to take the lead where its protection and solutions expertise is particularly relevant, or where involvement with the internally displaced is closely linked to the voluntary repatriation and reintegration of refugees.*
- *UNHCR will pursue a solutions-oriented strategy to avoid prolonged humanitarian engagement, and will give priority to involvement in situations where a political solution is underway or being contemplated.*
- *Recognising the fundamental importance of co-operation and collaboration based on complementarity of mandates, UNHCR will work closely with the ERC and relevant organisations and actors to promote a common understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the organisations concerned, and to improve the mechanism for allocating responsibilities.*

## **Internally Displaced Persons: the Role of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees**

International concern for the plight of the internally displaced has gained new urgency in recent times, as ever greater numbers of people, uprooted by internal conflict and violence, are exposed to danger, extreme hardship and even death. The United Nations has taken a number of initiatives to address the problem, including, on the normative side, the adoption of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, and on the institutional side, the establishment of a collaborative approach with the Emergency Relief Coordinator as the Focal Point on the issue at Headquarters level.

Notwithstanding these efforts, large numbers of internally displaced persons remain without humanitarian assistance or protection, underlining the selective, uneven and in many cases, inadequate response of the international community, and the need to examine more effective ways to address the problem of internal displacement.

With that objective in mind, UNHCR has reviewed and refined its policy and role with the internally displaced. A fundamental assumption of the policy is that humanitarian organisations must work together to address the needs of the internally displaced, and that a better understanding of what individual agencies are able and willing to do for the internally displaced can help to strengthen collaboration. By clarifying its own role and responsibilities on behalf of the internally displaced, UNHCR hopes to make a positive contribution to the efforts to improve the response of the United Nations system.

### **Rationale for UNHCR's involvement**

UNHCR has an interest in the protection and welfare of persons who have been displaced by persecution, situations of general violence, conflict or massive violations of human rights: in other words, all those, who, had they crossed an international frontier, would have had a claim to international protection. This interest arises from the similarity between such internally displaced persons and refugees, in terms of the causes and consequences of their displacement and their humanitarian needs. Like refugees, many internally displaced have been forced to leave their homes because of fear of persecution, war and violence. Again, like refugees, they are in need of protection and assistance, as well as a solution to their plight.

In some situations the link between refugee problems and internal displacement is direct and clear.

- When refugees and displaced persons are generated by the same causes and straddle the border, not only are the humanitarian needs similar, a solution to the refugee problem cannot usually be found without at the same time resolving the issue of internal displacement. UNHCR's involvement in northern Iraq during the Kurdish crisis was one such example.
- In many situations, effective reintegration of returnees requires assistance to be extended also to the internally displaced in the same locality or community. In Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Guatemala, it has been operationally and conceptually difficult for UNHCR to differentiate between returnees and internally displaced. In Sri Lanka refugees returned home only to become internally displaced, prompting UNHCR to re-focus its programme on internal displacement. In Ethiopia, UNHCR participated in a cross-mandate operation with other agencies to promote reintegration of returnees and also stabilise other kinds of population movements.
- Sometimes refugees have sought asylum across the border in areas where there are also internally displaced. For instance, refugees from Sierra Leone and the internally displaced in Liberia were found, not only living together, but also affected in the same manner by instability in the country of asylum. Not only is it operationally difficult and morally unacceptable to distinguish between people in such a situation, assistance targeting only refugees may aggravate their insecurity.

In other situations, the relationship between refugees and the internally displaced is more complex.

- Refugees may be a minor component of massive internal displacement. Colombia and Chechnya are two such operations in which UNHCR is involved. Tajikistan was another instance of such involvement when geography and history dictated the flight of some 600,000 persons to other parts of the country and only a tenth of that number to neighbouring Afghanistan. In such cases, it makes little sense to base international assistance on location alone.
- Internal conflicts of a secessionist nature have uprooted people within national boundaries, which have then become international borders. For instance in the former Yugoslavia and Timor, UNHCR decided to provide protection and assistance to the uprooted on the basis of humanitarian needs, rather than refugee status. Borders, which shift even as people move, cannot be the sole factor determining the legitimacy of international concern.
- Sometimes it has been difficult to predict whether territorial disputes or ethnic violence will lead to a break-up of a state and exodus of refugees, but it has been felt that early action to protect and assist internal displacement might check the proliferation and prolongation of human

suffering and promote regional stability. This was the basis of UNHCR's response, for instance, in the Caucasus.

The range of situations described above make it clear that UNHCR's interest in the internally displaced is provoked, not only by the risk or reality of a refugee outflow, but also by the "refugee-like" nature of internal displacement calling for the Office's particular expertise in protection and solutions. While UNHCR is most likely to become involved where the same situation produces both internal displacement and refugee flows, the occurrence of a significant refugee problem is not a pre-condition for UNHCR's action, as the cases of Georgia, Azerbaijan, Chechnya and Colombia show.

Although UNHCR's involvement with the internally displaced goes back to the early 1970s, in recent years the scale and scope of UNHCR's activities on behalf of the internally displaced have dramatically increased in response to the changing nature of humanitarian crises. UNHCR is currently providing protection and assistance to some 5 million internally displaced persons, covering a range of operations from Colombia to Kosovo and the Caucasus.

### **Defining UNHCR's responsibility**

While UNHCR's Statute makes no reference to internally displaced persons, it recognises in article 9 that the High Commissioner may, in addition to the work with refugees, "engage in such activities... as the General Assembly may determine, within the limits of the resources placed at (her) disposal." Based on this article and over a period of several decades, a series of UN General Assembly resolutions have acknowledged UNHCR's particular humanitarian expertise and encouraged its involvement in situations of internal displacement. In particular, UN General Assembly resolution 48/116 (1993) set out important criteria to guide UNHCR's decision on when to intervene on behalf of internally displaced persons. These resolutions, together with article 9 of the Statute, provide the legal basis for UNHCR's interest in and action for internally displaced persons.

This interest, arising from the Office's humanitarian mandate, places upon UNHCR a responsibility to:

- advocate on behalf of the internally displaced;
- mobilise support for them;
- strengthen its capacity to respond to their problems; and
- take the lead to protect and assist them in certain situations.

In view of the growing linkages between refugee problems and internal displacement, UNHCR is committed to greater engagement with the internally displaced within the parameters of its principles and pre-requisites for operational involvement. In specific situations of internal displacement, the Office will analyse the needs, opportunities and constraints and assess the impact of its proposed involvement in the light of relevant considerations and conditions. The pros and cons of involvement will be assessed carefully in each case, keeping in mind the importance of promoting effective

humanitarian action to address the problem and the “value added” which UNHCR could bring to bear on it.

Notwithstanding the willingness to do more, political and operational constraints frequently limit international humanitarian action. The international community must continue to press those who have the authority and influence to overcome the obstacles, in particular the national authorities which bear the primary duty and responsibility to protect and assist internally displaced persons. UNHCR is ready to work, under the leadership of the UN Secretary General and in close co-operation with other relevant agencies, to mobilise support for operations where denial of access, insecurity, inadequate resources and other constraints hamper humanitarian action on behalf of the internally displaced. Even where UNHCR is unable to become involved itself, the Office can play a useful role in supporting and ensuring that others are able to provide assistance and protection to those in need.

### **UNHCR’s protection role**

Whatever the nature and degree of UNHCR’s involvement, the fundamental objective must always be to improve the protection of the internally displaced and promote solutions to their plight. The *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, which UNHCR has disseminated widely within and outside the organisation, provide a useful set of standards against which to measure the protection objectives and promote dialogue with state and non-state actors of violence.

Protection has been a major aspect of UNHCR’s involvement in several high-profile operations, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. In conflict-induced displacement, there are two concurrent needs: physical security and protection, and life-sustaining assistance and basic services. Assistance without protection is unlikely to succeed in ameliorating the condition of the victims, and might even aggravate their plight. Conversely, properly designed assistance can be an important tool of protection. Indeed, it is important to stress that although UNHCR has undertaken protection activities without a major assistance component in some instances, the co-relationship between the two aspects of humanitarian action should not be under-estimated. While protection will be a predominant need in certain phases of displacement and may require little or minimal concurrent material assistance, in other situations it will be difficult to provide effective protection without some assistance role.

Protection of the internally displaced can be particularly difficult because the national authorities retain the primary duty and responsibility but are frequently unable or unwilling to extend effective protection. Prevailing conflict often makes security a major problem. UNHCR has sought to meet the immediate protection needs of the internally displaced persons through international presence, monitoring and interventions to reduce violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.

In developing its protection strategies for the internally displaced, UNHCR has drawn heavily on its experience with returnees – refugees who have returned

to their country but are yet to be fully reintegrated. Returnees, like internally displaced persons, are nationals in their country. Often they return to situations where security and state and social structures are fragile. These are also the same situations affecting the internally displaced. Indeed, in some situations, such as Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, returnees have subsequently become internally displaced, blurring the distinction between the two categories. Reintegration of returnees poses a major challenge, both in terms of protection as well as economic and social rehabilitation and reconciliation of war-torn societies. Violent conflict, particularly when it has been prolonged and widespread, can affect the ability of the state to provide national protection. UNHCR has often played a critical role in promoting reconciliation and bridging the gap as national protection slowly reinstates itself.

Returnee operations clearly show that the protection role is not limited only to the stage of displacement but remains critical in the solutions phase. In a number of operations involving internal displacement or a mixed population of returnees and the internally displaced, for instance in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Tajikistan, UNHCR has worked with multilateral organisations and governmental and non-governmental actors to strengthen national protection, e.g. by building the capacity of national legal and judicial institutions, local NGOs and community groups.

Strengthening national protection is one important way of promoting a solution to internal displacement, and thereby curtailing human suffering and avoiding prolonged humanitarian engagement. UNHCR's experience with the internally displaced as well as refugees who have returned to countries torn by conflict provide many useful lessons for solution-oriented strategies to address internal displacement. UNHCR is undertaking a systematic review of its operational involvement with the internally displaced to draw lessons and develop best practices in the area of protection and solutions.

### **Parameters of operational involvement**

UNHCR's decision to become involved in a specific operation will be based on a thorough assessment of the situation and the fulfilment of certain operational pre-requisites. The assessment will analyse the risks and the opportunities as well as the possible impact of the proposed involvement. It will consider:

- Impact on the non-political and humanitarian nature of UNHCR's mandate. Internal displacement is usually most acute in situations of unresolved and prolonged conflict. These are also situations of gross and systematic violations of human rights and humanitarian law, of high security risk for humanitarian staff, and manipulation of humanitarian aid and actors for political purposes. In making its decision UNHCR will seek to ensure that its involvement does not compromise its humanitarian mandate.
- Impact on refugee protection and the institution of asylum. There can be both positive and negative fall-out of UNHCR's involvement. Countries of asylum may be more inclined to maintain their asylum policies if something

is done to alleviate the suffering of the internally displaced, reduce their compulsion to seek asylum and create conditions conducive to return. On the other hand, UNHCR's activities for the internally displaced may be (mis)interpreted as obviating the need for international protection and asylum. UNHCR's involvement should seek to improve the situation of the internally displaced while upholding their right to seek asylum.

- Impact on internal displacement. To what extent will UNHCR's involvement actually improve the protection situation and solutions possibilities of the internally displaced? This will depend not only on UNHCR's skills and resources but also on the presence and support of other organisations, and most importantly, on concurrent political action to resolve the conflict. As an organisation committed to the pursuit of solutions, UNHCR will give preference to engagement in operations where political efforts to resolve displacement are underway or being clearly contemplated.
- Relevance of UNHCR's experience and expertise. UNHCR's "value added" lies in its protection and solutions skills. It will be necessary in any given situation to measure their relevance in relation to the needs of the victims and to consider how they would complement or compare with the mandates and expertise of other agencies present, or contemplating presence.

A positive decision to become involved will also require the following conditions:

- Specific request or authorisation from the UN Secretary General or other competent principal organ of the UN. (Such a request is not necessary where the work with the internally displaced is an indivisible part of mandated activities e.g. assisting the internally displaced in the context of returnee reintegration).
- Consent of the state concerned, and where relevant, other entities in a conflict.
- Access to the affected population and adequate security for UNHCR and implementing partners to operate effectively.
- Clear lines of responsibility and accountability with the ability to intervene directly with all parties concerned, particularly on protection matters.
- Adequate resources and capacity to carry out activities.

### **Nature of operational involvement**

The nature and degree of UNHCR's involvement will vary, depending upon circumstances and the skills and activities that are needed at different stages of the problem. UNHCR may take the lead in providing protection and assistance with the co-operation of other agencies, or it may play a subsidiary role, depending upon:

- the phase of the displacement. In the early or pre-displacement phase, when tensions are heightened but there has been no significant displacement, the main focus will be on defusing tensions, promoting appropriate national laws and policies, building awareness, training, and preparedness measures. At this stage, UNHCR's role may be only catalytic or supportive of other actors and organisations that have clear responsibility for conflict prevention and promotion of human rights . During displacement, UNHCR's skills of providing protection and assistance will be most relevant, and in such situations UNHCR can be expected to take the lead. Once displacement has stopped or slowed down and solutions can be implemented, given its expertise in humanitarian solutions, UNHCR can again take the lead in promoting return or settlement elsewhere.
- relationship to refugee solutions. By virtue of its mandate, UNHCR has the responsibility to promote solutions to refugee problems, including the voluntary repatriation and reintegration of refugees. In situations where the successful reintegration of returnees requires addressing the needs of the internally displaced, UNHCR will be ready to take the lead because a comprehensive strategy to address displacement on both sides of the border is often the best way of promoting a lasting solution. As in the case of refugee reintegration, UNHCR will seek to work closely with development organisations in an effort to close the gap between relief and rehabilitation.
- the presence and activities of other organisations. At each phase of the displacement it will be important to assess whether the needs of the displaced are being adequately met by others, and whether it is necessary for UNHCR to address a gap relevant to its expertise. Colombia is an interesting example of how UNHCR developed a limited role for itself by taking into account the activities of other organisations, particularly ICRC and UNHCHR.
- the political and operational environment, including security considerations which may limit UNHCR's presence and activities.

UNHCR's operational experience has shown that in certain situations it is difficult to draw a meaningful distinction between the internally displaced and other vulnerable war-affected population in the same area. In such cases it may be necessary, in addressing the needs of the internally displaced, to adopt a broader, more comprehensive approach towards all those affected in the community, for instance through co-operation and co-ordination with other agencies.

### **Co-ordination and co-operation**

In defining its role with the internally displaced, UNHCR recognises the importance of acting in concert with all relevant actors and organisations, national and international, governmental and non-governmental. UN General

Assembly resolutions authorising UNHCR's involvement with the internally displaced have also consistently stressed the need to respect complementary mandates and relevant expertise of other organisations. The Office is fully committed to strengthening co-operation and co-ordination with other humanitarian organisations within and outside the UN system, particularly OCHA, WFP, UNICEF, ICRC, IOM, and NGO partners, and with the Representative of the UN Secretary General on Internally Displaced Persons.

UNHCR will continue to participate actively in the consultations of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) to establish policies and guidelines on internal displacement. Of particular importance will be the development of clear criteria and an effective mechanism to allocate responsibilities and identify a lead agency for operations involving the internally displaced. UNHCR is ready to work closely with the ERC and other relevant organisations to this end.

At the operational level, it is necessary to have a common understanding of complementary mandates and roles. UNHCR will engage in discussions with the ERC, sister UN agencies, the ICRC, IOM and other operational partners to explore ways and means of how best to clarify the respective responsibilities for the internally displaced. Memoranda of Understanding of the kind which UNHCR and its partners have signed for refugee operations could be helpful in this regard.

Last, but not the least, UNHCR will continue to work closely with the Representative of the UN Secretary General on Internally Displaced Persons to support and expand advocacy on behalf of the internally displaced. Disseminating, promoting and "operationalising" the Guidelines through staff training and application in the field provide a useful basis for strengthening an already fruitful relationship.

### **Summary of UNHCR's main operational involvement with internally displaced persons**

This summary of current UNHCR operations involving internally displaced persons is presented in alphabetical order, by geographic regions. It reveals the following interesting points:

- The nature and extent of UNHCR's involvement has varied between operations and regions, in light of political and financial support, as well as operational and security constraints.
- UNHCR has been most active on behalf of internally displaced persons in Eastern Europe, where the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union led to various internal conflicts, which in turn produced mixed outflows of refugees or internally displaced, or internal displacement of a refugee-like nature. The rationale for UNHCR's involvement has been based on a comprehensive strategy to prevent or solve refugee problems, which included addressing the situation of displaced populations in their own countries.
- In contrast, UNHCR's involvement with the internally displaced in Africa has been limited. Although insecurity has been a major deterrent, the real obstacles have been lack of capacity and resources. In Africa, UNHCR has had to focus its full attention, capacity and resources on situations falling within its core mandate, viz. large and complex refugee problems. Involvement with internally displaced persons has usually been in the context of repatriation operations.
- Where UNHCR has been active with the internally displaced, the Office concentrated its activities in the area of protection and solutions. However, because much of the internal displacement has been deliberate in an effort to create mono-ethnic states, protection has been difficult, and return and/or local integration has been resisted for political reasons. The search for solutions has brought UNHCR closer to international conflict resolution processes, as in the Balkans and the Caucasus.
- UNHCR's operations in Colombia and Sri Lanka are particularly interesting in the way they have developed innovative concepts and strategies for the protection of internally displaced persons.
- As in the case of refugees, UNHCR's field presence has been a major tool for effective implementation of protection and solutions-oriented activities. At the same time, security constraints have limited its ability to deploy its staff, underlining the difficulties inherent in operations involving internal displacement.

## A. Europe

### Azerbaijan

#### Numbers and profile of IDP population

*At the end of 1999, the total IDP population in Azerbaijan stood at 570,000 according to government estimates. UNHCR is assisting some 160,000 IDPs, including about 10,000 returnees to war-damaged areas.*

*The internally displaced are dispersed throughout the country. In the initial phases of internal displacement, they settled in a spontaneous manner, mostly in urban areas where they found accommodation with relatives or in public buildings. In the summer of 1993, tent camps were established in the southern and central parts of the country. Towards the end of 1993, and particularly in 1994 and 1995, settlements of pre-fabricated houses were built with the help of international agencies.*

*By 1998, just over half of the internally displaced were located in urban areas, especially in the capital, Baku, and the nearby city of Sumgait on the eastern coast and in the cities of Ganja and Mingchevir north of Nagorno-Karabakh. The trend among the displaced towards urban migration, especially to the capital and its suburbs, suggests that this percentage is likely to rise. In the cities of Imishli and Beylagan, it is estimated that internally displaced persons constitute as much as 50 per cent of the population.*

#### Rationale for UNHCR's involvement

*UNHCR became involved in the Caucasus in the early 1990s as part of its strategy to address coerced population movements in the former Soviet Union in a preventive and solution-oriented manner, including through greater involvement in the country of origin with the internally displaced.*

#### Nature of UNHCR's involvement

*UNHCR first established its presence in Azerbaijan in 1992 to provide emergency relief. Since 1996 its assistance strategy has been to promote integration adapted to the prevailing post-conflict phase (even though it lacks a peace settlement). Sectors of UNHCR assistance are mainly shelter, community services, education, health and nutrition, income generation, crop production and livestock husbandry. The emphasis is on self-sufficiency.*

*With the agreement of the government, UNHCR has given priority to those communities that had been displaced for long periods and could be settled on land which was accessible to them. The Office also expanded shelter support to displaced persons returning to accessible areas of origin in war-damaged border regions.*

*UNHCR has developed a framework of cooperation with the World Bank and UNDP for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of war-damaged areas in close cooperation with the Government of Azerbaijan. Under this framework, a self*

*reliance and income-generation project for IDPs of \$ 10 million is to be implemented. UNHCR also pursues an active dialogue with UNDP, the World Bank, USAID, EC, ICRC and IFRC promoting contingency planning in preparation for a larger return movement which could occur following tangible progress in peace negotiations on Nagorno-Karabakh.*

**Comment:**

*The stalemate in the peace negotiations has had serious repercussions on the lives of most of the hundreds of thousands who remain internally displaced, as the absence of a durable peace prevents them from returning to their areas of origin. The Government's political commitment to regaining all of its lost territory and having Nagorno-Karabakh return to its former status limits the resettlement and allocation of permanent shelter to all IDPs. However, the agreement between the Government and its international partners to promote self-reliance of the displaced persons while pursuing conflict resolution has been a major achievement boosting UNHCR's solutions-oriented strategy.*

**Former Yugoslavia**

**Numbers and profile of IDP population**

Croatia: The current overall figure is 43,000 persons. This includes some 5,500 elderly and socially vulnerable Serbs in the Danube Region, who fled military operations in 1995 and are unable to return to their homes which have been occupied, damaged/destroyed or privatized. (Another 40,000 of this group became refugees in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1998 at the end of the UNTAES mandate). In addition, there are also some 38,000 ethnic Croats, of all age groups, displaced from the Danube region in other parts of Croatia, and who are unwilling to return home for lack of employment opportunities.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: There are some 820,000 IDPs still in Bosnia and Herzegovina, of whom 480,000 are in the Federation and 340,000 in the Republika Srpska. Most of the displacement is from one entity to the other, although there is also some displacement within the Federation between Croat and Bosniak controlled areas. All age groups are represented among the displaced population.

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia: There are currently an estimated 200,000 IDPs in Serbia and another 32,000 in Montenegro. They are mainly Serbs and Roma who fled from Kosovo. A registration exercise is underway in Serbia which may revise the numbers. All age groups are represented since entire communities have left.

**Rationale for UNHCR's involvement**

UNHCR's was designated the lead agency for the humanitarian operation in the Balkans by the UN Secretary-General on 14 November 1991. The rationale for UNHCR's involvement was based on a comprehensive approach to address displacement within and across borders. The break up of The former Yugoslavia converted internal borders into international borders, and many of the displaced into refugees. Furthermore, the nature of the conflict in The former Yugoslavia, and the

consequent displacement were such that the refugee problem could not be addressed without simultaneously addressing the needs of the internally displaced. In the end, the humanitarian needs were so similar, compelling and inter-related that UNHCR ended up assisting 4 million civilians, including refugees, displaced and besieged population in the region.

Under Annex VII of the Dayton Peace Accord in 1995, UNHCR was given the lead role for the return and coordination of relief to refugees and internally displaced persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

### **Nature of UNHCR's involvement**

*Population displacement in the Balkans is extremely complex, and the nature of UNHCR's involvement has varied according to the stage of conflict, the needs of the victims and the possibility for solutions. Between late 1991 and 1995 UNHCR coordinated a massive life-saving operation to protect and assist refugees, internally displaced and other war-affected population created by the conflict in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition to normal tasks of providing protection and assistance to refugees in neighbouring states, UNHCR monitored the security and human rights of the displaced and war-affected population, and intervened with various actors to mitigate their protection problems.*

Protection remains an important issue for returning refugees and displaced population in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through advocacy, monitoring of returnees and internally displaced, and promotion of their human rights, UNHCR has sought to create more favourable conditions for return. Post-Dayton, an important protection aspect in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been resolving property rights of the displaced and returnees.

UNHCR has carried out its protection and assistance activities in the former Yugoslavia in close cooperation with other international political, military, human rights and humanitarian actors. For example, in Croatia UNTAES played a crucial role in ensuring a peaceful reintegration of the Danube region under Croatian rule and was extremely supportive of UNHCR's efforts to push for the two-way return of IDPs to and from the region. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, cooperation with SFOR is essential for ensuring minority returns in secure conditions, while the Office of the High Representative (OHR), often at UNHCR's suggestion, has taken political action to press for specific legislative and administrative measures to remove obstacles to minority returns. In Kosovo, UNHCR is operating under the umbrella of UNMIK as lead organization of the humanitarian pillar. While remaining an integral part of the UN Mission, UNHCR has not hesitated to raise with UNMIK and K-FOR its concerns with regard to the protection of ethnic minorities and their return to their home areas.

### **Comments**

The former Yugoslavia, in particular the Bosnia and Herzegovina operation, has been a defining moment for UNHCR's role with the internally displaced. It has demonstrated UNHCR's strengths as a protection agency and the usefulness of its expertise in protecting and finding solutions for the internally displaced. The experience in the Balkans has also demonstrated the importance of political support

for humanitarian action, and particularly the need for political solutions to conflicts which produce massive internal displacement.

## **Georgia**

### *Numbers and profile of the displaced population*

There are some 278,000 internally displaced persons in Georgia. UNHCR assists 83,400 persons or 30% of them .

The overwhelming majority of the displaced (96 percent) are ethnic Georgians displaced from the region of Abkhazia. About 14,000 persons have been displaced by conflict in South Ossetia, of whom about 10,000 ethnic Georgians live in government-controlled areas, while the remainder are displaced in South Ossetia

### *Rationale for UNHCR involvement*

*UNHCR became involved in the Caucasus in the early 1990s as part of its strategy to address coerced population movements in the former Soviet Union in a preventive and solution-oriented manner, including through greater involvement in the country of origin for the protection and assistance of the internally displaced. In the case of South Ossetia, there was a cross-border outflow into North Ossetia in the Russian Federation, providing further justification for UNHCR's involvement.*

### *Nature of UNHCR involvement*

The main objective of UNHCR's activities in Georgia is to promote humanitarian solutions to internal displacement, where possible through return, reconciliation and reintegration.

UNHCR has sought to promote solutions for those displaced by the Georgian Ossetian conflict by participating in the OSCE-sponsored conflict resolution process, supporting dialogue between state and non-state local authorities, training and building their capacity to reintegrate ethnic minorities. Through increased staff presence, UNHCR was able to monitor the protection situation of some 1,500 returnees from North Ossetia to South Ossetia. UNHCR has also provided material assistance and shelter to 2000 refugees and internally displaced persons in the area. During 2000, UNHCR will continue to help returnees reintegrate in South Ossetia, monitor their situation, and support reconciliation efforts.

In the case of the internally displaced from Abkhazia, UNHCR participates in and supports the conflict reconciliation process under the Secretary-General's Special Representative by chairing the Working Group on Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons. In coordination with UNOMIG and CIS PKF, UNHCR monitors the situation of spontaneous returnees. In government-controlled areas UNHCR has continued its income-generation and community empowerment activities. It has also advocated for the political, social and economic rights of the internally displaced persons as citizens without prejudice to their eventual return. UNHCR's material assistance is limited to vulnerable groups.

Other agencies, in particular the World Bank and UNDP are being increasingly drawn in to address longer term development prospects in areas of return and displacement, emphasizing integration and the inclusion of IDPs in national development strategies, without prejudice to their eventual voluntary return when conditions permit.

#### *Comment*

The international peace machinery continues its work in the midst of political tension and occasional renewed fighting. In the absence of conflict resolution the vast majority of the IDPs remain displaced, and the possibility of a lasting solution remains uncertain.

### **Russian Federation**

#### *Numbers and profile of internally displaced population*

The statistics relating to IDPs in the Russian Federation are extremely difficult to desegregate from those concerning “forced migrants”, a term used in Russian to encompass various forms of population movements, including refugees, internally displaced persons and ethnic Russians and others “forced” to leave the CIS countries. Between 1993 and 1999, some 880,000 “forced migrants” registered with the Russian authorities. This figure included 140,000 persons from Chechnya (displaced by the first Chechen war in 1994-96) and about 30,000 persons displaced by conflict in Prigorodny District, North Ossetia.

The most recent conflict in Chechnya (last quarter of 1999) has displaced more than 250,000 people, approximately 70,000 of whom have now returned to Chechnya. Numbers have fluctuated since then but at the end of March 2000, there were estimated to be 213,000 persons in the neighbouring republic of Ingushetia, about 20,000 persons in other Russian republics such as Daghestan, Stavropol and Krasnodar, while another 100,000 persons were estimated to be displaced within Chechnya itself.

Of the population displaced by the first Chechen war, UNHCR assists approximately 54,000 people. Of the additional 350,000 or so displaced by the most recent wave of conflict in Chechnya, UNHCR assists some two-thirds.

#### *Rationale for UNHCR involvement*

UNHCR’s involvement with the internally displaced persons in the north Caucasus, as in the south Caucasus, is part of its strategy to address coerced population movements in the former Soviet Union in a preventive and solution-oriented manner, including through protection and assistance of the internally displaced.

#### *Nature of UNHCR involvement*

UNHCR’s presence in the north Caucasus dates back to 1995, when, at the request of the Russian Federation and with the consent of all parties concerned, UNHCR provided reintegration assistance to those displaced by conflict in Chechnya and the Prigorodny district, North Ossetia. UNHCR undertakes some protection work on

documentation and property issues, and provides assistance to vulnerable groups in the areas of shelter, education, community services and health.

Following the outbreak of hostilities in 1999, and at the request of the governments of Ingushetia and the Russian Federation, UNHCR has provided relief to some 213,000 displaced persons from Chechnya. The assistance, including food and non-food items, shelter, water and sanitation, is coordinated by UNHCR within an inter-agency framework including WFP, UNICEF, UNDP, WHO, ICRC, DRC and MSF. Assistance is also provided by EMERCOM, the relevant Russian Ministry.

In addition, UNHCR, has carried out protection activities on behalf of the Chechen displaced in the neighbouring republics. This has involved ensuring that the borders of Chechnya remain open and that refuge is available in the neighbouring republics to those fleeing the conflict in Chechnya. UNHCR also seeks to ensure that no one is forced to return to Chechnya, and that those who wish to return voluntarily are assisted to the extent possible.

#### *Comment*

Because of security reasons, UNHCR has no presence in Chechnya and only limited presence in Ingushetia. This makes protection activities difficult. Notwithstanding continued insecurity, increasing numbers of displaced persons are returning to Chechnya. Although UNHCR will provide some limited material assistance to the returnees, it will not be able to monitor their conditions or provide rehabilitation assistance inside Chechnya because of insecurity and continued fighting. UNHCR will continue to provide protection and assistance to the displaced persons in the neighbouring republics so that they can remain there safely, until such time as they wish to return home.

## **B. Americas**

### **Colombia**

<b>Size and profile of the IDP population</b>
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Statistics are a subject of dispute between the Government, which claims some 500,000 internally displaced persons in 2000, and NGOs, which report some 1.5 million internally displaced persons. UNHCR uses a figure of 800,000 persons.

The internally displaced come predominantly from a rural background with 58% being women, of whom at least 36% are heads of household. Indigenous communities and Afro-Colombians have been hardest hit as their areas of origin are amongst the most affected by the conflict. The highest concentration of displacement is in the northwest of the country, bordering Panama and Venezuela. In areas of temporary settlement, urban settings and large cities, multiple displacement is a recurrent feature.

## **Rationale for UNHCR's involvement**

UNHCR involvement in Colombia is based on a two-pronged strategy, which has as its dual objectives the strengthening of asylum in neighbouring countries while promoting the protection and welfare of the internally displaced in Colombia.

## **Nature of UNHCR's involvement**

In mid-1997 the Government of Colombia requested UNHCR to establish a presence in the country to assist national institutions dealing with IDPs. With the Secretary-General's concurrence and after a lengthy consultation process with national institutions, international organizations and NGOs operating in Colombia, and key donors, the High Commissioner replied positively to the Government of Colombia.

A small office was opened in June 1998. Subsequently in January 1999, a MOU was signed with the Government setting out the scope of UNHCR's programme on behalf of IDPs. In April 1999 an Operational Plan, based on this programme, was endorsed by the Colombian Government and key donors.

UNHCR provides technical cooperation to the authorities on issues relating to IDPs in the following areas: policy development and institutional building to promote protection and solutions; strengthening of coordination mechanisms and international cooperation; building awareness on the situation of the internally displaced.

UNHCR also serves as a catalyst to encourage a concerted response from other agencies working with IDPs. At the request of the Resident Coordinator (endorsed by the IASC-WG), UNHCR facilitates UN coordination of the humanitarian response to displacement, and endeavours to ensure that political initiatives in relation to the peace process reinforce the protection and assistance of IDPs.

## **Comments**

*UNHCR in Colombia follows a protection and rights-based implementation strategy based on the five components of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. With no material relief component, this programme is unique in UNHCR's history of involvement with IDPs, since it is a predominantly protection-based IDP operation.*

### **C. Asia**

#### **Sri Lanka**

##### *Numbers and profile of the displaced population*

According to the Government of Sri Lanka some 800,000 persons are currently displaced as a result of ongoing conflict. UNHCR is assisting some 612,000 persons.

Of the estimated 800,000 IDPs, 60% are male and 40% female. A third of the displaced population is below 18 years of age.

About 40% of IDPs are in the northern Jaffna Peninsula. Another forty per cent are in the districts of Kilinochchi, Mannar, Mullaitivu and Vavuniya. The remaining displaced persons are spread across the districts of Anuradhapura, Puttalam, Trincomalee and other areas. Some 164,000 persons are living in “welfare centres” in government-controlled areas.

#### *Rationale for UNHCR’s involvement*

UNHCR’s operational presence in Sri Lanka began in 1987 in order to facilitate the reintegration of returning refugees from India. In the early 1990s, the outbreak of hostilities between the Sri Lankan authorities and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) created massive displacement in northern Sri Lanka, including among those who had returned from India. At the request of the Sri Lankan Government, UNHCR extended its activities for returnees to include internally displaced persons in areas where the Office was already present. UNHCR’s activities for the internally displaced were endorsed by the United Nations Secretary-General in 1991. While returns from India have been curtailed by the fighting, UNHCR’s activities for the protection and assistance of the internally displaced have grown.

#### *Nature of UNHCR’s involvement*

The overall objective of UNHCR’s presence in Sri Lanka is to improve the protection situation of the internally displaced persons in the north and north-east of Sri Lanka, and to provide durable solutions as the security situation improves.

Due to the volatility of the military situation, UNHCR’s programme in Sri Lanka has had to adjust in accordance with the needs of the displaced. Through its field presence UNHCR seeks to provide some degree of protection to internally displaced persons near areas of conflict. The Open Relief Centre in Madhu, supported by UNHCR, provides emergency relief and offers an area of relative safety to thousands of displaced persons. The continuous presence of UNHCR field teams also enables the Office to detect early warning signals of displacement and provide emergency assistance in concert with the Sri Lankan authorities and other agencies to those uprooted by fresh fighting. UNHCR is in regular dialogue with State and non-State actors to promote freedom of movement and humanitarian assistance and protection of civilians.

The ability to promote durable solutions is limited by insecurity and frequent military activity. Nevertheless, wherever possible, UNHCR has encouraged the local authorities to create conditions conducive to return of the displaced persons. Micro-project assistance has been provided to the displaced and returnees as well as to the affected host communities to stabilise population displacement and facilitate reintegration.

UNHCR activities are closely coordinated with those of relevant United Nations agencies within the framework of the existing United Nations Emergency Task Force, and with the ICRC. In addition, UNHCR has been involved in the World Bank’s

Northeast Irrigated Agriculture. UNHCR's assistance activities are implemented with the help of a number of international and national NGOs.

*Comment*

UNHCR's operation in Sri Lanka has been a laboratory for testing concepts on protection and assistance for the internally displaced. It has also been the one of the longest running IDP operations of UNHCR, with constant outbreaks of fighting jeopardising progress on solutions and no clear end to the conflict in sight.

**D. Africa**

**Angola**

**Numbers and profile of IDP population**

Because of successive displacements over a prolonged period, statistics on IDPs are difficult to estimate. The UN Inter-Agency consolidated Appeal for 2000, categorises approximately 3.7 million people as "war-affected". This figure includes some 1.1 million "newly" internally displaced persons in 17 provinces of Angola.

The vast majority of them are women and children. Many are in physically appalling conditions. The influx of people into urban areas has put enormous pressure on sanitation, health and social services, already stretched to the limit.

**Rationale for UNHCR's involvement**

UNHCR had not been involved in assisting IDPs in Angola in the past. Its main role in Angola was to assist the repatriation of refugees, and it assisted the internally displaced persons only to the extent that they were mixed with returnee populations. This has come to a halt with the curtailment of repatriation as a result of worsening insecurity.

At the request of the Angolan government and following an inter-agency mission in February 2000, UNHCR has agreed to extend its activities with the internally displaced persons in the northern provinces of Uige, Zaire and Luanda provinces. These provinces have been selected, not only because of the dire needs, but also because they are areas to which refugees who returned earlier are now internally displaced, and to which future repatriation is likely to occur.

**Nature of UNHCR's involvement**

UNHCR is examining the possibility of providing assistance, in the first instance, on an "emergency basis", to meet urgent basic needs and stabilise the condition of the population in the selected provinces. UNHCR will build a protection component into its activities, taking into account the ground conditions. UNHCR's involvement will be in the framework of the UN inter-agency coordinated response.

Humanitarian assistance is currently provided by several international agencies, including WFP, UNICEF, FAO WHO, ICRC and numerous NGOs. The UN Country

Team is coordinated by the Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator. Insecurity, including landmines, and logistical problems constrain humanitarian activities and severely limit access to IDPs in many areas of the country.

### **Burundi**

The number of internally displaced in the country is estimated at over 800,000, more than 12% of Burundi's population. The vast majority of IDPs are women and children. According to Save the Children, around 1,500 children are separated from their families. The displacement is connected to the armed conflict and the Government's policy of "regroupement". In addition, drought and consequent crop shortages have compounded the problem of internal displacement.

*UNHCR had in the past provided ad hoc assistance to IDPs in response to requests from the Government. IDPs were also able to benefit from UNHCR's assistance in returnee areas where UNHCR's area-based approach served the returnees as well as their communities, of which IDPs were a part. Currently, these activities have been suspended due to the UN Security Phase IV. UNHCR has not been involved in provision of assistance to "regroupement camps" because of its position against forced relocation.*

*The deteriorating humanitarian situation in Burundi may make it increasingly difficult for UNHCR to maintain its current position of refraining from involvement with IDPs.*

OCHA has the overall responsibility for the coordination of assistance to the IDPs. Life-sustaining assistance is provided by WFP, UNICEF, IFRC, other agencies and NGOs. Some limited help is also distributed by the same agencies to some accessible regroupement sites in Bujumbura Rural.

### **Democratic Republic of the Congo**

The total number of displaced persons in the DRC is estimated at some 960,000 people. This figure is a very rough estimate because, due to logistic and security reasons, there is virtually no access to the areas where the displaced live.

The displacement has been caused mainly by the on-going civil war. In December 1999, floods around Kinshasa added to the numbers of the displaced. Potential for further displacement (both internal and external) remains very real as ethnic tensions persist in many areas throughout the country, particularly in North and South Kivu.

UNHCR has no direct involvement with IDPs, although the Plan of Operations for the Lusaka Cease-Fire Agreement foresees a comprehensive area-based approach, which would mean UNHCR's involvement with the internally displaced in those areas where refugee/returnee programmes will be launched.

UNHCR has provided one-time assistance to the flood victims as a humanitarian gesture. UNHCR has also assisted the Government to establish camps for displaced returnees.

Humanitarian assistance is currently provided by other agencies: OCHA (coordinating United Nations efforts), ICRC (food and non-food items), WFP (food), UNICEF and WHO (health), EC (provides funds to the programmes and agencies described here), various NGOs (OXFAM, MSF, CARITAS, ACF).

### **Ethiopia**

The Ethiopian/Eritrean conflict in 1998 created some 300,000 internally displaced persons in Ethiopia, which requested UNHCR's assistance for them. UNHCR provided one-time material assistance to the displaced in Ethiopia through the OCHA inter-agency appeal.

### **Eritrea**

The same conflict created 360,000 internally displaced persons in Eritrea. Again in response to a request from Eritrea, UNHCR provided one-time material assistance to the internally displaced in Eritrea through the OCHA inter-agency appeal. It should be noted that in December 1999, UNHCR fielded a high level mission to Eritrea to discuss the repatriation of Eritrean refugees in the Sudan. Eventual assistance to returnees through community-based reintegration programme would also benefit the local population including IDPs.

### **Liberia**

At the peak of the Liberian conflict between 1990 and 1996, the IDP population was estimated at 1 million persons. It should be recalled that all IDP camps were dismantled by the Government in late 1998. The majority of these camps were located in Montserrado County (Monrovia and the surrounding areas). The residents of these camps formerly came from other districts of the country and were mostly urban dwellers who settled in unfinished buildings in the capital Monrovia. UNHCR provided one-time assistance to internally displaced persons located near some Sierra Leonean refugee camps.

### **Republic of the Congo**

There were 810,000 IDPs in the first half of 1999. The main cause of the displacement was the civil war. Since December 1999, an agreement has been signed between the warring parties, following which 370,000 persons have returned to their areas of origin.

UNHCR is not involved with IDPs. Insecurity, lack of access and weak presence on the ground militated against involvement. The position could be reconsidered in the future if repatriation of Congolese refugees from neighbouring Gabon begins. Then assistance could be extended to the IDPs residing in returnee areas.

OCHA coordinates efforts of the humanitarian agencies. WHO and MSF (F) are involved in health care, WFP provides food and IRC camp management.

### **Rwanda**

UNHCR has had some involvement with IDPs in Rwanda, based on the fact that these were former returnees whose reintegration was interrupted by the growing insecurity in the north-west of the country. The insecurity has resulted in the displacement of some 625,000 persons in Ruhengeri and Gisenyi Prefectures in the north-western part of the country.

*UNHCR's assistance was limited to provision of non-food items and logistics support. A decision was made in full consultation with other agencies, not to start any long-term involvement with IDPs, which would have been contradictory to UNHCR's policy of gradually reorienting the programmes and phasing down infrastructural rehabilitation.*

Other agencies involved include WFP (food), UNICEF (water, sanitation, nutrition centres), and WHO (health). OCHA plays a coordinating role.

### **Sierra Leone**

The internally displaced population in Sierra Leone is estimated at over 1 million persons of whom 150,000 live in the capital, Freetown.

*UNHCR did not provide any direct assistance to the internally displaced persons in Sierra Leone. However, some of the internally displaced were mixed with Liberian refugees particularly in the capital and in the second largest city, Bo. While distributing relief items to the Liberian refugees, UNHCR also provided one-time material assistance, mainly of non-food items, to the internally displaced persons.*

UNHCR plans to assist the internally displaced living in returnee areas in the context of the voluntary repatriation operation for refugees.

### **Somalia**

It is estimated that there are some 2.8 million IDPs in Somalia. UNHCR received a request from the north-west Somalia authorities in 1998 to repatriate 1,200 IDPs from north-west Somalia to southern Somalia. UNHCR declined the request because the country is still considered a unified nation by the international community. UNHCR however, offered to provide one-time assistance in non-food items to the group.

### **Uganda**

It is estimated that some 600,000 IDPs are in Uganda as a result of various rebel group activities in the northern and western part of Uganda. In 1997 and 1998, for humanitarian reasons, UNHCR provided one-time assistance to the internally displaced persons in the form of blankets and other non-food items. The majority of them are living near refugee settlements.

May 2000

## **List of Acronyms**

CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
EC	European Commission
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally displaced persons
IFRC	International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
IRC	International Rescue Committee
MSF	Médecins sans Frontières
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNMIK	United Nations Mission in Kosovo
UNOMIG	United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia
UNTAES	United Nations Transitional Administration for Eastern Slavonia, Baranja, and Western Sirmium
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization