The International Community and
Humanitarian Intervention

Deng, Francis. *Protecting the Displaced: A Challenge for the International Community.* Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1993.

Lewer, Nick and Oliver Ramsbotham. *"Something Must Be Done": Toward an Ethical Framework for Humanitarian Intervention in International Social Conflict.* Peace Research Report Number 33. Bradford, England: Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, 1993.

Weiss, Thomas and Larry Minear, eds. *Humanitarianism Across Borders: Sustaining Civilians in Times of War.* Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1993.

If anyone needs two terrifying examples to illustrate the inadequacy of the current approach to dealing with the world's refugee crisis, they can be found in Bosnia and Rwanda. In the former, UN attempts to protect so-called safe areas call into question the very definition of "safe." And in the latter, the numbers alone tell the story: several hundred thousand civilians butchered in genocide and two million persons displaced, including some 250,000 who crossed into Tanzania in one 24-hour period.

But, while these two examples happen to be the ones attracting the most attention today, they are far from the only ones. In recent years the international community has been confronted with one refugee emergency after another, in rapid, sometimes overlapping succession. Crises in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the Balkans, and the former Soviet republics have strained the capacities of the United Nations almost to the breaking point. Never in its history has the demand on the UN to protect and assist refugees been greater.

The political and social instability and humanitarian crises of the early post-Cold War era have fostered intense study and debate regarding what concepts, mandates, capacities, structures and resources are required to meet the humanitarian challenges of the 1990s and beyond. The three studies reviewed here assess the experience accumulated so far from international involvement in emergency operations in the world's most violent conflicts in the past few years and offer useful suggestions about how the international community might respond more effectively in the future.

Lewer and Ramsbotham maintain that the most prevalent conflict today is international-social conflict which is neither purely inter-state (international) nor purely domestic (social), but sprawls somewhere between the two. Francis Deng, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for internally displaced persons, analyzes six such conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Russia, Somalia, Sudan, El Salvador and Cambodia. These are either on-going or recently resolved conflicts, but it is clear in all six cases that the hybrid nature of these conflicts makes

them particularly vicious and intractable, and poses grave problems for external intervenors who are drawn in for protracted emergency operations as a result. All three books demonstrate that the difficulties of helping civilians in such disasters are exacerbated during conflict.

These studies also demonstrate that international systems for intervening in international-social conflicts, particularly on behalf of the persecuted and displaced, have been less than satisfactory. The UN simply was not designed to deal with internal conflicts. While the organization has had some important successes in El Salvador, Namibia, and Nicaragua, where it helped to end protracted internal conflicts by disarming the opposing forces and monitoring elections, the UN is finding it difficult to resolve all internal conflicts. In countries like the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, Angola or Rwanda, the UN is dealing with bitter internal strife brought about by age-old communal, ethnic and religious tensions. The political will that is required for UN intervention to succeed in these situations is often absent because there is limited international consensus on issues of self-determination, state succession and humanitarian intervention. In addition, success is made all the more difficult because UN member states remain reluctant to commit their soldiers to missions that are of little direct relevance for their own national security interests.

An additional problem is that the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was designed to work primarily with refugees who had fled their home countries. Although there is a clear international mandate and specific institutions – most prominently, UNHCR – to assist and protect the world's 19 million refugees, no institution has been given the responsibility for addressing the needs of the world's estimated 25 million people displaced within their own countries. Francis Deng notes that this is a critical weakness of the international humanitarian system. In addition, as noted in the books under review, the body of international law governing the treatment of internally displaced persons is entirely inadequate. The community of states has yet to fully appreciate the international consequences of internal displacement, and as a result, these people are not protected by the international system precisely because they do not become refugees but remain within the boundaries of their own countries.

Deng offers three ways to provide comprehensive international protection and assistance to the displaced: the establishment for the internally displaced of the equivalent of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees; the expansion of the mandate of UNHCR to explicitly include internally displaced persons; or the appointment of a senior official within the UN Secretariat who would be charged with responsibility for the internally displaced. More radical responses are offered by two of the authors in the edited volume by Weiss and Minear. Cuny and Ingram, both experienced emergency relief practitioners and managers, question the ability of existing UN institutions to deal adequately with the growing number of conflict-related emergencies in the post-Cold War era and call for a drastic revamping of the UN system to respond effectively to massive population movements caused by

international-social conflicts. Cuny recommends the establishment of a new UN organization for the victims of armed conflict, while Ingram calls for the expansion and internationalization of the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), the agency whose mandate it is to monitor international humanitarian law and the laws of warfare.

Because it seems unlikely that any of these institutional changes will occur in the short term, interagency cooperation is the key to a more effective response to the problems of displacement in the years ahead. Interagency coordination has, however, always been a weak point within the UN. Making the system work better requires a more effective division of labor among the actors involved in responding to the humanitarian, political and security dimensions of internal conflicts. More attention must be focused on a range of players, including development agencies, human rights networks, peacekeeping and conflict resolution mechanisms and the traditional relief organizations – all of which must be involved in finding innovative approaches and collaborations to resolve conflicts and their accompanying displacements.

With the benefit of recent hindsight, however, it seems clear that closer interagency cooperation will be quite insufficient by itself to mitigate, let alone resolve, the underlying problem of international-social conflict, especially where there is a long and violent history behind it. It is time for a major debate about how the UN, regional bodies and states can effectively intervene in internal conflicts. The Bradford study by Lewer and Ramsbotham focuses on the issue of humanitarian intervention and sets forth a framework of general principles that would guide the international community in deciding when a domestic situation warrants international intervention. This study clearly articulates the principles on behalf of which the international community may need to intervene. However, as we have seen in intensely political struggles such as Bosnia and Somalia, it is extremely difficult for intervenors to act non-politically in the way humanitarian intervention demands. Thus, more might have been said about the practical considerations that may restrain these actions, such as the desire of governments to control both their commitment of armed forces and their financial expenditures. In addition, it is important to note that the problems concerning intervention are as much a matter of political will as a question of manpower or money.

It is clear from these three studies that we need a new approach to security issues such as forced migration. We must recognize that the global refugee crisis is an essentially political problem, and not a problem of international charity. Because the causes and consequences of refugee movements are linked intimately to political issues, the international community must do more than build a stronger humanitarian response. What is needed is nothing less than a working international security system that can help prevent refugee disasters from occurring in the first place.

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