

Introduction

Much has been written in recent years on the subject of humanitarian action. A wealth of specialist literature also exists on the legal aspects of refugee protection. But few historians have focused specifically on the issue of forced human displacement and on the development of international approaches to the problem. As the historian Eric Hobsbawm has noted in his book *On History*, why some historical experiences become part of a wider historical memory, but so many others do not, is a disquieting phenomenon.¹ This book attempts to address this issue by looking at the history of forced displacement in the second half of the 20th century.

During the last decade of the 20th century, governments, international organizations and the public became increasingly aware of the problems faced by refugees and internally displaced people. This was largely a result of live television reports, which provided dramatic images of desperate people fleeing from places such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Chechnya, Iraq, Kosovo and Rwanda. It also resulted from the increased scope, in the post-Cold War era, for involvement in situations of mass displacement by humanitarian organizations, human rights organizations, multinational military forces, peace negotiators, war crimes investigators, journalists and a range of other external actors. The problem of forced displacement, however, is not new, and neither are international efforts to alleviate the suffering of uprooted people.

International approaches to refugee protection

Throughout history, people have had to abandon their homes and seek safety elsewhere to escape persecution, armed conflict or political violence. This has happened in every region of the world. Most religions incorporate concepts such as asylum, refuge, sanctuary and hospitality for people who are in distress. But until the 20th century there were no universal standards for the protection of such people. Efforts to protect and assist them were essentially localized and *ad hoc* in nature.

It was not until the period after the First World War, when the League of Nations came into being, that the refugee issue came to be regarded as an international problem that had to be tackled at the international level. Even then, the growth of an international system to respond to and manage refugee problems was slow and intermittent. The League of Nations appointed a number of High Commissioners

Fourth, the number of international actors involved in programmes aimed at protecting and assisting refugees and other displaced people has grown significantly. In the early 1950s, UNHCR's partners were small in number. By 1999, its implementing partners included over 500 non-governmental organizations (NGOs). UNHCR has also increasingly been called upon by the UN Secretary-General to act as the lead UN humanitarian agency in emergency situations. In addition, UNHCR has found itself working side by side with other UN agencies, UN peacekeepers, other multinational military forces, regional organizations, human rights organizations, and a range of other international and local actors.

Fifth, the organization has become increasingly involved in volatile and unstable places, as well as in situations of ongoing armed conflict. Initially, UNHCR worked only in countries of asylum which were safe and unaffected by armed conflict. UNHCR staff are now often present in the midst of war. This has exposed them to new dangers and has presented the organization with a whole set of new challenges.

UNHCR's activities during its early years are sometimes described as having been reactive, exile-oriented and refugee-specific.² Reactive, because UNHCR dealt with refugee problems primarily in the country of asylum. Exile-oriented, because efforts were focused on activities in the country of asylum, and responsibility for solving refugee problems was seen as resting with countries receiving refugees rather than with those producing them. Refugee-specific, because UNHCR generally did not concern itself with other forms of forced displacement.

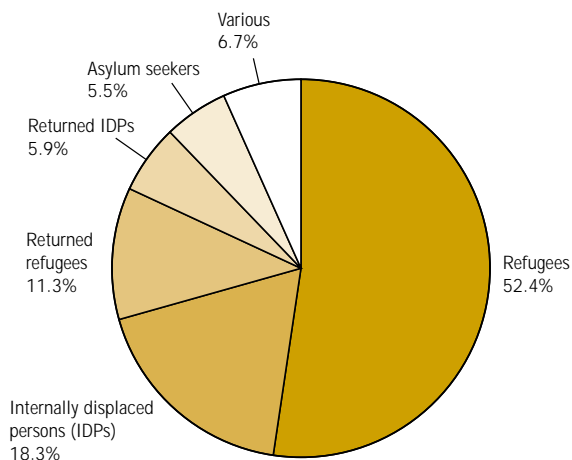
By contrast, UNHCR's activities in later years—particularly in the post-Cold War period—have been described as proactive, homeland-oriented and holistic. Proactive, because the organization has been much more willing to engage in activities aimed at preventing the human rights abuses and situations which give rise to the displacement in the first place. Homeland-oriented, because UNHCR's strategy has increasingly emphasized not only the duties of host countries but also the obligations of countries from which refugees flee. Holistic, because the organization has sought to promote a more comprehensive approach to the problem of forced displacement. This approach is more long-term and takes into consideration the needs not only of refugees but also of internally displaced people, returnees, asylum seekers, stateless people and others.

History of forced displacement

This book does not set out to provide an institutional history of UNHCR but rather a general history of forced displacement in the 50 years since UNHCR's inception. Much of the book deals with crises in which UNHCR has played a central role in responding to the needs of refugees and other displaced people. But it also examines other groups such as Palestinians (most of whom fall under the mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) and Tibetan refugees in India, where UNHCR's role in providing protection and assistance has

**Total population of concern to UNHCR,
31 December 1999* (Total = 22.3 million)**

Figure 0.1



* For details and explanations, see Annex 2.

humanitarian organizations in confronting ‘ethnic cleansing’, the difficulties of protecting vulnerable civilians in an active war zone, and the decision by the international community to establish ‘safe areas’ in Bosnia and Herzegovina—which eventually ended in tragedy with the fall of Srebrenica and Zepa in 1995.

Throughout the Bosnian war, UNHCR coordinated a massive emergency relief operation. Numerous obstacles were faced by humanitarian organizations in gaining access to vulnerable populations. Staff were exposed to extreme dangers and many were injured or killed. To a large extent, the UNHCR-led humanitarian operation became a substitute for other forms of political or military action. The chapter then describes the first four years after the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in December 1995, during which time repatriation made little progress in reversing the process of ethnic separation.

Chapter 9 also describes the refugee crisis which took place in the southern Balkans in 1999, when some 800,000 Kosovo Albanians fled to Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYR Macedonia). It examines UNHCR’s attempts to coordinate international assistance to the refugees, the trend of increasing bilateral assistance, the role of the NATO-led military force in constructing refugee camps and in providing other support for the humanitarian operation, and the ‘humanitarian evacuation programme’ which was set up to take refugees from FYR Macedonia to third countries. It then assesses the situation in Kosovo since June 1999, when the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia formally accepted a peace plan under which all its military, police and paramilitary forces withdrew from the province, leading to the deployment of a NATO-led force in Kosovo. Within three months, some 200,000 Serbs and other minorities left Kosovo in a process which became known as ‘reverse ethnic cleansing’.

Endnotes

Many of the documents cited in the book are drawn from the UNHCR archives. These references give the author, recipient (if appropriate), the title or subject of document, file, unit, date, and fonds and series number (e.g. F/HCR 11.2).

Introduction

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- 2 See UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees: In Search of Solutions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, pp. 30–55.
- 3 L.W. Holborn, *Refugees: A Problem of our Time: The Work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1951–1972*, 2 vols, Methuen, Scarecrow Press, NJ, 1975.

Chapter 1

- 1 E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century*, Michael Joseph, London, 1994, pp. 50–2; L.W. Holborn, *Refugees: A Problem of our Time: The Work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1951–1972*, 2 vols, Scarecrow Press, Methuen NJ, 1975, p. 23; G. Loescher, *Beyond Charity: International Cooperation and the Global Refugee Crisis*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, pp. 46–54; M.R. Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985, pp. 296–345; J.G. Stoessinger, *The Refugee and the World Community*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1956, pp. 45–8.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Holborn, *Refugees*, p. 24.
- 4 Marrus, *The Unwanted*, p. 321.
- 5 See in general, Loescher, *Beyond Charity*, pp. 47–9.
- 6 IRO Constitution, Article 2(1) (a); Annex, Article 1c.
- 7 UNGA Res. (8/1), para. (c) (ii), 12 Feb. 1946.
- 8 B. Harrell-Bond, 'Repatriation: Under What Conditions is it the Most Desirable Solution for Refugees? An Agenda for Research', *African Studies Review*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1988.
- 9 L.W. Holborn, *The International Refugee Organization: A Specialized Agency of the United Nations, Its History and Work 1946–1952*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1956, p. 200; Holborn, *Refugees*, p. 40.
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- 14 Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, Deputy High Commissioner, speech to Norwegian Refugee Council, 19 May 1965.
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- 17 J. Furlow, 'Revolution and Refugees: The Hungarian Revolution of 1956', *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1996, pp. 107–8.
- 18 Oral history interview with A. Lindt, 4 Feb. 1998, F/HCR 36.1.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 High Commissioner, 'HC's Report from Yugoslavia, No. 1', memo, 15 April 1953, 1/7/5 YUG, HC Missions, F/HCR 11.1.
- 21 For figures see UNREF Executive Committee, 'Report and Further Recommendations of the Problem of Hungarian Refugees', UN Doc. A/AC.79/73, 8 May 1957, Tables I and IV.
- 22 R.A. Saager to High Commissioner, memo, 19 March 1957, 1/7/5 YUG, HC Missions, F/HCR 11.1.
- 23 P. Weis to M. Pagès, 'Eligibility of Refugees from Hungary', memo, 9 Jan. 1957, 6/1/HUN, F/HCR 11.1.
- 24 UNGA Res. 1006(ES-11) and 1129(XI), 9 and 21 Nov. 1956.
- 25 UNHCR Branch Office for Austria to High Commissioner, Geneva, 'Eligibility Procedure and Screening of New Arrivals', memo, 20 Nov. 1956, 22/1/AUS, F/HCR 11.1.
- 26 American Council of Voluntary Agencies, 'Report on the Hungarian Refugee Problem', New York, 1958.
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- 28 Coles, 'Approaching the Refugee Problem Today', unpublished manuscript, Venice, Nov. 1987, p. 7.
- 29 Lindt interview; see also G.J.L. Coles, 'Solutions to the Problem of Refugees and the Protection of Refugees', background report for UNHCR, Geneva, 1989.
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