The State of the World's Refugees 1993

Chapter Three
Information as Protection

On 7 November 1992, a vessel slipped away from the Somali port of Marka carrying a desperate human cargo: 3,302 refugees from the brutal civil war that had plunged their country into anarchy and famine. Distress signals from the ship, which carried little food or water, were picked up five days later, as it headed for the Gulf of Aden. No port in the region was willing to accept another shipload of Somali boat people – until the press was alerted and began to write and broadcast news of the impending tragedy. World attention focused on the lost ship, and states with forces in the region launched a week-long air and sea search until it was located. Yemen, already host to 50,000 Somali refugees, opened the port of Aden. The ship, jammed with hungry, thirsty, frightened people, docked safely on 18 November.

A late 20th-century cliché holds that information is power. Information is also protection. Neither the general public nor officials can respond adequately to refugee problems they know nothing about. Gathering information and communicating it effectively are central to the assistance and protection of refugees.

Radical changes in the information environment, the result of the technological revolution, have made it less likely that humanitarian tragedies will unfold completely unnoticed by the outside world. There are other risks, however. The consumers of modern media are exposed to enormous quantities of information from multiple sources. Refugees and other humanitarian issues compete with an array of topics, ranging from local to global concerns and from the momentous to the trivial. “Compassion fatigue” has often been predicted, but attention fatigue is as great a danger. The impact of media coverage on public opinion and the impact, in turn, of public opinion on the political process make it vital that refugee issues get a hearing.

The camera – especially the television camera – has proved to be a powerful advocate for people in need, including refugees. But the arrival of photographers and television crews usually occurs at a late stage of refugee-generating crises, after the exhausted victims of violence, persecution and terror have fled their homes and gathered together where their plight can be more easily observed. The cameras seldom stay on beyond the onset of the next crisis, although the victims generally do. On television screens and in the headlines, Liberia is erased by the crisis in the Persian Gulf, the problems in Iraq by the tragedy in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Information can play a role in protecting refugees right from the beginning of a crisis. If exposure starts early enough, and draws an effective response, it may even prevent people from having to become refugees. Failing that, once displacement has occurred, sustained attention may help foster solutions.

“Information draws attention to policies and practices that create refugees”

Information is both a resource and a tool for the protection of refugees. It is the resource that alerts governments, international agencies and private groups to the need to assist people who have had to flee. It is often the tool that persuades such entities to act and convinces members of the public to support their actions. Information is also a resource for people who are contemplating movement. It may help refugees choose the safest and most appropriate channels for departure, and the most opportune moment to return. For people who are not under the kind of compulsion that would give them a claim to international protection, accurate information about their chances of being admitted as immigrants may influence their decision to leave home.

One function of information is to draw attention to the policies and practices that create refugees and to identify those responsible. The media often provide the setting for the "court of public opinion", as well as the instrument for relaying the evidence. In countries of asylum and resettlement, information channels – which include informal networks as well as conventional news media – perform an important function in building public awareness of the meaning of refugee status and encouraging humanitarian attitudes in general.

False or incomplete information – whether unintentional or deliberate – can be as dangerous as good information is helpful. It can result in inadequate policies or, in the refugee's case, a potentially fatal course of action. The circumstances from which refugee crises emerge are typically the most difficult in which to gather reliable, objective information. Governments and opposition groups, relief agencies and advocacy groups have become increasingly sophisticated in the presentation of data to illustrate their own points of view. There is sometimes a fine line between selectivity and manipulation; outright fabrication of events by partisans is not unknown. And of course the media have their own biases, reflected not only in the content of news reporting but also in the definition of what is news.

The best information base is built by including as many different sources as possible, while remaining fully aware of the biases or limitations of each. For conveying the genesis and dynamics of forced displacements, few sources can compete with the refugees themselves.

Drawing attention to refugee-creating abuses

One of the purposes of public information is to galvanize international opinion through continuous monitoring and reporting of conditions that lead to refugee movements. The proliferation of information channels facilitates this task. Often, there is a *de facto* alliance between informal or unofficial observers in the field and the media. The former, with intimate knowledge of the situation on the ground, can provide first-hand descriptions of events, while the latter can deliver it to a global audience. For example, the desperate plight of villagers and townspeople under siege in eastern Bosnia during the winter of 1992-93 was in part brought to light by local amateur radio operators. Their reports, while not always accurate, were monitored by international news media and brought in external observers better equipped to assess humanitarian needs. Refugees provided the first accounts of pirate attacks on refugee boats in the South China Sea, of civilian massacres by government forces in El Salvador and of inhumane detention camps and widespread rape in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Their stories were relayed by humanitarian workers and picked up for further exploration by news media (see Box 3.1).

The use of refugee reports as a source of information makes special demands on humanitarian agencies and the media. It requires skilled and compassionate listeners, as well as sensitivity to the victims' right to privacy. Often the retelling of an ordeal can be an additional trauma, particularly for torture victims and women who have been raped. Piecing together a consistent and objective account of events from hundreds of highly personal, emotional tales is difficult, and relaying anecdotal evidence of abuses has its dangers. Yet it is just such personal accounts that humanize the abstractions of refugee issues, and that are the most powerful instruments for mobilizing public determination to assist the victims.

The manipulation of information by the parties to a conflict is a perennial problem. A former ambassador in Belgrade, before the break up of Yugoslavia, recalls receiving the same graphic, illustrated "reports" of atrocities from both sides of the Serb-Croatian conflict, each claiming them as evidence of the horrors perpetrated by the other. This practice has, if anything, occurred with even greater frequency during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In one of the most blatant examples, Belgrade television claimed that the 56 people, including 15 children, killed by Serbian shelling in the besieged town of Srebrenica on 12 April 1993 were in fact captured Serbs who had been tortured to death. UN officials in Srebrenica immediately and unequivocally denounced the report as "a shameless lie".

"Subtle forms of media bias can have far-reaching effects on international perceptions and policies"

Such crude distortions of reality are relatively easy to discredit. More subtle forms of bias hold greater dangers, as they fuel the hatred and the will to fight of the warring parties, and can have far-reaching effects on international perceptions and policies. The old debate about who is a “terrorist” and who is a “freedom-fighter” is the one of the most obvious examples. For years, the word “Palestinian” was hardly ever to be found in the Western media without words such as “terrorist”, “bomb” and “hijack” nearby. The word “Israeli” has suffered much the same fate in the Arab and Islamic press. Almost all the world’s media are guilty of stereotyping directly or by implication. Even objectively provided information can be subject to political manipulation. Right-wing demagogues, for example, frequently use immigration figures to inflame xenophobic and racist reactions. Information employed in this manner can feed and perhaps even cause persecution and conflict.

Humanitarian organizations are not only users of information about refugees and their problems; they are also among the main sources of it. Providers of assistance and protection in the field have unrivalled access to refugees and their stories of how they came to be uprooted. Reporters and observers who visit refugee camps, many of which are in remote and inaccessible parts of the world, commonly find themselves dependent upon relief organizations for both logistical support and an interpretation of the situation. Yet being seen as major conduits for information, especially on sensitive issues such as human rights, can place relief workers at risk of being thrown out of the area where they work, or even of physical attack. On the other hand, in some situations, contact with the press may provide them with a degree of protection.

The ability to communicate is indispensable to humanitarian agencies, almost all of which depend on awareness of refugee problems to generate public or official support for their work. Some organizations exist solely for the purpose of disseminating information about refugees and exerting pressure on governments to adopt certain policies. Others combine advocacy work, public education, fund-raising and direct assistance. Each of these roles uses information in a different way. For example, the main purpose of some public information activities is to build constituencies for humanitarian organizations and mobilize funds for refugee assistance. Others aim to arouse public opinion to demand certain responses from political leaders. All organizations have to be selective when choosing material to disseminate, and the act of selection will inevitably sometimes raise doubts about the fairness and balance of the picture that is being presented. In a similar vein, public exposure by relief workers of abuses may lead to charges that they are stepping beyond the bounds of their non-political, humanitarian role.

In the age of the hand-held video camera, the fax machine, the cassette recorder and the computer disk, information is difficult to suppress. The mere fact that an attempt to do so has been made can provide a clear warning signal of potential humanitarian problems. Yet some of the worst and most sustained occurrences of deliberate deprivation, persecution and indiscriminate violence have occurred in areas shielded from international observation: for example in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge government and in remote areas of Mozambique. Access for observers, reporters and, as the next chapter will discuss, relief workers, is an essential ingredient of protection.

“A true information vacuum is rare, but a certain volume and momentum are needed to stimulate and sustain response”

A true information vacuum is rare, but a certain volume and momentum are needed to stimulate and sustain a response. The war of attrition that the government of Iraq has been waging against the Shi’ites and Marsh Arabs in southern Iraq and the no-holds-barred civil war taking place in southern Sudan have both received coverage by the media and have been raised in international fora such as the General Assembly and the UN Commission on Human Rights. However, the volume of information has been slow to reach critical mass. Reports appear sporadically, people are shocked and then, when no more information is immediately forthcoming, the spotlight moves on to other, more accessible catastrophes.

The dynamics of information in such situations are hard to unravel. Journalists have proved time and time again that they are prepared to go anywhere, however dangerous, to cover a story. By June 1993, for example, more than 30 journalists had been killed while reporting the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, many of them as a result of deliberate targeting. Editors – who tell their reporting staff where to go – make their decisions on the basis of perceived levels of interest among their audiences. The likelihood of international political or military engagement also plays a role in such decisions. Iraq, Somalia and the former Yugoslavia have all captured and retained the headlines in the West at various times, partly because Western involvement was seen first as a genuine possibility and then as a fact. Meanwhile, equally grim human catastrophes unfolding in places such as Liberia and the Sudan, remained relatively unnoticed outside the immediate region. Just as information can be an important factor in generating political action, the potential interests of powerful states can play a central role in determining the focus of the mass media.

More consistent reporting, including eye-witness accounts, is needed if the continuing crisis in the Sudan, for example, is to receive the sustained attention it desperately requires. Conditions in the south of the country – the scene of one of the world's most under-reported humanitarian disasters – are dire, owing to the fighting between the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and government troops and, more recently, the fierce infighting between southern factions. The economy has been ruined by nearly 30 years of civil war; 1.7 million people are believed to be displaced by the lethal combination of drought and conflict; 7.2 people million are reportedly in need of assistance; 600,000 lives are thought to have been lost already. Some estimates put the numbers far higher. The situation has many parallels with that in Somalia but has received relatively little attention, in part because both government and rebel authorities have tended to bar independent media from entering the area. In mid-1993, however, access became a little easier. Aid agencies stepped up their activities and news of the crisis in southern Sudan began to appear more frequently in Western media.

One inhibitor of the free flow of information that is entirely beyond the media's control is, of course, the denial of access. Regimes and factions engaged in the systematic murder of large numbers of people in remote and inhospitable locations have often shown great skill in playing the information game. Relief agencies and NGOs are refused entry, the media barred, often under the pretext that it is for their own safety – a claim that on occasion comes close to being a threat. The true story will likely emerge in the end but, as in the case of El Salvador's Truth Commission, it may be years before credible hearsay is shown to be fact by mass graves and documentary evidence uncovered during the course of a systematic investigation.

It is not enough for information on refugee-producing events to become widely available. A willingness to act upon it must exist if exposure is to have a practical protective function. The fear of disclosure of abuses can have a deterrent effect in certain situations, for example when antagonists are competing for international legitimacy. In all circumstances, however, information is at least the beginning of protection, showing where and why it is needed.

Stimulating response to the needs of refugees

When awareness of a refugee crisis is aroused, practical response to the needs of the displaced often begins with material assistance. The most pervasive images of refugees are associated with physical need: pictures of emaciated children, wounded civilians, frightened and destitute families seeking to escape threats to their lives. These powerful images are what news media, especially television, need to tell a story; they are also what people respond to most directly: digging into their own pockets, expressing their sense of urgency through local media or grass-roots organizations and lobbying their political representatives.

Media coverage of the plight of Kurds on the Iraq-Turkey border in 1991 and of widespread starvation in Somalia in 1992 provoked massive responses at both public and political levels. Probably the most renowned case of public response stimulated by the media dates back to the Ethiopian famine of 1984-85, and to the BBC film footage that brought the starvation of internally displaced people to the television screens of the West. It generated an outpouring of sympathy and financial contributions from private citizens, and revitalized the attention of governments to the unfolding tragedy.

It also demonstrated the important role of non-conventional and non-news media in drawing attention to humanitarian issues, as the initial news coverage was amplified by, among other things, rock concerts that subsequently became a benchmark of solidarity with people in need. Popular music, drama and fiction have now all become means of raising awareness. Celebrities such as the late Audrey Hepburn (for UNICEF), and Barbara Hendricks and Sophia Loren (for UNHCR) have put their ability to command attention at the service of refugees and victims of famine and war.

“Public opinion can be aroused by exposure to a refugee problem but meet a blank wall in terms of policy response”

A generous public response to campaigns for refugee assistance makes it possible for NGOs to respond to emergencies, often more rapidly and flexibly than official agencies can. Nonetheless, the resources available through governments are much larger. Therefore the relationship between public information, public opinion and government response is an important one, although by no means as direct as some simple formulations would have it.

The notion that information, reflected in news media, acts on public opinion and through it drives policy-making does not do justice to the complexity of the relationship between information and policy. Public opinion can be aroused by exposure to a refugee problem but meet a blank wall in terms of policy response. A government may explain inaction in terms of national interest, conflicting goals or pragmatic constraints. Then again, an activist policy may be formulated not in response to expressed public opinion but in anticipation of it. Information conveyed in the media may act directly on policy-makers, unmediated by a wider public debate. It is relatively rare that information generates a direct demand for action from an aroused public and thereby moves foreign policy – but it can make the public more receptive by explaining the need for action. Consequently information in the service of refugees must work on several levels at once: on general public opinion, on groups with a special interest in refugee affairs, on “opinion makers” and on those directly involved in setting policy.

Building public awareness

It is easier to explain the physical needs of refugees than the requirement for other kinds of protection. Food, water, shelter, medicine and immediate physical security from fighting and shelling are tangible in a way that the need to ensure the legal protection of refugees and to safeguard and promote their rights are not. As a result, legal protection measures are often less comprehensible to the public at large and more likely to cause resentment than relief assistance.

Public ambivalence is exacerbated by a blurring of the distinctions between refugees and other migrants, and by a failure to comprehend the specific needs of different groups. Effective communication can be used to clarify these distinctions, while promoting humane attitudes toward all those in need. It can also explain the obligations to protect refugees that states accept under international law. Explaining what it means to be a refugee is particularly important at a time when so many man-made and natural disasters claim public attention. Some elements of the mass media create an image of a never-ending stream of undifferentiated victims, or of an impending deluge of economically motivated immigrants. Information conveyed by local and national governments, international agencies, citizens’ groups and NGOs has a central part to play in restoring perspective and accuracy to public perceptions of refugee inflows.

The most worrying aspect of the misapprehensions about refugees is the manifestation, in many countries, of xenophobic or racist reactions against foreigners (see Box 3.2). Many attacks have been directed specifically against housing and other facilities for asylum-seekers, although the perpetrators generally do not make distinctions among refugees, temporary labourers and long-term foreign residents. An encouraging counter-trend can be seen, however, in popular campaigns to reject and condemn such attacks and the attitudes behind them.

Public information also has a role to play in presenting a more complete picture of refugees than that contained in the stereotype of a mass of ill-educated, helpless victims. Many refugees bring skills, energy and high motivation to the countries that offer them asylum (see Box 3.3). Isabel Allende, Bertolt Brecht, Marlene Dietrich, Albert Einstein, Sigmund and Anna Freud, Gabriel García Márquez, Rudolf Nureyev and Sir Georg Solti are just a few of the many refugees and exiles whose work has enriched humankind.

Providing a basis for decision-making

The importance of information as a tool for educating and mobilizing the public is equalled by its importance as a resource for making decisions. Any decision-maker is constrained by what he or she knows about the available options and the likely consequences of a chosen course of action – whether that person is a government minister, an asylum officer trying to determine if a particular individual should be granted refugee status, or someone deciding whether or where to seek asylum. A sound information base is a prerequisite for sound decision-making.

In situations where applicants for asylum are screened individually, the determination of refugee status under the 1951 Convention requires an assessment of whether the reasons for the asylum-seeker's flight are included among those covered by the definition of who is a refugee, and whether the applicant's fears are well-founded or not. Organizations and individuals who work with refugees – particularly those who must determine if a person or a group needs international protection – depend on clear, accurate and up-to-date information on circumstances in the country of origin, including human rights practices and the treatment of ethnic or religious minorities.

In most cases, the challenge is not lack of information. A huge amount of data exists. The challenge is to identify what is credible, reliable and relevant – and then to locate and retrieve it so that it can be used in situations where it is needed. The range of relevant material is broad. Information on political, economic, social and legal structures is important, as are reliable facts about human rights problems. Several layers of information are needed: not only about what the law of a certain country says, but also about the relationship between the law and usual practice.

The vast array of factual and analytical material available about countries of origin, and the importance of finding the most trustworthy information to support judgements, gives information technology a key role in protection. Modern communications technology accomplishes in a matter of seconds, tasks that consumed much time and manual labour in the past. Computerized data banks allow researchers to conduct "on-line" searches and to retrieve information over great distances. To take advantage of these new capabilities, international refugee information networks have been established and are being steadily augmented.

"Quantity of information is not a substitute for quality of analysis"

The International Refugee Documentation Network (IRDN) is one example. It was set up in 1986, with the purpose of developing tools for the rapid exchange of information between international and non-governmental organizations dealing with refugees. It has established an electronic mail system known as the International Refugee Electronic Network (IRENE) which allows instant electronic contact between centres around the globe, from Denmark to South Africa. The Human Rights Information and Documentation System (HURIDOCS) – now used by more than 350 refugee and human rights documentation centres – is another system designed to make data more accessible and compatible. Through such co-operative efforts, many smaller organizations now find it much easier to share information and services with a worldwide audience.

Information on asylum applications and countries of origin is increasingly being exchanged among governments, international agencies and private organizations. Plans and

mechanisms for information-sharing have proliferated in the industrialized countries in recent years. In Europe in particular, governments have set up a range of information systems designed to help prevent multiple applications and disruptive movements of asylum applicants between European countries, as well as to harmonize refugee determination procedures. The new systems are specifically geared to sharing data on trends in asylum applications, countries of origin, legal and migration issues and even individual case files.[1] Various international organizations have also set up related computerized information projects, including the International Organization for Migration and UNHCR whose Centre for Documentation on Refugees continues to maintain and develop its databases on refugee-related case law, legislation, international instruments, country-of-origin information and more general literature. Lack of access to information is rapidly ceasing to be a constraint on the development of refugee policy.

As noted earlier, however, information is not a neutral commodity. Its usefulness does not depend on compilation alone. The user must be able to recognize what is important and judge the reliability of content and the biases in reporting. The importance of these factors point to the potential dangers of databases: quantity of information is not a substitute for quality of analysis.

The decision-makers on the front lines of refugees flows are, of course, the refugees themselves. Accurate information can be a life-giving resource for them, although refugees in flight have limited choices about how to respond to what they hear. Refugees are deeply affected by decisions such as the closing of the Turkish border to Kurdish refugees in 1991, the US decision in 1992 to return all Haitian asylum-seekers directly to Haiti without asylum hearings and the policies of European and other states that asylum claims should be processed in the first “safe country” entered. Individuals under pressure to flee are helped by having access to information about conditions that may affect their prospects for securing protection.

“Accurate information can be a life-saving resource for refugees”

Access to information continues to be important once refugees have reached an asylum country. They need to know their legal rights and obligations as well as what resources are available to assist them. Material of this sort, in the refugee’s own language, can lay the basis for a successful adaptation to new circumstances, whether temporary or permanent. Voluntary repatriation depends very heavily on feedback about conditions in the home country; only on this basis can a refugee make an informed decision to return home.

Information of concern to refugees also has a role to play in the decision-making of other migrants. Particularly unfortunate are the many people who travel under a mistaken impression that they will be received as refugees and allowed to resettle abroad, but who do not satisfy the criteria for refugee status. People leave their homes ill-informed about the conditions and likelihood of being allowed to enter or remain in a country of asylum. Often, they invest heavily in the journey, which may itself subject them to danger. People who travel by boat are particularly at risk, as are those who entrust themselves to unprincipled and extortionate smuggling networks (see Box 3.4).

The policies and practices that affect such people should be broadcast widely in order to spare those who have virtually no chance of gaining refugee status the perils of a fruitless journey – and to avoid overburdening the asylum channels with non-refugees. The arrival of large numbers of asylum-seekers without valid claims prejudices public opinion in receiving countries to the detriment of those who do need international protection. Mass information programmes have been implemented in Viet Nam and Albania to alert people to the conditions and prospects of asylum in receiving countries (see Box 3.5). To the extent that these strategies persuade non-refugees to forego the asylum channels, they enhance the protection of refugees.

The intelligent use of good information is the key to good decisions, whether in determining the refugee status of an individual, planning preventive strategies or devising solutions such as voluntary repatriation for large groups. It also helps identify people who are not at risk, and thus provides a basis for developing fair and effective methods for dealing with the misuse of asylum procedures. Credible information, broadly based and widely shared, supports and strengthens the system of international protection.

Box 3.1 Breaking the Story of the Bosnian Detainees

Pictures of emaciated prisoners, their hollow stares framed by the barbed wire of a Serbian detention camp, flashed across television screens around the globe in August 1992. Shocked by these images, and by graphic newspaper accounts of atrocities in the camps of northern Bosnia and Herzegovina, the world reacted with outrage. Within days, the commanders of the prison camps – men who would normally spurn public opinion – were forced to begin closing them. Such is the protective power of information.

The day the first firm information on some of the camps was received by the UNHCR Press Office in Geneva, it was shared – on a background basis – with a number of journalists, including Roy Gutman of Newsday, the American reporter who broke the story. UNHCR also helped corroborate some of the evidence gathered independently by Gutman, who subsequently earned a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting on the camps.

Not all the information provided was background. On 27 July – a week before Gutman's prison camp story made world headlines – UNHCR had published details of some shocking human rights abuses, including an unconfirmed but credible report it had received concerning Omarska prison camp. These were distributed to more than 4,300 journalists, diplomats and humanitarian organizations worldwide. Of Omarska camp, a source was quoted: "Guards ... boasted that they will not 'waste bullets' on their detainees, who have no food, water or shelter and who are beaten twice a day. 'They will starve like animals,' one guard said." The UNHCR report and additional background information helped convince the editors at Newsday to publish Gutman's story on 2 August. Television cameras, the first from the UK's Channel 4 News, followed. On 4 August, the UN Security Council issued a statement demanding that the ICRC and other international bodies be allowed to inspect the camps and prisons in former Yugoslavia. Within a week, international observers began entering the camps; shortly afterwards, arrangements to close them and transfer the detainees out of the country got under way.

By early July 1993, over 5,500 detainees had been released under ICRC supervision, 4,647 of whom had been given asylum abroad along with 6,383 family members. The detention centres in Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, were by no means a thing of the past. Of the 8,238 detainees notified to the ICRC in 1992, 2,416 were still being held prisoner by the three warring parties, despite repeated agreements reached with the ICRC. Furthermore, additional civilians were reportedly still being taken prisoner. There is every reason to fear that civilians continue to be held under harsh conditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, out of reach of the scrutiny, and therefore the protection, of outside observers.

Box 3.2 Racism and Xenophobia

"There are only 90,000 of them here but they are a disgusting and painful abscess on the body of our nation. An ethnic group without any culture, moral or religious ideals, a nomad mob only robbing and stealing. Dirty, full of lice, they occupy the streets and railway stations. Let them pack their dirty tatters and leave forever!"

From a wall poster in Central Europe

In some countries, incidents of criminal violence committed against asylum-seekers have risen by as much as 400 per cent in the early 1990s. They cannot be treated as a marginal phenomenon. In too many countries it is no longer considered unacceptable for political leaders to publicly flaunt racist or xenophobic sentiments.

Racial persecution is a major cause of refugee flight. The number of refugees around the world can be seen as a barometer of human intolerance. Ironically, these very refugee flows are today being cited as a cause of the new xenophobic trend. Racism, and the violence that goes with it, all too often haunt refugees even after they have found asylum.

Equally disturbing, public hostility towards what is seen as an endless tide of immigrants has convinced policy makers in many industrialized nations that their constituencies have reached saturation point. This has led many countries to adopt more restrictive approaches to asylum, sparking fears that the centuries-old tradition may be crumbling at a time when it is needed most.

Germany has confronted its xenophobia problem more openly than most other nations. It recorded 4,587 attacks against foreigners in 1992, compared to 2,462 such incidents in 1991. The 1992 figure included 548 incidents of arson directed at accommodation centres for foreigners and asylum-seekers. Seventeen people died in racially-motivated attacks. Anger at the sheer number of asylum-seekers – Germany found nearly 440,000 on its doorstep in 1992 – led to increased support for far-right fringe parties. An economy in recession and massive unemployment fuelled resentment over the generous benefits the state accords to those seeking sanctuary, the majority of whom are found, after lengthy legal proceedings to have no claim to refugee status. The animosity displayed by the extreme right reached such a high pitch that Japanese companies in Berlin began giving employees tips on how to dress and behave to ensure they would not be mistaken for Asian refugees. On the positive side, in an encouraging and heart-felt public expression of revulsion at the wave of xenophobia, hundreds of thousands of Germans have taken part in a series of massive demonstrations across the country.

Germany is most often cited in treatises on xenophobia because of its high-profile public debate on the issue and its meticulous record-keeping. But the problem of xenophobia is widespread throughout Europe and elsewhere. The Nordic countries, once considered bastions of tolerance, have not been spared xenophobic acts of violence. Nor have Belgium or Switzerland. In France, a 1992 government survey found that 40 per cent of French people admitted they held racist sentiments, while 21.2 per cent characterized themselves as “very racist”. And in Japan, thousands of posters appeared in Tokyo in early 1993 urging fellow Japanese to “Get rid of the delinquent foreigners who are destroying our nation’s culture, tradition and safety.” The wall poster quoted above could have been found almost anywhere. The “ethnic group” it attacks could be one of a hundred. Disturbed by the rising tide of racism and xenophobia, some governments and human rights organizations have joined hands with the media to counter-attack. There have been strong manifestations of public disgust in response to the racial attacks in Germany and the Nordic countries. Several other nations have mounted public awareness campaigns aimed at confronting mounting xenophobia head on.

A total of 76 organizations, including UNHCR, have participated in a Spanish campaign organized around the theme “Democracy is Equality”. With financing from the Ministry of Social Affairs, the campaign used TV spots, full-page advertisements in national newspapers and subway posters to combat the ignorance that breeds racism. The campaign – which generated extensive public debate – was both controversial and courageous in that it used racist epithets to fight deep prejudices against refugees, immigrants, gypsies and all people of a different race.

Media initiatives in other countries have included a message broadcast between commercials by a Netherlands TV station, which stated “If you too think that foreigners must leave the country, then we prefer to do without you as viewers of RTL 4.” Also in the Netherlands, Radio 3, a rock-music radio station, launched a concerted campaign against racism and other forms of discrimination in early 1993.

Elsewhere in the world, politicians and local media are often failing to combat – and in some cases actively fuelling – rabble-rousing attempts to blame the ills of society on foreigners or minority groups. While it would be simplistic to claim that information campaigns like those cited above can, by themselves, cure such deeply ingrained problems as racism and xenophobia, they can certainly be useful in encouraging greater tolerance and positive humanitarian attitudes towards people in need.

For the sake of society at large, including refugees and asylum-seekers, it is important that certain obvious messages – which are sometimes forgotten by the general public and politicians alike, particularly in the context of the immigration debate – are broadcast loud and clear. Foreigners do not cause economic decline. They do not invite racism. On the contrary, they are the principal victims.

Box 3.3 Refugees and the Nobel Peace Prize

UNHCR's first High Commissioner, Dr Gerritt van Heuven Goedhart, was perpetually strapped for cash. "What does international protection mean for a man who dies of hunger?" he asked in his first report to the General Assembly. "Passports are necessary but hunger can't be stilled by them." Insisting that UNHCR was not in business merely to "administer misery", van Heuven Goedhart was impatient with the slow response of donors when it came to providing material assistance to destitute refugees. Taking matters into his own hands, he sold a bar of gold inherited from one of UNHCR's predecessors, the Nansen Office for Refugees. He got $14,000 for the gold, which the Nansen Office had purchased with funds from its 1938 Nobel Peace Prize.

The Nobel Peace Prize figures prominently in the history of refugees. The Norwegian Nobel Committee has decided to highlight efforts made on behalf of refugees at least four times. Prior to the 1938 award to the Nansen Office, Fridtjof Nansen himself had received the prize in 1922 for his work on behalf of Russian refugees. UNHCR has been honoured twice, in 1954 and in 1981.

The 1954 prize, awarded only three years after the founding of UNHCR, cited the agency's work on behalf of the 2.2 million refugees and displaced people in post-war Europe. High Commissioner van Heuven Goedhart told the committee that UNHCR's objective, like Nansen's, was to create "a state in which no people of any country, in fact no group of people of any kind live in fear or need". To his 99 staff members he said: "Everybody could say that he was one per cent of the Nobel Prize winner." In 1981, when the number of refugees had risen to nearly ten million, the Nobel Committee praised UNHCR for dealing with a veritable flood of human catastrophe and suffering, both physical and psychological" despite substantial political difficulties. The committee drew attention to the "tremendous and increasing number of refugees" in the world, mentioning those who had fled Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Viet Nam.

"The stream of refugees ... creates serious problems in relations between states, and for this reason the activities of the Office of the High Commissioner are serving the interests of humanity and peace," the committee said. The High Commissioner at the time, Poul Hartling, called the award "a statement to the world's refugees that you are not forgotten".

The Nobel Committee has also presented the award on five occasions to individual refugees who rose above their personal tragedies to make exceptional contributions towards peace – underlining the fact that a bundle of meagre belongings is not necessarily the only thing a refugee brings to his or her new country.

- Ludwig Quidde, a prominent German pacifist, was co-winner of the 1927 Nobel Peace Prize. Quidde, a strong opponent of the revival of German militarism, escaped to Switzerland in 1933 after the Nazis came to power.
- Willy Brandt, who had fled to Denmark and Norway from his native Germany in order to escape the Gestapo, later became Chancellor of West Germany. He received the

Nobel Peace Prize in 1971 for his policies of peace and reconciliation with the East.

- Romanian-born American novelist Elie Wiesel, deported by the Nazis in 1944 to Auschwitz, received the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize for his spiritual leadership in an age when "violence, repression and racism continue to characterize the world".
- The Peace Prize recipient in 1989 was the Dalai Lama, Tibet's exiled spiritual leader. He was recognized for his opposition to violence in his struggle to preserve the historical and cultural heritage of his people.
- The 1992 Nobel Peace Prize went to Rigoberta Menchú, a Guatamalan Mayan Indian who had sought asylum in Mexico, in recognition of her crusade for social justice and ethno-cultural reconciliation based on respect for the rights of indigenous people.

Box 3.4 Trading in Human Misery

Human smuggling is big business. In many instances, organized crime is involved at both ends of the journey. Crime syndicates operating in China, for example, charter ships, recruit passengers with promises of easy riches and then ensnare them by providing loans to pay the extortionate sums charged for illicit passage – as much as $30,000 per person. To pay off the debt, many people end up as virtual bonded slaves to the smuggling syndicates. Working illegally in restaurants, laundries, prostitution rings and gambling halls, they are disciplined by fear both of their employers and of the authorities. Wages of 70 cents an hour – less than one fifth of the legal minimum in the United States – have been reported.

Smuggling rackets find a ready market for their services not only among would-be migrants seeking to bypass immigration controls, but also among the persecuted. Denied passports or exit permits, people in flight from persecution may have little choice but to turn to rings of organizers who arrange their departure for profit. Refugees fleeing from Viet Nam during the first wave of "boat people" in the late 1970s often paid large sums of money to secure their passage. More than a few were swindled in the process.

Smuggling operations vary from country to country – the common theme being the exploitation of human misery. Moscow reportedly has become a staging post for movements from the Middle East (especially Iraq) and East Africa.[2] Russian racketeers demand high prices for passage to the Nordic countries via Russia or the Baltic states. Sweden, with its liberal asylum laws, is the favoured destination. In January 1993, several Latvian boats, containing mainly Iraqi Kurds, were intercepted by the Swedish authorities. Other countries have been affected as well. In the same month, the bodies of five Tamils were found dumped at a motorway parking lot in Austria. They had died of suffocation in the cargo container of a truck that was smuggling them from Moscow to Italy.[3] Recently, criminal syndicates have moved to make their smuggling operations more efficient. Large ships have been used to transport cargoes of up to 400 people, often by long circuitous routes, to Western countries. Sweden, Australia and the United States have had to deal with several such cases. In one of the worst known incidents, in May 1993, a freighter carrying 397 Chinese ran aground in its approach to New York City. Ten people drowned while trying to swim ashore.

In early July 1993, three other boats carrying 659 Chinese were intercepted off California by the US Coast Guard. A diplomatic imbroglio ensued which kept the Chinese at sea for days while the United States sought to avoid admitting them and to persuade the Mexican government to allow disembarkation. They were eventually permitted to transit in Mexico pending rapid deportation to China. One person, identified as having a valid asylum claim was admitted to the United States.

Tens of thousands of Chinese have been smuggled into the United States since the early 1980s. But controls are getting tougher and more people are being caught. Significant numbers of them, upon being apprehended, claim political asylum. The US government holds that the situation in China cannot justify a blanket determination that none of those brought in illegally have a well-founded fear of persecution if returned home. Indeed, Chinese asylum-seekers in the US have had much higher rates of approval for refugee status than most other

national groups. The Chinese authorities, alarmed about the criminal syndicates operating the trade, have publicly stated their desire to eradicate it.

Ironically, most of the Chinese originate from the relatively prosperous provinces of Guangdong and Fujian. The unequal distribution of wealth brought about by rapid industrialization and privatization, compounded by distorted information about the outside world, help the racketeers win the confidence of would-be migrants. One way of fighting this kind of exploitation is through an information counter-attack aimed at alerting people to the dangers and misery that likely await them during and after an illicit voyage.

In the meantime, those who seek asylum remain entitled to a fair hearing. For it is not only migrants seeking a better life who fall victim to racketeers, but also people in genuine fear of persecution who have been driven by desperation into the hands of smugglers for lack of alternative escape routes.

Box 3.5 Mass Information Campaigns for Prevention

Contemporary flows of refugees and migrants involve a nexus of push and pull factors which are not always easy to disentangle. It is increasingly clear, however, that illusions and misinformation play a major part in persuading large numbers of people who do not qualify for refugee status to seek asylum. Such people often put their lives and those of their families at risk. Moreover, the magnitude of their numbers imposes a large financial and social burden on the international community. More importantly, it represents a major threat to the principle of asylum, as governments tend to react by introducing restrictive measures which may hamper genuine refugees' efforts to gain admission to a safe country.

Just as misinformation, illusion and misunderstanding about economic opportunities and immigration possibilities in the industrialized world can be an important factor in fuelling irregular movements of people, accurate information can play an important role in containing them. When the ending of automatic resettlement in the West for Vietnamese boat people and the subsequent adoption of the Comprehensive Plan of Action for Viet Nam in 1989 (see Chapter One, Box 1.4), initially failed to stem the exodus – which by then was of a largely migratory nature – an urgent attempt was made to address the problem at its source.

A mass information campaign was launched in Viet Nam using local television, radio and press, backed up by outside media, notably the BBC and Voice of America. This aimed to give the Vietnamese accurate and credible information about the new conditions for resettlement, and to explain the Orderly Departure Programme (ODP), the direct migration channel. It was hoped that, after gaining a clearer understanding of the realities of their situation and prospects, people who were intending to leave clandestinely for non-refugee related reasons would think better of their plans.

The campaign began with repeated television broadcasts of a film made by Vietnamese television, under UNHCR sponsorship. It illustrated conditions in the camps in Hong Kong and featured UNHCR and government officials explaining that only recognized refugees would be resettled. Within six weeks of the initial broadcast, the arrival rate in Hong Kong had dropped by 87 per cent compared with the previous year. By the end of 1992, the combined effect of the repatriation of non-refugees to Viet Nam, the expanded ODP and the mass information campaign, which publicized these and other developments in Viet Nam, had brought the clandestine exodus to an end.

The impact of mass information on departures from Viet Nam has led to an extension of the approach to other situations. In 1991, as a multi-party system began to emerge in Albania and exit restrictions were lifted, more than 40,000 Albanians poured into Italy. As, by this stage, the motivation was chiefly economic misery rather than continuing political persecution, steps were taken to establish direct dialogue with the population at large in Albania through weekly radio programmes on Radio Tirana, again backed up by the Voice of America and the BBC. As in Viet Nam, information is being provided to the population about the criteria for granting asylum and refugee status, as well as the possibilities for legal departure. In 1992, the

number of asylum-seekers arriving in Italy dropped to 2,493. The mandatory repatriation of some 17,000 Albanians by the Italian authorities the previous year undoubtedly played a key and controversial role in stemming the exodus, but the volume of enquiries received by the mass information programme suggests that it, too, played a significant part and that Albanians are continuing to take its message seriously.

Mass information has become a valuable tool that helps dissuade people from leaving their countries for reasons other than those that would qualify them for refugee status. Clearly, such programmes have to be carefully planned and closely monitored in order to avoid any risk of their being exploited as a means of discouraging people who are genuinely in fear of persecution from leaving the country in which a mass information campaign is operating. If a campaign is to be effective, the information it provides has to be – and be seen to be – impartial and therefore credible to its target audience. For this reason, campaigns are launched only in certain very specific situations, and are closely supervised by UNHCR throughout.

---

1 The Dublin Convention spells out the obligations of signatory states to share data on trends in asylum applications, country-of-origin assessments, legal issues and individual cases. The Schengen Supplementary Agreement foresees the creation of an information system containing computerized data on individual asylum applicants, although some states are insisting that measures to protect the privacy of individuals must be added before the agreement is put into force. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development includes a demographic monitoring unit, SOPEMI, which tracks migration flows. The Maastricht Summit, of December 1991, endorsed a clearing house for information on asylum, including laws and statistics, which will be implemented by the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers of the European Community in Brussels. In February 1993, European governments agreed to set up a Migration Information Unit to collect and disseminate information on migration trends in Central and Eastern Europe and the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. The Economic Commission for Europe and the Council of Europe are also engaged in similar data-collection exercises.

2 Henry Kamm, “Refugees Are Big Business on Moscow-Nordic Route.” *International Herald Tribune*, 16 February 1993.

3 “Cinq refugiés tamouls retrouvés morts au sud de Vienne.” Paris: *Libération,* 18 January 1993.