

The State of the World's Refugees 1993

Chapter Five Responding to Refugee Emergencies

In the autumn of 1990, United Nations agencies drew up contingency plans for an anticipated flow of refugees from Iraq into Turkey. Amidst some criticism that they were being overly alarmist, and a consequent reluctance to contribute on the part of donors, preparations to receive up to 400,000 people were scaled back. In April and early May 1991, as government troops closed in, 1.8 million Kurds suddenly headed for the Turkish and Iranian borders (see Box 5.1).

Since then there has been a rapid succession of refugee crises. In 1992 alone, over 3.5 million people were forced to flee across an international border in search of safety. "Refugee emergencies" – large, sudden movements of desperate people in difficult conditions – have been a hallmark of the early 1990s.

In the 16 months between December 1991 and June 1993, the number of people dependent on international assistance in the former Yugoslavia rose from 500,000 to 3.6 million. In March 1992, some 3,000 refugees a day were arriving in Kenya to escape the fighting, famine and chaos in Somalia. At the peak of the crisis, the number of Somalis seeking sanctuary in neighbouring countries rose to more than a million, well over 10 per cent of Somalia's total population. At about the same time, a quarter of a million Muslim refugees from Myanmar fled into poverty-stricken Bangladesh, and up to 500 refugees a day were pouring into Nepal from Bhutan. By late 1992, the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia had created more than 800,000 refugees and internally displaced people, while the civil war in Tajikistan had uprooted another half a million. In February and March 1993, 280,000 refugees from Togo sought refuge in Benin and Ghana.

The scale, frequency and suddenness of the refugee crises of the 1990s have exerted enormous pressures on international emergency response capacities. Not all emergencies, however, fall into the same category. In some, large numbers of people have fled across international borders to escape persecution and oppression – as happened in the cases of Myanmar and Togo – creating traditional refugee emergencies that fall squarely under the responsibility of UNHCR.

In other, more complex, situations, armed conflict, political instability, drought, ethnic tensions, economic collapse and the deterioration of civil society have occurred in daunting combinations. Crisis conditions in one area may spill into others where they aggravate different problems – as, for example, when refugees from armed conflict pour into an area already suffering from acute food shortages. Multiple emergencies within a region, such as those in the Horn of Africa or the Balkans, interact with each other in unpredictable ways and at several levels. Such complex humanitarian emergencies involve not only refugees but also internally displaced people, as well as victims of war and famine. They require a different range of responses from the United Nations.

"A refugee emergency calls for extraordinary logistical and organizational feats"

Irrespective of whether it is a classical refugee influx or one occurring in the context of a wider humanitarian crisis, a refugee emergency calls for extraordinary logistical and organizational feats. People leave their homes with little or no means to sustain themselves. Their escape route often crosses inhospitable terrain and leads them to regions that lack the resources to support large concentrations of people (see Boxes 5.3 and 5.6). Food, water, sanitation, shelter and medical care have to be provided in inaccessible places under extremely difficult circumstances.

The death rate within the affected population traces a grim but accurate chart of how well emergency relief efforts are meeting the challenge. Among the Kurds fleeing to the Turkish border from Iraq in April 1991, the initial mortality rate was 18 times higher than that of non-refugee populations in both countries, though the situation improved relatively rapidly. By contrast, initially low mortality rates among Somali refugees arriving in inhospitable areas of eastern Ethiopia in 1988-1989 increased sharply thereafter, reaching a peak nine months after they entered the refugee camps.¹ Because of the extreme urgency involved, emergency operations are inevitably conducted under somewhat chaotic conditions. They are, moreover, frequently plagued by insecurity. The result may be inadequate assessment of needs and insufficient or inappropriate staffing. Other problem areas include the monitoring of aid supplies and the establishment of a clear division of labour among relief organizations, as well as the effective evaluation of operations.

The speed and efficiency of the initial response to a refugee emergency affect the welfare and in some cases the very survival of the people concerned; they may also influence the prospects for solutions. Strenuous attempts are therefore being made to overcome the weaknesses of past responses to emergencies in the light of experiences gained from recent crises, in particular those in northern Iraq, in Kenya and Somalia and in the former Yugoslavia. The new mechanisms, structures and procedures that are evolving have already been tested by events on a daily basis in countries such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Benin and Tajikistan.

The quality of protection in an emergency depends, in the first instance, on an understanding of the refugees themselves and the circumstances surrounding their flight. The rather dry-sounding exercise known as "needs assessment" provides aid organizations with vital information about exactly who the people are, what physical condition they are in and, ideally, what kind of protection they need. The answers to these questions will not be uniform across a group of refugees, since it is essential, though often very difficult in an emergency, to distinguish the needs of particular groups such as women, unaccompanied children and members of ethnic minorities.

The profile of a refugee group is often distorted by their experiences. The age and sex composition of a group is revealing. There may, for example, be a conspicuous absence of young men. If so, have they been killed, imprisoned or conscripted for military service or forced labour? Are they fighting voluntarily with a rebel army? Or have they simply chosen to stay outside the formal assistance structure because they wish to protect their property or livelihoods?

Women and children account for roughly 70 per cent of a normal population in developing countries but make up about 80 per cent of refugees worldwide. The high incidence of female heads of family or unaccompanied women in many refugee groups gives rise to particular protection and assistance needs. Under-representation of young women in a refugee population, on the other hand, sends a particularly chilling signal and may indicate that they have been abducted or detained.

The capacities of the international humanitarian system have been severely strained by the recent succession of refugee emergencies. The problem is not simply the number and scale of emergencies. It has also stemmed from the fact that few of the displacements have been fully resolved. Consequently, resources deployed in reaction to one crisis have not been available for the next.

Protection: the first casualty in emergencies?

In the heat of a refugee emergency, the immediate priority is to save lives. Two factors, in particular, are crucial. One is to protect the displaced people from being forced back into the areas from which they have fled, and the other is to supply them with food, water, health care, shelter and sanitation. Meeting the physical needs of people in an emergency is the more tangible response of the two, and often seems to dominate the agenda of emergency assistance. But protection should be built into emergency management from the very beginning. The challenge is to provide aid in a way that shields people from further persecution and violence, while simultaneously laying the foundations for lasting solutions to

their predicament.

One straightforward but vital element of protection is registration of the people coming forward for assistance in a crisis. Registration provides a picture of who is coming from where and for what reasons. This establishes a basis for monitoring conditions in the country of origin and deciding when it is safe to encourage refugees to return home. Other important protection measures include ensuring the civilian character of refugee camps, establishing a degree of mutual trust between the refugees and the authorities (whether of the host country or UNHCR), promoting efforts of the refugees to organize themselves and setting up procedures to deal smoothly with any protection problems that may arise.

“Households headed by women are particularly vulnerable”

The way assistance is provided affects the quality of protection afforded. For example, a refugee camp that is too close to the border of the country of origin may provoke military attack, be viewed as a convenient base by insurgent forces or inflame political tensions. Efforts to move refugee populations from volatile frontier areas may, however, run into resistance either from a government anxious to keep open the possibility of rapid return to the country of origin, or from the refugees themselves.

Effective protection must also take account of the disruption of social structures that often characterizes refugee situations. Poorly laid-out camps may increase the vulnerability of certain groups, such as single women, minorities, or unaccompanied old people and children. In many societies, it is assumed that protection for women is provided mainly through the family. Yet family structures are likely to be severely weakened or destroyed altogether during a crisis. In such circumstances, households headed by women may become particularly vulnerable and be deprived of their fair share of rations or services. Refugee women often face a threefold barrier to protection: their families have lost the power to protect; national protection has broken down or been withdrawn; and international organizations can encounter serious difficulties reaching women directly, or even recognizing their special needs. Specific guidelines on the protection of refugee women have been developed to help organizations working with refugees to ensure that women are protected against manipulation, exploitation and sexual and physical abuse, and that they are able to benefit from assistance and protection programmes without discrimination.²

“Protection is just as vital to survival in an emergency as food and shelter”

Refugees frequently find themselves living alongside other victims of upheaval – be they returnees, internally displaced people or affected local inhabitants. Since 1992, humanitarian agencies have experimented with a new approach to this type of complex situation, working increasingly closely to provide assistance to mixed populations. The practical benefits of this “cross-mandate” approach have quickly become apparent – notably in the Horn of Africa – but there are some concerns about how to ensure the quality of protection offered in such a framework. Some of the categories of people who require humanitarian assistance do not have a need for international protection as such, whereas others do. It is essential that the protection function is not lost or blurred during the rush to meet the urgent survival needs of mixed populations. For those who require it, protection is just as vital to survival in an emergency as are food and shelter.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of refugees is their need for international protection. Nevertheless, assistance and protection are often inextricably linked. An international presence established to provide assistance in countries of asylum or of origin is frequently the most effective protection tool available. By July 1993, UNHCR had some 590 staff members in the former Yugoslavia who were involved not only in distributing relief to the displaced and besieged populations, but also in monitoring the situation and trying, albeit in desperate

circumstances, to restrain ethnic cleansing and defend human rights (see Box 5.2). In Somalia, UNHCR has established a presence near the Kenyan border and brought in food and assistance in an effort to stabilize the population movements and eventually create conditions conducive to the return of refugees (see Box 5.4). Open Relief Centres in Sri Lanka have become havens of safety, accepted and respected by both warring parties. In such cases, the international presence that accompanies the assistance is probably the best – though not necessarily wholly or even largely successful – form of protection possible.

Co-operation in emergencies

The United Nations system consists of various agencies, programmes and offices. Several of them, including UNHCR, WFP, UNICEF, UNDP, WHO and the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (which includes the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Co-ordinator) have emergency response as part of their mandate. Of these, UNHCR is the one with a specific responsibility for refugees, but the concerns of the others are obviously germane in refugee emergencies. Only the first three routinely carry out direct operations in the field during humanitarian emergencies using their own staff, equipment and management.

In addition to the UN agencies that may be present during an emergency, a great many local national organizations, both official and non-governmental, will be on the ground, ranging from military units to religious groups. International NGOs may also be active, along with the ICRC and the local Red Cross or Red Crescent (see Box 5.5). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) may also play an important part if people need transportation in an emergency. For example, almost one million people who fled from Iraq and Kuwait during the Gulf crisis were assisted to return home by the IOM.

“Co-ordination works best at field level”

A serious crisis is likely to involve dozens of relief agencies, while a protracted and highly visible one may attract literally hundreds of more-or-less independent participants. A monumental effort is required to assure that their actions are complementary, or at least do not work at cross-purposes. No single entity can exert authority over all the diverse actors, although co-operation is in the interest of all. The more urgent the needs on the ground, the greater the danger that questions of co-ordination will be neglected. This is an irony at best, and a tragedy at worst, for it is during emergencies that it is most important to ensure that no effort is wasted or counterproductive. However, co-ordination is costly in terms of time and staff – precisely the resources that are in shortest supply during a crisis.

In classic refugee emergencies, UNHCR has a clear mandatory responsibility within the United Nations system to provide protection and assistance. It performs this function in close collaboration with other UN agencies and NGOs that have expertise in particular sectors, such as food, health and water supply. When some 280,000 Togolese refugees flooded into Benin and Ghana in early 1993, for example, UNHCR despatched an Emergency Response Team and mounted a \$9.9 million programme on the basis of an appeal launched to the international community. In marshalling its response, it sought the support of the relevant UN agencies, primarily WFP and UNICEF, as well as a number of NGOs.

Not all humanitarian crises, however, fall so clearly under the mandate of any one UN organization. In complex humanitarian emergencies, a wide range of actors may have to be mobilized to respond to the needs of a multitude of affected people including refugees, internally displaced people and victims of war, drought and famine. In such situations, effective co-ordination is essential to ensure that responsibilities are clearly allocated and gaps in the relief response are covered. The disaster that has overtaken Somalia is a clear example of a multifaceted crisis requiring a co-ordinated, inter-agency approach.

Under such circumstances, the UN has adopted flexible patterns for co-ordinating the activities of its agencies and the private organizations that work with them. The Secretary-General has frequently designated a “lead agency” to take overall charge of humanitarian operations – a role entrusted to UNHCR, for example, in northern Iraq in 1991 and in the current humanitarian relief effort in former Yugoslavia. Alternatively, an individual may be

appointed as an Emergency Co-ordinator or a Special Representative. In 1992, the United Nations took a new step aimed at improving the co-ordination of its responses to complex humanitarian emergencies with the establishment of a Department of Humanitarian Affairs. The experience of the past few years has led to improvements in co-ordination, not only within the United Nations system but also between UN and non-UN bodies such as the ICRC, IOM and NGOs.

“There is no daylight between crises; crisis has become the norm”

The “crisis-intensive” years of the early 1990s have taught some valuable lessons. One is that co-ordination works best at field level. Protection and assistance staff in the field have both a vivid appreciation of the nature of the problems that must be tackled and direct exposure to duplication or gaps in the work of the various agencies on the scene. This is a strong argument both for decentralization of decision-making concerning the conduct of operations and for the greatest possible responsiveness at headquarters to observations made in the field. If such an approach is to function smoothly, however, decisions taken at field level must proceed according to a clearly articulated division of labour.

Another important lesson that has been learned is that most of the support for refugees and displaced persons, particularly during the early stages of a crisis, is provided by the people and governments of the receiving communities. Even in this age of instantaneous communications and jet transportation, it takes time to mobilize and deliver assistance on the scale required when tens or even hundreds of thousands of people are suddenly forced to flee. International organizations should reinforce existing efforts to promote and support national preparedness by helping countries likely to receive refugees to develop relevant expertise, procedures and emergency response plans. Assistance of this nature undoubtedly strengthens protection. States which feel their concerns and burdens are understood and shared are less likely to refuse to admit refugees or force them back across the border.

A third lesson – though one which still raises as many questions as it answers – stems from the relationship between the new generation of peace-making or peace-keeping initiatives and humanitarian assistance. At the operational level this has led to the growing involvement of armed forces in humanitarian activities – a pattern likely to be repeated in future crises.

Since 1991, multinational military forces deployed under the auspices, or with the blessings, of the United Nations have been used in four major humanitarian relief operations: in “Operation Provide Comfort” in northern Iraq, in the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia, as the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in Croatia and Bosnia and in “Operation Restore Hope” in Somalia. Three of the four directly involved aid and protection for refugees or returnees. The fourth, in Somalia, involved internally displaced people and, along with other efforts such as the cross-border assistance programme run by UNHCR from neighbouring Kenya, has slowed the outflow of Somali refugees to surrounding countries.

Despite the effectiveness demonstrated by military forces in these humanitarian operations, questions remain about how extensive a role they should play. Some of the reservations are that military support is too expensive, and that the self-contained nature of military operations tends to retard the building of local capacities essential for long-term solutions to take hold. There are also fears, discussed in the previous chapter, that a military presence may politicize humanitarian relief. Clear criteria need to be established for humanitarian activities undertaken in association with peace-keeping efforts.

Preparedness

A refugee emergency, by its very nature, demands immediate action. Delay may cost lives. Initial responses to both the huge Kurdish movement toward Turkey in 1991 and the first mass arrivals of Somali refugees in Kenya in 1992 were woefully inadequate. Preparedness is the key to emergency response. Maintaining a capacity to respond to emergencies at full readiness would, however, be immensely expensive. It would involve keeping a great many

resources waiting idly for a crisis to occur. The materials and expertise needed for a relief effort in the tropics would be next to useless in a winter emergency in the mountains of Central Asia. Only national defence establishments and local fire departments routinely maintain so much idle capacity. For other institutions, including humanitarian ones, careful planning and standby arrangements can help to compensate for the lack of excess capacity.

The elements of preparedness are staff, supplies, appropriate management skills, logistics and communications. Of course, emergency funds must also be available to support the mobilization of human and material resources. As refugee emergencies increase in number and frequency, the opportunity for agencies to return to “normal” patterns of staffing and operations after an emergency has virtually disappeared. There is no daylight between crises; crisis has become the norm. As a result, institutions that work with refugees have had to revamp their emergency arrangements. UN agencies such as WHO and UNICEF have created new emergency response units. UNHCR has increased its emergency fund to \$25 million and created new structures within the organization to allow it to respond quickly when mass displacements occur.

At UNHCR, emergency preparedness is one of the three main programme strategies for the early 1990s, along with prevention and repatriation. Emergency preparedness and response officers have been appointed and teams designated to cover each region where crises are likely to develop. Beyond the finite resources of regular staff, UNHCR has established standby arrangements with the Norwegian and Danish Refugee Councils, under which people with the necessary skills can be loaned to UNHCR on very short notice. Similarly, the Swedish Rescue Board maintains standby logistical and technical support for UNHCR, which can be deployed in as many as three emergency operations at any one time. These arrangements allow a field station to be set up, completely operational and self-sufficient, at 72 hours’ notice.

UNHCR and its national partners such as the Nordic agencies have built up limited stockpiles of supplies and equipment. While it is often less expensive to buy basic commodities on the open market at the time of an emergency than to store them in advance, other items are more difficult to procure at such short notice. Therefore small stocks of vehicles, field survival kits, telecommunications equipment and portable computers have been set aside for use in a crisis. Basic relief supplies such as tents, blankets and water tanks are maintained in centrally controlled (but not centrally located) warehouses maintained by the suppliers or by NGO partners. This kind of standby capacity is the most effective way of breaking the impasse between the need to be prepared and funding limitations.

“There has been a much higher proportion of winter emergencies in the 1990s”

The refugee emergencies of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s took place mostly in tropical or semi-tropical locations. Emergency procedures and supplies were largely geared to warm climates. In the 1990s, there has been a much higher proportion of winter emergencies: the former Yugoslavia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, northern Iraq and Tajikistan, to name just a few. Winter emergencies are more demanding in terms of fuel, clothing, shelter and food requirements, and pose a distinctive set of threats to health. They place additional demands on standby arrangements.

Preparations for a crisis are not complete when people, supplies and equipment are lined up. Staff must be exhaustively trained in conducting emergency operations, for they will often be setting up the equivalent of medium-sized cities in places where there is nothing – no infrastructure, no economic base and in some cases virtually no natural resources. Certain tools have to be prepared in advance if such a daunting task is to be manageable: these include country profiles, detailed maps and carefully worked-out contingency plans for disaster-prone areas.

Prolonged emergencies

When does an emergency cease to be an emergency? When death rates stabilize? When international assistance and protection agencies are able to hand over responsibility to local authorities? When a reasonable degree of self-sufficiency has been attained? Self-sufficiency for refugees in the country of asylum is an increasingly elusive goal. In earlier periods it was quite common: for example, UNHCR helped to establish 144 rural settlements for refugees in Africa between 1962 and 1986, on land made available by host governments. Such courses of action are a rarity today.

Although African countries have seldom closed their borders, the legendary African hospitality toward refugees appeared to be wearing thin when, in 1992, the government of Malawi announced plans to introduce restrictive measures, including the fencing of refugee settlements, aimed at the more than one million Mozambican refugees on its territory.

The same kind of frustration was evident in the Kenyan authorities' sudden decision the same year to demand the immediate repatriation of all refugees on its soil – a demand it subsequently retracted. Such reactions occur either because the pressure of population growth on natural resources makes additional cultivators appear to be more of a burden than a benefit. They may also happen because governments fear that refugees might bring social or political instability. In either situation (and the two often co-exist), refugees often end up living in closed or isolated camps where they have little scope for economic self-reliance and where humanitarian emergencies can fester at varying levels of intensity.

To help avoid this happening, maximum use has to be made of available resources. The most abundant, wasted resources in a refugee camp are the time and skills of the refugees themselves – especially the men. Women continue to fulfil their responsibilities to perform household labour and child care, which are always time-consuming and may be more laborious away from a familiar setting. However, separated from their field, flocks or other means of livelihood, many male refugees spend idle days in enormous frustration. In a prolonged emergency, both the welfare of the displaced people themselves and the budgets of aid agencies can benefit if this human resource is put to productive use.

The impact of refugee emergencies is by no means confined to the refugees themselves. It is the least developed countries that have been host to the great majority of refugees over the past two decades. Refugee influxes often impose heavy short- and longer-term burdens on such countries and may aggravate the social, economic and environmental crises that they already face.

“The least developed countries host the great majority of refugees”

The nature of a refugee emergency does not allow for proper environmental planning to take account of the ecological impact of a sudden large-scale increase of population. In many receiving countries, the influx of people has destabilized the local environment and depleted already scarce vegetation in semi-arid areas. Cutting of wood for fuel and construction results in deforestation while refugees' livestock aggravate over-grazing. When an emergency is prolonged by failure to achieve a political settlement, the circles of land degradation around refugee settlements grow ever wider. A refugee crisis can turn into an environmental crisis that is capable of generating further displacements if remedial action is not taken. Somalia, Sudan, Kenya, Malawi and Pakistan have all experienced environmental devastation as a result of mass arrivals from neighbouring countries (see Box 5.6). Environmental measures should be incorporated into refugee programmes at the earliest stages of planning to minimize the damage.

Poor planning can exacerbate the situation. For example, the contractor asked to prepare the site of the Ifo refugee camp in Kenya, at very short notice and at great speed, simply scraped away all the vegetation from a huge square of land. Once installed, the refugees were left to

struggle with dust storms in the midst of a man-made desert without a scrap of shade or windbreak, and had to walk long distances to reach the meagre resources of the bush. The mistake was not repeated at other sites, but Ifo may never recover. It was typical of the kind of mistake made in emergencies, when speed is of the essence and attention is focused on immediate needs.

Repatriation and the end of the refugee phase of an emergency do not necessarily signal the end of a crisis. UNHCR was able to withdraw from northern Iraq in mid-1992 after helping some 1.7 million displaced people reintegrate into their communities. The crisis of displacement was over, but the political and economic crisis, and responsibility for averting continuing threats to the security of the population, remain in the hands of other UN agencies and member states. In 1991 and 1992, up to half a million Ethiopian refugees fleeing conflict in Somalia spilled back into their home country, triggering a "returnee emergency" of daunting proportions.

The reinforcement of co-ordination within the United Nations system in general, and of emergency response capacity in particular, has undoubtedly increased efficiency in the face of refugee crises. This has been demonstrated in the humanitarian operations in the former Yugoslavia, Kenya, Bangladesh and elsewhere. There is, however, a pressing need to look beyond emergencies towards solutions. Rather than being seen as isolated events, refugee crises need to be approached as the first stage of a continuum that links emergency response, mediation, repatriation, rehabilitation and development. To be effective in this respect, the United Nations must continue its efforts to improve co-ordination both among its different agencies and between its political processes and the activities of its humanitarian and development organizations. Approached otherwise, emergency response may only succeed in converting a death sentence to one of life imprisonment in dependence, alienation and confrontation.

Box 5.1 Emergency Response in Iraq

Around four million people were displaced in the 12 months following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990. Between August and December, during the build-up to the Gulf War, more than a million migrant workers and other foreign nationals fled from Iraq and Kuwait into Jordan and other neighbouring countries, while some 850,000 Yemenis living in Saudi Arabia streamed back to their homeland.

It was not, however, until early April 1991, shortly after the war had ended, that armed conflict between the Iraqi government and disaffected groups within the country provoked one of the largest and fastest refugee movements in recent history. In a three-week period, over 400,000 Iraqis fled to the Turkish frontier. By mid-May a further 1.4 million had taken refuge either in the Islamic Republic of Iran or in the eastern border area of Iraq. With the exception of some 70,000 Shi'ites from the southern region around Basra, the overwhelming majority were Kurds.

The sudden, massive outflow prompted a humanitarian relief operation of unprecedented scope and intensity. On the Turkish border, providing assistance to so many refugees scattered across a dozen isolated and inhospitable mountain locations presented an immense logistical problem. Relief was provided by international agencies and also, on a much larger scale, by the 13-nation coalition force, around 30 bilateral donors and over 50 NGOs. Employing more than 20,000 personnel and 200 aircraft, the allied operation provided dramatic and unprecedented evidence of the logistical and relief capacity of the industrialized states and their military establishments.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, where the industrialized countries were considerably less forthcoming with assistance despite the much greater numbers of refugees, UNHCR mounted one of the most ambitious airlifts it had ever undertaken. Even so, deliveries could not keep pace with the speed of the emergency. By the end of April, only 12 per cent of the blankets, 9 per cent of the kitchen utensils and 11 per cent of the tents required had been delivered. Relief flights were consequently increased to ten a day throughout May. In all, the airlift

delivered just under 6,100 metric tons of relief supplies during April and May 1991.

The speed with which the refugees fled Iraq was matched by that of their return. They started to trek home within six weeks of the start of the exodus. On 18 April 1991, the UN and Iraq signed an agreement allowing UN humanitarian centres to be established on Iraqi territory. Coalition forces extended their presence into the north of the country, creating a security zone near the Iraqi-Turkish border designed to encourage refugees back into more accessible areas of Iraq where they could be more easily fed and sheltered. In mid-July, when the coalition forces withdrew, responsibility for humanitarian assistance in the security zone was transferred to UNHCR.

The massive movement back down from the Turkish border region began in the second half of April, and the last of the mountain camps was closed in early June. Large-scale return from the Islamic Republic of Iran also began in April. By December, only 70,000 Iraqis from the 1991 refugee population were left in the Islamic Republic of Iran and some 10,000 in Turkey.

The refugees' return to a devastated landscape and continuing insecurity presented a number of serious problems. At the end of August, large numbers of people were still without adequate shelter in northern Iraq and in danger from the rigours of the oncoming winter. In a race against the clock, UNHCR launched one of its largest ever shelter programmes. Distribution of building materials was not started until 15 October, when the population movements were sufficiently stabilized. To be effective against winter, it had to be completed by mid-November. Although security considerations delayed the implementation of the programme, by 30 October some 1,600 trucks had crossed the border from Turkey to Iraq over dangerous mountain trails to deliver around 30,000 metric tons of winter construction material to half a million people. Between October and December 1991, reconstruction work was carried out in more than 1,500 of the 4,000 villages that had been destroyed. (See illustration)

With the emergency relief phase completed and rehabilitation and reconstruction under way, UNHCR handed over its operation to other United Nations agencies in June 1992.

The Iraqi refugee crisis, exceptional though it may have been in many ways – not least in the strategic interest that it held for the industrialized world – reflected the growing scale and complexity of humanitarian emergencies and revealed serious shortcomings in the ability of humanitarian organizations to respond swiftly and effectively. It provoked a radical reassessment of the UN emergency response systems.

Attempts to improve co-ordination, which lay at the heart of the debate, resulted in the establishment of the United Nations Emergency Co-ordinator and the creation of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs at the beginning of 1992. The crisis also resulted in an enhanced appreciation of the importance of early warning mechanisms and emergency response capacity in tackling major humanitarian crises.

In addition, difficult questions were raised concerning mandates and fundamental principles. How should the need for humanitarian intervention be balanced against national sovereignty? How can the unparalleled capacity of the military be used most effectively in humanitarian operations? Who should be responsible for the needs of mixed populations that include refugees? What is UNHCR's role in providing protection and assistance to internally displaced people? And what are the principles governing repatriation into situations of continuing conflict? Although definitive answers to these questions have yet to be found, they are of crucial importance if the international community is to respond effectively to future emergencies of this magnitude.

Box 5.2 Evacuation from Srebrenica

In March 1993, the besieged town of Srebrenica in eastern Bosnia stood on the verge of catastrophe. Its original, mainly Muslim, population of 6,000 had swelled to over 50,000 as people fled from neighbouring towns and villages that had fallen to the advancing Bosnian

Serb forces. Virtually cut off from outside assistance for almost a year, the people of Srebrenica were in a desperate condition. With no medicine or food apart from the limited supplies contained in airdrops, a large proportion of the population was close to starvation. Thousands were sleeping outside in the snow with little or no shelter, and there were many wounded and sick.

After sustained international pressure and a dramatic gesture of solidarity by the UNPROFOR commander, General Morillon, who entered Srebrenica on 11 March and refused to leave until UNHCR food convoys were allowed into the town, the first convoy for three months finally got through to Srebrenica on 19 March. The following day it returned to the Muslim-held town of Tuzla with 618 women, children and wounded on board.

Evacuation is a last resort, in that it acquiesces in the very displacement that preventive efforts aim to avoid. But in some circumstances it is the only way to save lives. There is a very fine line between refusing to facilitate ethnic cleansing and failing to prevent needless deaths. During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina humanitarian agencies have been forced to confront this dilemma on a number of occasions.

In Srebrenica the line was clearly on the point of being crossed, and UNHCR and UNPROFOR decided to continue evacuating the most vulnerable members of the town's population. On 24 March, a helicopter airlift began – and was immediately suspended when Serb artillery shelled the landing zone, killing two people and wounding 14 others, including two Canadian soldiers, seconds after French helicopters had taken off with 24 evacuees.

A second food convoy reached Srebrenica on 28 March. Preparations had been made for it to evacuate 650 vulnerable cases. However, during the night thousands of frantic people began forcing their way on to the trucks. Among many heart-rending scenes, parents who were unable to get on board thrust their children into the arms of those who had succeeded. By the time the convoy left the following day, more than 1,600 old men, women and children – many of them unaccompanied – were packed into the 19 trucks. Six people had been killed in the scramble to get on board and a further seven deaths occurred during the arduous journey along snow-covered tracks to Tuzla.

A similar pattern of mass panic and tragedy took place when another convoy unloaded supplies in Srebrenica on 31 March. This time nearly 3,000 old men, women and children were evacuated on 14 trucks, with six deaths caused either by overcrowding or the freezing weather. The convoy was halted both at Serb checkpoints and, for five hours just short of Tuzla, by angry Muslim forces who believed the evacuations were helping the Serbs achieve their goal of taking over the whole of eastern Bosnia. Next day, the Muslim authorities in Srebrenica announced that no more evacuations would be permitted.

To avoid repetitions of the panic and overcrowding, it was decided that only half the trucks in future convoys would enter Srebrenica loaded with food. The other, empty trucks would wait outside the town, ready to take half the evacuees on board. After several convoys had failed to get through, a further evacuation took place on 8 April when 2,100 desperate people defied the local authorities and forced their way on to 14 trucks. The empty trucks waiting outside Srebrenica helped reduce the crush and avert casualties.

On 6 April, the Serbs had cut Srebrenica's water supply, and during the week of 12 April heavy shelling left dozens of dead and well over a hundred wounded. On 13 April, one more convoy evacuation, involving 800 people, took place. On 16 April, the Security Council designated Srebrenica a "safe area" under United Nations protection. Over the next ten days around 700 people, mostly wounded, were evacuated by helicopter.

By the time the evacuations ceased towards the end of April, a total of some 9,000 people had been rescued from Srebrenica. For those who stayed behind, the situation remained extremely bleak and precarious. As concern mounted about the long-term viability of the "safe areas" in eastern Bosnia and the plight of their trapped and traumatized populations, the possibility of further mass evacuations could not be discounted.

Box 5.3 Introduction to a refugee camp, Kenya, 28 September 1992

Refugees gather throughout the afternoon and into the night in a neutral strip of land between the Kenyan and Somali border posts near Liboi. By morning, there are nearly 700 of them. A UNHCR team arrives at 8 a.m. to screen the new arrivals. They pick out those who are so sick or weak that they need immediate medical attention, issue ration tickets and try to prevent people who are not refugees (or who are already registered in a camp) from signing up for assistance.

The team separates the waiting crowd into three groups: the small farmers known as Bantu in Somalia, the cross-border tribes and people of urban origin. The Bantu, an ethnic group of Tanzanian origin, are in poor condition. They are dusty, footsore and exhausted. Apart from their ragged clothing they have no possessions except some containers for water and a few pouches that might once have held food. They have walked to the border from an area near Kismayu, a distance of almost 400 kilometres. They fled because of the drought, and because bandits had taken everything from them, including their stores of food. Among them are some frail, elderly people and three orphaned brothers. The oldest looks about 13, the youngest eight. They think one of their uncles may be in Dagahaley refugee camp near Ifo. UNHCR will keep them in Liboi in a feeding centre for a few days to strengthen them while trying to locate the uncle.

The urban people, from Kismayu and Mogadishu, are better off but just as frightened of the violence that has engulfed their former homes. The cross-border tribes are nomadic; whether they are called Kenyan or Somali has never meant much to them until now. The UNHCR team questions them about traditional grazing lands and water points, trying to determine if they are indeed affected by the fighting in Somalia, or “merely” by the drought and general insecurity of north-eastern Kenya. One extended family has arrived with its animals – about 20 goats and five camels. The family is told it cannot take the animals to Ifo. There is not enough grazing and water for the livestock already at the camp.

People who are obviously ill or starving are not questioned too closely, but are sent on to a camp for at least temporary assistance. Some estimate that as many as a third of the people in the Kenyan camps are locals. No one doubts that many of them are in serious need of assistance, though not of international protection. One family of nomads has lost a child – a three-year-old girl – in the night, probably from measles. They bury her as they wait to be screened.

By the end of the morning, 38 sick or badly malnourished people have been sent directly to the hospital in Liboi camp, with a relative to look after each one. Another 535 have been accepted for settlement at Ifo camp, one of three sprawling settlements near the town of Daddab, each of which shelters about 40,000 Somali refugees.

In groups of 50, carefully listed, they climb into open trucks for the dusty journey of about 90 kilometres. The group includes 311 children. Roughly 60 per cent of the 116 household groups are headed by women. On an empty stretch of highway, each head of household is given the precious slip of paper that will later be exchanged for a ration card.

The journey ends at Ifo camp. After they get off the trucks, the children are taken aside by Médecins sans Frontières and given a cup of milk, a measles vaccine and a vitamin A tablet. They are then screened for malnutrition. The mothers of those who need supplemental feeding are instructed to take them next day to a normal, intensive or super-intensive feeding centre. Meanwhile, the heads of family line up to register and receive their ration cards. More than 500 people are processed in little over an hour.

The refugees then get back on the trucks and are taken to the distribution centre run by CARE. They present their ration cards twice: first for “non-food items” including a tent or tarpaulin, blankets, a small stove and jerrycans for hauling water. Next they join the food line and receive flour, beans, oil, sugar, salt and a tin of fish. People struggle to lift the heavy loads back into the trucks.

One malnourished, unaccompanied boy of about 12 returns bereft. After being issued with his

single ration card, he collected his food and joined up with a family who helped him load it into a truck. But then they pushed him out and threatened him. He doesn't protest. He is too exhausted; he has probably suffered worse. A Kenyan social worker takes him home for the night. The next day she will identify his clan and region, and try to find relatives in one of the camps. If there are none, an elder of his clan will find a family to take him in.

By the time the last groups are taken to their allotted sites, dusk is falling. They must erect their shelters and cook a meal before they settle down for the night. No fuel is provided; the refugees have to scavenge it from the bush, a demanding task in arid Ifo. Some, especially the nomads, have never encountered this kind of food. Used to meat and milk, they have to be taught how to make bread and cook the beans.

The first day as a refugee is untypical, but it introduces some of the central elements of camp life: boredom, bureaucracy and endless standing in line. The routine is like the diet: strange, distasteful and monotonous, but it is enough to sustain life and, perhaps, hope.

Box 5.4 The Cross-Border Operation into Somalia

Kenya was struck by one of the fastest growing refugee emergencies in 1992, with an average of 900 refugees entering the country each day. While significant numbers came from Ethiopia and the Sudan, the majority were Somalis fleeing one of the worst humanitarian disasters in recent history. By the end of the year, more than 400,000 refugees were in Kenya, including 285,619 Somalis. The influx required a massive emergency response: 11 new camps were established in Kenya during the year and assistance budgets soared. (See illustration)

In the turmoil that had befallen Somalia, the refugees were fleeing a combination of violence, anarchy and drought. The obvious dangers of a continuing exodus of epic proportions, and the difficulties of providing protection and assistance in the midst of the insecurity that plagues northern Kenya, were compelling arguments for looking beyond the traditional approach of delivering assistance only to the country of asylum. At the request of the UN Secretary-General, UNHCR therefore launched a cross-border operation in September 1992 with the initial aim of stabilizing population movements inside Somalia itself and stemming the momentum of refugee flows into neighbouring countries.

Initially constrained by the conspicuous lack of international political initiatives addressing the Somali crisis, the cross-border programme was given a new lease of life by the deployment of a US-led multinational force (UNITAF) in Somalia at the beginning of December 1992. This development meant that at last there was a realistic prospect of better security and improved control of relief distribution – essential pre-conditions for the return of Somali refugees. As a result, the cross-border operation stepped up a gear in January 1993, as UNHCR and other organizations began to expand their presence and programmes on the Somali side of the border.

The operation, which involves importing assistance from Kenya into “preventive zones” in southern Somalia, is intended to be both preventive and solution-oriented. At one level, it aims to mitigate at least one of the principal causes of displacement by providing assistance in specific areas that people might otherwise be forced to leave mainly for famine-related reasons. At another level, it seeks to create conditions conducive to the eventual voluntary repatriation of refugees from camps in Kenya. Indeed, some 3,200 Somali refugees returned home voluntarily, within the framework of the programme, as early as October and November 1992 .

In addition to providing food and other relief items, it is hoped that the cross-border operation will begin rehabilitating the social infrastructure, including schools and clinics, and encourage a return to self-sufficiency in agriculture and livestock. By June 1993, more than 160 Quick Impact Projects (see Chapter Six) were being implemented in co-operation with 20 NGO partners. By the same date, 188,000 Somali refugees had signed up for voluntary repatriation from the Kenyan camps. Around 30,000 had already returned home, 12,000 of them with the

help of UNHCR. If security continues to improve, the UNHCR offices established in Somalia under the cross-border programme will be well placed to support the voluntary return of the 285,000 Somali refugees currently in Kenya.

The effectiveness of the cross-border programme in Somalia has still to be determined and is, to some extent, hostage to a political solution to the Somali crisis. It is, nevertheless, an interesting example of an innovative approach that aims to prevent and solve problems of displacement by extending assistance to all people in need in a given area, in the hope that some of them will be able to avoid becoming refugees, and that those who have fled their homes will be able to return.

Fig. 5. A
Quick Impact Projects in Kenya and Somalia: June 1993

Sector	Bardera	El-Wak	Garbahare	Lugh	Mandera	Nairobi	Total
Transport	0	0	0	0	3	0	3
Water	10	11	4	2	8	0	35
Infrastructure	2	1	0	4	1	0	8
Community Services	14	2	5	6	2	2	31
Education	2	3	1	2	9	0	17
Agriculture	9	1	2	0	13	0	25
Livestock	3	4	0	1	1	0	9
Forestry	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Health	3	13	2	1	12	0	31
Total	43	36	14	16	49	2	160

Box 5.5 The Role of NGOs in the Field

Non-governmental organizations perform an indispensable, though varying, role at every stage as a refugee situation develops. They are involved in preventive efforts from the very first signs of crisis; once an emergency is under way, they are instrumental in saving lives and meeting the basic needs of the victims; and, finally, they play a key role in the identification and implementation of solutions, including voluntary repatriation.

Where prevention is concerned, those NGOs already well established on the ground can provide invaluable information about unfolding crises, alerting the world to the imminence of refugee flows and other population movements. Repeated violations of human rights, impending crop failure and rising ethnic tensions are all examples of early warning signals that are often first detected by NGOs.

In the emergency phase of refugee crises, rapid intervention by NGOs frequently saves innumerable lives. Because of their size and flexibility, they can react quickly to provide essential relief such as health care, food, water supplies and shelter. Once survival is assured, NGOs help refugees look forward to a better future by providing education and social services.

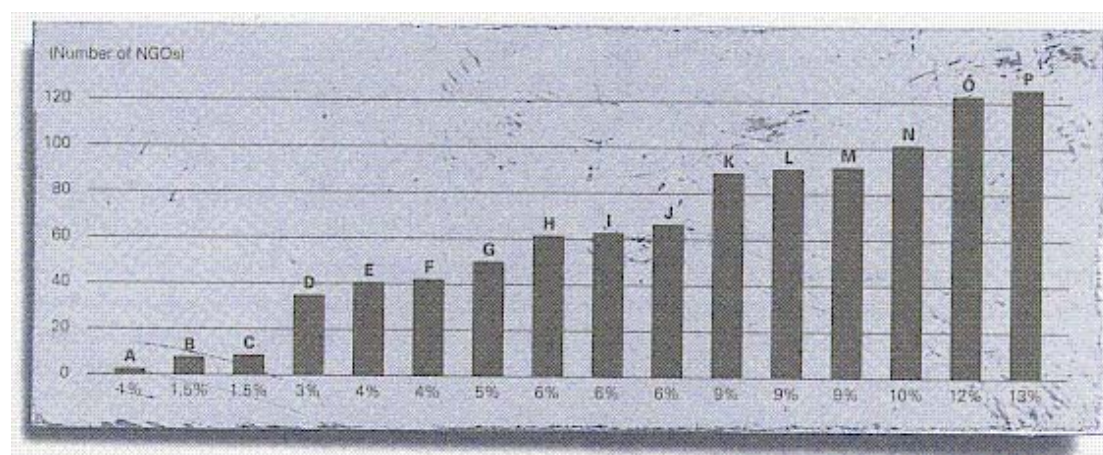
NGOs also have a role to play in solutions to refugee problems. The resettlement of millions of refugees could not have taken place without their active collaboration. Their involvement is also crucial during voluntary repatriations, when their contributions include accompanying refugees back to their places of origin, designing and implementing quick impact rehabilitation projects and monitoring human rights. In carrying out these and other activities, more than a few NGO staff have lost their lives.

Since its establishment in 1951, UNHCR has collaborated with NGOs in all its fields of activity. Over 200 NGOs co-operate in UNHCR's relief or legal assistance programmes. In all, UNHCR maintains regular contact with close to 1,000 NGOs involved with refugees in one way or another.

Recent, large-scale refugee outflows have led to a new stage in the development of UNHCR-NGO relations. The needs to improve emergency response systems, establish preventive

networks, strengthen indigenous NGOs, and ensure continuity between relief and solutions are some of the challenges currently facing UNHCR and NGOs alike. A strong spirit of partnership and a willingness to complement each other's work by means of close consultation are essential to both.

Fig 5.B
Non-Governmental Organizations: UNHCR's Operational Partners, 1991-1992



Number of NGO operational partners in each sector of activity

- | | | |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| A Fish – 3 NGOs | G Food – 51 NGOs | M Domestic Needs – 92 NGOs |
| B Livestock – 8 NGOs | H Protection – 62 NGOs | N Education – 102 NGOs |
| C Forestry – 9 NGOs | I Income Generation – 63 NGOs | O Agency Operational Support – 124 NGOs |
| D Crop Production – 35 NGOs | J Shelter – 66 NGOs | P Health and Nutrition – 126 NGOs |
| E Water – 41 NGOs | K Community Services – 89 NGOs | |
| F Sanitation – 43 NGOs | L Transport – 91 NGOs | |

Box 5.6 Shouldering the Burden: The Case of Malawi

Malawi is a small, densely populated country in southern Africa. Its economy is predominantly agricultural. More than 85 per cent of its 10.3 million people live in rural areas. With a GNP of \$230 per capita in 1991, Malawi ranks among the world's least developed countries.

A massive influx of refugees from the devastating war in neighbouring Mozambique began in 1986. By 1993, Malawi was host to a million Mozambican refugees – equivalent to 10 per cent of its own total population.

Refugees live in 13 of Malawi's 24 administrative districts and, in some cases, they outnumber the local inhabitants. They live either in so-called open settlements alongside Malawian villages, or else in large, organized camps. As the shortage of arable land prevents their involvement in agriculture, they are almost entirely dependent on outside relief for food,

water and essential services. Their presence has been a tremendous burden on local economies. It has also had a negative effect on the development efforts of the country as a whole.

The country's road system, particularly the network of dirt tracks that link rural areas to main roads, was not designed to carry more than 180,000 metric tons of relief a year. Road surfaces, bridges and culverts have all been severely damaged by the frequent passage of heavy vehicles. As a result, it is more difficult for Malawian farmers to transport their agricultural products, and this has affected food distribution throughout the entire country. Access to refugee centres has also deteriorated.

Even more devastating has been the impact of the refugee presence on Malawi's forests. Refugees have felled large numbers of trees in order to acquire wood for fuel and building materials. The refugees' settlements, located in some of the most ecologically vulnerable areas of the country, have exacerbated deforestation and led to subsequent land degradation. Malawi is currently losing about 3.5 per cent of its forest cover each year.

In addition to these problems, the steadily increasing demand for already scarce goods and services has led to tension. Refugees are in direct competition with Malawians for access to severely stretched government services, including health facilities, schools, water supplies, informal employment opportunities and welfare programmes. Despite the provision of large-scale foreign aid to support the refugees, the Malawi government has had to divert a significant proportion of its own revenues to the refugee programme, thus reducing resources available for national development.

Sustainable development will only be possible in Malawi if the impact of refugees on the country's resources is significantly reduced. UNHCR has become involved in reforestation, the construction and maintenance of roads and water supplies, and the distribution of locally produced, fuel-efficient stoves. However, the scale of these activities falls well short of compensating for the strains caused by the refugee presence, let alone meeting wider national needs. For this to be achieved, UN development agencies and bilateral aid donors will have to provide substantial support. Development projects specifically designed to tackle problems in refugee-hosting areas are already at the advanced planning stage. Even if the recent momentum in repatriation to Mozambique is maintained (see Chapter Six, Box 6.2), Malawi will undoubtedly feel the consequences of the refugees' presence for years to come. It remains to be seen, however, if the international community is prepared to fund development and rehabilitation projects which compensate Malawi for the generous asylum it has provided to the Mozambican refugees.

1 "Famine-Affected, Refugee and Displaced Populations: Recommendations for Public Health Issues." *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 41.RR-13, 24 July 1992. US Dept. of Health and Human Resources, Public Health Service.

2 See UNHCR, *Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women*. Geneva: UNHCR, July 1991.