

REFUGEES

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REFUGEE
GO HOME

The Changing Face of Protection



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

Seeking protection's 'Holy Grail'

UNDER THE CATCHY HEADLINE "Swan Bake – Asylum seekers steal the Queen's birds for barbecues" Britain's tabloid SUN newspaper recently reported in a front-page story that 'callous' asylum applicants were baiting traps for the royal swans in streams and parks and then cooking and eating them.

Knowing that a 'good' story could run and run, THE SUN the following day reported "Now asylum seekers

are nicking the fish" – this time, apparently, gangs were "plundering lakes and rivers" for protected fish and, like the swans, again barbecuing them. For good measure, THE SUN reported "Geese are also being slaughtered for food."

It is summer in the West and the so-called 'silly season' in the

newspaper business—a time when there is generally little 'hard' news around and so the columns are filled with lighthearted features.

If that were the case in this instance, the reports might be safely ignored, especially since another British newspaper, THE INDEPENDENT, said the stories were untrue anyway.

But the barbecue stories were simply part of a deeply worrying daily torrent of often abusive and, at times, xenophobic reports pouring off the country's tabloid presses as they gleefully reported the ongoing battle—as they see it—between the tides of 'bogus asylum seekers' and a hapless 'soft touch' Britain.

The government, media and public at large all agree Britain certainly is facing an immigration dilemma.

But the tabloid headlines do a grave disservice, indeed poison the real debate: how to tackle a highly complex and rapidly changing global migration problem which involves not only asylum seekers and refugees and the best ways to protect them, but also the often interlinking movements of millions of economic migrants seeking a better way of life, human traffickers and their ruthless multi-billion dollar business and the global impact of the war on terror.

In "The changing face of protection" this issue examines the plight of refugees down the ages and how to help them.

Mass flight from persecution has been a reality for centuries. Terror has been used for just as long to kill, maim and panic millions of terrified civilians.

What is new is that these perennial problems have fused with contemporary realities—the swiftness of travel and communication, the appearance of unprecedented numbers of ordinary people simply seeking a better lifestyle—in just a few years to create today's global wall of worry and uncertainty.

But more than 50 years after its creation, UNHCR believes a tried and trusted instrument, the 1951 Refugee Convention, remains the cornerstone of refugee protection albeit with an added fillip. Recently, High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers launched a series of initiatives both to strengthen the treaty and more vigorously pursue protection's Holy Grail of finding permanent and safe solutions for the world's uprooted peoples.

After all "It is better," he said, "to bring safety to people, not people to safety."



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REFUGEES

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“**T**HERE IS A TERRIBLE PRICE TO BE PAID for an open-door shambles of an asylum policy,” thundered Britain’s Sun newspaper recently. “A time bomb is ticking.” The rival Daily Mail warned that “A massive influx of asylum seekers infected with HIV is overwhelming hospitals... and routine operations for British patients could be cancelled.” The Daily Express took a slightly different line: “Immigration officials have virtually given up trying to stop bogus asylum seekers flooding into Britain.” The following day, the Express upped the scare tactics by telling its readers that as many as “Seventy three million people will win the right to live and work in Britain when their countries join the European Union next year.”

It was a typical week in an unrelentingly shrill crusade by the tabloid media, highlighted by another writer who denounced Britain “as a daft (stupid) country when it comes to dealing with immigrants and asylum seekers.”


“No, I’m not talking about the fact that we admit every Tom, Dick and Harry, or that we provide them all with vast sums in legal aid to fight their deportation; or that we allocate them places in posh hotels, give them social security benefits and, later, houses and jobs,” opined the writer, Kilroy. “No, what really demonstrates how daft, how stupid, how weak we have become is that we now give council accommodation and state benefits to those planning to murder us all with deadly poison.”

Across the continent, Italians watched as a flotilla of rickety boats ferried illegals from Africa to the holiday island of Lampedusa. One high ranking Italian official reputedly urged naval vessels to open fire on the incoming ships, many of which foundered even before reaching land. A local resident, agitatedly watching the latest ship arrival, shouted to a visitor: “The government should put them into a bloody great ship and then tow it around to (Prime Minister) Berlusconi’s place in Rome.”

A report described the deplorable conditions the illegals endured to try to reach the European promised land: “Crammed together after days in desperate squalor at sea, they cling to hopes of a better future. At the end of their fetid journey, disease is rife among the families who have left their homeland, taking with them everything in the world they possess. Policemen await them, wearing masks to protect themselves from the disease and rank stench of human suffering.”

GUN LAW

At the same moment in Africa, hundreds of thousands of men, women and children cowered among the battered ruin that today is

A group of children, likely in a conflict-affected area, looking somber and weary. The children are of various ages, and their expressions are serious. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people and a sign that says "COFFEE TOFFEE".

Millions of people have been killed or displaced in the deadliest documented war in Africa's history in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Few have any kind of protection.

*Reshaping
protection
programs for
millions of
people in a more
complex era*

Old problems... **NEW REALITIES**

by Ray Wilkinson

the Liberian capital of Monrovia, trying to escape the latest round of fighting in that country's relentless civil war. "Awash with weapons, the law of the gun prevails and innocent civilians are the victims," High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers lamented before an international peacekeeping force began arriving to try to stop the carnage.

In the Pacific, the detention of children on a flyspeck island called Nauru was an issue of the day. Senior members of Amnesty International marched on

the home of Australian Prime Minister John Howard to demand the release of 112 young detainees from Nauru, an offshore camp set up in 2001 to house boatloads of people trying to reach Australia. The government vigorously defended its immigration policy in the face of widespread criticism, but in demanding the children's release Amnesty said: "We look at the Australian government as

one of the leaders in the protection of human rights, and if we see continued detention of children, then of course it reflects the reality that the law is different from the practice."

As never before, the plight of people on the move—refugees, asylum seekers, economic and environmental migrants—has insinuated itself into every part of the globe. The issue is debated in the corridors of power from Paris to Beijing. Citizens in a rural South Carolina town anxiously await the arrival of a group of refugees from Africa. The tiny state of Burundi remains battered and bruised after decades of conflict in which hundreds of thousands of civilians were slaughtered or fled. Nauru, one of the world's tiniest republics, became embroiled in the problem by accepting Australian largesse—and groups of unwanted boat people—as an economic lifeline.

The fate of governments and individual political careers succeed or founder on the issue. In some countries such as Britain, the topic became so 'hot' it competed for headlines and space with David Beckham, the superstar icon of the global soccer scene whose every move is recorded and broadcast by an army of mainstream photographers and paparazzi.

Capitals, humanitarian organizations and the U.N.

refugee agency, guardian of the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention, found themselves caught up in the maelstrom, struggling with varying degrees of success to adapt their systems, policies and priorities to a rapidly changing environment.

DRAMATIC CHANGES

But why have things seemingly altered so dramatically at the start of a new millennium, and is the situation really as out of control as the cumulative drumbeat of daily headlines suggest?

Mass flight is nothing new. From the dawn of history, entire populations have been periodically forced to flee their homes and their countries during times of conflict. Even in the last few decades, as many as 10 million people fled from East Pakistan to India in the early 1970s in the largest single human displacement in modern history. Millions more were uprooted in Southeast Asia, Africa and Europe.

And though 'terror' will now indelibly be associated with the attacks against New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, that weapon, too, has been used from the earliest times to kill, maim and uproot terrified civilians in their millions.

What is new is that old problems have fused with new realities in a brief period of time to create what some countries perceive as an unprecedented threat to their sovereignty, security and global stability.

Because of improved communications the world, almost overnight, has grown smaller. Nations such as the United States or Australia which, because of their geographic isolation, could watch turmoil in far away places with a certain degree of detachment, see themselves on today's front lines. Viewed from the developed world, crises in Afghanistan, Iraq or Haiti appear appreciably closer to home than even a few years ago.

Europe is no stranger to the large scale movement of refugees, especially during and after two world wars, but governments there feel less in control today, threatened by the unpredictable nature of migrations as boatloads of people from Africa or migrants on scores of well-travelled overland smuggling routes from the east try to breach the increasingly higher walls the continent erects to keep them out.

The number of uprooted persons of concern to UNHCR worldwide actually decreased from an all-time high of more than 27 million in 1994 to more than 20 million today—but that is only part of the story.

There are an estimated 20-25 million civilians internally displaced within their own country, people in desperate straits enjoying little international sympathy or protection—but potentially part of the next major exodus. ▶



CORBIS/SHUTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION

The modern protection regime began in the wake of World War II when UNHCR was created to help refugees like these civilians at a postwar repatriation center.

AS NEVER BEFORE, THE PLIGHT OF PEOPLE ON THE MOVE—REFUGEES, ASYLUM SEEKERS, ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL MIGRANTS—HAS INSINUATED ITSELF INTO EVERY PART OF THE GLOBE.

Protection through the ages

■ **People have been forced to flee** ever since they began forming communities centuries ago. Encouragingly, the tradition of offering sanctuary is almost as old as flight itself. Ancient religious texts often refer to asylum, a word of Greek origin meaning ‘without capture’ ‘without violation’ or ‘without devastation.’ Plato wrote: “The foreigner isolated from his fellow countrymen and his family should be the subject of greater love on the part of men and of the Gods.”

■ **Individual states or leaders carried the burden** of helping uprooted people. Theseus, King of Athens, counseled Oedipus, the King of Thebes, “Like you, I well remember that I grew up in the house of others and in a foreign land. I faced deadly dangers. So that, whoever asks my hospitality, as you do now, I would not know how to turn away.”

■ **Nations began to develop an international conscience** in the early 20th century and efforts to help refugees went global. The League of Nations, forerunner of the United Nations, in 1921 appointed famed Norwegian polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen as the world’s first High Commissioner for Refugees with a mandate to help some 800,000 mainly Russian refugees.

■ **At the same time, a body of international refugee law** began to take shape starting with the 1933 League of Nations Convention relating to the International Status of Refugees followed by the 1938 Convention concerning the Status of Refugees.

■ **The League collapsed at the end of World War II.** During the chaos and aftermath of that conflict, first the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration helped seven

million refugees and other groups to repatriate to their homes, and then the International Refugee Organization (IRO) resettled more than one million refugees in new countries around the world.

■ **In 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights** was proclaimed, followed a year later by the fourth of the Geneva Conventions covering the protection of civilians caught up in conflict.

■ **The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees**, an agency “of an entirely non-political character” was created by the U.N. General Assembly in 1950, principally to help an estimated one million wartime refugees still milling around Europe. On July 28 of the following year, the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, the major legal foundation on which UNHCR’s work is based, was formally adopted.

■ **It was the first international agreement** covering the most fundamental aspects of a refugee’s life. It defined the term ‘refugee’, outlined a refugee’s basic rights including such things as freedom of religion and movement, but also underscored a refugee’s obligations to a host government. A key provision stipulated that refugees should not be returned or ‘refouled’ to a country where he/she faced persecution.

■ **The original Convention was deliberately narrow in scope.** It allowed states to limit their obligations to European refugees and did not cover people uprooted from their homes after 1 January 1951. But as the ‘refugee problem’ went global, it became obvious the Convention needed strengthening. In 1967 the U.N. General Assembly adopted the Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees which effectively

removed time and geographical restrictions contained in the original 1951 document.

■ **In 1969 the then Organization of African Unity (OAU)** adopted its own liberal refugee convention. For the first time, a legal document extended refugee recognition to people fleeing in large groups and escaping such things as external aggression, occupation or foreign domination. It included the now universally accepted principle of ‘voluntary’ repatriation. Other regional treaties followed, including the 1984 Cartagena Declaration signed by Latin American countries.

■ **For the first four decades of its existence**, UNHCR had always worked on the fringe of wars, helping uprooted peoples to try to restart their lives once they had reached safety in surrounding countries. However, the agency’s operations changed dramatically in the early 1990s and responding to increasingly complex conflict situations, staff began working in the middle of wars in such places as northern Iraq and the Balkans.

■ **The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks** in New York and Washington signalled a seismic shift in global political and military activity. They resulted in the American-led war on terrorism and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Millions of refugees were swept up in the fallout. More than two million civilians were able to return to their ancestral homes in Afghanistan following the installation of a new government there, but many others became entangled in tougher security and asylum restrictions introduced by many countries.

■ **In what High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers** called the most important meeting on refugees in a half century, Convention signatories (joined by other

nations, non-governmental organizations and experts) met in Geneva in December 2001 and reaffirmed their “commitment to implement our obligations under the 1951 Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol fully and effectively” and promised to “address the causes of refugee movements as well as to prevent them.”

■ **The conference was part of an ongoing UNHCR process** called Global Consultations on International Protection which resulted in the creation of an Agenda for Protection, effectively a series of guidelines for governments and humanitarian organizations to use in strengthening worldwide refugee protection.

■ **In conjunction with the Agenda**, Lubbers introduced several other initiatives to bolster areas of protection concern which had not been foreseen by the original drafters of the Convention, to try to eliminate the so-called ‘gap’ between refugee emergencies and long-term development for refugees and devastated communities and to promote, where applicable, local integration or resettlement of uprooted people.

■ **At its peak in 1994**, with conflict raging in the Balkans and millions displaced by the Rwandan genocide and other upheavals in Central Africa, UNHCR was assisting and protecting an estimated 27 million people. Today, the agency continues to help more than 20 million civilians. Since the 1950s, it has assisted between 50-60 million persons to restart their lives and in the process won two Nobel Peace Prizes for what UNHCR’s first High Commissioner Gerrit Jan van Heuven Goedhart called its attempts to create an environment “in which no people of any country, in fact no group of people of any kind, live in fear and need.” ■

Taking advantage of easier communications and shorter distances, millions of so-called economic migrants were also on the move in any given time period.

Smugglers and human traffickers developed a multi-billion dollar business, willing to ship anyone anywhere as long as they could pay often extortionate fees for their passage.

Immigration and asylum systems in developed states became overwhelmed at times as they tried to handle increasing numbers of people and sort out persons in genuine need of help and those simply seeking a better life elsewhere.

Wars became messier and dirtier. Some, such as those in Sudan and Angola, turned into 'protracted' crises lasting for decades and becoming increasingly difficult to resolve.

Terrorism and Washington's subsequent war on terrorism went global, stretching from the mainland United States through Europe, the Middle East, Africa to the once idyllic paradise of Bali, raising suspicions about any 'foreigner' asking for help.

VOLATILE COCKTAIL

This movement of real refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants, the uncertainty of future terror attacks, the global reach of the traffickers and smugglers, efforts by developed countries to tighten their border security and immigration procedures, combined to produce a volatile cocktail of apprehension, worry and, at times, xenophobia.

High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers dismissed the apocalyptic visions of some politicians and media and insisted that key instruments such as the 1951 Refugee Convention remained the cornerstone of efforts to protect some of the world's most vulnerable people.

He also acknowledged that his organization had reached a significant 'crossroads' and new protection strategies including a strengthened Refugee Convention, improved international cooperation, greater burden sharing among states and increased aid to poorer states hosting refugees were all now on the drawing board.

Volker Turk, head of UNHCR's protection policy and legal advice team, called the current protection environment "infinitely more complex and challenging" than even a few years ago.

But reshaping protection policies to meet new challenges is not a new phenomenon.

The principle of asylum is as ancient as the first forced exodus of peoples and the methods of protection have constantly adapted to the realities of the time.

Initially, it was left to powerful kings or individual countries to offer sanctuary to the downtrodden.

Theseus, the King of Athens, told Oedipus, the King of Thebes: "I well remember that I grew up in the house of others and in a foreign land. I faced deadly dangers. So that, whoever asks my hospitality, as you do now, I would not know how to turn away."

It was not until the 20th century that countries be-

gan to develop an international conscience. The League of Nations, forerunner of the United Nations, appointed history's first High Commissioner for Refugees in 1921. Two other agencies followed—the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and the International Refugee Organization (IRO)—before UNHCR was created by the U.N. General Assembly in 1950.

At the same time, a body of international humanitarian and refugee law began to take shape. It included the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, followed a year later by the fourth of the Geneva Conventions covering the protection of war-affected civilians.

On 28 July 1951, the Geneva Refugee Convention was adopted by the U.N. General Assembly—a convenient benchmark from which to begin measuring the modern global refugee regime.

Though it was the first truly international agreement covering refugees, it was also a deliberately restrictive instrument. The final document principally covered around one million refugees in Europe who had been made homeless before 1 January 1951. The drafters felt "it would be difficult for governments to sign a blank cheque and to undertake obligations towards future refugees, the origin and number of which would be unknown."

There was no mention of the right to asylum in the document. Or of such issues as gender persecution. The fathers of the Convention—all men—did not deliberately omit this category. In those far-off days, it was not even considered.

In the intervening decades, many gaps were plugged by international, regional and national legislation and other measures were put into place as the numbers of refugees grew inexorably and crises became global and more complex.

National asylum systems were developed, with UNHCR acting in a watchdog capacity. Gender-related violence under certain circumstances is now widely considered to fall within the refugee definition.

A 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees effectively removed the earlier 1951 deadline and geographical restrictions in the Convention. Two years later, the Organization of African Unity adopted its own refugee convention which included the now uni-



The most important meeting on refugees in a half century was held in Geneva in December 2001 where delegates endorsed the importance of the 1951 Refugee Convention.

UNHCR/S. HOPPER/CP/GVA*2001



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versally accepted principle of ‘voluntary’ repatriation.

Interim solutions were forged to solve specific crises. In the wake of the decades-long war in Indochina, a highly complex package called the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) committing all the principal actors to specific roles was formulated. A key element—which would also be used in later conflicts such as Bosnia—was the development of the principle of temporary asylum or protection under which regional states agreed to accept large numbers of fleeing civilians, but with the proviso that they would eventually return home or resettle in another state.

TURNING POINT

The 1990s were a watershed of sorts for UNHCR. As the cold war era ended the nature of war itself changed. Conventional conflicts were increasingly replaced by messier, internal crises.

Previously, the refugee agency had worked on the periphery of war, helping refugees once they had reached the safety of a neighboring country. But in the aftermath of the first Gulf war, in Bosnia and in Africa’s Great Lakes, field staff deployed to the very center of these new style conflicts. The agency expanded its staff and took on added responsibilities,

running aid convoys, operating airlifts, launching special programs, rebuilding hospitals and schools, repairing roads.

But behind these activities a hidden time bomb was about to explode and would last for years, both within UNHCR itself, among governments and other humanitarian agencies.

The issue was protection.

Supporters of the organization’s new ‘super role’ argued that all of its activities were ‘protection related.’ Refugees had first to be given basics such as shelter, food and water before they could be considered as safe and work then started to help them rebuild their lives. Education programs had to be implemented for child refugees. When they returned home, programs were needed to help reintegrate refugees and also to help the communities to which they were returning.

In the absence of other agencies, UNHCR undertook many of these activities and increasingly was also called upon to help millions of persons internally displaced within their own countries who had no international godfather to protect them.

If there was little argument that all of these programs were necessary, there was prolonged and ongoing debate about whether UNHCR’s mandate covered

UNHCR provided food, water and medicine to huge populations in the Middle East, Africa and the Balkans in the 1990s. Critics said the agency was ignoring its basic protection mandate.

WHAT IS NEW IS THAT OLD PROBLEMS FUSED WITH NEW REALITIES IN THE BRIEFEST PERIOD OF TIME TO CREATE WHAT SOME COUNTRIES PERCEIVE AS AN UNPRECEDENTED THREAT TO THEIR SOVEREIGNTY, SECURITY AND GLOBAL STABILITY.

“I feel like I was a blind man who can now see”

Resettlement offers a fresh start to life, but the system is under pressure

“I can’t believe people want me here,” Mohamed Muktar said through an interpreter as he stepped from the aircraft in Syracuse, New York. “It was God’s plan to come to America.”

It also took more than 10 years of temporal heartbreak and planning before the African could embark on an improbable journey which whisked him from a lifetime of semi-slavery and years living in a mud hut in a sprawling refugee camp on the Horn of Africa to the undreamed of delights and headaches of urban America.

Muktar is one of an estimated 12,000 people known as Somali Bantu who will make similar trips from eastern Africa to some 50 American communities in the coming months.

High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers would like to expand the number of refugees who are annually accepted for permanent resettlement in 17 traditional host countries such as the United States, Canada and Australia as part of an overall drive to improve protection for the more than 20 million people the agency currently cares for.

But while the movement of the Somali Bantu was the most ambitious resettlement program ever undertaken out of Africa and the successful culmination of more than a decade of work by the refugee agency to find them a new home, it also vividly underlined the problems facing refugees in a period of increased apprehension towards foreigners.

UNHCR reported that in 2002, in the wake of terror attacks on the United States, the number of successful resettlements directly

under the auspices of the agency plunged by 56 percent.

Though Washington agreed to accept 70,000 refugees that year, because of increased security measures, only 26,300 were actually resettled.

And while some American communities warmly welcomed the Bantu, others, voicing economic and social concerns, were not at all eager to greet strangers in their midst.

The group’s ancestors had originally been seized by Arab slavers in the 18th and 19th centuries from what is today Tanzania and Mozambique and shipped via Zanzibar’s great slave market to the Persian Gulf, Middle East and some to Somalia on Africa’s Horn.

When that country collapsed in the early 1990s in an orgy of civil war and bloodletting, thousands of Bantu, still living lives of feudal slaves, together with tens of thousands of Somalis, fled to neighboring countries, the majority to Kenya.

A NEW BEGINNING

Life in a sun-baked refugee camp was in many ways even harsher than their old existence, but the Bantu made clear to UNHCR officials the majority would never return to Somalia even if peace was restored there. During their decade-long exile, both Tanzania and Mozambique, their ancestral homes, refused to accept the Bantu. The Americans finally did.

There were inevitable delays and hiccups in the operation. Families became separated. Other refugees who were not involved in the

operation were hostile. The Bantu were transferred from one camp to a safer location in northern Kenya where they not only underwent official vetting but learned about life in their newly adopted country—and how to turn on an electric switch, use a shower or an elevator—things they had never done or seen before.

In DuPage County, Illinois, residents there showered the first arrivals with food, clothing and toys. In Phoenix, Arizona, 42-year-old Hassan Mberwa and his nine-member family moved into a huge apartment. On his first visit to a supermarket he was so overwhelmed by its size and choice he could only whisper, “It’s as big as Kakuma”—the refugee camp in northern Kenya which houses 40,000 people. Unused to travelling by car, his 14-year-old daughter Arbai vomited every few minutes into a plastic bag.

Other communities expressed apprehension about their new guests. In the town of Cayce, South Carolina, residents said the test scores of Bantu children, who cannot read or write English, would lower overall school rankings. The influx might put pressure on the police department and depress housing values.

In Burlington, Vermont, former state legislator Barbara Kehaya warned, “If we are having trouble educating the students we’ve got, the refugees place too much of a burden on the community.”

The city council of Holyoke, Massachusetts, passed a symbolic resolution several months ago asking the federal government not to locate any Bantu there.

But these refugees are nothing if not tenacious and optimistic (REFUGEES N° 128). Like Mohamed Muktar when he first landed in the United States, Abdullahi Hussein Abdi also invoked a miracle.

“I feel like I was a blind man who can now see,” this Somali Bantu said shortly before boarding his own flight to a new life. ■

From an African refugee camp to a new life in America.



UNHCR/B.PRESS/CS/KEN*2002



UNHCR/H. CAUX/DP/USA*2003



EPA/ANSA/FRANCO LANNINO

OLD PROBLEMS... NEW REALITIES

such activities, whether its core work of 'pure' protection would suffer as a result and on a practical note, whether the agency even had the resources to accomplish everything it was trying to do.

In an era of tight budgets and manpower reductions, that particular struggle continues. Delivering convoys of food to besieged enclaves such as Srebrenica in Bosnia is high-profile, television-glamorous and easy for accountants and donors to understand and compute the cost. Laboring for months to help fashion new asylum legislation in an obscure Central Asian capital or spending weeks carefully monitoring the well-being of a small group of vulnerable people in Sri Lanka is expensive, time-consuming and difficult to gauge the impact.

One recent internal memo on protection noted the problem: "It is important to recall that the delivery of international protection is a staff intensive, specialized service that cannot be equated with or quantified in the same way as the distribution of relief items. The function is more difficult to measure, but it is in fact the *raison d'être*, the 'added value' of UNHCR."

LOSING THE PLOT

Critics took aim at UNHCR and its protection role from several directions. They accused it of having 'lost the plot' on protection, diluting or ignoring its core responsibilities in pursuit of projects other organizations could undertake. And depending on the critics particular viewpoint, the agency was also either ignoring the concerns of states or conversely succumbing to national political pressures.

Some capitals warned that UNHCR's role and the Convention itself were increasingly irrelevant.

At the height of the controversy over the introduction of tough new asylum restrictions in Australia, Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock said the refugee agency had become eurocentric and had to begin listening more closely to the countries paying its bills.

"If we are being increasingly forced by the large numbers of asylum seekers turning up by boat to allocate more and more resources for that task, we will not have the resources available to enhance the activities of the UNHCR," he said in one interview, noting that states were spending \$10 billion annually to process illegal immigrants.

Opponents of that view said UNHCR was allocated only one-tenth of that global amount to care for more than 20 million people and that if more resources were made available to the agency for front-line work, this could help relieve the strain on national asylum structures and eventually reduce the pressure on their asylum systems.

A WALK IN THE PARK

Volker Turk was a senior protection officer en route to Bosnia in 1997 when he went for a walk in the garden of the Hotel Villa Bled in Slovenia. "It was one of those grey, wet November Balkan days, but suddenly the sun broke through and we saw the lake for the first time and walked around it," he recalled.

He and his colleague, Erika Feller, then deputy director of UNHCR's protection division and now its director, agreed that "We had become big relief operators, dazzled by helping large numbers of people, less able to concentrate on the nitty gritty, complex work of protection. We needed to become the motor of pro- ▶

Governments feel threatened by huge movements of people, including these illegal immigrants from Africa trying to reach Italy as their boat sinks.

CRITICS TOOK AIM AT UNHCR FROM SEVERAL DIRECTIONS. THEY ACCUSED IT OF HAVING 'LOST THE PLOT' ON PROTECTION, DILUTING OR IGNORING ITS CORE RESPONSIBILITIES IN PURSUIT OF OTHER PROJECTS.

Nine million ghosts

*No friends, nowhere to live, no official identity.
It's not easy being stateless*


When thousands of civilians fled a bloody civil war in the central Asian state of Tajikistan to neighboring Kyrgyzstan in the early 1990s, many didn't realize they were headed for double trouble.

At a stroke, some people in the exodus became not only refugees, but because of a particularly cruel stroke of timing, they were about to become stateless, too—people who do not have a country they can officially call home, civilians who are not recognized by any state as citizens.

Both countries had recently become independent following the collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1991. As each struggled to build a viable and fully sovereign state, Kyrgyzstan adopted a citizenship law shortly after independence, Tajikistan adopted the relevant laws in 1994. People were granted nationality in their respective country if they had permanent residence on the day each law went into force.

Civilians fleeing the Tajikistan fighting between those two dates tumbled into a legal nightmare. Though many were ethnic Kyrgyz, they arrived in that country too late to claim citizenship there. When Tajikistan introduced its own citizenship rules a little later, but at a time when many civilians were still marooned outside that country as refugees, they were unable to claim Tajik nationality, either.

Welcome to the Byzantine and often dark underworld of statelessness where people not only don't have a country to call their own or the right to a passport, but also minimal, if any, access to normal basic rights such as education, health, political choice or even the ability, without papers, to officially



A refugee from Tajikistan receives a new passport for her family in Kyrgyzstan.

bury their dead. "They are non persons, political ghosts, without a legal home, a country or an identity," one statelessness expert said.

The plight of the world's 10.4 million refugees is well documented and, although the problem of displacement remains highly controversial, extensive international, regional and national legislation is in place to

try to tackle this global crisis. Increasing attention is also being paid to the plight of a related group of uprooted people, the estimated 20-25 million persons displaced within their own countries, so-called IDPs.

HUGE NUMBERS

But though the number of stateless persons globally is also massive—the best educated guesstimate is that there may be nine million people effectively cast adrift from the global political system of nation states—this problem receives far less attention and is far less generally understood.

There are international instruments on statelessness. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights underlines that "Everyone has the right to a nationality." But while 145 countries have acceded to the 1951 Refugee Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol, only 55 nations have signed a 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and even fewer, 27, the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.

Because citizenship disputes sometimes trigger displacement and refugee exoduses, and other refugee-statelessness problems overlap, the U.N. General Assembly in 1974 turned to UNHCR as a natural interlocutor in the absence of any other 'dedicated' statelessness organization and asked the agency to provide limited legal assistance to stateless persons. Seven years ago it mandated UNHCR to further broaden its role to help promote the avoidance and elimination of statelessness on a global scale.

After instructing more than 1,400 of its own staff on statelessness issues, the organization helped train a global network of lawyers, judges, government and non-government officials. UNHCR participated

directly with more than 60 governments in drafting or amending nationality laws and regional organizations such as the African Union in promoting statelessness resolutions.

Earlier this year, it queried a total of 192 countries to try for the first time to build a comprehensive global picture on statelessness: the problems countries are facing, laws and projects they have already adopted and the help they might need from UNHCR. The results will be known later this year.

From its early work in eastern and central Europe helping such groups as the descendants of 250,000 Tatars who were forcibly deported by Stalin from the Crimea in 1944, the agency has also expanded its activities to other parts of the world in need of help.

Along the roof of the world, an estimated 80,000 ethnic Nepalese fled neighboring Bhutan more than a decade ago (the number has since risen to 112,000). The Bhutanese government has said only a tiny number among this group are Bhutanese citizens and will eventually be allowed to repatriate—the great majority will fall into the legal limbo of statelessness unless a compromise can be engineered.

Across the world in the Western Hemisphere, between 250,000-500,000 ethnic Haitians living in the Dominican Republic are in a similar situation. Children born to these Haitians or from mixed marriages between Haitians and Dominicans are often refused registration at birth—thus being deprived of any official recognition. Groups of children have periodically been rounded up and unceremoniously dumped across the border into Haiti.

During the last war between Ethiopia and Eritrea on the Horn of Africa, nearly 100,000 ethnic Eritreans were arrested by the government in Addis Ababa and bundled into Eritrea.

There are few funds or manpower resources to help these and other stateless groups. UNHCR for instance has only one full-time statelessness expert. Governments need to be sympathetic or millions of people could become permanent outcasts.

Back in Kyrgyzstan a helping hand was extended. The country has modified its citizenship law and offered many of the legally stateless refugees who had fled Tajikistan a new nationality and a new start. At least one little pocket of suffering has been eradicated. ■

tection once more, to re-establish leadership, to become proactive rather than reactive.”

From there flowed the idea of what were first called “three circles consultations.” The idea for a revitalized protection regime was outlined in an internal paper: “UNHCR will engage in a series of consultations with experts and senior government representatives concerning measures to ensure international protection to all who need it, with a view to developing comprehensive legal standards... The objective of this process is to identify the content and nature of such protection, without detracting from international refugee instruments; to consolidate the various elements of UNHCR’s mandate; and to review the lawmaking process in the area of international protection.”

Feller added, “These consultations will address in particular the inadequacies in the international legal framework.”

Two years of roundtables, teleconferences and negotiations followed in what had now been relabelled Global Consultations.

“We were very nervous,” Volker Turk said. “At the beginning there were very many naysayers who predicted that the process was doomed.”

In the event, two years ago, 162 countries, refugee and humanitarian experts met in Geneva in the most important global meeting on refugees in half a century and adopted a landmark declaration reaffirming the validity of the 1951 Convention. The gathering recognized the ‘enduring importance’ and the ‘relevance and resilience’ of the document which Lubbers described as a treaty “about freedom from fear.”

“A few years ago, the Convention was under attack,” Lubbers said. “States were arguing it was out of date. That is no longer the case. Now, no one is questioning its continued validity.”

Encouraged by that endorsement and turning the Global Consultations into a more practical platform, the agency shaped what it called an Agenda for Protection, a framework containing the broad outlines, general directions and yardstick activities to be used by governments and humanitarian organizations to strengthen the protection regime.

Volker Turk said it was “a minor miracle that we have got as far as we have. We have regained our credibility. The carping has stopped.” Erika Feller said the agenda had become “part and parcel of the language and working framework of states at the highest level.”

High Commissioner Lubbers launched a series of specific initiatives aimed at strengthening both core protection instruments and programs and bridging the gap between where the agency’s protection mandate ends and where other organizations step in to promote long-term rehabilitation and development among returning refugees.

HELP

If Convention critics had backed away from the most radical demands to scrap or opt out of the 1951 ►

OLD PROBLEMS... NEW REALITIES

treaty, there was general recognition that it still needed help around the edges.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair said the document's "values are timeless" but added that "with vastly increasing economic migration around the world and most especially in Europe, there is an obvious need to set proper rules and procedures. The United Kingdom is taking the lead in arguing for reform, not of the Convention's values, but of how it operates."

One suggestion was the addition of a protocol similar to the 1967 treaty. "States got extremely nervous about that," one participant said. Like their predecessors at the original Convention negotiations, govern-

ment host huge numbers of refugees or where the displaced persons come from in the first place.

The Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) covering Indochinese refugees was a forerunner of the type of agreement the High Commissioner proposed under his new initiative.

At the recent inaugural meeting of a special forum to debate Convention Plus attended by government and non-governmental representatives, Lubbers underlined a theme that has dominated many of his speeches: that giving assistance in the field, providing legal help and involvement in asylum issues is only half the battle. Ultimately, refugees must be helped to restart their lives, either by returning home or starting afresh in a new country.

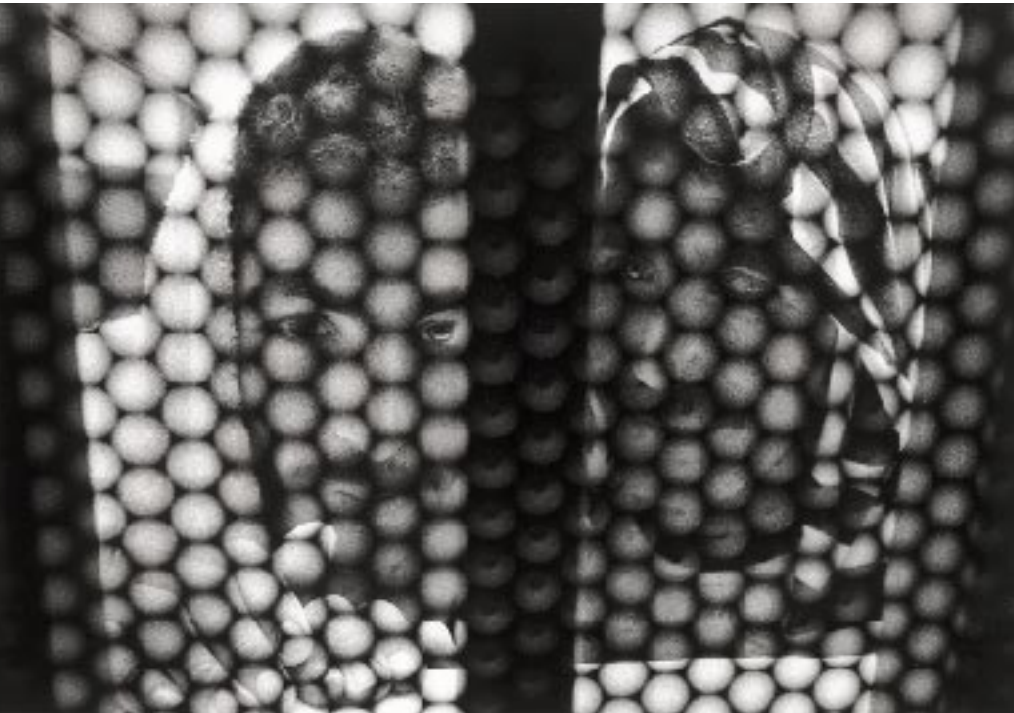
Or as he said in one recent speech: "Protection is not protection if there are no solutions." He added in another presentation that "2002 was the year UNHCR started to portray itself as part of the solution." But there was still a long way to go and finding permanent solutions "was (still) not functioning well enough."

The agency encouraged states to accept more refugees for permanent resettlement (see *Somali Bantu story page 10*) or to integrate them locally in countries where they had first sought asylum (Development through Local Integration -DLI).

Pilot projects were undertaken in Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Eritrea to ensure the successful homecoming of refugees by creating a seamless operation during the four major phases of return—namely repatriation, reintegration, rehabilitation and reconstruction. Lubbers dubbed this the 4Rs initiative intended to eliminate one of the most prob-

lematic and persistent faultlines in humanitarian operations—the gap in many operations between emergency assistance provided by organizations such as UNHCR and funds to launch and sustain long-term development.

High-level protection officials also insisted that a widespread change of attitude and of tone was necessary to successfully push the protection agenda forward in such troubled times. "If we don't show more flexibility, if we do not move away from the 'purist' line that protection claims are always paramount and governments' actions are always tinged with suspicion, we are going to make ourselves and the Convention irrelevant," said one.



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UNHCR is concerned at the increasing government use of detention.

ments were "not ready to go into new, legally binding texts," the source said. From the opposite end of the spectrum, there was concern that wide ranging discussions could end up "unravelling and fatally weakening the Convention," she said. "It was a path down which no one wanted to travel."

Instead, Lubbers proposed a project he called Convention Plus, effectively a series of flexible special agreements, either binding or non binding, between states and/or humanitarian organizations. They would address problems such as more equitable burden sharing, tackling the erratic flow of refugees and asylum seekers and targeting increased development aid to the world's poorest countries which either

"WHAT REALLY DEMONSTRATES HOW DAFT, HOW STUPID, HOW WEAK WE HAVE BECOME IS THAT WE GIVE COUNCIL ACCOMMODATION... TO THOSE PLANNING TO MURDER US ALL WITH DEADLY POISON."

Another added, “Our approach has already changed. We used to tell states ‘You can’t do that... unless.’ Now we’re saying, ‘Yes we can do that... but let’s also examine the problems.’ It is a far more positive and productive approach.”

Some critics disagree, viewing this approach as a dangerous path to tread, a short step from handing over the protection mantle to the very governments that should be closely monitored.

CONVENTION MINUS

Improvements in protection do face ferocious barriers, a mountain of obstacles dubbed by some as ‘Convention Minus.’

In Europe, the Pacific and North America the interception of people trying to reach countries where they might claim asylum has increased.

The refugee agency will present a draft conclusion later in the year to its governing Executive Committee for approval, insisting that intercepting countries must take all measures to identify genuine refugees and asylum seekers before they can be turned back.

The number of ‘unacceptable’ detentions also rose, though UNHCR has long recognized the right of countries to hold people in certain circumstances for a limited amount of time, optimally for no more than one month.

On the ground, a recent protection report noted: “The lack of security remains endemic, camps and settlements have been infiltrated by armed elements, refugees are intercepted, denied entry or forcibly returned, are unable to gain access to effective asylum procedures, are not given papers, increasing the risk of arbitrary detention and deportation, face hostility from host populations and frequently risk attack, rape and death.”

Though the fallout and anticipated backlash against refugees and asylum seekers in the wake of the attacks in the United States and war on terrorism was not as widespread as anticipated, there was still cause for concern.

“In taking counter-terrorism measures, we must ensure that governments avoid making unwarranted linkages between refugees and terrorism,” Lubbers said. “Genuine refugees themselves are the victims of persecution and terrorism, not its perpetrators.” And in another speech: “There is a risk these people may become convenient scapegoats and may be unfairly victimized. We must not allow this to happen.”

But in the United States, thousands of people targeted for resettlement—a major plank in the agency’s search for permanent solutions—did feel the backlash, at least temporarily. Though the 2002 admission quota to that country was set at 70,000, only 26,300 people were admitted. UNHCR reported a plunge of 56 percent in resettlement cases directly under its auspices in other parts of the world.



UNHCR/M. ECHANDI/CS/MEX•2002



UNHCR/N. BEHRING/DP/SLE•2003

The refugee agency, the only U.N. organization with an official mandate to protect refugees, also worried that in an already complex environment where it was increasingly difficult to separate genuine refugees from other ‘migrants’ the roles of humanitarian agencies themselves were becoming fuzzy.

Officials expressed concern at the increasing number of agencies describing their work as ‘protection’ related which could lead to a dilution of expertise ultimately detrimental to the very people everyone was trying to help.

One protection official described the problem colorfully: “UNHCR is sometimes like the ugly bride who arrives at church with a small dowry. We often deliver messages governments don’t want to hear and we are not very welcome.” Other agencies, however, “are trying to be the beautiful bride with the large dowry, ready to please.”

HIGH STAKES AND SPIN

Recent events in Europe underscore the high stakes, spin, misunderstandings and even a cloak-and-dagger atmosphere which can arise anytime immigration and protection are on the international agenda.

Britain earlier this year floated a controversial proposal which would essentially ‘export’ Europe’s asylum problem by establishing a series of processing centers in countries on the outskirts of the Union, or as London described it “within wider Europe” where people seeking sanctuary would be vetted.

The Observer newspaper quickly reported a “Secret Balkan camp built to hold UK asylum seekers.” The story was subsequently debunked.

As the intrigue mounted, other newspapers allegedly spotted the British ambassador in Albania skulking around remote mountain areas inspecting potential detention facilities.

Faced with ferocious criticism from human rights groups and some fellow European states, London dropped that idea but then suggested the establishment of ‘zones of protection’ further afield in areas such as the Horn of Africa from where many refugees originated and where they would be assisted and vetted under the British proposal.

Foreign Secretary Jack Straw insisted that this second project had the “full support of UNHCR.”

Recognizing both the delicacy and urgency of the issue, the refugee agency issued what it called a “three-pronged approach to improving the global asylum system.” One called for the strengthening of the asylum

(Continued on page 18)

Helping decommissioned child soldiers such as these in Sierra Leone and assisting Guatemalan refugees receive land titles and citizenship in Mexico are unconventional protection programs.

Kerosene shortages, property

It's all in a day's work for a UNHCR protection officer

BY JACK REDDEN

For three relentless hours, refugees from Afghanistan's minority Hazara community bombarded the UNHCR official with complaints about medical services, questions about repatriation and demands for everything from computer lessons to protection against police abuse. Masti Notz was elated.

"This is great, these refugees know their rights," the head of the agency's office in Peshawar replied when a staff member suggested that the refugees of Bassu camp were too demanding. "This is a model camp."

The nearly 5,500 residents in Bassu, sited in a remote bulge of Pakistani territory surrounded on three sides by the sweeping mountains of Afghanistan, built their mud houses last winter in three months by hand. They pooled their resources to buy a generator that powers the light bulbs needed to extend the hours in which they can weave the carpets that provide most of their income.

The meeting with Notz was held on the shaded veranda of their new mosque. Listening to the refugees' concerns, Notz's instinctive reaction was to ensure UNHCR provided as much protection and support as possible. "I am convinced that the whole raison d'être of UNHCR rests on protection of refugees—both legal and physical," said the head of operations in Pakistan's turbulent North West Frontier Province (NWFP).

After spending most of her 10-year career in UNHCR as a protection officer, Notz carried that training to her current post. Protection is as much a mindset as a product of training and in one recent four-day period that became apparent as she confronted virtually every aspect of UNHCR's protection mandate.

She is in an angry mood at the start of a four-hour drive to Kurram, a district on the extreme edge of Pakistan's fiercely independent Tribal Areas. UNHCR had failed for months to provide kerosene to Afghan refugees who fled during the 2001 U.S.-led war that unseated the country's Taliban rulers.

"There has been no kerosene distribution since March so there is no light in the camp," she said. "This is a fundamental protection is-



UNHCR/J. REDDEN/DP/PAK2003

Addressing the concerns of Afghan refugees.

sue." Without nighttime illumination, women using communal toilets face the danger of rape. Children get lost. Thieves sneak undetected into darkened camps. Refugees seeking a substitute for kerosene scavenge for firewood, straining relations with their Pakistani hosts who also depend on the limited resources.

OTHER VIEWPOINTS

Notz routinely tells UNHCR employees to put themselves in the shoes of refugees and others. It's a practice she displayed for the

benefit of the staff themselves at the UNHCR guesthouse in Saddar, a chaotic administrative town amid the rice paddies in the Kurram district. In Pakistan, female staff cannot mix easily with male staff in the evening. Notz authorized the purchase of a second television set and separate phone lines for female staff to keep in touch with their families.

Notz herself was born in Los Angeles, lived until the age of 10 in Iran, speaks fluent English, French, Spanish and Farsi and as "a product of East and West, I see each culture through the other's eyes."

disputes, rape, lost children

in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province



The following day, after a Land Cruiser trip across a largely dry gravel streambed, 4,000 refugees in Old Baghzai camp voiced their concerns. One Afghan cannot return home because he doesn't have a school certificate needed to get work; Notz directed him to an appropriate office in Peshawar. One youth would like to return, but his father is paralysed; she suggested that as a particularly 'vulnerable' family, they might be better to stay in Old Baghzai.

But Notz was also carrying a tough message to the four camps in Kurram and their

'new' 2001 refugees who arrived long after 1.2 million others who have been in exile for as long as 23 years.

In early 2002, UNHCR began helping refugees return to Afghanistan, with the majority coming from Notz's Frontier Province region. A tripartite agreement between the U.N. refugee agency and the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan covering the operation ends in early 2005, however, after which remaining Afghans could be screened to determine whether they are in need of refugee status or will simply be bracketed as economic migrants.

"You have to think seriously about what you are going to do when this camp closes," Notz warned.

When a refugee from Jalalabad complained he no longer had a home to go back to in that city, Notz urged him to be realistic: UNHCR covers the cost of transportation home, a package of food and other resettlement assistance and shelter for the most vulnerable. But it cannot promise the immediate return of land or property, one of the most contentious issues facing the Afghan government.

Notz and her fellow protection officers in the field must also constantly balance individual needs within a larger framework.

BALANCING ACT

"Empathy is very good in trying to redress some of the small things, but you have to be able to do things evenhandedly," she said. "You cannot have empathy for everybody, you need to have rules and regulations so you can distribute things evenly among people, so that you can treat people in the same way. If you try to have empathy for each person, it just doesn't go far enough."

Notz followed a similar routine in the other camps she visited, delivering warnings, tackling individual problems and leveling everything with a touch of humor.

"I'm like a dentist," she told one gathering in the Farsi language, which many Afghans understand. "I only know how to pull out teeth. I don't do surgery and all those other things."

When one woman complained of worms in the distributed food, Notz discovered the supplies were not checked. She ordered an immediate examination of existing and future stocks.

After a man protested that he was given pills rather than a more effective injection, she turned to the side, adjusted the dark glasses she always wears, and quietly advised a doctor never to forget that treating largely illiterate refugees can require a large dose of psychology as well as the medicine itself.

Back in Peshawar, Notz discussed the problems she has uncovered on her field trip with the Commissioner of Afghan Refugees in NWFP, Brigadier Mushtaq Alizai. When she first arrived here just before the September 11 attacks in the United States, relations between UNHCR and the government were tense. Pakistan supported the Taliban and backed up its demands that refugees go home with harassment and arrests.

The situation is far more cordial nowadays. The Commissioner urged 'voluntary pressure' to increase the number of refugees returning, but he also endorsed improved medical services and a distribution of quilts after Notz had asked for an increase in the number of women doctors on call and checks on the quantity and quality of medicine available.

A group of relatives asked her to help in locating a girl, now aged about 19, who was taken to Germany as an orphan for medical care more than a decade ago. Notz promised to look into it, but also underlined that UNHCR both then and now would consider what was in the best interests of a child—a basic principle of protection.

In earlier days at UNHCR, Notz said, protection may have been considered an 'ivory tower' issue with specialists turning out rather academic papers. These experts are still essential, of course—especially in helping governments draft refugee legislation—but in the field, the 1951 Refugee Convention takes on a human face.

"You have to be constantly vigilant," said Notz. "When you have protection glasses on, you see the world in a certain way." ■

"IF YOU TRY TO HAVE EMPATHY FOR EACH PERSON, IT JUST DOESN'T GO FAR ENOUGH."

(Continued from page 15)

► systems of individual states. A second would transform Europe into a single asylum regime, crucially with any central processing centers inside the Union rather than outside as the British had suggested, and therefore subject to direct European oversight.

A third 'regional' prong urged traditional donors to significantly bolster their aid both to refugees and host countries in poor areas of the world, thereby reducing the pressure to seek asylum further afield. It included special arrangements tailored for specific refugee groups.

The two approaches were fundamentally different. As a UNHCR spokesman, Rupert Colville, later insisted: "We are concerned with making more concerted and imaginative efforts to grapple with specific situations in regions of origin, not with creating new geographical or physical entities. We want to remove the pressures on refugees to move, not somehow trying to contain them. UNHCR is not talking about 'zones of protection.' We're not sure what this concept means."

the world and send a dangerous signal about the UK's commitment to human rights."

There were few winners amid the wreckage.

SOVEREIGNTY AND IDPs

On the larger global stage, debate continued to swirl around the fundamental issues of sovereignty, the right to intervene during humanitarian crises and the responsibility for helping anywhere between 20-25 million people who are internally displaced within their own countries, a group bureaucratically referred to as IDPs.

In one of the most controversial speeches by any U.N. Secretary-General, Kofi Annan three years ago urged member states to put aside their most jealously guarded powers—sovereignty and the sanctity of national borders—in the higher interest of protecting civilians caught in the crossfire of war.

In a radical set of recommendations, Annan suggested the Security Council could intervene indirectly in internal conflicts, authorizing preventive peace-keeping missions, creating 'safe corridors' in war

HIGH COMMISSIONER LUBBERS ACKNOWLEDGED HIS ORGANIZATION HAD REACHED A 'SIGNIFICANT' CROSSROADS AND NEW PROTECTION STRATEGIES WERE ALL NOW ON THE DRAWING BOARD.

The devil was in the nuance but Amnesty International, in a 37-page report, further muddied the waters by suggesting the British and UNHCR proposals were one and the same. The report's very title: "UK/EU/UNHCR: Unlawful and unworkable extraterritorial processing of asylum claims" set the tone.

The riposte was unprecedented. "The Amnesty report clearly misrepresents UNHCR's position," Volker Turk insisted. "It is flawed in its legal and policy arguments. It does a disservice to what we are trying to do by linking all the proposals together. It has fed into, and badly misled, the public debate."

Lubbers said the agency's position had been "widely misinterpreted and misrepresented." Its regional proposals were "not about burden shifting, it's about burden sharing."

The damage nevertheless had been done. Experts, government officials and the media, let alone the general public, seemed hopelessly confused about who had proposed what. The Guardian newspaper, normally an informed journal on asylum issues, reported in one story that Prime Minister Blair had "failed to win agreement for EU funding of the U.N.'s plan to set up 'zones of protection' when the story was a clear reference to the British, not the UNHCR plan.

The same article reported 12 British organizations protesting to Blair that British backing for this so-called U.N. (in reality British) plan: "These proposals will be seen as shifting responsibility for asylum seekers and refugees to some of the poorest countries in

zones to enable aid agencies to reach beleaguered populations, enforcing existing international humanitarian and human rights law and imposing sanctions such as arms embargoes against recalcitrant states.

In a more recent report entitled "The Responsibility to Protect," Gareth Evans, president of the International Crisis Group and Mohamed Sahnoun, special advisor to Annan on Africa, concluded that in the last decade the international community had "made a mess" of humanitarian intervention in places like Kosovo, Rwanda and Bosnia.

Debate had degenerated into "cantankerous exchanges in which fervent supporters of intervention on human rights groups, opposed by anxious defenders of state sovereignty, dug themselves deeper and deeper into opposing trenches."

The authors argued that military intervention should be used on occasion—but sparingly and following strict guidelines. The issue itself should be reframed from 'the right to intervene' to 'responsibility to protect.' In itself this responsibility to protect would be an umbrella concept embracing not just a 'responsibility to react' but also a 'responsibility to prevent' and a 'responsibility to rebuild.'

While governments and policy experts slugged it out, the debate over the care of victims of internal conflict bogged down.

Though it does not have a general mandate for IDPs, UNHCR currently cares for around six million people from this group. Their plight is similar to ►

Too many cooks?

More organizations are trying to help the world's internally displaced. But is this a helpful development?

BY IAN PIPER

In the past few years, the problem of the world's internally displaced people has grown, attracted more media attention and increasingly involved a wider section of the international humanitarian community.

There have been calls for UNHCR to take a more prominent role and other agencies such as the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) have adopted higher profiles in helping this group of uprooted persons—actions which might be seen as clouding the established operational role of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The ICRC has been active for many years in helping the internally displaced, estimated by the U.N. to number 20-25 million around the world, a role widely recognized by governments and military authorities and based on international humanitarian law. Recent operations in West and Central Africa underline this ongoing commitment.

But clearly, with wars themselves becoming more complex and confused and the increased number of humanitarian actors signaling the biggest change in the IDP environment in a decade, there is a need for greater understanding, cooperation and coordination to avoid unnecessary overlap and confusion.

The ICRC must be centrally involved, and a major challenge for the organization will be how well it handles its relations with other agencies.

These issues have to be tackled at headquarters level, but also critically in the field where fumbled decisions can cost lives.

Within the Red Cross 'family' the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and some of its individual members are already involved with helping the internally displaced. This requires coordination between these organizations and their partners. The solution may be an increased leader-

ship and coordination role by the ICRC, even outside the immediate Red Cross/Red Crescent movement.

The most critical relationship is that between UNHCR and this greater Red Cross family. Often operating in the same areas on behalf of the same people, ICRC and UNHCR, in particular, need to be clear about their respective re-



AFP/GETTY IMAGES/ANDRES CARRASCO

Helping the world's unfortunate.

sponsibilities and roles and their attitude to donor-driven organizations new to the scene, especially in view of the new complexities including the involvement of ethnic, religious and even criminal elements in armed conflict and the growth of internal wars in the last 30 years.

GROWING ROLE

ICRC's own operational role is growing. It focuses on the urgent needs of all people affected by conflict—not only persons forced to abandon their homes, but also local populations in whose communities IDPs have sought sanctuary. Both groups have the right to protection under the Geneva Conventions.

In some cases, for instance, while IDPs can eventually move on, local civilians may wish to stay and look after their homes, therefore needing greater protection.

The ICRC has to be clearer about what it means by 'urgent needs' and a 'direct result of conflict'. It needs to clarify to what extent it will support and rehabilitate IDPs in periods of transition, including populations returning home after a war.

There is cause for concern about so-called neglected situations, problems which have slipped from the media gaze, attract less interest from governments and are no longer considered emergencies. Long-term IDPs who are not covered by ICRC's mandate often fall into this category. Their eligibility for support may be challenged as they settle into lives of poverty and discrimination, living on the outskirts of cities such as Bogota, Sarajevo, Khartoum and Luanda.

To further strengthen its operations, the ICRC has now included a blueprint called the "Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement" in its training schedule, recognizing these principles as a useful tool in areas not already covered by international humanitarian law such as the return of displaced persons to their homes or the recovery of documentation. The ICRC helped draft the principles, though they are not legally binding.

Finally, while helping uprooted people in a practical manner, ICRC also contributes to the global debate on displaced persons, refugees and migrants.

The responsibility of states, with which the ICRC has a unique relationship, is important. Governments that create the problem of displacement must be held to account. They must recognize people who are in a precarious and threatening situation need security, humanity and justice and must not be treated simply as migration statistics by states fearful of population movements. ■

IAN PIPER is a senior press officer at ICRC's Geneva headquarters.



AP/AMIR SHAH

Going home, as more than two million Afghans have done since early 2002, is the best solution and protection for most refugees.

refugees, they are often in the same geographical locations as ongoing refugee operations and it is common sense that the agency should care for specific populations.

But each new crisis produces the same political and operational dilemmas, the latest example being the war in Iraq.

Both within UNHCR and within the greater U.N. and humanitarian families there were familiar questions: since IDPs are not covered by UNHCR's mandate why should the organization become involved? Did it, anyway, have the resources at the time of financial retrenchment, to take on additional responsibilities? If it did not become involved would it cede part of its patch and its importance to other eager players in an increasingly competitive and crowded humanitarian environment?

There were unlikely to be clear-cut answers to any of these questions on IDPs and sovereignty for years to come.

INVISIBLE PROTECTION

Away from glamorous crises such as Iraq, the television cameras and media headlines and the high-profile conference circuit, what one report described as the 'largely invisible work of protection' continued, unheralded and unremarked, a myriad of daily programs and projects, large and small.

Proper documentation and refugee registration helps to prevent arbitrary detention or *refoulement* (the forcible return of refugees). In Ecuador a data base developed jointly by the government and UNHCR now provides documentation assistance to Colombian refugees. In Côte d'Ivoire, Georgia, Guinea and Yemen, ID cards were distributed for the first time not only to men but also to women.

Canadian police officers were deployed to Guinea early in the year to help improve refugee camp layout

and alleviate the threat of physical attacks, especially against women.

Recognizing the particular vulnerability of females, a range of other protection programs were initiated.

These were closely linked to efforts to increase the access to education, which not only prepares young people for the future, but also helps protect them from sexual abuse, military recruitment and trafficking.

In Sri Lanka teach-ins were organized to educate returning civilians about the dangers of unexploded military ordnance.

In Sierra Leone, guerrillas, especially child soldiers, were helped through the painful process of demobilizing and reintegrating into societies which they had terrorized for years.

A review of the protection capacities in 11 African countries was recently completed, part of ongoing legal efforts to help countries worldwide, but especially poor and developing states, to put into place effective legal and physical asylum and immigration structures.

In recent months, El Salvador, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Moldova, Paraguay and Peru all approved refugee legislation for the first time. Ukraine and Timor-Leste acceded to the 1951 Convention and/or the 1967 Protocol, bringing to 145 the number of states to have done so.

In Croatia, Bosnia and Burundi, efforts to resolve property and land disputes continue, though such processes can take years to complete.

The refugee agency encouraged the integration of refugees in host countries. In one successful example, more than 7,600 civilians originally from Guatemala were naturalized since 1996 in Mexico. A similar large-scale project is currently underway in Zambia.

Stateless civilians in the central Asian state of Kyrgyzstan have been awarded citizenship and UNHCR has expanded its efforts to help an estimated nine million stateless persons around the world to 'come in from the cold' and find homes (see page 12).

The agency sponsored CDs by local artists, a television soap opera and radio and television adverts in an effort to combat xenophobia in Côte d'Ivoire.

In Yemen's capital, Sana'a, a law course on refugee and human rights reached nearly 500 staff, an initial springboard to countrywide dissemination of the information.

Encouraging though all of those projects were, there was still a long way to go to reach Lubbers ultimate protection objective.

As he said in one recent speech: "It is better to bring safety to people, not people to safety." But he added: "When the international community fails to do this, as it frequently does, we must uphold the right of people to seek and enjoy asylum." ■

ANGOLA

A new BEGINNING

After three decades of war, an unlikely peace is blossoming in Angola

BY FERNANDO DEL MUNDO

LIKE A SPHINX, Angola is rising from the ashes after three decades of civil war. Schools, clinics, hospitals and homes are being rebuilt in the southwest African nation. Roads are being repaired. And most importantly, people are going home.

More than one million persons, mainly civilians, were killed, four million were displaced within Angola and nearly 500,000 fled to neighboring countries during one of the world's most enduring conflicts.

But following a peace agreement in April last year between the government and Angola's rebel movement,

UNITA, some 1.6 million displaced persons 'spontaneously' returned to their towns and villages in a country twice the size of Texas and rich in oil, diamonds, other minerals and fertile land.

Early this summer, UNHCR began an organized repatriation of refugees, opening up routes from neighboring Namibia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia as the tempo of return increased.

In Angola's eastern province of Moxico, there is a mood of optimism amid the war ruins. Davide Zeferino, a 41-year-old former maths teacher, walked for 10 days from the Meheba refugee camp in Zambia to the town of Cazombo on a look-see visit before asking his wife and seven children to join him.

He carried 10 kilos of rice and clothes as capital to establish himself as a small time trader selling dried fish. He hopes eventually to use his education to join a non-governmental or international organization.

"Life here is very difficult," he concedes, "but there are practical things you can do and be hopeful about the future."

Maria Clara Bambi, who fled the country in 1978, has turned a pile of rubble in Cazombo into a neat home. In Kinshasa, the Congo capital where she spent her exile, she learned how to make pastries from which she now earns a small income. With her blond hair, fuchsia jacket over a blue shirt and denims and black JP Tod's moccasins, Maria Clara Bambi is also optimistic: "There is no more war. It is all over."

HOPE AND CAUTION

Just off the main road leading into Cazombo, a small colony of soldiers who were demobilized several weeks ear-

lier await their promised rehabilitation in a dozen tents and grass huts. They are both a symbol of hope—that the war may really be over—and of caution—that much remains to be done if the scars of war are to be healed.

In the north of the country, returnees are rebuilding their shattered homes. Sixty-percent of Kuimba commune was destroyed in the war and it was empty just a year ago. Today, 60 percent of the original 25,000 population has returned. "This place had been swallowed up by the forest, but when the people returned they pushed it back," said Alexander Gomes, a local education coordinator, proudly.

But amidst the general euphoria, there are cautionary signs. Most of the country's infrastructure was destroyed and the landscape remains pockmarked with bullet-sprayed homes, shops, barracks and churches, many of them a legacy of 400 years of Portuguese colonial rule. It will take years or decades to repair the damage.

"In many places, the basic infrastructure is not there yet to make returns feasible," according to UNHCR's Angola representative Janvier de Riedmatten, which is why the agency is only helping people to return to 'viable' communities.

HEAVILY MINED

Angola is one of the most heavily mined regions in the world. More than 100,000 people were disfigured by the deadly ordnance during the war and it remains a threat today. A test run for a repatriation convoy from Zambia was delayed for one month earlier this year after an unexploded anti-tank shell was found near the highway which is lined with tall elephant grass severely restricting visibility through the rainforest.

It is a difficult choice to abandon the comparative safety of a refugee camp, its schools, medical services and vocational training facilities, for a very uncertain future, especially for particularly vulnerable people.

Forty-five-year-old Catherine Kadina-Mungeko lost her husband to the war and two children to disease. Following renewed fighting in 1998, a land mine blew off her leg as she was carrying her fifth child. "I can only go (home) when the time is good," she says cautiously.

Sixty-year-old Isabelle Lututala first fled the country in 1973. After several years in exile, she returned home and fled again as the pace of the war ebbed and flowed. In the process she lost four of her nine children—a daughter and three sons—one of whom was shot in front of her.

This time, she said, "When I go home, I want to stay for good." ■



UNHCR/C. MIRTENBAUM/DP/ANG-003

En route home.

WATER



THREE DAYS TO LIVE...

Sahel drought 1974.

AS HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF TERRIFIED Rwandans poured across the border, they crashed into a cruel illusion. Sparkling in the tropical African sun, the vast expanse of Lake Kivu stretched away to the horizon, offering the bedraggled army of displaced people the hope of immediate and unlimited supplies of lifesaving water.

But as the exodus continued relentlessly, the Rwandans were pushed further and further away from the lake, finally settling into the nooks and crannies atop a dry plain of black and grey volcanic rock dozens of miles away.

In a matter of days in the summer of 1994, more than one million Rwandans trying to escape the ongoing genocide in their country, tumbled into neighboring Zaire (today the Democratic Republic of the Congo). In the following weeks, despite a multi-billion dollar international aid effort, as many as 60,000 died

from a vicious cycle of water shortages, disease and, inevitably, cholera.

As the world population has more than doubled in the past 60 years, an increasing number of people are facing water shortages, threats to their economic and environmental well-being, their health and like the Rwandans, their very lives. Groundwater, the unseen source of life for two billion people, is diminishing at an alarming rate almost everywhere.

Some 450 million people in 29 countries live with chronic water shortages. One person in six has no access to safe drinking water and more than two billion people have no adequate sanitation. Waterborne diseases kill a child every eight seconds and are responsible for 80 percent of all illnesses and death in the developing world.

Refugees and other displaced groups are among the most vulnerable of the vulnerable.

Uprooted peoples often escape from the world's poorest nations, only to find sanctuary in equally destitute countries. Refugee camps are sometimes located in thinly populated parts of a country where there is little infrastructure and, most importantly, little water.

HOT AND DRY

The Horn of Africa, home in the last few decades to hundreds of thousands of refugees from Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia, is one of the hottest and driest spots on earth. Sudan has an estimated four million people on the move, but much of the country is desert or scrub. Even when water is tantalizingly close, as in the case of the fleeing Rwandans, it may still be difficult to access because of political or military problems.

In such often inaccessible regions, in the middle of a war, water can be prohibitively expensive and difficult to deliver even when its need is recognized as paramount. An adult can live for several weeks without food, for instance, but in extreme conditions, two or three days without water turns into a sentence of death.

In Zaire, the United States military eventually used heavyweight Galaxy transport aircraft to move water pumping stations halfway across the world to tap into Lake Kivu. It then cost \$10,000 a day to get the minimum acceptable amount of water—around 7 liters per day per person—to 200,000 people in one camp only a few miles away.

In parts of the Horn in the 1990s, some refugees were forced to survive on less than three liters per day.

Access to water is a basic human right and together with partners such as water specialist Oxfam, UNHCR is already involved in a variety of water-related projects around the world. They include not only trucking supplies to isolated camps, drilling wells, maintaining generators and water pumps, but also building dams and rehabilitating lakes and rivers to help protect the environment and, where possible, encouraging small-scale fishing and agricultural programs to help make refugees self-sufficient.

To mark the International Year of Freshwater in 2003, the agency launched a global survey to identify any major gaps in its programs to provide safe water to the more than 20 million people it cares for worldwide.

Improvements probably will include a more systematic collection and use of data, improved cooperation with other agencies and better use of groundwa-

ter and rainwater catchments.

Funds permitting, of course. As budgets became tighter, the refugee agency has been forced to slash the amount of money available for research and development projects, training and on-the-ground programs.

"We need to learn how to value water," U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said recently, referring to the continuing wasteful use of water in many parts of the world.

That is one lesson most refugees have already taken to heart. ■

Liberia:
The joy of water.



UNHCR/C. SHIRLEY/CS/LBR-1997

“We are here today and TOMORROW WE DISAPPEAR”

Colombia's indigenous and poor people bear the brunt of conflict



UNICR/W. SPINDLER/DP/2003

Colombia's indigenous groups have become particularly vulnerable in that country's ongoing conflict.

BY WILLIAM SPINDLER

DEEP IN THE AMAZON RAIN FORESTS, clandestine laboratories refine local coca leaves into cocaine. Powerful crime syndicates, opposing guerrilla and paramilitary groups duel for control of the lucrative trade with destructive scorched earth military and assassination campaigns.

The regular army, supported by the United States, recently stepped up its campaign to eliminate both the trade and its sponsors. Heavily fortified airstrips, military compounds, checkpoints and lumbering patrols stud the landscape. Overhead, crop-spraying aircraft unleash deadly clouds of chemicals to destroy the coca fields.

The epicenter of all this activity, Colombia's southern province of Putumayo, became one of the most dangerous places in the turbulent South American country.

Some peasant farmers abandoned their hamlets and villages and fled in increasing numbers to somewhat safer larger towns.

Since 1985, non-governmental organizations estimate as many as three million people were uprooted from their homes (the government said this figure is too high) to become internally displaced within Colombia or refugees in neighboring states. More than 200,000 persons were killed in the unending cycle of violence involving the army, entrenched landowning elites, and irregular armed groups fighting for territory, power and wealth not only in Putumayo, but also in many other parts of the country.

HIT HARD

Amid this ongoing carnage, Colombia's indigenous populations and its poorest regions have paid a particularly high price. The small ethnic groups face not only death and displacement, but also the permanent loss of their way of life and centuries-old cultures.

In the semi-abandoned villages of Putumayo in the south, one indigenous leader worried: "Unfortunately for us, our lands are of great strategic importance to the armed groups. They have killed many members of our communities. They try to recruit our youth by persuasion or force. Many families have become displaced."

The territory of the Cofan ethnic group in the border area with neighboring Ecuador is also under threat. But "the land is the most important thing of all," according to one Cofan official. "If we lose our territory, we disappear as a culture, as a community. We lose our children, we lose everything. We become poor. We become sad. We remain only as drifters. We are here today and tomorrow we disappear."

In the north, many of the 20,000 Sikwanis (Guahibo) ethnic group living in border areas with Venezuela fled springtime fighting between paramilitaries and guerrillas from FARC, the largest of Colombia's left-wing groups.

Last year, one-third of the 4,500 strong Kankuamos people were displaced from the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta region. There, the origins of the universe rest on four pillars, one belonging to each of the main ethnic groups in the region, and the rude eviction of the Kankuamos upset that delicate cultural balance ac-

“WE NEED DOCUMENTS FOR OUR SECURITY,

cording to the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC).

Tule (Kuna), Bari, Embera and other groups from the Sierra Nevada, Naya and Chocó regions also found themselves under pressure.

RESPONDING

Local groups, aided by UNHCR, have begun to respond.

The refugee agency helps the Indigenous Zonal Organization of Putumayo (OZIP) which in turn provides practical help, legal advice and training to individuals and local authorities (*cabildos*) and it researches indigenous cultures themselves.

This assistance paid off for everyone when OZIP was able to negotiate an agreement with the government to compensate local communities for voluntarily abandoning the cultivation of 6,000 hectares of coca.

Indigenous doctors known as *mambeadores de coca*, use this same leaf in a more beneficial manner, treating trauma victims of the conflict in time-honored traditional ways. Spiritual guides or *taitas* also employ a vine called *yagé* which for the Cofan people is “a spiritual element in our life and in ceremonial use allows us to propose a model for life for our future generations.”

Identification papers are as important as medicine or food in a country where the lack of proper documentation can prove deadly at the hands of gunmen or prevent people from receiving needed assistance.

In a more innocent era, “long time ago, the only *cédula* (ID) we had was this,” a Cofan traditional leader told one visitor recently. “This was all we needed to be identified by others,” he said, pointing at his many brightly colored necklaces.

But times have changed. Today “without a *cédula* you simply don’t exist,” another indigenous chief said. “We need documents for our security, to adapt to the needs of society, to receive basic health and education from the government. Without documents we can’t even register our dead.”

To improve that situation, indigenous populations were among the recipients of some of the 140,000 ID cards distributed thus far to IDPs and other groups of civilians considered to be particularly at risk in an ongoing project by the National Registry Office and UNHCR.

MASSACRE

Along with the indigenous groups, less developed parts of the country have been particularly savaged.

Chocó, a sliver of tropical jungle wedged between the Andes mountains and the Pacific Ocean in the northwest of the country is the poorest of all.

The regional capital, Quibdó, shelters more displaced persons per capita—tens of thousands of them—than any other population center in Colombia.

Along the banks of the nearby Atrato, San Juan and Baudó rivers, hundreds of thousands of mainly Afro-Colombians and indigenous civilians are trapped in the web of war. The armed gangs who control the waterways do not allow them to fish, hunt or gather wood.

Food, medicines, fuel and other essential supplies are intercepted and hijacked by the gunmen.

Travel itself is dangerous. At least 600 people have been killed in the last few years according to the main Afro-Colombian Association, ACIA.

The inhabitants of San Martín fled fighting four times, but when a navy unit clashed with guerrillas in April, they dispersed for the last time. They say they will never again return to San Martín.

The town of Bojayá is only now recovering from the worst single tragedy in the country’s blood soaked war.

In an incident a year ago, 119 people, many of them children, were killed and scores were wounded when a missile hit the church in which they were sheltering during another round of interminable fighting between FARC guerrillas and the paramilitaries.

A week after the massacre, a UNHCR team arrived in Bojayá and then established a permanent presence in Quibdó. Chocó was selected as one of the first areas in the country to benefit from the Humanitarian Action Plan, a joint initiative by U.N. agencies to target particular areas with a coordinated series of projects.

Teachers at the La Gloria urban school in a working class district of Quibdó have been trained to respond to the specific needs of displaced children among the 1,200 students. School and parent associations are being strengthened and new schoolrooms built.

A cultural center for displaced youth in another part of the town financed by the refugee agency promotes dance, music, theatre and literature and is being built by the youngsters themselves. “We are not investing on infrastructure but on communities themselves,” says UNHCR field officer Jovanny Salazar. “We want young people to build their own center themselves, learning practical and organizational skills and offering them alternatives.”

A fishing project near Bojayá will help 850 families. Some of the destroyed homes in the town of Napipí are being rebuilt. As with the country’s indigenous groups, other IDPs in the Chocó region are being supplied with identity documents.

A U.N. motor launch plies the Atrato river regularly, offering the isolated communities both reassurance and a link with the outside world.

But despite the help, while the conflict continues, Colombia’s embattled indigenous peoples mourn the destruction of the entire country. One Naya regional leader lamented: “Colombia is the most biodiverse country in the world and 75 percent of it is found in the territories of the indigenous peoples. When they attack us, they are attacking the whole of humanity.” ■



School in one of Colombia’s poorest regions.

UNHCR/8-HEBER/CSJ-COI-2003

TO RECEIVE BASIC HEALTH AND EDUCATION. WITHOUT DOCUMENTS WE CAN’T EVEN REGISTER OUR DEAD.”

COLOMBIA

There are photographs of death, rape and phantoms. In happier times, the pictures capture mom in the kitchen before the ‘troubles’ or a portrait of a smiling ‘little sister.’

For more than two years, Shin Takeda and the Aja Project handed out \$50 point-and-shoot cam-

eras to young displaced persons and refugees around the world with the simple instruction to chronicle their lives, both their suffering and hopes.

The following photographs and narrations are from a subsequent traveling exhibition and focus on Colombia’s uprooted children.

ALL PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE AJA PROJECT



Jazmín / 11 years old

In Pines they’ve killed lots of people, they’ve raped girls. For example last year they tortured a man, they cut him in half and left him naked. They’ve found girls dead there. Sometimes they rape girls and kill them afterwards and leave them there until they are found. That’s why I took this photo.



José William / 10 years old

When we played, we played ball or if not my brother would chase cars and I would go to play with my friends... Sometimes I saw that my parents were sad because we couldn't go out to play because other kids had been kidnapped and taken by the guerrillas and all that. That's why my parents got very sad... I'm happy because here I can go out happily and here I can play happily with my brother like I always wanted.



Elver José / 12 years old

This reminds me something of death, they seem like phantoms.



Jenny Mayerly / 12 years old

We all slept in a bed like this. When the guerrillas came and threatened my dad the only thing my dad did was turn on the light. They hit the lightbulb and everything was dark and they began rummaging through everything. They took my dad outside and smacked him with the blade of a machete and my mom was all worried, my mom cried, we did too... My poor little brother, he came out like this because my mom took a lot of pills for her headache and molars and all that. That's why my little brother came out like this. We've done everything possible to help him get back his sight.

Sol Marina / 10 years old

We love our little sister a lot because we take care of her when my dad isn't around. My mom left us when we were small, I was three and my sister was eight. We have to leave here because my stepmother is bored with us, so we have to go to Tolima (*a different state*).





Gustavo Angel / 14 years old

The kitchen where we lived before was the same like this. When the army got there, it threw bombs to kill guerrillas and all that. No bombs hit us, although a guerrilla killed my uncle because he didn't want to fight with them. I was four or five years old. I cried because they killed my uncle and I didn't know what to do. I left there to the forest, and from there to the mountains and arrived at night. I felt real bad. My mom almost fainted; it gave her a heart attack.



The media and asylum seekers: victims one day, scroungers the next.

“Genuine refugees themselves are the victims of persecution and terrorism, not its perpetrators.”

High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers.

“The delivery of protection is a staff intensive, specialized service that cannot be equated with the distribution of relief items. It is the *raison d’être*, the ‘added value’ of UNHCR.”

A UNHCR protection memo.

“The lack of security remains endemic, camps have been infiltrated by armed elements, refugees are intercepted, denied entry or forcibly returned, are unable to gain access to asylum procedures, are not given papers.”

A recent UNHCR protection report.

“They are non persons, political ghosts, without a legal home, a country or an identity.”

An expert on the plight of an estimated nine million stateless persons.

“What demonstrates how stupid, how weak we have become is that we now give state benefits to those planning to murder us all with deadly poison.”

A comment in the almost daily crusade by some British newspapers against ‘bogus’ asylum seekers.

Liberia “is basically destroyed.”

U.N. Special Representative Jacques Klein at the height of the recent fighting in the devastated West African nation.

“My wife and two children have both died. Now I’m so hungry, I’m afraid I may also die. I’m seeing double and my insides hurt at night. Can you help me?”

The Reverend Terrance Dudley, a refugee in the Liberian capital of Monrovia.

“I heard everything but could do nothing. I was powerless.”

A Congolese farmer describing the recent massacre of his wife, eight children and two brothers by gunmen.

“We cannot forget the past, but we must look to the future and Kosovo’s citizens must ensure safety for Kosovo’s minorities.”

President Ibrahim Rugova, urging the return of 200,000 ethnic Serbs who fled in 1999.

“The paramilitaries told us if we didn’t leave they would make us kneel down, rape us and massacre us.”

A Colombian Indian villager.

“I wonder if Japan favors refugees under its immigration control system?”

Former High Commissioner Sadako Ogata, referring to Japan’s annual acceptance of some 100,000 foreign ‘entertainers’ compared with 26 people who received refugee status in 2001.

“If they had mass graves in Iraq, in Rafha the whole camp was a tomb for the living.” “His mother and father have died, and he still doesn’t know.” “I feel like my soul has returned to my body.”

The first group of Iraqi refugees to return officially to the country—describing their exile and both the shock and joy awaiting them at home.

Sergio Vieira de Mello

15 March 1948 – 19 August 2003



Sergio Vieira de Mello (right) and Timor-Leste President Xanana Gusmao enjoy a light moment during that country's move towards independence.

"I have been sent here with a mandate to assist the Iraqi people and those responsible for the administration of this land to achieve freedom, the possibility of managing their own destiny and determining their own future."

Sergio Vieira de Mello was eloquently outlining the goals of his latest mission shortly after arriving in Iraq earlier this year. In the wake of his death and those of 22 other colleagues when a truck bomb demolished the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad, those words became an apt epitaph not just for Vieira de Mello's doomed journey to Iraq, but for a lifelong career helping the world's most vulnerable people—in Africa, Asia, Kosovo and East Timor.

A Brazilian national, educated in his homeland and at the Sorbonne in Paris, fluent in Portuguese, Spanish, French and English, Vieira de Mello began a 33-year-long United Nations career in 1969 as an assistant editor with the U.N. refugee agency.

Pragmatic, discreet, a citizen of the developing world, but equally at ease with his elegant style in a refugee camp or in rarefied political circles, Vieira de Mello served UNHCR in trouble spots around the globe before becoming Assistant High Commissioner in 1996.

He moved to New York in 1998 as U.N. Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief. As Secretary-General Kofi Annan's special representative, he first helped to steer the troubled province of Kosovo back towards a

peaceful future and then guide East Timor to independence, possibly his finest achievement.

He was named U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights in September 2002 and had taken a four-month leave of absence to once more become the United Nations chief troubleshooter in Iraq.

Vieira de Mello had intimations of trouble ahead. "The United Nations presence in Iraq remains vulnerable to any who seek to target our organization," he had told the U.N. Security Council in New York shortly before heading back to the Middle East.

"All too often, it is the best people who are sent to the most challenging places," UNHCR High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers said following his death, but Vieira de Mello had paid "the ultimate price in the process. He was a true gentleman... who fought for human rights and the dignity of the downtrodden."

Secretary-General Kofi Annan said Vieira de Mello's death "was a bitter blow for the United Nations and for me personally. The death of any colleague is hard to bear, but I could think of no one we could spare less."

Former U.S. ambassador to the U.N. Nancy Soderberg summed up the secret of a dazzling career cut short by a terrorist bomb: "He could deal with kings and diplomats and ordinary refugees with the same enthusiasm and sense of respect."

**The road for a refugee
is as long
as you make it.**



UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees