CONCLUSION - Investing in the future
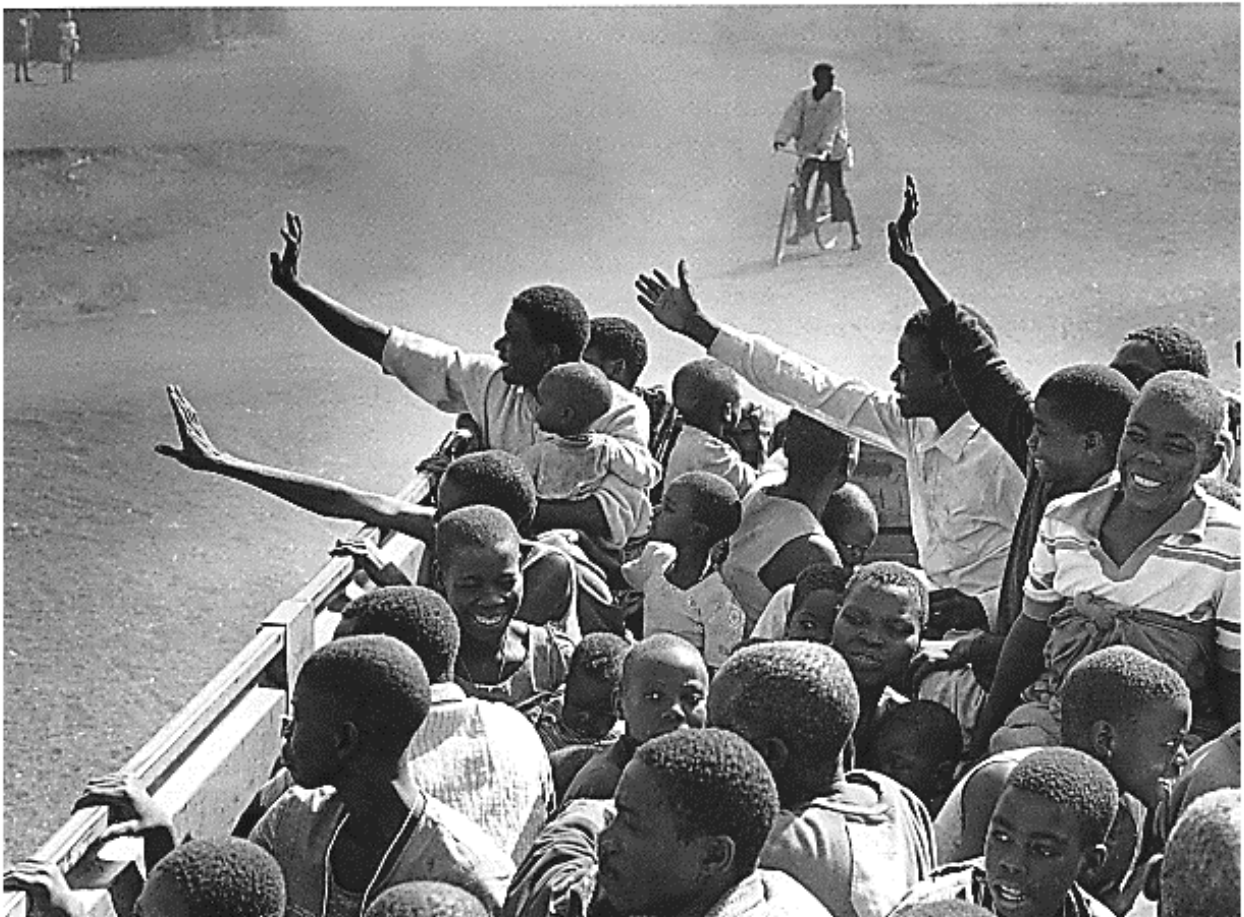
Disabled Mozambican refugees repatriating from Kunyinda in Malawi, May 1994
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'The coming anarchy: nations break up under the tidal flow of refugees from environmental and social disaster. Wars are fought over scarce resources, especially water, and war itself becomes continuous with crime, as armed bands of stateless marauders clash with the private security forces of the elites.'

It may read like the plot of a particularly lurid movie. But the preceding paragraph is actually taken from the cover of an intellectual journal, *The Atlantic Monthly,* introducing Robert D. Kaplan's 'preview of the first decades of the twenty-first century.'

Kaplan is by no means alone in his despondent assessment of the future. Just five years ago, the demise of the eastern bloc and the end of the Cold War generated a tremendous sense of optimism about the new world order, not least within the US political establishment. But the prevailing mood has now changed, and is epitomized by the title of a recent book written by former presidential security advisor Zbignew Brzezinski: *Out of Control: Global Turmoil on the Eve of the Twenty-first Century*.

Academic analysts are predicting an equally insecure future. In his best-selling volume, *Preparing for the Twenty-first Century*, historian Paul Kennedy suggests that we could be entering a period in which mankind is unequal to the challenges posed by the combination of technological change, environmental degradation and demographic growth. 'What sort of future do we face,' he asks, 'if social turbulence increases at the same pace as the world's population?'

Causes for concern

A cursory glance at the global refugee situation would appear to confirm such gloomy prognostications. The last five years have witnessed a rapid increase in the number of people affected by armed conflict and communal violence. While it is not easy to establish precise statistics, the number of people displaced within and from their own country is now approaching 50 million - around one out of every 110 people on earth. And that figure does not include the many people who have been uprooted by ecological and industrial disaster or by state-sponsored relocation programmes. According to the World Bank, up to 90 million people have been displaced over the past decade to make way for dams, roads and other development projects.

As previous chapters of this book have suggested, refugee numbers are not the only cause for concern. Mass displacement of the most cruel kind imaginable has become a conscious objective of the combatants in many armed conflicts. Humanitarian assistance is used as a weapon of war, while states and societies around the world are closing their doors to the victims of violence. Although the majority of refugees are victims of circumstances beyond their control, members of some displaced and exiled populations are armed, and are bringing violence and instability both to the societies where they settle and to their countries of origin.

Despite the efforts of UNHCR and its partners to resolve the plight of displaced populations, there is no solution in sight for some of the world's largest refugee groups: the Rwandese in Tanzania and Zaire; the Liberians in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea; and, of course, the displaced people in former Yugoslavia, to give just a few examples.

Over the years, international conferences have repeatedly endorsed the notion that refugee assistance programmes should be 'solutions-oriented from the outset'. The hard truth, however, is that solutions are ultimately dependent on political, military and economic factors which lie beyond the control of any humanitarian organization. In some situations, the only option may be to provide refugees with food, shelter and other basic services, until the time comes when their plight can be properly resolved.

The resourcefulness of refugees

Although the search for solutions is confronted with significant obstacles, it is too easy to fall into the trap of humanitarian pessimism - a syndrome which unwittingly undermines the very cause which it seeks to advocate. When every new displacement is referred to as 'an unprecedented crisis', when refugees are portrayed as people who bring nothing with them except needs, and when aid organizations and the media insist on giving publicity to refugee problems rather than their resolution, should it be surprising that the world has become somewhat weary of the issue? In conclusion, therefore, it is necessary to recall some of the more positive observations which emerge from a review of the state of the world's refugees.

Recent years have witnessed a substantial growth in the number of people and organizations with a professional interest in refugees, in both practical and analytical functions. As with any other specialized field of activity, the refugee sector has developed its own shorthand, a vocabulary full of concepts such as 'temporary protection', 'safe third country' and 'durable solutions', which mean relatively little to people who are not engaged in this area.

While these are normal and perhaps inevitable developments, they have had the unfortunate effect of diminishing the attention paid to the aspirations and activities of refugees themselves. As one anthropologist has observed, refugees are too often seen as the objects of action, as 'beneficiaries' or 'a caseload', rather than as actors in their own right. 'They are people whose lot it is to be counted, registered, studied, surveyed and in due course hopefully 'returned', at which point they become 'ordinary people' once again.'

Refugee camps and settlements are not, of course, 'normal' places, particularly in situations where the population has little or no access to land or wage labour, and must therefore rely on external assistance. But perhaps the most striking characteristic of any refugee population, particularly in the post-emergency phase, is the extent to which its members are preoccupied with very ordinary human concerns: choosing a partner, bringing up children, maintaining social relationships, trying to improve their standard of living and generally making the best of what can be a very demanding situation, both physically and psychologically.

Like any other group of people, refugees are not all equally industrious. But to realize their basic needs and aspirations, exiled and displaced populations are usually obliged to develop a whole range of practical coping strategies. Some of these strategies naturally revolve around the provision of assistance, one of the most visible and essential resources in a refugee situation. As one analyst has commented, 'when refugees buy and sell ration cards, register children several times over, split their families between a relief camp and external economic activities and set up markets around camps to trade in relief grain and other commodities, they are demonstrating qualities of resourcefulness and ingenuity.'

When there are other means of making a living in a refugee settlement area, they are very rarely ignored. As a study of Ethiopian refugees in Somalia concluded, 'not only did the refugees seize every available opportunity to earn an income, but they also entered into economic relationships with local businessmen or rich farmers by devising contractual agreements to gain access to land or employment. More often than not these were inequitable relationships... but under prevailing constraints they provided the refugees with a means to engage in productive activities, no matter how infinitesimal were the returns.'

Precisely the same kind of resourcefulness can be seen in any UNHCR repatriation programme, when, after years of living in exile, refugees calmly disembark from the bus, truck or boat which has brought them back to their homeland, pick up their meagre belongings and a modest package of assistance, walk back to their village and start to pick up the pieces of the life they left behind. Moreover, as UNHCR's own statistics demonstrate (see Table 8, Annex II), the majority of returnees who repatriate do so of their own accord, without being provided with transport by the organization.

The search for solutions does not, therefore, depend on governments, international organizations and NGOs alone. It relies to a great extent on the knowledge and capacities of refugees themselves, and on their determination to resume a more productive life. The protection and assistance provided by states and humanitarian organizations is, of course, an essential component of the search for solutions. But such activities are most likely to prove effective when they support refugee choices and coping strategies, enabling the men, women and young people concerned to manifest their resourcefulness.

Current crises in broader perspective

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The refugee problem tends to be portrayed in catastrophic terms, and it is not difficult to understand why. Objectively, there is the sheer scale and complexity of human displacement in recent years. Besides this, a number of other, more subjective factors also come into play. Many aid agencies rely on public sympathy to

mobilize support for their cause, and are therefore inclined to dwell on the most tragic dimensions of their work. Host governments in the low-income regions of the world are naturally eager to emphasize the burden which they bear by providing sanctuary to large numbers of displaced people, while the industrialized states have sometimes exaggerated the scale of the refugee problem in order to justify the closure of their borders to asylum seekers and other migrants.

Without diminishing in any way the suffering experienced by the world's exiles and the problems which their presence can create for host countries and communities, there is also a need to see contemporary refugee problems in a broader geographical and historical perspective. It is often forgotten, for example, that despite the spate of internal conflicts and population displacements which have characterized the past five years, during the same period, some nine million refugees have been able to go back to their homes, often in countries where longstanding conflicts have been resolved or reduced, and where pluralistic systems of government have been established for the first time.

Similarly, despite the erosion of the institution of asylum in certain parts of the world, it must not be forgotten that states continue to offer refuge to substantial numbers of asylum seekers, giving them the opportunity to begin safe and productive new lives. In 1994, for example, 250,000 people were granted asylum or protection in the industrialized states - almost twice as many as the 136,000 who were allowed to stay in 1985, but, of course, a much smaller proportion of total applications.

Areas which once produced massive numbers of uprooted people, such as Central America, South-East Asia and Southern Africa, now feature much less prominently on the international refugee map. In these and other situations, humanitarian organizations have played an essential role, capturing and creating new opportunities to resolve refugee problems, as well as consolidating political settlements through repatriation, reintegration and reconciliation efforts.

Inevitably, perhaps, each generation considers its own problems to be much larger and more complex than anything experienced in previous years. Hence the tendency to label each new refugee emergency as unprecedented in scale, speed or suffering. But if the search for solutions in Liberia, Rwanda or former Yugoslavia sometimes appears to be an impossible task, then it is worth recalling that similar sentiments were expressed about the refugee situation in Europe during the 1940s and 1950s, the Indo-Chinese exodus in the 1970s and the exodus of Mozambican refugees in the 1980s.

Of course, the internal conflicts which have flared up over the past few years have presented a particularly difficult challenge to the international community in general and the United Nations in particular. With the collapse of the old world order, new fault lines have appeared within and between states. In the space of a few years, the world has passed from the predictable structure of the Cold War to a period of turbulence and transition, the final outcome of which is still unknown. Recent refugee emergencies in areas such as the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Africa are in many senses quite different to those encountered in earlier years, particularly in their unpredictability and volatility, as well as their political and logistical complexity and the level of danger involved for humanitarian personnel. At this time of

uncertainty and rapid change in world affairs, expectations of the United Nations and its specialized agencies have also increased substantially.

It would be naive to believe that states and social structures are immutable entities, and that refugee movements can be averted through a simple preservation of the status quo. A realistic approach to the prevention and resolution of refugee problems must recognize the need for and inevitability of change. Human progress is inseparable from conflict, in the dictionary definition sense of a 'strong disagreement' or 'a clash between contradictory impulses or wills'. The more challenging question is whether conflicts can be resolved without violence and population displacements.

According to one international relations expert, the opportunities for preventive action may be very limited once the parties to a conflict have adopted intransigent positions, particularly in disputes based on ethnic, religious or regional antagonisms. 'The historical record,' he writes, 'suggests that the management of communal conflicts is inherently difficult, whether it be attempted by states, empires, regional or global organizations.' As recent experience in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda has demonstrated, once the first bullet has been fired and the battle lines have been drawn, population displacements are not only likely to take place, but may also become a part of the deadly logic of war.

Putting principles into practice

Despite the recent spate of conflicts and population displacements in different parts of the world, times have changed - and in most senses changed for the better - since the end of the Cold War. A new degree of international cooperation has become possible, even if many national, regional and ideological differences remain to be resolved. The United Nations and other institutions have been able to formulate new responses to international problems, even if, as in the case of several recent peacekeeping operations, they have not always achieved their stated objective. And an alternative and solutions-oriented approach to the refugee problem has emerged, even if there is still a significant gap between the rhetorical support offered to the new paradigm and the extent to which its principles are actually observed by states and other actors.

The challenge for the remaining years of the millenium must therefore be to bridge this gap, to ensure that all people enjoy the right to live in safety in their own country and community, as well as the right to seek asylum in another state when such conditions no longer prevail. But how can that objective be achieved?

Many words have been written about the causes of refugee movements, most of which ignore a simple point: that mass displacements are the consequence of decisions taken by powerful individuals and institutions, both within and outside of the countries which actually produce refugees. Wars do not start unless an army is ordered into action. Some people are maimed by land-mines because other people have a direct interest in the manufacture and sale of such weapons. Ethnic cleansing only takes place when political leaders and their supporters conclude that it is in their interest to organize such expulsions.

In the first instance, therefore, individuals, institutions and societies must be persuaded of the moral dimension of the refugee problem. As all cultures and religions appear to recognize, it is simply wrong that people should be forced to

abandon their own country and community in order to survive. And it is unacceptable when such victims of violence are denied the opportunity to seek sanctuary elsewhere.

The notions of solidarity, burden-sharing and accountability have gained a somewhat tired and bureaucratic character, their meaning blunted by endless repetition in official speeches and resolutions. But the idea on which they are based remains entirely relevant. As members of the human race, we have a responsibility to safeguard the welfare of others and to ensure that the costs of such efforts are distributed in an equitable manner. Conversely, we must reaffirm the principle that individuals and groups do not have the right to pursue their own interests in any way they please and without regard to their consequences for other people. In the international community, as in any other community based on the rule of law, those individuals and entities who violate agreed standards of behaviour must expect to be held accountable for their actions.

At the same time, it must be remembered that standards are sustained not only by altruism and the fear of retribution, but also by pragmatic self-interest. In other words, people give consideration to the rights and welfare of others because their society would cease to function if they did not. Precisely the same principle can be applied at the international level. Moral and humanitarian considerations apart, it is in the interest of states and other actors to resolve refugee problems and to address the causes of mass displacement, because the cost of doing nothing is certain to be much greater.

What might have happened in Rwanda if the estimated US$ 2 billion spent on refugee relief in the first two weeks of the emergency had been devoted to keeping the peace, protecting human rights and promoting development in the period which preceded the exodus? Does it really make sense for the industrialized states to spend up to US$ 10 billion a year on their asylum systems, while freezing development assistance allocations and pursuing economic policies which have the effect of obliging people in the less prosperous states to migrate in search of work? If the international community is serious in its desire to resolve the refugee problem, why have the UN's human rights institutions remained the world body's poor relation, with a budget and operational capacity that is miniscule in relation to its relief and peacekeeping activities?

Looking to the future, one might ask what the consequences will be if the rate of economic development in sub-Saharan Africa continues to stagnate and decline? When the crunch comes (as it already has to varying degrees in Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Somalia), will the international community simply ignore the human suffering and displacement that takes place? Or, as seems much more likely, will it be obliged to spend billions more dollars on open-ended relief operations and peacekeeping efforts, simply to bring some temporary stability to the situation? The UN's annual peacekeeping budget has already increased by 500 per cent since 1989, from US$ 618 million to US$ 3,340 million. UNHCR's expenditures have doubled in same period, from around US$ 570 million to some US$ 1.2 billion in 1994. At what point will the world recognize the cost, in both human and financial terms, of failing to invest in the future?

Peace, democracy and development

More effective controls are needed on the production and export of small arms and the development of deadly new weapons.

The right of people to remain in safety in their own country depends ultimately on development in the broadest sense of the word. Not simply the kind of development that can be measured in terms of economic growth, but the kind of development that allows people to realize their human potential, to retain their self-respect, to enjoy physical security, to meet their material needs, to participate in decisions which affect their lives and to be governed fairly, under the rule of law.

If such objectives are to be achieved, a number of key issues will have to be addressed, both in actual and potential countries of origin and at the international level. Such an investment in the future will also require foresight and a sustained commitment. Refugee problems are often the product of deep-rooted tensions and inequalities, and must be addressed through long-term strategies.

In the first place, the international community should devote more effort to the task of conflict prevention. Recent years have witnessed a substantial increase in the sums of money devoted to peace-plan operations and peacekeeping initiatives, and these initiatives have played a valuable role in the resolution of old refugee problems, the containment of new conflicts and the delivery of humanitarian relief. But far fewer resources have been devoted to the prevention of conflict by means of activities such as institution-building, the development of power-sharing arrangements, the promotion of political and economic cooperation at the regional level or early efforts at mediation and conciliation. As recent experience has demonstrated, 'hard intervention' in the form of military force is fraught with problems in situations of internal and communal conflict. The early deployment of humanitarian personnel and human rights monitors - a strategy described as 'soft intervention' by the High Commissioner for Refugees - could play a particularly valuable role in this area.

If peace and security are to be maintained within and between states, governments will also have to commit themselves to reductions in arms expenditure, and to more effective controls on the production and export of small arms and landmines and the development of deadly new weapons. Incentives must be given to countries which undertake arms reductions and promote long-term peacebuilding measures, just as the international financial institutions reward those countries which undertake structural economic reforms. The financial institutions might themselves play a more active role in the prevention and resolution of refugee problems, most notably in the areas of demobilization, returnee reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction.

To avert armed conflict and promote reconciliation, steps must also be taken to identify, name and, where appropriate, prosecute those responsible for war crimes and grave human rights abuses. Violence and refugee movements will continue to take place unless the current culture of impunity is changed. At the same time, more resources should be devoted to the promotion of human rights and to training in the

laws of war, particularly in those societies which are emerging from long periods of authoritarian government.

Increased support and assistance should be given to states which observe democratic principles and human rights standards. Countries with governments which respect and protect their citizens are far less likely to experience violence than those which engage in or fail to prevent abuses. Individuals and groups of people must be protected from the arbitrary exercise of state power, and the rights of minorities protected, by means of constitutional safeguards and other power-sharing arrangements.

Institution-building is a primary prerequisite for conflict prevention, resolution and the promotion of democracy. It is also a task which encompasses a wide range of different activities: the establishment of impartial judicial, legal and penal systems, the expansion of basic education and training programmes; the creation of an active civil society; the participation of non-governmental organizations in the political process; as well as the promotion of a high ethical standards within official and private structures. A modest investment in such areas by the world's more prosperous states could reap rich rewards in terms of good governance and the prevention of refugee movements.

The promotion of development in the more conventional sense of the word is also a high priority. Peace and economic growth are inextricably linked. Without security, even the most basic productive activities are jeopardized. And without development, social and communal tensions are far more likely to arise and to assume a violent form.

The economic performance of too many countries is currently constrained not only by the absence of peace, but also by the difficulty of competing in an increasingly competitive international trade market, as well as a massive burden of debt. Additional measures must be taken to reduce this burden if the world's less prosperous countries are to realize their development potential and to escape from the vicious cycle of deprivation and displacement.

Within the low-income states, the related problems of land distribution, environmental degradation, population growth and food security must be tackled with urgency. A hungry society is an angry society, and angry people are often driven to destructive activities in their struggle to survive.

Ultimately, private investment and trade may play a more important role than aid in the promotion of economic growth. But countries devastated by war are often unable to attract foreign capital and find it difficult to reactivate the productive sectors of their economy without external support. Official development assistance is indispensable in creating the conditions in which investment and trade can flourish. The current decline in assistance levels must therefore be reversed, and combined with an effort to ensure that aid is properly targeted towards activities that meet immediate human priority needs and which also lay the foundation for long-term and sustainable growth.

Prevention, protection, solutions

As the international community's refugee organization, UNHCR has in recent years sought to address the problem of human displacement by means of a triple strategy of preparedness, prevention and solutions: a level of preparedness that enables a speedy and effective response to new refugee emergencies; the provision of protection and assistance in ways that help to avert or limit such displacements; and a concerted effort to find lasting solutions to refugee problems, particularly (but not exclusively) through voluntary repatriation and reintegration. The challenge now is to determine how the innovative approaches and activities described in the preceding chapters of this book can be further developed and dovetailed to resolve existing refugee situations and prevent the proliferation of new crises of human displacement.

It will not be an easy task. The refugee problem is inextricably linked to many of the most pressing issues confronting the world today: the protection of human rights; the resolution of conflicts; the promotion of economic and institutional development; the conservation of the natural environment; and the management of international migration. If the refugee problem is to be addressed effectively and equitably, an integrated approach will be required, tackling these diverse issues simultaneously and in a systematic manner.

Resolving the refugee problem is therefore a task which must engage all states, societies, communities and individuals, working together on the basis of shared objectives and values. When the United Nations was founded in 1945, the declared purpose of the new body was to reaffirm the world's faith in 'fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small.' Fifty years later, the search for solutions to the refugee problem must be guided by the same principles.