

Testimony of Roberta Cohen

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Congressman Smith, Representative Payne and Committee members, thank you for inviting me to address the Subcommittee on refugee protection issues. In his opening statement, Representative Payne underscored the link between refugees, who cross borders, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) who remain uprooted inside their countries, both groups seeking safety from persecution, violence and human rights violations. He noted that in Africa, there is an alarming number of IDPs -- 12 to 13 million -- and called upon the United States to become more involved.

As an expert in the field of internal displacement, I would like to underscore that the phenomenon of forced migration involves both refugees and IDPs. Both groups are usually in the same destitute and deprived conditions, requiring international protection and assistance. One only has to look at the IDP camps in Darfur, Sudan and the refugee camps across the border in Chad to see the life threatening conditions both groups endure. Although refugees and IDPs have separate legal regimes, operationally it is important they be dealt with in a more holistic way. As the UK Secretary of State for International Development Hilary Benn put it after visiting Darfur, "Is it really sensible that we have different systems for dealing with people fleeing their homes dependent on whether they happen to have crossed an international border? I have my doubts."¹

The fluidity in the situations of the two groups is also noteworthy. Internally displaced persons are potential refugees. When IDPs find little or no protection at home they may try to cross borders. It is therefore not surprising that among those accepted for refugee resettlement in the United States are people who were internally displaced. In parts of the world where borders change as in the South Caucasus, the former Yugoslavia, and the Horn of Africa, one can be a refugee one day and an IDP the next. Moreover, when refugees return to their home countries, they easily can become internally displaced if there is an absence of security or sustainable conditions.

Today, there are more than twice as many IDPs as refugees, an estimated 23.7 million IDPs whereas the number of refugees of concern to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has dropped to 9.2 million.² There are many explanations for this discrepancy, including the return of millions of refugees home, but one must also draw attention to the growing worldwide inhospitality to refugees and asylum seekers since the end of the cold war and to the recent restrictions on refugees following 9/11. With increasing numbers of countries finding it too costly, burdensome, or even destabilizing to admit refugees, the number of internally displaced persons has been climbing in

¹ Hilary Benn, Statement before the Overseas Development Institute, London, December 15, 2004.

² See Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Global Overview of Trends and Developments in 2005*, Geneva, pp. 9, 78-9, and UNHCR, *State of the World's Refugees 2005*, p.213.

inverse proportion to the declining number of refugees. In Africa today, where hospitality to refugees is generally high, one finds some 3 million refugees but 12 to 13 million IDPs.

The challenge for the United States is to develop strong policies and programs for both groups of forced migrants. The refugee resettlement program has long been a beacon of hope for many abroad in need of protection. In fact, the United States has a commendable record when it comes to resettling refugees. However, the reduction in the numbers following 9/11 has created considerable hardship. While it is encouraging that beginning in 2004, the numbers have begun to rise (to more than 50,000), the totals are not yet up to pre 9/11 levels (75-100,000). More flexible interpretations of US counter-terrorism laws would be welcome so as to allow more deserving men, women and children entry into the United States as refugees. People uprooted inside their countries are often caught up against their will in the middle of civil wars between warring factions or between government forces and insurgent groups. When being considered for resettlement, they should not be penalized for this misfortune or for having identified with or lent support to groups that protected them against state abuse. In this connection, the waiver given to 10,000 Burmese this year is a welcome development and should be extended to other groups as well.

The reduction in funding being proposed by the United States for refugee protection will have impact on UNHCR's work for both refugees and internally displaced persons. This is especially true in Africa, where the needs of both groups are so acute. The displaced in these countries not only need protection and assistance during their period of displacement but also need help to return and reintegrate in home areas following peace agreements. In both the Sudan and the DRC, for example, millions of IDPs have been returning home, but without sufficient international support. This means the returns are neither secure nor sustainable, which in turn could lead to renewed conflict and displacement, undermining stability in these countries. When Walter Kalin, the Representative of the UN Secretary-General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons visited south Sudan toward the end of 2005, he found little or no preparations to enable IDPs and refugees to return home in safe and sustainable conditions.³ In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre reported that the majority of the 1.6 million IDPs returning home received no support.⁴

A reduction in funds by the United States will also undermine UNHCR's ability to undertake an expanded role for IDPs. In January 2006 a new international division of labor was decided upon by the UN to make the international response to internal displacement more predictable and accountable. Under the new system, UNHCR agreed to become the lead agency for IDPs in the areas of protection, emergency shelter and camp management. However, UNHCR will not be able to assume this new role without

³ UN Commission on Human rights, Mission to the Sudan, Report of the Representative of the Secretary-General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, E/CN.4/2006/71/Add.6, 13 February 2006.

⁴ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Global Overview*, p. 51.

adequate support from donor governments. UN High Commissioner for Refugee Antonio Guterres has made clear that UNHCR will need resources beyond its regular budget, which has been reduced this year by 20 percent, in order to expand protection for IDPs. With receipt of the needed funds, he underscored, UNHCR could “help to ensure that millions of IDPs benefit from the same kind of assistance and protection given consistently to refugees around the world.”⁵

Since Africa is the continent with the most IDPs, UNHCR chose the DRC, Liberia, Somalia and Uganda to be the four pilot countries to begin its lead role with. Surely every effort must be made by the United States to enable UNHCR to apply its skills and expertise to the populations uprooted inside these countries. In the past, UNHCR was able to assist only one million IDPs in Africa; now the opportunity exists for UNHCR to provide protection to greater numbers of Africa’s internally displaced. The United States should be in the forefront of those promoting a more comprehensive approach and seeking to narrow the disparity in treatment between refugees and IDPs on the continent most ravaged by conflict and displacement.

Greater capacity will be needed within the United States government so that it can focus on internally displaced persons as fully as it does on refugees. A recent report of the US Institute of Peace described a lack of institutional clarity in the US government when it comes to responding to IDP crises.⁶ Although to its credit USAID in 2004 adopted a policy on IDPs,⁷ which indicates that it will serve as the government’s “lead coordinator” on internal displacement, the author of the USIP report, former US Ambassador to Angola Donald Steinberg observes that there usually is “a turf battle” between offices in USAID and the State Department when a humanitarian emergency arises involving IDPs.⁸ He also considers too little the “money dedicated to IDPs within the USAID budget” as compared with the Refugee Migration Account, administered by the State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM). The USIP report proposes more clout and IDP specific resources for the USAID office dealing with internal displacement while also calling for a senior official in the State Department to serve as principal interlocutor with USAID and undertake diplomatic advocacy for IDPs as well as seek to address the root causes of displacement. The USIP report cites an earlier study by the Brookings Institution and the US Committee for Refugees that called upon Congress to focus on IDPs as a discrete policy issue requiring attention and oversight.⁹

Recommendations

⁵ Message from the High Commissioner on UNHCR’s engagement with Internally Displaced Persons, Geneva, 30 November 2005.

⁶ Donald Steinberg, “Orphans of Conflict: Caring for the Internally Displaced,” United States Institute of Peace, October 2005.

⁷ USAID Assistance to Internally Displaced Persons Policy, October 2004.

⁸ Steinberg, p. 13.

⁹ James Kunder, “The U.S. Government and Internally Displaced Persons: Present, but Not Accounted For,” Brookings Institution and U.S. Committee for Refugees, Washington DC, November 1999.

To promote a more comprehensive approach by the United States government to the phenomenon of forced migration, the following recommendations are made:

1. The Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations should hold a separate hearing on the 12 to 13 million internally displaced persons in Africa and the steps the United States should take to address the problem. The extent to which the United States is sufficiently equipped at the institutional, legal, political and financial levels to deal with internal displacement in Africa should be a major focus of the hearing.
2. Beyond Africa, the Subcommittee should press for the holding of hearings on the 20 to 24 million people in all regions of the world uprooted by persecution and conflict who remain within the borders of their countries. Despite growing awareness of the impact of internal displacement worldwide on the stability of countries and regions, there has yet to be a hearing on the subject. The USAID policy on internal displacement makes clear that “failure to respond adequately to the needs of failed states and large displaced populations can become a catalyst for regional instability, and in some circumstances can produce disaffected individuals who become vulnerable to exploitation by international extremists.”
3. The US government must provide adequate support to UNHCR so that it can play the expanded role it has been given in the protection of internally displaced persons, especially in Africa. At present, the dearth of funding is limiting UNHCR’s ability to carry out its new responsibilities with IDPs.
4. The US government should give greater attention to protection for IDPs. Funds should be specifically targeted not only for food, medicine and shelter but also for measures to increase the physical security of IDPs, including support for peacekeeping operations in Sudan and the DRC involved with the protection of IDPs. The extent to which certain categories of IDPs should be resettled in the US should also be explored, in particular traumatized or persecuted individuals and women at risk.
5. In order to reinforce its humanitarian response, the US government should seek to address on a more consistent basis the root causes of conflicts in which large numbers of refugees and IDPs are involved. Humanitarian relief is but a stopgap measure. It can never substitute for the political settlements needed to resolve the conflicts that produce displacement.