

People on the Move in the 21st Century: Refugees and the New Trends of Displacement

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In today's world it is becoming more and more difficult to give protection, to give assistance, and to provide solutions to the millions of refugees worldwide. The key reason for this is the fact that more and more public opinion and states are becoming very concerned, and rightly so, with security problems. At the same time the impact of migratory movements also has a huge influence in the way people look at those who are different, as foreigners, and their impact on their own societies.

The United States is an open society. The U.S. was born by people coming from all over the world; the U.S. has always been a very tolerant society but unfortunately in many other parts of the world, and especially in the developed world, we are witnessing more and more a tendency to close the doors, a tendency to reject those who are different, to reject the foreigners, and not to understand that in today's world because people will be more and more on the move with globalization that every society will be multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural. It is very important that we all learn to live with each other and to respect each other. Unfortunately, as I said, in many, many countries doors are being closed and the idea that refugees have the right to be protected by the international community is losing ground.

This is the first challenge we face: How we interact with public opinion is to make people understand that refugees are not terrorists; they are the first victims of terror. It's perfectly possible to protect the security of a country, to keep a safe management of the borders and at the same time to give those who need protection physical access to procedures fair treatment of their claims.

The second challenge that is now very dramatic to us and all operations worldwide is the impact of food prices. As you can imagine when looking at the refugee situation, namely in camps in Tanzania or in Kenya, or in Chad or in many other countries, there is no way for refugees to leave, but with the support of the international community. The fact that food prices are rising so dramatically is making it more and more difficult to provide them with the minimum essentials for them to be able to survive. The impact of food prices is not solely making life difficult for the humanitarian organizations, The World Food Program and ourselves, in support and assistance to refugees. If you look at the news every day you will see that more and more riots are emerging, problems of stability are becoming more and more worrying. If you look at countries that are young democracies, that have emerged from conflicts just a few years ago, are struggling to

guarantee the stability of democracy and the stability of peace, you can imagine how difficult it is for those countries to cope with the fact that a large majority of their population are in the developing world, in very poor environments. A large majority of that population now don't have the capacity to feed themselves. In impact of these new situations on the stability of peace and the stability of democracy is enormous, and the risk of a growing number of refugees caused by extreme poverty accelerated by the rising prices of food is a major concern for us. It's not only the difficulty in providing support to the refugees themselves, it is the risk of having more and more refugees because of the interaction between poverty, rising food prices, stability, and peace in many areas of the world.

The third challenge I would like to discuss is the sustainability of solutions. It's important to protect and to assist refugees, but it's much more important for refugees to find an adequate life, with full respect of their rights and full normalcy in the way they can live with their families. Last year we helped several hundred thousand refugees go back home; in Afghanistan, in southern Sudan, in the Democratic Republic of Congo(DRC), in Burundi. Beyond that we have presented almost 100,000 refugees for resettlement in the developed world and we have tried to integrate them into the societies who are able to accept them and [provide] asylum. We have now a problem in Tanzania to naturalize 170,000 refugees coming from Burundi that arrived in Tanzania in 1972. The problem is not those that have been naturalized, but those that came from Burundi and now have children. There's no chance for them to go back to their country to give them full citizenship rights in Tanzania.

The best solution for refugees is always the possibility for them to return home voluntarily and in safety and dignity as soon as conditions allow that to be possible. But, you can't imagine what it means to help tens of thousands every month to go back to southern Sudan at the moment. In southern Sudan there is not much to rebuild because nothing has ever been built in the past. In southern Sudan the education and the health systems are almost nonexistent, there are no jobs available for people and the living conditions are extremely dire. And yet the people want to go back and they want to participate—there will be a census, there will be elections—and they really want to go back and participate in the construction of their country. But you can imagine the dilemma of an organization like ours helping them to go back knowing that many of them will face extremely difficult circumstances in their country and not being able, because we are not a development agency, to provide them with conditions for full integration in a normal life. The sustainability of peace and democracy again is a key question and the capacity to create the conditions for meaningful economic development in these countries is a major challenge. Unfortunately, in most of these countries, Burundi, DRC, Afghanistan, southern Sudan, in most of these countries, the local governments are very poor and these national communities are very dysfunctional in providing development assistance and this represents, as I said, another major challenge for us.

An additional challenge has to do with what I refer to as the new weapons of forced displacement. Refugees, according to international law, are those that fled their countries because of well founded fear of persecution or because of the situation of war or conflict. This concept has been extended by of courts and by laws implemented in many countries to consider not only the political persecution by the governments but also the persecution by non-state agents like terrorist groups; and not only political dimensions but also more and more cultural dimensions and social dimensions. Recently there was a Spanish Court that decided that the Pakistani woman that had been badly treated by her family and by her husband and the [Pakistani] government was not willing to protect her, had the right to be considered a refugee in Spain against what was the

government policy at the time. Now, a new law is being adopted to grant refugee status to those that are victims of these forms of persecution that have nothing to do with the political dimensions of the state persecuting its own citizens but of new forms of persecution in our societies. For a refugee to be recognized as such is always as the victim either of war or persecution. The problem is that more and more people are forced to move in today's world for other reasons. Climate change is impacting their lives, drought makes many areas, namely in Africa, totally unable to sustain human life and people are forced to leave. Extreme poverty as we have seen is also a factor of displacement and these things are more and more interconnected. In Darfur when a Janjaweed group attacks a village, it's true that the Janjaweed group is linked with the government of Khartoum and it is attacking the village that they presume could support one of the rebel groups against the government. It is also true that the Janjaweed are herders, are nomads, and the village is a village of farmers, and with dwindling water resources the competition for water make it useful for the Janjawees to pick out these people to have access to the water for their own herds.

More and more, climate change triggers conflict, conflict triggers displacement, but climate change alone also triggers displacement, conflict triggers poverty and poverty then triggers displacement—and these things are more and more interconnected and it is more and more difficult to distinguish who's who in the complex flows of movement we are witnessing all around the world. Then we see people disembarking in Italy, and you see smugglers and traffickers abusing the rights of people in such a horrible way it's sometimes difficult to know who's an economic migrant, who's a refugee, who's a victim of what in this complex pattern of displacement in today's world. The international community has not the instruments to cope with these challenges. For refugees, yes; the refugees, as defined by the Convention, have protection according to international law. An organization like mine is supposed to deal with governments to make sure that the law is abided by. But the others are dependent on the goodwill of countries, governments and the capacity of the international corporations that in many aspects is extremely limited as you well know.

And finally the last challenge. A refugee is a refugee when he or she crosses a border, but more and more people are being displaced but remain within the borders of their own countries. Those should benefit from the protection of their own government but unfortunately many governments don't have the capacity or the will to do so. In eastern DRC in 2005 I remember reading some statistics coming from UNICEF that 35,000 women had been raped, most of them by elements of the army rebel groups and militias that are active in the area. I don't think it's the government's intention that that happens but the government does not have the capacity to avoid it. The army is not paid sometimes and so when soldiers are not paid they tend to loot villages and when they do, these things happen. This is a drama of gigantic proportions. Now, the government is not able to provide protection and these international communities in many circumstances lack the legal instruments or the capacity to be able to respond to this kind of challenge. But in other circumstances it's even more complex. Is the government not only unable to do so but unwilling to do so? Or even being part of the problem? If you look at the situation in Darfur you know exactly what I mean. In these circumstances even if the General Assembly of the United Nations has accepted the principle of the responsibility to protect—which means that the governments that are supposed to protect their own citizens, but if that is not the case, the international community has the responsibility to do so on their behalf—the truth is that in the present environment it's very difficult for the responsibility to protect to be assumed by the international community, and because of that we see people suffering in a dramatic way with the world being unable to provide them with the protection and the assistance they require.

All this makes our work more and more complex. Theoretically, things are rather simple—if you are a refugee because you are a victim of persecution you are supposed to be protected according to international law; governments are supposed to do so and if not, our organization can act. The problem is in many, many circumstances we don't know exactly who is a refugee and who's not. In many, many circumstances people are forced to flee because of reasons not defined in the Convention, and in many circumstances people have to flee and remain within the borders of their own country and we are not able, or we are now allowed, to act to guarantee their protection and to make sure that we can advise them and see that their rights are respected.

Unfortunately, in today's world these problems are not being sufficiently discussed. There is not sufficient awareness about them, about the complexity of the different things that we have on the table. And when there is awareness and when there is debate political will is sometimes lacking because obviously this represents a huge responsibility for the international community. Selfishness is also something that is always around and in many circumstances because with the trends that I referred to in the beginning—security concerns, concerns about migration and its impact on society—people tend to be more and more worried about their own interests, and less and less open to support those that need protection and assistance because they can no longer live in their community but are true victims that need our solidarity.

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