



CANADA'S PERIODICAL ON REFUGEES

REFUGEE

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VIOLENT DISPLACEMENT AND POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION: AFGHANISTAN, UGANDA, AND RWANDA

Editorial

Ogenga Otunnu

Today there are many Afghanistans, Bosnias, Burundis, Cambodias, Croatias, Democratic Republics of Congo, Rwandas, Somalias, Sudans, and Ugandas, where tens of millions of people are violently displaced. The uprooted, including the societies, are emotionally and culturally traumatized and decimated, physically devastated and economically impoverished and marginalized. More often than not, the faces and plights of the uprooted do not capture the attention of the media.

The causes of violent displacement are complex and related: wars, violence, violations of the right to socioeconomic development, violations of other fundamental human rights, chronic deficit of legitimacy, hotly contested concepts of society, and the quest for hegemony. The roots of the crises are located in past and present history of the societies, and the interplay of domestic, regional and international factors.

Afghanistan, for example, has experienced a ravaging war for nearly two decades. The protracted war has

claimed over a million lives, permanently disabled some 300,000 Afghans, generated over a million internally displaced people and some 6 million refugees.¹ The overwhelming majority of the refugees sought asylum in Pakistan and

Iran. Some of those who repatriated under conflict, especially between 1992 and 1998, have fled again, mostly within the turbulent country.² The physical, psychological and psychosocial consequences of the war, uncer-

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tainty and violent displacement are devastatingly dehumanizing and transgenerational. 3

The war has also destroyed infrastructure, schools, hospitals, cities, villages, pastures and livestock. In a chronically poor country where the literacy rate stood at below 10 percent before the war, the effects of the prolonged crisis on human development is quite profound. 4

Some of the causes of the war are related to the strategic location of the mountainous and landlocked country: Afghanistan borders Pakistan in the south and east, Iran in the west, China in the far north-east, and Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in the north. The location of Afghanistan which highlights the country's immediate and direct geopolitical and cultural significance to Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East has attracted a host of invaders, conquerors and imperialists: the Greeks, Mongols, Turks, Uzbeks, British, Russians, Americans, and Soviets. During the Cold War, for example, the country was turned into a major geopolitical battle field by the competing hegemonic power blocs of the USSR and the United States. The superpowers provided military training to their Afghan allies, and supplied large quantities of ammunition and arms, including anti-personnel mines. Anti-personnel mines, some planted and others dropped by war

planes, do not only hinder repatriation and resettlement under violent conflict, they continue to kill and maim many non-combatants:

About 10 million mines are thought to have been laid in Afghanistan ... Often they are washed down by floods on to previously cleared land. In some areas, they are everywhere: in villages; gardens; tracks; fields. In others, they may be only on access roads ... Nobody can be sure how many people have been killed by mines, but a figure of 200,000 may be realistic. 5

Regional powers, principally Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran, also contributed to the ruthless and protracted war that has devastated the country.

From 1982, Iran, whose ideological and military involvement in Afghanistan was temporarily halted by the need to consolidate the Islamic revolution that crushed the Shah regime, attempted to counter the influence of the pro-American Sunni-based Islamic groups with a Shia influence. Iran's active involvement in the war for ideological dominance and influence was also a part of its larger project of regional sub-imperialism. Pakistan, on the other hand, was actively used by the United States to contain Soviet hegemony in the region. The American-Pakistan alliance allowed Pakistan to obtain enormous military and financial aid from the United States. Pakistan's role as a fairly autonomous and hegemonic satellite also made it quite easy for the United States to channel huge military aid and humanitarian assistance to various *mujahedeen* political factions. To be sure, Pakistan's involvement was also motivated by regional and religious imperatives. 6

Internal power struggles, personality conflict, violent politics of ethnicity and religion, and profound crisis of legitimacy of the state, its institutions, the incumbents and their challengers have also accounted for the systematic violations of rights, mass displacement and enormous destruction of one of the poorest countries in the world.

The end of the Cold War was expected to facilitate a negotiated settlement and create conditions for post-conflict reconstruction. However, the abdication of leadership by the remaining superpower, among other factors,

has diminished the commitment to ending the war. According to a statement made by the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, Robin Raphel, to the *International Herald Tribune* on 5 November 1996, Afghanistan was a "crucible of U.S. strategic interest" during the Cold War. However, since the demise of the Soviet Union, the United States does not have a plan to end the war:

As long as the rival factions think they can prevail and establish control over Afghanistan and as long as such outside countries as Pakistan and Iran continue to encourage them to be

lieve they can win—there is no prospect for a negotiated settlement. We know none of them can win, but they don't know it. Sadly, what needs to happen is a military stalemate that goes on long enough that various factions conclude they can't win.⁷

Raphel's statement was largely intended to deny the U.S. involvement in the on-going war. However, a number of Afghan observers maintain that the U.S.' "backdoor" support for the Taliban does not only make the American policy more incoherent and less credible, it also undermines prospects for a negotiated settlement to the war.⁸ Other western democracies, regional powers and warring factions in Afghanistan have also shown little determination to end the war and embark on post-conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction of the war-torn country.

As the war rages on several fronts between the Taliban regime and armed opposition groups, peaceful settlement to the conflict and prospects for post-conflict reconstruction are further betrayed. The situation is compounded by the Taliban Islamic laws which systematically violates women's rights to education and employment and freedom of movement. Violations of women's rights by the Taliban authorities were extended to women staff working for international humanitarian agencies.⁹ This discriminatory law has been criticized by Iran and some Islamic parties in Pakistan as being consistent with Islamic teachings.¹⁰

The situation is equally desperate in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Sudan, and Uganda. These countries have not only produced large numbers of refugees and internally displaced people, they also host large numbers of refugees from neighbouring countries. For example, there are over 470,000 internally displaced people in Acholi in northern Uganda, some 650,000 IDPs in and around Ruhengeri and Gisenyi in Rwanda, and over 500,000 internally displaced people in Burundi.¹¹

The situation is compounded by the growing internal armed resistance in these countries. Since the outbreak of

the war against the Kabila regime by Congolese-Tutsi—who are dismissed by Presidents Mugabe of Zimbabwe and Kabila of the DRC as a mere front for the construction of Tutsi empire in the region by Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda—Hutu rebels from Burundi and Rwanda and three Ugandan rebel groups from West Nile, Acholi and western Uganda have joined forces with Kabila against the "invading" forces in the DRC. The Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), for its part, has merged its central command with Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and the Congolese-Tutsi. According to the Kabila regime, the invading forces—which are essentially made up of the very forces that overthrew Mobutu and installed Kabila to power: Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda—are actively supported by Britain, the United States some European and North American mining companies.¹²

A similar claim about the involvement of Britain, the United States and the mining companies is made by many African countries, including Angola, Chad, Namibia, Sudan and Zimbabwe. The proponents of this view highlight the reluctance by Britain and the United States to condemn the violation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the DRC (violation of international law) by Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda as an indication of the support the violators continue receive from the two major powers and their domestic economic interests. They also claim that the United States sent a large contingent of military advisors and new weapons to Rwanda and Uganda to aid the war effort. The arrival of some Ugandan military officers for training in the United States in November 1998 is also paraded as another evidence of USA complicity in the war.

It is also suggested that inconsistent western policies towards Africa has contributed to the escalation and persistence of the war. According to the proponents of this view, while one-party rule or the repression of multi-party democracy in some parts of Africa is condemned and punished by the west as violations of universal human rights,

it condoned and rewarded when practiced by some governments. In such an instance, they maintain, the west attaches greater significance to its economic interests and commitment to Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank than to the universality of human rights. In fact, in such situations certain rights such as the right to belong to and choose a party of one's interests and freedom of association are defined by the west as situational and relative to societies. Uganda is often mentioned by this group as a leading case of a one-party state which is not only embraced by the West, but is being funded by Great Britain to hold a referendum whose sole objective is to legitimize one-party rule. The complicity of Great Britain is partly supported by a position advanced by the British Head of the Department of International Development for Eastern Africa, D. S. Fish, the Wider Consultation on Uganda (WiCU):

You raise a number of issues concerning democracy, human rights and the legitimacy of the government. As regards the form of democracy in Uganda, it is our view that this is for the Ugandan people to decide. They will have the opportunity to do so in the referendum scheduled for 2000.¹³

Similarly, while violations of human rights by some governments are publicized, condemned and punished, similar violations by others are concealed, rewarded and often blamed on other factors. It is this group of enlightened violators of rights who are often paraded by western governments, institutions and scholars as the new breed of African leaders.¹⁴

In the on-going war, Kabila has surprised many distant observers of African political history by mobilizing almost the entire continent, including the Francophone states of Africa, against Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda. Some of the states, especially Angola, Chad, Namibia, Sudan and Zimbabwe are militarily supporting Kabila in the war. In fact, without the military support of these countries, the regime

would have collapsed faster than that of Mobutu.

Rwanda and Uganda, on the other hand, have explained their presence in the DRC as a security move against the growing cross-border raids into their countries by rebels forces based in the DRC. They also point out that the rebels, including those who committed genocide in Rwanda, have been recruited by the Kabila regime to fight against them. Attempts to avoid another genocide against the Tutsi in the DRC is also offered to justify the presence of the two countries in the DRC.

A number of African countries which are directly involved in the war have also embarked on massive arms race. For example, it was reported that in late November 1998, Uganda received 90 tanks from Russia. The tanks reached Uganda through the Tanzanian port of Dar es Salaam.¹⁵ The DRC, Rwanda, Sudan and Zimbabwe are also actively involved in the arms race. Furthermore the DRC, Rwanda, Sudan and Uganda are heavily recruiting into the army and mobilizing some demobilized soldiers for the war. Yet all these countries are financially bankrupt, heavily indebted and are unable to meet the basic needs of their people. Some of these governments, especially the DRC and Uganda, are also plagued with high level and chronic corruption.

The scramble for Africa, as the war in the DRC is often presented, does not only threaten the existence of many countries in Africa, it also demonstrates the impotence of regional organizations, including the Organization of African Unity. The failure of the OAU to resolve the growing crisis between Ethiopia and Eritrea further highlights the growing insignificance of the OAU in finding "African" solutions to post-Cold War conflicts in Africa.

Lack of a coherent, pro-active, common and cost-effective strategy and political determination to deal with the crises, have convinced some western governments and the institutions they control to try as much as possible to keep the uprooted invisible, voiceless and away from "their backyard."

The international media, for their part, may highlight some of the tragic drama. However, analyses of the drama, which often take only a few minutes in a program or a tiny section of newsprint, are often superficial and misleading. Further, interests in the "play" are only sustained if the theatre is next door and threatens national security and economic interests of the countries where the media are based. At times, unofficial policies pursued by some journalists or media discourage reporting "embarrassing" news about a friendly regime or a friendly anti-regime group. In other instances, lack of resources or more interesting news elsewhere discourage reporting violent displacement and gross violations of rights in some parts of the world.

The unwillingness or reluctance or inability to provide a balanced and objective report about gross and systematic violations of human rights also affects the legitimacy and credibility of some human rights organizations and some organizations assisting refugees and internally displaced persons. Indeed, some of these organizations, while claiming impartiality, objectivity and balance in their activities, deliberately distort or withhold information about violations of human rights or the plight of refugees and internally displaced persons in some countries. Occasionally, some of these organizations provide misleading and distorted information because they lack resources or mandate or competence to verify information they obtain from other sources. Yet, information generated by these organizations and the international media often form an important part of what human rights and refugee scholars and policy-makers rely on. Equally, by providing deliberately distorted information or withholding crucial information, some of these organizations do not only engage in silencing and making the victims of violations of rights invisible, they also violate the rights of those they claim to protect.

Some human rights and refugee scholars also provide misleading and/or distorted accounts of violations of rights and violent displacement. At

times, this problem stems from incompetence, lack of intellectual honesty or the desire to advance a particular interest which is not supported by a critical examination of sources and methodology. The need to become an "expert" without understanding the issue and/or a particular region or the pressure to publish or the desire to obtain research grants on a topical subject may also contribute to silencing and making the uprooted invisible. Also, policies which are informed by such studies compound the crises of violent displacements and violations of rights.

Against these challenges, the need for reconciliation and post-conflict reconstruction remains extremely urgent. Reconciliation means achieving peace; addressing the causes of violent conflicts that led to displacement; healing the wounds caused by violent conflict and injustices; addressing the needs of those uprooted; demilitarization of society; creating institutions that are responsive, fair and democratic; and reconstructing the bereaved society. This issue of *Refuge* focuses on some of the challenges of displacement and reconstruction in Afghanistan, Uganda and Rwanda. Connection between development and displacement emerges by noting that nearly a billion people in the "Third World" live in absolute poverty. Yet this condition has resulted from political decisions of the states and the international economic systems. Questions of definitions, asylum and protection of refugees are also discussed in this issue. ■

Notes

1. See, for example, UNHCR, *Refugees*, no. 108, "Afghanistan: The Unending Crisis" (Geneva: UNHCR, 1997); Nassim Jawad, Minority Rights Group International Report, *Afghanistan: A Nation of Minorities* (London: MRG, 1992), 5; U.S. Committee for Refugees, *Left in the Cold: The Perilous Homecoming of Afghan Refugees* (Washington, DC: USCR, 1992), 2.
2. UNHCR, *Refugees*, no. 108, "Afghanistan: The Unending Crisis," 7.
3. For similar observations from similar tragedies, see A. Zi and A. Uganda, "Towards an Epidemiology of Political Violence in the Third World," *Social Science Medical Journal* 28, no. 7 (1989): 663-42; M. Eisenbruch,

"From Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to Cultural Bereavement: Diagnosis of Southeast Asian Refugees," *Social Science Medicine* 33, 6 (1991): 673-80; E. Ehrensaft, "Culture in the Diagnosis and Treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," *Transcultural Psychiatric Review*, 4 (1995): 395-406; A. Dawes et al., "Political Violence in South Africa: Some Reflections on Children of the Violent Destruction of their Community," *International Journal of Mental Health* 18, no. 2 (1989): 16-43; I. Martin-Baro, "Political Violence and War as Causes of Psychosocial Trauma in El Salvador," *International Journal of Mental Health* 18, no. 2 (1989): 3-20.

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5. UNHCR Reports, cited in U.S. Committee for Refugees, *Left in the Cold: The Perilous Homecoming of Afghan Refugees* (Washington, DC: USCR, 1992): 12.
6. Amnesty International, *Afghanistan* (London: AI, November 1995), provides an excellent description of arms supplied to Afghanistan and armed opposition groups between 1979 and 1992.
7. *International Herald Tribune*, 5 November 1996, cited in Amnesty International, *Afghanistan* (London: AI, 1996).
8. See, for example, Amnesty International, *Afghanistan* (London: AI, 1996).
9. Amnesty International, *Afghanistan* (London: AI, 1997).
10. See, for a start, Amnesty International, *Afghanistan* (London: AI, 1996).
11. See O. Otunnu, "The Path to Genocide in Northern Uganda," *Refuge* 17, no. 3 (August 1998): 4-13; *IRIN update* 553, 26 November 1998; U.S. Committee for Refugees, *World Refugee Survey 1998* (Washington, DC: USCR, 1998).
12. See, for example, "London's Warlords Annex East Congo," *EIR*, London, November 1998.
13. See D. S. Fish, Head of DFID Eastern Africa, *WiCU Conference Resolution*, 19 November 1998. To be sure, U.S. Department of State, *Uganda Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1997* details some violations of these rights by the Uganda Government.
14. See, for example, "Ugandan Abuses Bring Shadow of Terror to the Heart of Africa," *The Independent*, London, Thursday, 12 November 1998.
15. See *IRIN Update* 533, 26 November 1998.

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2. *Discussion of Immigration Bill C-86*, Vol. 12, No. 2, July/(Aug.) 1992.
3. *General Issue/Refugee Sponsorship*, Vol. 12, No. 3, Sept. 1992.
4. *Eastern European Refugees*, Vol. 12, No. 4, Oct. 1992.
5. *The Tragedy of Somalia*, Vol. 12, No. 5, Nov./Dec. 1992.
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