



## The Refugee Problem: Implications for International Security

In the post-Cold War era, security has acquired a new and more complex significance. To the traditional political-military issues at the intra-state level must be added many other concerns including ethnic conflicts, refugee and migration flows and population growth. Major new security threats are already arising from political and social instability in the Third World and Eastern Europe, either as a result of ethnic, inter-community or religious tensions, or because of economic upheaval. A consequence of this instability has been a rise in the number of refugee and migration movements as faced by many countries across the world.

The enormous changes and instability generated by the end of the Cold War and the instability in the Middle East have triggered and are triggering new mass movements of people across the globe. These refugee exoduses are commanding the attention of high-level policy makers not only for humanitarian reasons and because of the increasing numbers involved, but also because of the serious consequences that mass displacements have for national stability, international security and the emerging new world order.

The scale of refugee's movement has expanded dramatically in recent years—from an estimated 9 million refugees in 1984 to the current estimate of 60 million. A number of conditions in developing nations, including rapid population growth, economic stagnation, famine, unstable political conditions, ethnic conflicts, environmental deterioration, and ongoing civil war have led to the current high rate of relocation adding to the magnitude of the problem.

Today, large-scale movements of refugees and other forced migrants have become a recurrent and tragic feature of the contemporary world. Today, there are more than 60 million people who are of concern to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Violent conflicts and abuse of fundamental human rights, aggravated by poverty, social inequities and environmental degradation, have led to refugee flows in different parts of the world. Prospects for solving refugee problems appear mixed; repatriation often occurs in

difficult and dangerous situations, sometimes to conflict-torn societies. As refugees increase in numbers, the possibilities of their returning home remain limited with more and more doors being closed on them. Wealthier nations see them as a threat to their existing standards of living, while the poorer ones consider them a burden on their meagre resources.

Refugees are people in flight, searching for improved security. However, according to the 1951 UN Conventions Relating to the State of Refugees, a refugee is "any person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country."

Today, majority of mass movements are caused by war, ethnic strife and sharp socio-economic inequalities. The difficulty of building durable state structures in the context of deep ethnic divisions and economic under-development has resulted in much of the domestic conflict and political instability that the developing states have experienced or are experiencing. These conditions not only generate refugee flows, but also make the resolution of refugee problems in the developing world quite problematic.

Currently more than half of the world's refugees are fleeing from communal-based violence, and this trend is likely to continue. Indeed, we should expect ethnic warfare to flare up repeatedly in the developing world today, and to become more perplexing and intractable for those managing international security than were the politically motivated guerrilla wars of national liberation of the past several decades. Moreover, ethnic conflicts are also likely to re-emerge in regions where such tensions and hatreds have remained largely dormant for the past several generations.

This is most evident in Eastern Europe, former Soviet Union and the Middle East, where long-standing ethnic rivalries are more apparent than at any time since World War II, but conflicts are also likely to occur among indigenous populations in Latin America and elsewhere. With modern weaponry accessible even to the poorest country, civil war can quickly devastate its fragile infrastructure, while population increase and density usually mean that more people are displaced than in previous conflicts. Refugee movements can both create or exacerbate conflict between neighbouring states and challenge the integrity of the host state. Refugees and other migrants are frequently perceived by both sending and receiving states as a threat to stability and as a bilateral problem with serious national security implications.

This is particularly the case in conflicts involving the spill-over of turmoil across national borders and frequently involves a mass exodus of refugees from one country to another. The activities and ambitions of the refugees themselves, as well as those of the governments of asylum and of the guerrilla movements in both sending and receiving states are additional significant factors in the prolongation and complexity of refugee problems as is being experienced in the Middle East today.

As a general rule, when a mass exodus occurs the primary concern of policy makers in both countries will be the impact of this flow on their own power positions. If the refugees and migrants are seen as contributing to the receiving state's power base, policy makers will accept and in some cases even welcome the newcomers. On the other hand, if the influx is

perceived as a threat to the national security of either the sending or receiving state, the population movement will result in inter-state tension and conflict. Unwanted migrations, such as refugee movements, can also frequently threaten inter-communal harmony and undermine major societal values by altering the ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic composition of the host population, as in India's North East.

In countries which are divided into antagonistic racial, ethnic, religious or other groupings, a major population influx can place precariously balanced multi-ethnic societies under great strain and may even threaten the political balance of power. It is not surprising, therefore, that many states are extremely reluctant to accord legal recognition to refugees from neighbouring countries for fear of complicating political relations, encouraging a mass influx of people seeking assistance and eventually swamping the existing cultures, or increasing political instability by offering protection to ideologically or culturally incompatible groups of people.

Even in situations where refugees share similar ethnic and linguistic characteristics with their hosts, hospitality can soon wear thin, especially when strategic and security issues are at stake. The pressures created by mass refugee influxes in poor countries can also affect the formulation of security and foreign policies in these states. Governments walk a tightrope in trying to balance economic, national security and humanitarian interests. Refugees and other exiles often live on, or very close to, the disputed borders; they either reside among combatants in an on-going conflict, or are suspected of materially assisting guerrilla forces attempting to overthrow the government from which they have fled. Some host governments are understandably reluctant to offer asylum for fear of being drawn into the conflicts involving their neighbours.

There is no doubt that mass influxes of migrants and refugees, if not adequately addressed, can endanger social and economic stability and security, particularly in countries where ethnic rivalries may already be virulent, where the central government is weak and consensus on the legitimacy of the political system is lacking, and where essential resources are very limited. In such situations, migrants and refugees compete with nationals within host societies for the scarce jobs and services available. The strain on the host population's social services and physical infrastructure, the distortion of local economic conditions, and the racial and religious tensions which sometimes result in countries with acute problems of cultural heterogeneity constitute legitimate security concerns for many developing countries.

Migrants and refugees can also be perceived as a threat to the cultural identity of the receiving state. In Western host countries, expatriate communities establish schools for their children, their own newspapers, religious institutions and cultural organisations. The initial concern of migrants is often to preserve their cultural heritage and to protect the interests of their community. However, as expatriate communities or their leaders gain their political footing, they can also intervene in a variety of ways which threaten the security and stability of host countries.

Refugees can also be sources of international conflict. Offering sanctuary and support to migrants and refugees frequently incurs military retaliation and draws asylum countries into the turmoil. In many Third World regions of conflict, fighters often mingle with

refugee populations, using their camps for rest and medical treatment and sometimes for recruitment.

As complex mass movements continue to occur all over the world, it is evident that the issue of refugees and other population movements will be high on the international agenda in the coming years. Today, refugee movements are increasingly being perceived as matters of the highest concern for the international community. Yet despite this awareness and concern, the response of states to this issue has been narrow and confused. Foreign policy makers must look beyond refugees and relief measures for them to address political conflict, violation of human rights and economic impoverishment as the root causes of refugee flows.

Although, it is apparent that refugee and security issues are closely related and do often command the attention of the high-level policy makers, the nature of the security threat posed by refugee problems is frequently outside the usual scope of defence and foreign ministries. The deployment of military forces and the creation of security alliances are largely irrelevant to such non-military threats to security, and different institutions, techniques and forms of international co-operation are needed to deal with them. What we require now, are new and innovative approaches towards conflict resolution, external assistance and domestic controls. In the long run, the only effective way of dealing with the problem is to address systematically the conditions that create such movements.

While it is clear that the issues that immigration raises require a long-term perspective and a systematic approach, the successful management of this problem will also require unprecedented global cooperation. In particular, the countries of origin have a responsibility towards their own citizens especially in terms of preventing the situations which give rise to refugee and migrant flows, and national sovereignty should not be used to shield governments from their responsibilities. In this regard, the countries of origin must reach accommodation with their ethnic and religious minorities and refrain from political repression. Without directly addressing the root causes of refugee flows, there can be no realistic chance of regulating emigration pressures. Moreover, rapid population growth in the Third World threatens to swamp any progress achieved in economic development and human rights. It will not be possible to curb transitional refugee and migration flows until the South manages to control its population growth.

A failure by both the industrialised and developing countries to take action to stem the tide of poverty, violence, persecution and other refugee-inducing factors will prove costly in security terms. Dealing effectively with refugee and other population movements both at home and abroad is, therefore, in their self-interest and coincides with their search for long-term global strategic stability.

### **Salient Points**

- Major new security threats are arising from political and social instability in the world.
- Enormous changes and instability generated by the global instability have triggered new mass movements of people across the globe.
- Majority of mass movements are caused by war, ethnic strife and sharp socio-economic inequalities.

- The perceived threat to national security of either the sending or receiving state often results in inter-state tension and conflict.
- Unwanted refugee movements frequently threaten inter-communal harmony and undermine major societal values by altering the ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic composition of the host population.
- Many states are reluctant to recognise refugees from neighbouring countries for fear of complicating political relations or for avoiding ensuing economic burdens.
- Pressures created by mass refugee influxes in poor countries also affect the security and foreign policies in these states.
- The only effective way of dealing with the problem is to address the conditions that create such movements.
- Foreign policy makers must look beyond refugees and relief measures to address political conflict, violation of human rights and economic impoverishment as the root causes of refugee flows.

## Glossary

**Stagnation:** lack of growth or development

**Inequity:** inequality; lack of fairness

**Repatriation:** return of someone to their own country

**Intractable:** hard to deal with

**Exacerbate:** to make a situation worse

**Exodus:** a mass departure of people

**Influx:** a mass arrival of people

**Asylum:** shelter from danger