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Citation: 8 Int'l J. Refugee L. 276 1996



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REVIEW ESSAY

The State of the World's Refugees: In Search of Solutions, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Oxford University Press Inc., New York. 1995. 264 pp. ISBN 0-19-828044-0, 0-19-828044-2.

The search for solutions to human displacement caused by violence and threats of persecution continues despite the hallowed end of superpower rivalry. *The State of the World's Refugees: In Search of Solutions* deals with current geo-political issues and the seemingly intractable problems facing the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the mid-1990s. Increasingly, UNHCR is a lead agency addressing both the needs of displaced people as well as the conditions which generate their dislocation. International political pressure as well as UNHCR experience and expertise shape international responses to forced migration. At its Geneva headquarters, as well as on the ground in refugee camps and safe areas, UNHCR's current scope is an expression of a tremendous global surge in human displacement. The authors contend, 'UNHCR has been transformed from a refugee organization into a more broadly based humanitarian agency' (p. 48). The agency's focus has broadened to meet the exigencies of current political crises, yet the bases for such change are not clearly defined:

The world's most powerful States and the United Nations itself have been placed in a considerable dilemma by the rash of internal conflicts and humanitarian emergencies since the demise of the bipolar State system. While the old rules of the game have evidently changed, the international community has found it extremely difficult to articulate a coherent set of principles and practices which are geared to contemporary circumstances. (p. 115)

The above excerpt identifies a key issue underlying UNHCR's increased scope in delivering humanitarian assistance since the end of the Cold War. The book has been compiled by an editorial team, consisting of Raymond Hall, Jeff Crisp, and Marina Ronday-Cao, at UNHCR, as well as a group of UNHCR senior staff and an academic advisory group. It offers a refreshingly frank and often thoughtful discussion of some of the pressures facing the organization as it rallies to meet the challenges in both the scale and nature of human displacement.

Despite its title, the book focuses more on the 'state of UNHCR in the post-Cold War context' than on the state of refugees *per se*. Given the new challenges UNHCR has faced over the past five years, this emphasis is welcome. The five main chapters outline important changes in the global geopolitical landscape as well as the domestic politics of donor countries. Some of these changes include the importance of peacekeeping to the provision of humanitarian assistance, the emerging salience of human rights as opposed to Cold War tensions in defining protection needs, and the declining popularity of resettlement in traditional host countries as a solution to displacement. The two final chapters, respectively entitled 'Promoting Development' and 'Managing Migration', focus on more conventional analyses of displacement. They discuss what the world should look

like more than the political exigencies that shape humanitarian assistance. The final chapters do raise important problems of backlash against refugees and chain deportations, as well as the implications of States' efforts to construct buffer zones to deter potential asylum seekers.

The writers describe the post-Cold War era as 'the new international disorder' (p. 34). Optimism that conflicts might be reconciled and that refugees could return home as superpower tensions ease has 'been overshadowed by a crop of new and very large humanitarian emergencies in areas such as the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central and West Africa' (p. 35). While the book is written in a non-controversial, even-handed, accessible manner, it raises salient questions for legal scholars, social scientists, and those interested in 'managing migration.' This essay reiterates a number of these questions and examines some of the implications of the material presented.

Context

The first publication in the present series, *The State of the World's Refugees: The Challenge of Protection*, was published in 1993 by Penguin and focused on meanings and practices of protection at UNHCR. Among other subjects, it discussed UNHCR's protection of groups other than formally recognized refugees. In emphasizing and expanding the constituents to whom it offers protection, UNHCR has effectively customized its competence in relation to other UN agencies at a time when cutbacks and rationalization of UN activities is the rule.

While both the 1993 compilation and the new book include interesting maps, numerous tables, and information boxes that highlight particular crises of and responses to displacement, the latest book begins to explore what might be called the *geopolitics of mobility* — that is, the differential power and resources available to refugees and other forced migrants to move, and the global economy of geopolitical and intergovernmental power which shapes how these groups are managed by international organizations, such as UNHCR. Speaking of mobility, geographer Doreen Massey notes that,

some are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it.¹

Not every displaced person or group of displaced persons has access to the same avenues of escape. Possibilities for protection are shaped by the willingness of the UN or other international bodies to get involved, as well as the economic and political status of the displaced people.

According to UNHCR, a new paradigm of managing migration has emerged. Upon closer reading, it becomes clear that new types of intervention are being employed and that these have strategic value.

¹ I adapt Doreen Massey's term to include other economies of power, such as geopolitics. D. Massey, 'Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place', in J. Bird, B. Curtis, T. Putnam, G. Robertson, & L. Tickner (eds.), *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, New York, Routledge, 1993, 59–69, at 61.

Whereas the older paradigm can be described as reactive, exile-oriented and refugee-specific, the one which has started to emerge over the past few years can be characterized as pro-active, homeland-oriented and holistic. (p.43)

The new approach emerged in 1991, when the UN Security Council adopted resolution 688 authorizing assistance to Iraqi Kurds in Northern Iraq, and remains current five years later. It focuses on preventing displacement, shifting emphasis from the right to leave to the right to remain (p. 47). The right to remain, in turn, is premised on the supposition that potential refugees be helped at home, before they cross an international border. In explaining the rationale for the new approach, the book does point a finger at individual governments: 'States are increasingly taking steps to obstruct the arrival of asylum seekers, to contain displaced people within their homeland, and to return refugees to their country of origin' (p. 16). The operative word here is 'contain.' Containment, the book maintains, can be the basis of peace and security in one sense, and yet it can also mean 'closing borders and prohibiting a besieged population from leaving the towns and village where they have congregated' (p. 54). The 'safe haven' of Srebrenica was the site of mass murders in July 1995, despite the presence of UN peacekeeping forces. It raises a serious question: When is containment peaceful, and when does it jeopardize the safety of displaced persons? As the Secretary-General also commented with respect to the Security Council's resolutions on Bosnia and Herzegovina, 'the problem with safe havens is first of all that we have not received a definition of what is meant by a safe area' (p. 129).

In criticizing States for their obstruction of asylum and their general unwillingness to accept large numbers of refugees, even on a temporary basis, the book is somewhat precariously balanced. The fact UNHCR is reliant on many of these same countries for voluntary contributions is scarcely acknowledged. Relationships of reciprocity and reliance between donors and UNHCR are elided in the book — UNHCR being a major recipient of political and financial investments to manage refugees and other displaced populations. To blame States for endangering the lives of displaced people or asylum seekers is to miss the point that UNHCR has two sets of clients, donor governments and refugees. UNHCR is the transfer point of power in crises requiring humanitarian assistance to displaced people. A discussion of the negotiations between donor States and UNHCR would have been useful in determining what gets funded, when, and how. Despite its reliance on donor governments, UNHCR's historic role as an advocate for refugees does make the book's criticism of recalcitrant receiving countries more palatable.

The vague and somewhat confusing term 'preventive protection' (p. 50) is used to describe the overall strategy of this new approach. Increasingly UNHCR has become involved in operations *within* countries where people are displaced, often in conflict zones. One senior staff member in the Division of International Protection has argued that the term 'preventive protection' is 'an abuse of language'.² He noted that 'preventive' indicates action antecedent to displacement, whereas 'protection', in the traditional refugee sense, refers to assistance provided

² Interview, UNHCR Chief of Promotion of Refugee Law Section, Geneva, 24 Oct. 1994.

after displacement has occurred. Other problematic terms such as 'preventive development' (p. 153) are used throughout the book; a 'UNese' guide explaining the origins and rationale of this imagined terminology would make a welcome appendix.

Preventive protection, with its emphasis on the right to remain, signals new challenges to the original notion of 'refugee' and the meanings of political borders. Citing the withdrawal of UN peacekeeping troops from Somalia in March 1995, the authors note, 'it is difficult to disagree with the UN Secretary-General's statement that "the time of absolute and exclusive sovereignty" has passed' (p. 40). While multilateral intervention may be more easily justified during humanitarian crises, the concept of sovereign borders can be undermined by such interventions. The peacekeeping mission in Somalia, for example, was authorized on the basis that human tragedy caused by conflict constituted a threat to international peace and security.³ Somalia did not pose a military threat to its neighbours; it did pose a humanitarian one. The US/UN intervention in Somalia raises two important questions: At what point do sovereign borders cease to matter? And under what conditions can multilateral intervention be justified?

The State of the World's Refugees: In Search of Solutions clearly illustrates the extent to which UNHCR has become involved with internally displaced persons (IDPs). In 1995, the agency reported responsibility for 14.5 million refugees, 4 million returnees, 3.5 million 'other persons of concern', and 5.4 million IDPs (p. 247). The numbers paint a telling picture of UNHCR's expanded mandate and concern for groups outside its formal mandate; almost half of 27.4 million total beneficiaries were not formal refugees. This sizeable proportion illustrates in turn the organization's variety of activities, including the return of almost 4 million refugees through voluntary repatriation; the use of safe havens and 'preventive protection' for displaced people within countries of conflict; and a sustained focus on well-being of internally displaced persons where access to assist them is possible.

In other UNHCR publications, the Division of International Protection at UNHCR has registered its concern for IDPS:

They have been called 'refugees in all but name'... Because they have not crossed an international boundary, the internally displaced have no access to the international protection mechanisms designed for refugees UNHCR finds it operationally untenable — as well as morally objectionable — to consider only the more visible facet of a situation of coerced displacement... No two humanitarian crises are ever the same, and a global approach to such complex situations requires, if anything, finer tools of analysis and a larger arsenal of flexible responses.⁴

While the mandate of UNHCR has not been formally amended, its recent actions suggest a commitment to 'flexible responses' to crises in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Somalia, Iraq and elsewhere. The traditional legal definition of 'refugee' is being renegotiated. UNHCR provides protection on the basis of

³ UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees: The Challenge of Protection*, New York/London, Penguin, 1993, 181.

⁴ UNHCR, 'UNHCR's Operational Experience with Internally Displaced Persons', Division of International Protection, Sept. 1994. Cited in the foreword.

need rather than status. In doing so, it aims to prevent displaced people who may be potential refugees from being forced to cross borders.

Promoting Peacekeeping

At a time when UNHCR is developing community-based approaches to managing migration in the field,⁵ the deployment of peacekeepers presents something of a dilemma. This book uncritically supports the simultaneous deployment of soldiers and relief workers in the same place. It implicitly promotes the 'can-do' mentality, hierarchical discipline and organizational skills of the military (p. 125). The problems of peacekeeping are, on the whole, glossed over, though caution is advised when working in war zones (p. 139). The French-led military intervention into Rwanda, known as 'Operation Turquoise', is described as 'impartial' (p. 128). Yet, early in 1996, UN peacekeepers left that country because the new Rwandan government refused to let them stay, arguing that UN forces had harboured Hutu militia members in the UN-protected 'humanitarian protection zone' in southwest Rwanda. A recent report initiated by the Danish government suggests that the UN response was too little too late, and that the consequential mass murder of up to 800,000 people might have been averted if appropriate action had been taken. A key conclusion of the study was that 'humanitarian action cannot substitute for political action'.⁶

The book does warn of the politicization of humanitarian mandates and States: 'it is not a question of whether humanitarian and political activities intersect, but rather how that relationship is managed' (p. 139). As reader, I would like to have had this issue analyzed in more detail. Instead, information boxes expounding the potential of safe areas and of airlifts in Sarajevo frame peacekeeping operations in a more neutral framework than they usually occur. No doubt there is a place for peacekeeping in mediating the conflicts of the post-Cold War period, but the specific relationship between humanitarian and military resources requires further clarification. The deployment of military resources for humanitarian purposes is of such significance, the book's authors contend, that 'UNHCR now employs a former army officer to provide advice on military and logistical issues' (p. 124). While collaborations between peacekeeping and humanitarian operations are increasing, the book's emphasis on the importance of military resources seemingly underestimates civilian staff's ability, experience, and expertise at UNHCR. The possibility that simultaneous deployment of military and humanitarian staff may contravene the safety of displaced persons and other civilians is not directly addressed.

Peacekeeping in the 1990s has taken place in failing States where conflict produces human displacement and public pressure to act is enormous. *The*

⁵ The reference here is to UNHCR's Quick Impact Projects (QIPs), which follow community development principles and other approaches that aspire to participatory planning and inclusive decision-making procedures.

⁶ Cited in H. Windsor, 'UN hierarchy taken to task over Rwanda', in the *Globe & Mail*, Toronto, 12 Mar. 1996. For a similar conclusion regarding the Rwanda crisis, see African Rights, 'Humanitarianism Unbound? Current Dilemmas Facing Multi-Mandate Relief Operations in Political Emergencies', Discussion paper no. 5, Nov. 1994, London.

State of the World's Refugees: In Search of Solutions cites examples of peacekeeping missions with humanitarian mandates, including operations in Iraq, Somalia, Tanzania, Rwanda, Zaire, Liberia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Yet, UN peacekeeping missions in Somalia, Rwanda, and Bosnia and Herzegovina have not provided solutions to conflict and displacement in those countries. Certainly, the scale of peacekeeping operations is greater than ever before. In its first four decades, the United Nations launched thirteen peacekeeping missions, while since 1988 it has authorized twenty-five. From 1945 to 1989, US\$3.6 billion was spent on UN peacekeeping options; between 1990 and 1995 the cost was US\$12 billion (p. 98). The multilateral contributions to such operations by member States have increased and are matched by dramatic growth in the budget of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. UNHCR's annual expenditures, in turn, have grown rapidly over the past two decades. From \$34.8 million in 1970, the organization spent \$444.2 million in 1984, and \$1,166.8 million in 1994 to assist refugees and others, 'persons of concern' (p. 255). These trends in spending point to an expansion of UNHCR's mandate and of the responsibilities of UN peacekeepers: 'the humanitarian, political, and military elements of the UN system have been brought into a new and very intensive relationship' (p. 117).

Legacies of Cold War language remain in the phrasing of certain questions: How, for example, 'can the notion of deterrence, a central pillar of military strategy during the years of the bipolar State system, be employed by the international community to deter or end conflicts in the post-Cold War era?' (p. 141). The question speaks to a combative notion of power as conflict when yet other assumed relations of power remain unexamined. The hegemony and membership of the 'international community', for instance, is not interrogated. The historical antecedents of conflict, particularly the legacies of colonialism and the armaments distributed during superpower rivalry are also important omissions. While the chapter on peacekeeping raises more questions than answers, it is a constructive exercise in understanding solutions to displacement.

Lacunae

While peacekeeping and some of the dilemmas of political versus humanitarian interventions are explored in the book, other innovations in UNHCR policy and practices are conspicuously absent. There is no evidence, for example, that UNHCR employs any gender analysis or maintains policies which aim to promote women. A single information box in chapter two highlights the problem of violence against refugee women. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, a UNHCR journal of refugee abstracts, country reports, and documents, published a special issue commemorating the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women.⁷ The conference, the issues it raised, and the solutions it proposed are not mentioned in the book. While the book may well have gone to press before the final proceedings of the conference were available, major recommendations were

⁷ 14 *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 'Special Issue on Refugee Women', Summer 1995.

generated at preparatory meetings as early as October 1994. UNHCR's policy on refugee women states that they should be integrated into all realms of decision-making and activity. A discussion of initiatives to provide training in gender analysis and other refugee-centred programmes, or of why these were excluded, would have been useful. The next book UNHCR issues could be more a inclusive volume. It is not simply a matter of including women refugees, but of taking account of the important feminist and gender analyses presented by refugee scholars in this journal and elsewhere. The appearance of the word 'mankind' in an information box entitled 'the laws of war' within the chapter on peacekeeping is somehow unsurprising.

The State of the World's Refugees: In Search of Solutions provides a brief discussion of temporary protection, regional safe havens, intra-regional resettlement, and increasingly restricted channels to traditional resettlement countries. An in-depth discussion of every solution is precluded in a single, slender volume. Nevertheless, the reader is left wanting to know more about the connections between domestic politics and international humanitarian interventions (p. 140), the basis for increasing xenophobia and anti-refugee backlash (p. 188), and the reasons why receiving States want to reduce refugee resettlement numbers (p. 162). Two separate tables outlining the decline of official development assistance, on the one hand, and the huge increase in financial support for UNHCR's humanitarian activities, on the other, beg an explanation. Why is there plentiful funding for humanitarian crises, but decreasing support for longer term development activities? Is this inverse correlation related to the down-sizing of the welfare State in many donor countries? If so, how?

Traditional Solutions

Surprisingly, one of the more conventional responses to human displacement — refugee camps — is hardly mentioned in the book. Except in the context of successful voluntary repatriation, camps appear to have passed with the Cold War conflict that bred them. The absence makes sense in that UNHCR has apparently moved beyond this 'exile-oriented approach.' Nonetheless, one is inclined to think that the book is intended as a marketing tool for potential donors who will not be attracted by the prospect of supporting old-fashioned refugee camps. In Central and East Africa, camps host literally millions of refugees, suggesting that their current importance as solutions should not be underestimated. The book does include some incisive comments on the subject:

As one anthropologist has observed, refugees are too often seen as the object 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'.⁸

This quotation hints at what is rarely discussed in the refugee literature, namely, cultural politics and institutional technologies of power in refugee camps. How, for example, are relief operations administered and refugee populations managed?

⁸ D. Turton, cited in UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees: In Search of Solutions*, 1995, 235.

What, if any, are the relationships between the well-intentioned efforts of humanitarian interventions and those of the colonial administrations that preceded them? Is a refugee camp a community or an institution? These questions admittedly reflect personal interests, but need to be asked.

The book frankly discusses the perils of tied aid and the power of affluent States to impose human rights stipulations on poorer countries. '[L]ocal actors frequently have little or no voice in deciding what assistance a country receives, to which activities it is allocated and how it is administered' (pp. 184–5). This relationship is felt perhaps most strongly among refugees in camps who wait for other options to materialize while the possibility of returning home is precluded by conflict. Perhaps the most pressing question for legal scholars, human rights advocates, and UNHCR staff alike is, 'How temporary is temporary?' (p. 88). By this the book means, at what point do refugee camps cease to be humanitarian sanctuaries where food, shelter, and medical needs are met but access to land, employment, and self-determination are precluded? While supported materially by the donor countries, refugees in camps are also contained in isolated locations without political status. Should there be a time limit? For how long does the privilege of safety against forced repatriation outweigh the civil and political, economic, social, and cultural rights safeguarded by the two international covenants?

These are the most engaging issues raised. They are also the most difficult. In the final part of the book, the authors decide to focus on subjects more easily tackled. They maintain that, '[t]he political agenda has been set too long by people whose main preoccupation is simply to keep the number of immigrants down' (p. 228). After the more substantive issues and questions raised earlier, this claim seems both self-evident and simplistic. This latter section mobilizes a rhetoric of fear: 'A hungry society is an angry society; and angry people are often driven to destructive activities in their struggle to survive' (p. 242). While this may be true in some cases, no evidence is provided. Furthermore, the claim competes with an observation made by the authors of UNHCR's 1993 sister volume, arguing that '[i]t is too simple to say that poverty begets refugees. In relatively static situations, extreme deprivation is as likely to breed resignation as resistance.'⁹ In both cases, evidence on which to base the claims is required to support the respective arguments.

In Search of Answers

This reviewer remains unconvinced of the merits of an approach which promotes 'the right to remain', although the strategy warrants further examination. Despite some evident weaknesses, this volume raises key issues and asks a number of difficult and challenging questions:

- Can refugee problems be averted through the creation of internationally protected 'safe areas' within war-affected countries? (p. 128). When is such

⁹ UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees: The Challenge of Protection*, New York/London, Penguin, 1993, 15.

containment constructive and peaceful and when does it jeopardize the safety of displaced persons?

- What defines a safe area?
- How temporary is temporary? (p. 88). At what point do civil and political, economic, social, and cultural rights prevail?
- What criteria operating between donor States, the 'international community,' and UNHCR determine which crises get funded, when, and how?
- At what point do sovereign borders cease to matter? Under what conditions can multilateral interventions be justified?
- What, if any, are the relationships between the well-intentioned efforts of humanitarian interventions and those of colonial administrations that preceded them?
- Does geography matter? Is 'preventive protection' deployed equally across sovereign borders where people are displaced by threats of persecution or generalized violence? Or is it geopolitically strategic and geographically discriminating?
- What is the relationship between contemporary domestic politics and increasing anti-refugee backlash?
- Why is there plentiful funding for humanitarian crises, but decreasing support for longer term development activities? Is this inverse correlation related to the shrinking of the welfare State in many donor countries, and if so, how?

In raising some of the dilemmas and issues faced by potential countries of first asylum, UNHCR, and its donor States, *The State of the World's Refugees: In Search of Solutions* provides the basis for an agenda of research and policy-making with respect to forced migration.

Since 1991, strategies such as 'preventive protection' in conjunction with peacekeeping measures which include protected 'safe havens' have been employed to curb refugee flows. This approach aims to be more inclusive in terms of who UNHCR assists, but it also has strategic value for the organization which must justify expanded emergency operations and maintain its unique competence in a climate of UN cutbacks. The approach to managing human displacement has shifted: governments prefer interventions which provide assistance to displaced persons *before* they cross a border. This book both illustrates and draws attention to this shift. In so doing, it identifies one of the most prominent changes in the management of forced migrants. It makes a valuable contribution to a growing body of literature which signals concern for displaced people and informs responses to the burgeoning population of forced migrants on a global scale.

Jennifer Hyndman
 Department of Geography
 University of British Columbia, Vancouver