

# Hard cases: internal displacement in Turkey, Burma and Algeria

by Roberta Cohen

In some countries, the internally displaced are beyond the reach of international humanitarian organizations.

Although the displaced populations concerned may be in dire need of assistance and protection, and could benefit immeasurably from outside support, few or no steps are taken, or strategies developed, to gain access to them. Whereas conflict is the inhibiting factor in some cases, in others, the governments concerned do not request aid and by and large reject any that is offered. Only rarely does the UN Security Council deem such situations to be threats to international peace and security and demand entry.

Leading examples of governments that successfully bar international involvement with their displaced populations are Turkey, Burma and Algeria. The situations in the three countries are, of course, quite different. In Turkey and Burma, governments have deliberately uprooted people in order to destroy their possible links to insurgency movements. In Algeria, displacement is a byproduct of conflict, primarily between the government and Islamist insurgent groups.

In Turkey and Burma, the displaced populations are ethnic minority groups that have long suffered policies of exclusion and marginalization by their governments. In Turkey, the Kurdish minority, which comprises about 20 per cent of the population, has been subjected, since the founding of the state, to forced assimilation. The Kurdish language may not be taught; Kurdish language broadcasts are illegal; Kurdish publications and media are restricted; Kurdish political parties are banned or harassed. In Burma, the ethnic minorities, which constitute one third or more of the population and include Karen, Mon, Chin, Shan, Rohingya, Kachin and

Karenni, suffer political and economic exclusion, restrictions in higher education, and 'cultural Burmanization'. The Rohingya are even denied citizenship, while non-Buddhists suffer religious persecution.

Although Turkey and Burma depict the insurgencies in their countries as 'terrorist' and respond to them with military action, the problems at base are political, and require negotiations over autonomy or other forms of power-sharing. In Algeria too, the government exclusively blames terrorists for the violence that causes displacement. It conveniently overlooks the impact of its own role in cancelling the 1992 election that the Islamic Salvation Front was expected to win. Moreover, its failure to protect its own population from the massacres and violence that ensued became a major cause of internal flight.

Outside efforts to influence the three governments are made difficult by their failure to request international assistance and by their shielding themselves behind the 'sanctity' of sovereignty. Burma does not want to acknowledge a problem of internal displacement in its country while Turkey significantly minimizes its magnitude and severity, insisting it can handle it by itself, despite evidence to the contrary. Both try to conceal the extent to which their own policies or actions may have contributed to the conflict and displacement. In the case of Algeria, outside intervention would contradict the government's assertions that it is adequately caring for its population and that the violence is under control.

At a conference organized in Washington DC in January 1999 by the Brookings Institution Project on Internal Displacement and the US Committee for Refugees (USCR), international experts and NGOs examined the plight of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the three countries and suggested possible strategies for dealing with these difficult cases.<sup>1</sup>

## Turkey: regional leverage

Anywhere from half a million to two million Kurds have been forcibly displaced by Turkish counter-insurgency campaigns seeking to root out support for the the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). To be sure, the PKK has also attacked and killed civilians and contributed to their displacement but government operations have been the preponderant cause. The Turkish military reportedly has emptied more than 3,000 villages and hamlets in the southeast since 1992, burned homes and fields, and committed other serious human rights abuses against Kurdish civilians. Hundreds of thousands have crowded into shanty towns outside major cities without access to proper sanitation, health care or educational facilities, and without stable employment prospects.

## *Even ICRC has been unable to operate in Turkey*

Despite repeated promises, the government has taken few steps to facilitate the return of forcibly displaced Kurds to their homes, assist them to resettle, or compensate them for the loss of their property. Nor does it allow others to help. The only local humanitarian NGO allowed to operate in the southeast has been shut down. No international NGO has been permitted entry. Even ICRC has been unable to operate in Turkey. The request of the Representative of the UN

Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons, Francis Deng, to visit the country has received no response.

There are nonetheless some possible avenues of action. In 1998, after repeatedly denying entry to the rapporteurs of the UN Human Rights Commission, the Turkish government did permit the Rapporteur on Torture and the Working Group on Disappearances to visit. Some attributed this change in position to Turkey's military victories over the PKK and its desire to be accepted into the European Union (EU). Indeed, the EU's leverage over Turkey is one possible entry point for pressing for better policies and practices toward the Kurds. In 1997, citing human rights grounds in part, the EU excluded Turkey from membership and the European Parliament blocked development aid. Given Turkey's interest in admission, the EU could insist upon certain steps being taken with regard to forced displacement. To gain entry in 1995 into the European Customs Union, Turkey undertook several reforms.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, of which Turkey is already a member, could also play a far more stringent monitoring role with regard to forced displacement, compensation and returns. As a result of cases brought before the European Human Rights Court and Human Rights Commission, Turkey has had to pay some \$800,000 in compensation to Turkish victims of human rights abuse - most of whom were Kurds whose homes and villages were destroyed.

Turkey is also a member of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the regional body best suited to create a political framework in which a dialogue between the Turkish government and Kurdish leaders could be introduced. OSCE can mediate disputes, dispatch missions to ease local tensions, and deploy monitors on the ground. Although its decisions are by consensus, OSCE has special procedures for taking action when governments fail to cooperate with it. Norway and Austria, OSCE's outgoing and incoming chairs, both have been prominent in focusing attention on internal displacement worldwide. Now as members of the executive *'troika'*, they could be encouraged to introduce a more vigorous OSCE role with regard to forced displacement and Kurdish minority rights.

Although generally reluctant to exert pressure on Turkey bilaterally, the United States may be willing to support multilateral initiatives within OSCE. For decades, the US relied upon Turkey as a strategic and military partner, first against the Soviet Union, more recently for air operations over Iraq, and as a bridge to central Asia. As instability within Turkey has become more apparent, however, members of Congress and the foreign policy community have begun to question the US approach. NGOs would do well to press the US to work within the OSCE framework to promote a political solution for the Kurds and support OSCE involvement in monitoring and facilitating IDP returns.

The UN and Bretton Woods Institutions should also be encouraged to play a stronger role. Specifically, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), UNICEF and the World Bank could try to expand development programmes in the south-east (the least developed part of the country), set up projects for displaced Kurds outside the major cities, and help with returns. The Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), the UN's 'reference point' for IDPs, could request the Resident Representative/Coordinator to regularly report on conditions of displacement, and place the issue on the agenda of UN inter-agency meetings. The UN system could also get behind the request of the Secretary-General's Representative on IDPs to visit Turkey.

### **Burma (Myanmar): focus on humanitarian aid**

Forcible displacement is a deliberate policy of Burma's military government. It has three main aims: to break up potential areas of opposition to the regime; to destroy the links between the insurgent movements of ethnic minorities and their local sympathizers; and to make way for large-scale development projects. Over the past decade, up to 1 million people or more have been forcibly uprooted.

The relocations themselves have been carried out brutally, accompanied by rape, pillage, the burning of fields and confiscations of land. The areas of resettlement have in the main been devoid of infrastructure and basic necessities. Many of the internally displaced have

been conscripted as forced labour on road, railways and irrigation projects, or as 'porters' for the military. Thousands who try to escape but do not reach the Thai or other borders (where some 200,000 have become refugees) have ended up hiding in mountains and jungles in dire need of food, shelter and medical attention.

The government has denied entry to the International Labour Organization and, for the past four years, to the UN's Special Rapporteur on Myanmar appointed by the Commission on Human Rights. It has also prevented access by international humanitarian organizations and NGOs to conflict areas. It has gained for itself the reputation of a pariah because of its refusal to honour the 1990 elections which brought the National League for Democracy (NLD) to power and because of its egregious human rights record.

Isolation of the regime has been the policy of choice of most Western governments and human rights organizations. Nonetheless, some policymakers and experts have proposed steps of limited engagement to exert influence. They point out that in recent years the government has begun to open itself up to

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## *OCHA should take the lead in pressing for an inter-agency needs assessment mission.*

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foreign investment, tourism and development aid. Although its overall goal is to reinforce its own position, especially that of its military, it seeks acceptance regionally and internationally and must also deal with a deteriorating economic situation. This could offer some leverage to potential donors to link assistance to political reforms. In November 1998, the Office of the UN Secretary-General, which has been pressing for reforms,<sup>2</sup> introduced the possibility, both to the government and opposition, of providing World Bank loans linked to political reform.

Caution, of course, is in order. An Open Society Institute report found that most of the profits from international invest-

ment “go directly to the regime or the small clique of soldiers and businessmen close to the junta.”<sup>3</sup> Any development aid would have to be predicated on full access to those in need, extend to the border areas where ethnic minorities reside and be carefully designed and implemented to include education, health, reforestation and agricultural programmes.

It should be noted that the government has been promising, but not delivering, development aid to ethnic minority groups that lay down their arms. This could suggest an entry point for sponsors of international programmes to explore whether they could introduce projects to the benefit of these groups.

Meanwhile, UN agencies in Burma, such as UNHCR, UNICEF, UNDP and WHO, could make a more vigorous effort, through the programmes they do conduct, to find out about the humanitarian relief needs of IDPs. Indeed, the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) should take the lead in pressing for an inter-agency needs assessment mission. Too little priority has been given to date to providing food and medicines to IDPs. Apart from the obstacle of access, there is the fear that aid will be diverted to the military and profit the government. There is also, however, the tunnel vision of donors, which focuses on long-range democratization goals - the restoration of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD to power - but overlooks the immediate humanitarian needs of the displaced.

In particular, strengthening cross-border programmes to reach displaced persons could help address humanitarian needs. The record shows that indigenous organizations have been able to bring food and health services cross-border to isolated IDPs. Another promising development is the government’s recent agreement to allow ICRC to maintain “a permanent presence in various border states”. This could offer an opportunity to collect information on IDPs and provide them with assistance. Greater presence for UN agencies in border areas is something the Secretary-General should advocate in his talks with the regime and opposition.



Governments in the region, like Japan, could be pressed to raise humanitarian concerns. In 1998 Japan provided quasi-development aid for the first time in ten years but attached no explicit conditions. Lobbying the Japanese government should become a regular feature of human rights and humanitarian strategy. Governments in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), which approved Burmese membership in 1997, should likewise be urged to raise human-

itarian issues. The ‘flexible engagement’ policy, proposed by Thailand and the Philippines, calls for discussion of human rights and democracy issues but should extend to forced relocation practices and the need for humanitarian access.

Some European and US corporations, such as Total and UNOCAL, continue to operate in Burma. Forced relocations and forced labour are reportedly being used

to construct facilities, such as oil pipelines, from which they directly benefit. The two companies in fact are being sued in the US for alleged complicity in such practices.<sup>4</sup> Since their reputations are on the line, the time may be right to urge them to review their policies and practices and raise issues with the government such as the need to avoid displacement, engage in fair labour practices, and compensate those displaced.

### Algeria: the information void

The scale of internal displacement in Algeria and the conditions of the displaced are largely unknown because entry has generally been denied to human rights and refugee organizations, especially since 1997, and to many journalists. Moreover, those who manage to make site visits are limited by lack of access and security risks and have not tended to collect information about those forcibly displaced as a result of the violence. Some place the total number in the thousands, others in the tens of thousands, or far more. What is known is that Algerians since 1992 have been fleeing from villages to larger towns and cities to avoid massacres by Islamist insurgent groups as well as fighting between these groups and government security forces and among the insurgents themselves.

The fact that the army and security forces have frequently failed to intervene to stop the attacks on civilians (up to 100,000 have reportedly been killed) has led some to believe that members of the security forces are directly involved with the armed groups. Government land appropriation schemes, about which little is known, have also been cited as a cause of displacement.

International fear of an Islamic state in Algeria led Western countries to give tacit support to the military government that nullified the 1992 elections. Yet its security forces have engaged in highly abusive practices, such as arbitrary arrests, torture and disappearances. Meanwhile, Islamists have ruthlessly targeted for killing those perceived to be 'enemies' of fundamentalist Islamic values and those directly connected to the state and have carried out indiscriminate

attacks and atrocities against villagers in rural areas.

Notwithstanding problems of access and security, and the government's discouragement of outside fact-finding, entry points do exist to secure information and monitor the conditions of those forced to flee. Local journalists and human rights groups remain active, despite harassment and restrictions, and some NGOs like the Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights, the Algerian League for Human Rights and the Algerian Refugee Council have managed to collect some information about forced displacement. There are also UN agencies on the ground, in particular UNHCR and UNDP, which, while not dealing directly with the internally displaced, could be tasked with providing information.

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## *serious human rights violations have to take precedence over concerns of state sovereignty*

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Most important, a civilian government came into office in April 1999, and it has introduced an amnesty for Islamic insurgents and pledged to reduce violence. While its record is still unclear, there is reason to believe that it may prove responsive to outside influence. Even in 1998, delegations from the EU and the UN gained entry, and the government subsequently set up offices throughout the country to process disappearance cases. The new government could be encouraged by the UN and EU to establish offices to deal with arbitrary displacement and to invite the Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons to visit.

Development agencies could also play a role. They could explore the impact of flight from rural areas on Algeria's poor agricultural output and on the housing shortage in the cities. Their programmes could help absorb at least some of the estimated 70 per cent of Algerian young men who are unemployed and more likely to be drawn into the insurgent activities that produce displacement.

### Conclusion

Even in the most difficult cases, there are strategies available to alleviate forced displacement. Regional organizations, donor governments, and the UN all have potential leverage. Secretary-General Kofi Annan has told the Commission on Human Rights and the General Assembly that serious human rights violations, in particular "the violent repression of minorities," have to take precedence over concerns of state sovereignty. This should encourage OCHA to turn its attention to the cases of Turkey, Burma and Algeria.

There are some of course who will argue that limited international resources are better spent on countries more likely to cooperate. But would it not be unconscionable to ignore millions of IDPs simply because they are caught up in situations deemed too difficult?

The UN is expected to focus on all IDPs. Although its *modus operandi* is to deal with governments that request aid, it certainly can use its discretionary authority to monitor situations and initiate actions on behalf of those who clearly fall within vacuums of responsibility in member states. To do less would be to fail in its mandate.

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1. The information before the meeting of 28 Jan 1999 was provided by four USCR analysts: Bill Frelick, who visited Turkey, Jana Mason and Hiram Ruiz who visited Burma, and Steve Edminster who researched the Algerian situation. See Bill Frelick *The Wall of Denial: Internal Displacement in Turkey*, USCR, November 1999 (see page 45 of this FMR for details); Jana Mason *No Way Out, No Way In: The Crisis of Internal Displacement in Burma*, USCR, Jan 1999; and Steve Edminster *Internal Displacement in Algeria: The Information Void*, USCR, Jan 1999.
2. The Secretary-General has a mandate from the General Assembly to use his good offices to talk to all parties in the conflict and encourage democratization and national reconciliation.
3. Mason, quoting Open Society Institute, 'Burma, Country in Crisis,' 1988.
4. William Branigan, 'Rights Victims in Burma Want a US Company to Pay,' *Washington Post*, 4-13-99.