Confusing deadlines: IDPs in Indonesia

by Christopher R Duncan

When does an IDP stop being an IDP? In Indonesia the answer was supposed to be: on 31 December 2002. This was the deadline announced in late 2001 when the government released its plan describing how it would solve the 'problem' of the more than one million IDPs spread across the country.[1]

The government's plan contained no details on how this was going to be accomplished other than providing three options for IDPs: i) returning them to their place of origin, ii) empowering them in their current location (i.e. integration) or iii) relocation. This new policy was greeted with confusion by many IDPs because it was announced at a time when people were still being displaced by ongoing violence in various parts of the archipelago. The document also announced that all government aid to the displaced would cease on 31 December 2001. This led some IDPs to speculate that it was aimed at mollifying host communities, many of whom were beginning to wonder when the IDPs were going to stop receiving aid and go home or integrate into the local community.

The ethnic, religious and political conflicts that followed the fall of the Suharto government in 1998 have displaced over 1.3 million people in Indonesia. Approximately half were displaced as a result of the ethnic and religious unrest in the eastern Indonesian provinces of Maluku and North Maluku. Although many of the conflicts have stopped, many IDPs have yet to go home. The return or integration of these IDPs remains of paramount importance to the Indonesian government as there have been reports of conflicts between them and host communities. Since it was conflicts between indigenous communities and migrants that created many of these IDP situations, their return or integration must be dealt with properly, or regional governments will simply be sowing the seeds of future conflicts.

The halt of government support at the end of 2001 affected IDPs in differing ways. A large majority were able to get by on their wages and the small amounts of aid they received from church groups or NGOs. Most IDPs had learned to cope without government aid, as corruption and mismanagement had depleted it significantly. However, those from more rural areas who lacked marketable job skills and older IDPs unable to do the manual labour jobs available were harder hit. Thus the policy did hasten the return of a small percentage of IDPs or, if they did not feel safe going home, simply displaced them to new, more rural communities.

Officials seemed to have a complete disregard for the situation on the ground, often urging people to return to places at the same time as new IDPs were arriving from those locales, fleeing renewed hostilities. As an incentive, the government promised IDPs that the North Maluku government and the armed forces would guarantee their safety – not reassuring when it was the failures of these two bodies that led to the their displacement in the first place. IDPs were also mistrustful of their former neighbours who had often turned on them during the conflict. Officials rarely took IDP trauma into account when discussing their return.

The deadline has come and gone and there are still hundreds of thousands of IDPs in Indonesia.

Suggestions for improving the resolution of IDP situations:

1. **Do not address the needs of victims of social conflict as though they are victims of a natural disaster.** While flood or earthquake victims can usually go back home as soon as the water subsides or the tremors stop, IDPs from social conflict cannot. By demanding that IDPs go home, officials contribute to the deterioration of relations between IDPs and host communities as the latter begin to think that the IDPs are simply staying to exploit aid.

2. **Teach regional officials and NGO workers the basics about the social conflict that created the IDPs with whom they are working**. Lack of knowledge about the conflicts affects the ability of civil servants and NGOs to work with IDPs, particularly when trying to assist them to return home; it also intensifies feelings of mistrust between IDPs, officials and NGO workers.

3. **Encourage/require internally displaced civil servants to move out of IDP camps**. Their presence within IDP camps caused a large amount of resentment among both host communities and IDPs. Research showed, that although internally displaced civil servants living in the camps did face numerous difficulties (occasionally their salaries were not paid), they were generally better off than other IDPs. Their removal from the camps, only after they have obtained paid positions within the local government, would have been a step towards improving relations and freeing up aid for IDPs in greater need.

4. **Set up an office to coordinate the return of civil servants to their original provinces**. A major problem in rebuilding conflict regions has been the flight of civil servants, including school teachers. In North Sulawesi many civil servants from North Maluku wanted to return when the

fighting had stopped but were hindered by their need to find jobs and arrange the complicated paperwork. A coordinating office could facilitate these transfers. District heads from recovering regions would submit lists of their personnel needs, to be posted in IDP camps and government offices.

5. **When building resettlement sites for IDPs, include homes for needy segments from the host community and provide clear and rigid guidelines concerning eligibility**. (This is already standard policy for transmigration projects.) In building new housing, the government must provide guidelines concerning who is eligible for the free housing and the status of the housing (whether the IDPs take ownership or have 'use' rights); these must be enforced in a consistent and transparent manner.

6. **Ensure greater coordination between provincial governments.** In the North Sulawesi case, there was initially only limited coordination between provincial governments – and chaos ensued. Boatloads of returning IDPs arrived in North Maluku without any warning, forcing local communities, already dealing with thousands of IDPs, to find housing and aid for more.

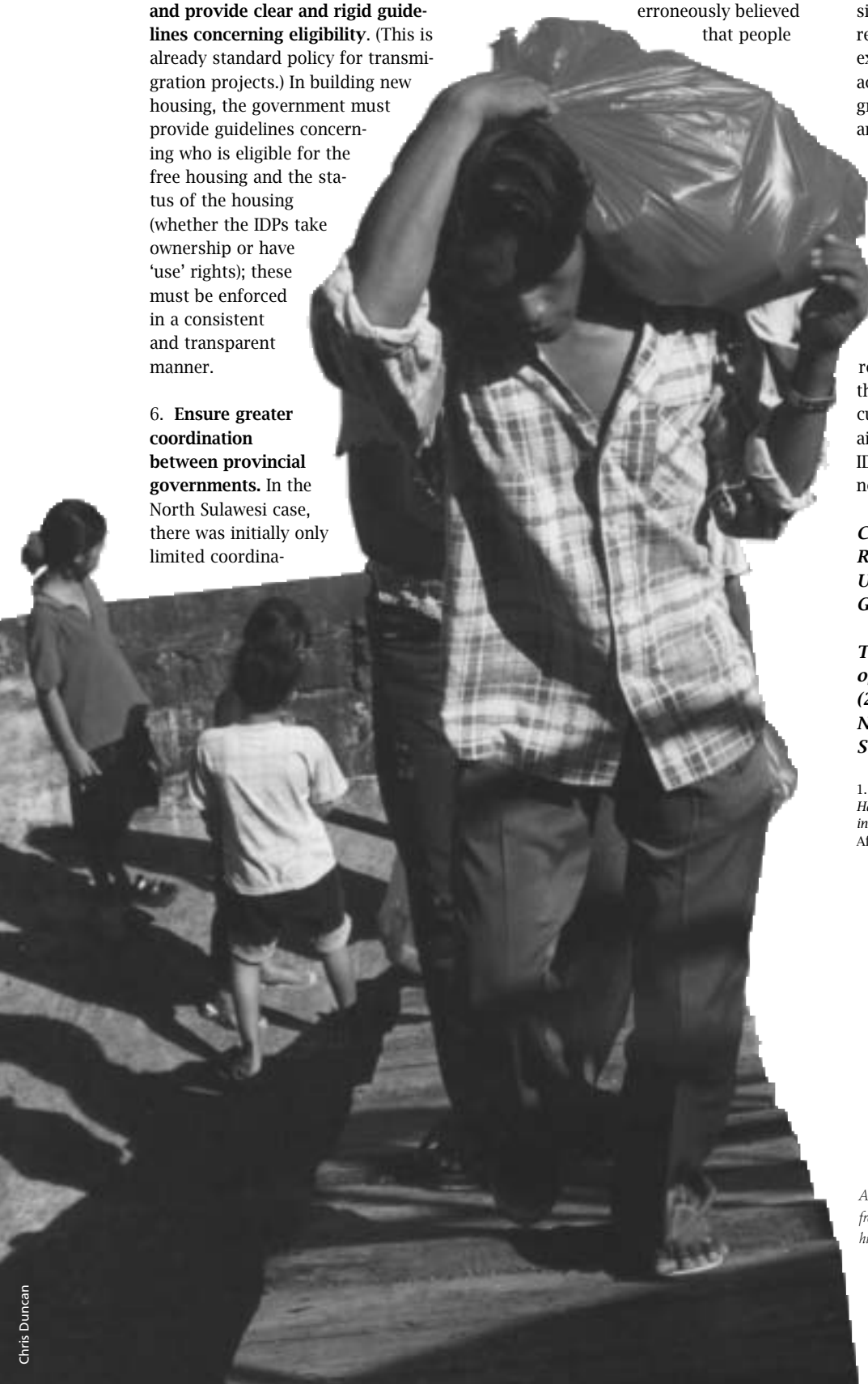
7. **Do not focus on IDPs living in camps to the exclusion of those living outside.** Government offices and NGOs (both local and international) erroneously believed that people living outside camps did so because they were better off financially. They failed to take into account the role played by IDPs' arrival dates. The first groups of IDPs from North Maluku were from urban areas, consisting largely of civil servants, merchants, and skilled labourers, most of whom found employment in North Sulawesi. Wealthy merchants and high level officials did not live in camps but some of those who could afford to live outside the camps instead chose to remain in the camps in order to exploit the low costs of living and access to aid. In contrast, the final groups of IDPs were often from rural areas and thus less able to find employment. They arrived after the camps were full; they had to rent homes and received less aid because they lived outside the camps.

8. **Provide IDPs with reliable sources of information.** IDPs need up-to-date information regarding the current situation in their former places of residence, the current government programmes aimed at them and their rights as IDPs. Local NGOs should fulfill this need.

Christopher R Duncan, PhD, is the RAI Visiting Research Fellow in Urgent Anthropology at Goldsmiths College.

This article is based on 18 months of anthropological fieldwork (2001-2002) among IDPs from North Maluku living in North Sulawesi.

1. This document, titled *National Policies on the Handling of Internally Displaced Persons/Refugees in Indonesia*, was released by the Minister of Social Affairs, Yusuf Kalla.



A North Maluka IDP boards a boat to return home from North Sulawesi carrying canned goods given to him by the government.

Chris Duncan