

People abroad and people at home in societies under strain

by Nicholas Van Hear

Over the last three decades, refugee crises have resulted in the dispersal of substantial numbers of people from the world's trouble spots. While much interest has focused on the effects of their presence in the countries that host them, these 'new diasporas' can also influence profoundly what happens at home.

This article looks at how diasporas can help or hinder their homelands, particularly those that are suffering from the effects of conflict or other forms of serious socio-economic strain. One concrete way in which those abroad shape the living conditions of those they leave behind is through the transfer of money home. Many studies, particularly of 'economic' migration, have shown how remittances from abroad can have profound impacts on those at home¹; this article will show that this is true, if not more so, for societies in conflict or otherwise in distress. From the point of view of those at home in such societies, the presence of family members abroad may be a lifeline.

Two countries that have experienced heavy out-migration in recent years are considered here: Ghana and Sri Lanka.² In the last three decades or so, there has been a large exodus of Ghanaians from their homeland, largely as a result of serious socio-economic difficulties at home. Many of those who have left have sought asylum. Since the 1980s the destinations have become much more diverse, so that there is now a large Ghanaian diaspora spread all over the globe. The out-migration continued even when economic, social and political conditions improved at home. Many people aspire to migrate, and many others

depend heavily on money sent by their relatives abroad.

Sri Lanka has also experienced heavy out-migration over the last three decades. At first this was largely labour migration, mainly to the Middle East; the exodus also included a brain-drain of professionals and people seeking educational advancement abroad. Since the civil war between the Sri Lankan armed forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) took off in the 1980s, a large scale outflow of asylum seekers, mainly Tamils, has taken place. While much of this movement was initially to southern India, many Sri Lankan Tamils have sought asylum further afield, so that a far-flung diaspora has developed. There are now large numbers of Sri Lankan households with members abroad, on whom they rely for a large part of their livelihoods.

Household migration strategies

Migration is commonly a matter of household strategy, particularly for coping during times of adversity. When and how to move, who should go, how to raise the resources to travel, how to use any proceeds from migration and other decisions are commonly matters for the whole household rather than the individual migrant. Like other household

strategies, migration involves outlays or investment, and there is an expectation of return from that investment. One of the principal outlays in recent years has been for the services of brokers or agents to arrange travel. As passage to the affluent countries in particular has become increasingly difficult, the agents' charges have become inflated; the resources that must be raised have therefore increased. Looking at migration in this way suggests that remittances are not a simple one-way transfer from those abroad to those at home, but rather that the process may be better viewed as a kind of exchange between those who go and those who stay.

There have been broadly three migration strategies open to Sri Lankans against

the background to conflict since the early 1980s: labour migration, usually to the Middle East; seeking asylum, initially in India and later in Europe or North America; and marriage to a partner abroad in Europe, North America or Australasia. Partly because the different migration strategies require very different levels of outlay or investment, these strategies divide broadly along class lines. Household investment is often large. Resources accumulated for the dowries of daughters might be invested in migration, meaning that marriage might have to be delayed. Substantial numbers of households, especially those displaced or otherwise war-affected, resort to moneylenders, or sell, mortgage or pawn land, equipment, houses, shops or jewellery.

Migration for work in the Middle East and elsewhere requires considerable outlays but is within the reach of farming and working class households who have some resources: it is pursued by poorer rural and urban families, and is increasingly used by displaced households to reconstruct their lives and livelihoods. In the 1980s, poor Tamil households displaced by the conflict were able to find refuge in south India. That option faded with the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by the LTTE in 1991, after which India's tolerance of Tamil refugees hardened. Asylum migration to other destinations, particularly in Europe or North America, has become increasingly costly, and has therefore become largely the preserve of well-to-do Tamils, who have both the grounds and resources to pursue it. Migration for marriage may also be costly, for the outlay that must be found is likely to be high when the spouse-to-be has residence status abroad. Whatever the form of migration, there is an understanding that those abroad should support those at home, the more so if they have helped in the passage abroad.

Ghanaian migration tends to be more opportunistic than in Sri Lanka but migration strategies are similarly shaped by socio-economic background. Migration of Ghanaians for education or professional advancement is long-established but depends on resources and connections and is largely the preserve of the more prosperous. The less well-off pursue a number of different strategies; asylum migration is one among several in the repertoire, which also includes marriage, stowing away on ships and other forms of illegal migration. Such migration is often very speculative. Some make for certain countries, such as Libya or Lebanon, with the idea of using them as stepping stones to more affluent destinations.

There appears to be less direct household investment in the migration than in Sri Lanka: the necessary funds are commonly raised from the migrant's own resources. Relatives in Ghana or abroad may help but commercial moneylenders are rarely resorted to. Ghanaians commonly send remittances for use 'in their own projects' - usually housing - rather than for collective household use. There is nevertheless expectation by the household of support from the migrant. However, remittances are not built into family finances in the way they are among Sri Lankan households; they are



rather seen as mindfalls, or as a kind of insurance that may be drawn upon in times of need.

Sustaining societies under strain?

Remittances have sustained households against the background of socio-economic near collapse in the case of Ghana and vicious conflict in the case of Sri Lanka. Ghana was in severe political, social and economic straits in the early 1980s. A recovery in the later 1980s faltered but was sustained in the 1990s, and can be seen as similar to the reconstruction undergone by some countries that have experienced serious conflict. The mass exodus precipitated by the socio-economic crisis provided part of the means, through remittances, for the recovery.

It is arguable whether money transferred has been deployed productively but remittances appear to have helped the survival of many thousands of Ghanaian households, by giving them the breathing space or resources needed to claw back and reconstruct. There appears to have been substantial investment in housing and in schooling of family members, and considerable investment in businesses. Those leaving in the later 1980s seem to have been notably more successful in terms of accumulating funds from abroad and investing them at home than those who left in the 1990s. The contribution of remittances to Ghana's socio-economic recovery thus may have peaked in the later 1980s and early 1990s. As opportunities to migrate – particularly seeking asylum – were curtailed in the 1990s, and more migrants were deported, earnings abroad have contracted and will have been less likely to help sustain Ghana's recovery.

At the same time, remittances have arguably had corrosive effects. Socio-economic differentiation has been accentuated, not least between those households with migrant members abroad and those without. There has also been differentiation between those households with successful migrants and those with migrant failures. Furthermore, relations between migrants and those at home may be tense, not least over the deployment of remittances. There are often bitter disputes

within extended families about the ownership or disposal of property, commonly housing, financed from abroad. Conversely, those at home often complain about the lack of reciprocity from migrants for the help they may have been given.

In Sri Lanka, migration and remittances have likewise contributed to the survival of perhaps hundreds of thousands of households – both those directly and those indirectly affected by the conflict.

Remittances from migrants by asylum or marriage have helped to sustain displaced and war-

affected Tamil households in and outside camps, and assisted some in the long haul to reconstruction after displacement or return. However this has increasingly become the preserve of the relatively well-off. While poorer households found refuge in south India and some sought asylum in the west, the cost of asylum migration and the fading of the south India option now mean that poorer households are rather displaced within Sri Lanka. One alternative for such households is for a member to seek employment abroad. Remittances from temporary labour migrants to the Middle East and southeast Asia have helped to sustain displaced Muslim and Sinhalese households who have few if any members abroad, and are not in a position to seek asylum.

Beyond just survival, investment of remittances in housing and particularly schooling are encouraging trends among displaced and war-affected households, as among those outside the zones of conflict. However, there are also socially corrosive aspects of the relations between those outside and those inside the country. The most serious charge is that migration and remittances have helped to perpetuate the conflict in Sri Lanka. Most obviously, exactions from Tamil migrants and their families by the LTTE have been a lucrative source of income for the organization. The LTTE regulates and taxes movement out of the areas they control, and is also said to be involved in migrant trafficking itself. Exactions continue once the migrant is abroad, through taxation of incomes from work and businesses.

Migration and remittances may help to perpetuate the conflict in other ways than finance for arms. It has been suggested that those in receipt of money sent by refugee or asylum seeker relatives abroad live a comfortable life in Sri Lanka – or at least one considerably more comfortable than it might otherwise be. For those abroad, particularly those whose status is uncertain, the attitude to the conflict is, to say the least, ambiguous, for it is the continuation of the war that justifies their asylum claim and therefore their stay – and hence makes possible the sending of remittances.

Some uncomfortable conclusions

As constraints on migration have increased, particularly in destination countries, and the cost of movement (often necessarily clandestine) has correspondingly increased, individuals' and households' migration choices are increasingly constrained by the resources they can mobilize; class is therefore an important determinant of the kinds of strategy pursued. This was less pronounced in Ghana than in Sri Lanka, where asylum migration has increasingly become the preserve of the well-to-do and well-connected; labour migration or internal displacement were the forms of movement that poorer households could afford; and the poorest often could not move at all. One important policy issue that this implicitly raises is the question of who is more deserving of assistance: those who leave, who may be relatively well-off, or those who remain, who may be worse off? If the need for assistance is greater for those who stay than for those who leave as refugees, the current focus of relief and assistance efforts may be misplaced.

As this article has shown, households invest substantially in migration of their members as labour migrants, as asylum seekers, for marriage or family reunion, and those left behind expect something in return from those who go. Asylum seekers and other forced migrants are therefore unavoidably confronted by economic issues (of the livelihood of those left at home as well as their own) similar to those encountered by labour or 'economic' migrants. The evidence from Sri Lanka and Ghana also confirms the ambivalence associated with the use of remittances sent back to societies in conflict or distress that has been noted in numerous studies of conventional

migration and remittances may help to perpetuate the conflict

economic migration, where assessment of the impact of migration in general and remittances in particular ranges from the 'optimistic' - remittances are productively deployed and contribute to 'development' - to the 'pessimistic' - remittances are wastefully spent and do not contribute to 'development'.¹

Ambivalence concerning remittances is still greater in the context of conflict and forced migration. On one hand, remittances and other transfers from abroad have certainly helped to sustain displaced, war-affected or otherwise distressed households and communities, sometimes for long periods. On the other, remittances have sometimes helped sustain the very conditions that lead to forced migration, both directly by funding conflict, and indirectly by giving some of the recipients of transfers an implicit interest in those conditions continuing.

This ambivalence poses serious policy dilemmas for countries that host refugees and other migrants. On one hand, those expatriates may well be fuelling conflict, which governments hosting them may well wish to discourage. On the other hand, the authorities of countries hosting migrants and refugees should be aware of possibly far-reaching consequences if such people are repatriated, or indeed if harsh restrictions are put on immigration. The consequences include the possibility that a diminution of remittances may lead to hardship, instability, socio-economic or political upheaval, and even the provocation of renewed conflict - and then quite likely renewed out-migration. In the longer term, remittances have the potential to be harnessed for the reconstruction and development of societies recovering from the distress of war or economic collapse; diminution of such transfers through repatriation will likely undermine such potential.

Ghana and Sri Lanka are far from the only societies in conflict or otherwise under strain that rely heavily on remittances. Money sent from Palestinians in the Gulf and elsewhere in the diaspora has helped sustain extended families in the Occupied Territories (particularly when access to the Israeli labour market was cut off) and displaced households in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. The mass exodus of Palestinians from the Gulf in the course of the Gulf crisis drastically reduced such families' incomes.

The Afghan diaspora, both in affluent Western countries and increasingly as labour migrants in the Middle East, has become an important source of income for families in the shattered homeland for Pakistan or Iran, particularly as international assistance has declined in recent years. Since banking and other conventional communication links are difficult or non-existent in Afghanistan, money from the diaspora is routed through traders or through relatives in Pakistan or Iran, from where it has to be taken inside in person.³

A similar, more sophisticated system has developed for the circulation of money within the Somali diaspora: fax companies have developed which can transfer money from, say, London to refugee camps in Yemen or Kenya or to Mogadishu, in a system incorporating Somali traders in the Gulf states.⁴

However, remittances are on the whole conservative in their effects: households and communities have at best been sustained, rather than having their conditions of life transformed by them.



After ten years at the Refugee Studies Centre, Nick Van Hear leaves in May to take up a senior research position at the Centre for Development Research in Copenhagen, joining a unit researching aspects of conflict and migration. He will continue his work on refugee diasporas, building on his comparative study *New Diasporas: The Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities* (London: UCL

Press 1998). Some of the findings of his recent work on this theme, based on fieldwork in Ghana and Sri Lanka, are featured above.

Nick will maintain an association with the RSC, specifically by developing collaborative links on a project on 'Complex Forced Migration Emergencies' with the Institute for the Study of International Migration at Georgetown University, Washington DC. The MacArthur Foundation has granted seed money to develop this project (see page 44).

Nick's email address at the CDR in Copenhagen from May will be nvh@cdr.dk

For many in such societies life is on hold: transfers from those outside to those inside appear to both sustain and perpetuate that limbo. While sustaining households in societies under strain may be a positive outcome, the potential for remittances to reconstruct or transform such societies has yet to be realized. That potential would repay further investigation by policy makers and practitioners.

1 Massey M, Arango J, Hugo G, Kouaouci A, Pellegrino A, and Taylor J *Worlds in Motion: Understanding International Migration at the End of the Millennium*, 1998, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

2 This article draws on fieldwork among about 800 households in Ghana and Sri Lanka in 1998. The support of the Leverhulme Trust for this research is gratefully acknowledged.

3 Mousavi S and Zajavery L 'People who stay: migration, development and those left behind in Afghanistan', 1999. Oxford: Refugee Studies Centre. Unpublished paper.

4 Perouse de Montclos, M 'Réseaux financiers et *hawilad*: le rôle de la diaspora somalienne dans la reconstruction de leur pays', 1999. Unpublished paper.