

Reflections on regime change

by Astri Suhrke

How do concepts about displaced people change?

What are the parallels between the development of the international refugee regime and equivalent policies and support structures relating to IDPs? Why is the current IDP regime lightly institutionalised and weak in comparison with the mechanisms and processes dealing with refugee flows?

The development of the international refugee regime was a process that reflected problem-solving concerns at the state level as well as hegemonic state interests. At times, it was also an agency-driven process. In many of the major displacement crises since World War II refugee problems have been seen as problems of international order. In recent years, the first major expansion of UNHCR and its activities occurred in the 1970s, and was the result of the impact of the Indochinese refugee crisis. Here the US played the role of a hegemonic actor and was a driving force behind regime expansion. A similar surge in activity happened in the 1990s in response to crises in the Balkans.

The end of the Cold War has opened up space for new ideologies. Sovereignty is now interpreted in terms of the rights of both states and individuals. Yet, the idea of human rights and 'individual sovereignty' has its limits. As we haltingly move towards a new regime for IDPs, what is now striking is the absence of a state 'promoter': a powerful nation playing a role akin to that undertaken by the US to expand the international refugee regime in the 1970s. Yet, there have been moments of expansion.

The defining event that pushed the IDP issue over the threshold of attention and led to institution building was the Gulf War. Security Council resolution 688 authorised humanitarian assistance to all those in need in northern Iraq without any mention of whether the Kurds in need of assistance were

refugees or IDPs. The US made a major breach in the wall of sovereignty by demanding that IDPs in northern Iraq should be internationally supported without regard to the government of Iraq.

While not milestones, further steps followed. In 1992, the UN Secretary-General appointed a Special Representative for Internally Displaced Persons, Dr Francis Deng. During the mid-1990s, he was instrumental in articulating a set of Guiding Principles for rights of, and support to, IDPs. In 1992 a central UN office for humanitarian affairs was established, later renamed OCHA. Although not generally an operational agency, and weak relative to the heavy UN agencies, OCHA has an over-all responsibility for coordinating assistance to IDPs. To that extent, the office represents a further institutionalisation of responsibility for this population. In these and related regime-building activities for IDPs in the 1990s, smaller states (such as Norway) and international NGOs were important actors. This new, light IDP regime has been able to be developed with the tacit permission of the US acting as a 'passive' hegemon.

Since 11 September we are facing a dramatically different situation and a new world order. What are the implications for IDPs? Two different scenarios can be envisaged.

- Are we embarking on a protracted humanitarian interlude? As the US again becomes an active hegemon, will action on IDP issues be subordinated to the 'war on terror'? This may entail weak or strong support for IDPs, depending on how it fits in with the agenda of the US. It therefore does not entail a regime but *ad hoc* and unpredictable responses.

- As the dust of the second Gulf War clears, will slow and piecemeal regime building again come to the fore as it did during the 1990s? In that case, are we talking about regime building proper where a range of actors work to strengthen international and state institutions for a more robust IDP regime?

Amid this uncertainty it is incumbent on IDP researchers to rigorously unpack the concepts, policies and justifications used by political actors when they define IDPs and develop mechanisms to offer them assistance and protection.

Basic questions should also be revisited. A fundamental question underlying the demand for an international regime to assist the IDPs is the assumption that IDPs constitute a particular category of persons that, by virtue of being internally displaced, have particular needs and, further, that these needs can best be met through a separate institutional structure of support, that is, a separate regime. This is not necessarily self-evident. A contrary assumption holds that the needs of IDPs can be met through the various existing agents of humanitarian assistance (such as ICRC, NGOs, WFP, UNICEF and UNHCR) in a patchwork manner and under existing human rights codes. Institutionalising a new category of beneficiaries could risk creating vested interests at the international aid level that serve to perpetuate such needs and related dependencies.

Astri Suhrke is a Senior Research Fellow at the Christian Michelsen Institute, Bergen, Norway.

Web: www.cmi.no

Email: astri.suhrke@cmi.no

This is a summary of an oral presentation.