

# Refugees and IDPs: are they really so distinct?

by Priyanca Mathur Velath

*Are we at risk of making artificial distinctions between different groups of displaced people? Has the category of people who may be described as Development-Induced Displacees (DIDs) been overlooked by the IDP community?*

**T**his paper locates the unique position of IDPs among other forms of forced migrants through a comparison with refugees. It draws attention to the neglected category of DIDs and uses evidence from India to argue for their inclusion within the IDP category.

Conceptually both refugees and IDPs are involuntary. Examples from the former USSR and East Pakistan show how today's IDPs can become tomorrow's refugees and refugees can turn into economic migrants, without any spatial migration whatsoever. The spheres of voluntary and forced forms of migration are often indistinct and overlapping.

Governments and inter-governmental bodies try to impose strictly defined categories. Refugee definitions have very explicitly excluded internally displaced groups. IDPs are noted to be the largest 'at risk' population in the world, yet arriving at an appropriate definition for them has been a slow and complex task. The current working definition formulated by the UN's Special Representative on IDPs is the broadest one at use at the international and regional level. But the boundaries of the category IDP are still fluid and the numbers of people within the category even more so.

Although internal displacement is not a new phenomenon we still lack a comprehensive count of IDP numbers

simply because they are not documented. While worldwide refugee figures are declining, those of IDPs are increasing. The gap between them has widened such that there are almost twice as many IDPs as refugees. Since 1995 the number of countries reporting the presence of IDPs has kept increasing; often the same countries report the highest numbers of both IDPs and refugees.

Study of the neglected phenomenon of development-induced displacement in India shows the unsustainability of attempts to draw distinctions between IDPs and DIDs. DIDs in India undergo violation of human rights at the hands of their own national and state governments and deserve to be treated as IDPs. They are inadequately compensated and state agencies have been unable to deliver promised quantities of land for those whose property and livelihoods have been lost. The large number of displacees who held no formal title to the land they used to cultivate have received nothing.

While refugees have an international system of protection to appeal to, IDPs have only national laws concerning land, rehabilitation and resettlement to depend on - if they exist. On the grounds that development projects are planned and those affected are compensated and resettled, DIDs are not treated as IDPs. However, in countries such as India,



the level of compensation is unjust and rehabilitation and resettlement are woefully inadequate. As the act of displacement is clearly a form of persecution those who are displaced should be treated as IDPs.

States which displace in the name of development must:

- stop assuming that displacement is inevitable
- recognise that although the physical act of displacement occurs only at one point of time it sets off a spiral of social and economic impoverishment, compounded by psychological trauma for landless, jobless and foodless DIDs
- stop granting rehabilitation as an act of reluctant generosity and start considering it an entitlement or a right
- search for non-displacing and environmentally friendly alternatives to disruptive infrastructure projects.

*Priyanca Mathur Velath is an MSc student at the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford. Email: pvelath@hotmail.com*



## Master of Science in Forced Migration

A nine month postgraduate degree course grounded in a multi-disciplinary approach that includes the perspectives of sociology, anthropology, law, politics and international relations.

For more information, visit the RSC website: [www.rsc.ox.ac.uk](http://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk) or email: [rscmst@qeh.ox.ac.uk](mailto:rscmst@qeh.ox.ac.uk)