

Introductory address

by Kim Traavik, State Secretary (Conservative Party),
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In Norwegian we have an expression: ‘to fall between two chairs’. I think the English equivalent is to ‘fall between the cracks’. In many ways, this describes the situation of IDPs.

On the one hand, they have often been let down by their own national authorities that were supposed to protect them from becoming IDPs in the first place. On the other hand, unlike refugees, they do not have an international organisation to deal with their plight. The basic principle of state sovereignty limits the ability of the international community to provide them with assistance and protection.

During the past few years, increased international efforts have been made to improve the lot of the internally displaced. Their sheer number has made them a phenomenon in world politics that cannot be ignored. Influential NGOs like the Norwegian Refugee Council have also helped to put IDPs on the international agenda.

Norway for one has been among those states that have worked to involve the UN in this respect and the Norwegian UN Mission is currently hard at work promoting this year’s main General Assembly resolution on IDPs. Our guiding principle is that the international community has the right and the obligation to ensure that the humanitarian and human rights of IDPs under international law are respected. Nevertheless, we maintain that it is the national authorities that have primary responsibility for providing protection and assistance to IDPs within their jurisdiction.

Since IDPs have become an object of international diplomacy, the focus has been on protection and assistance. Progress in this area, as in so many other areas of international diplomacy, is slow. But I am pleased to note that

we are moving steadily forward. Some of the prime movers whose contributions to the IDP cause have been truly significant are with us here today. It is a privilege to have here one of the principal architects behind the milestone document *The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, Roberta Cohen, as well as the UN Special Coordinator for Internal Displacement, Kofi Asomani.

The Norwegian Refugee Council has played a leading role in focusing world attention on the internally displaced, especially through its global IDP database, and I am happy to see that once again the Council is pioneering a new understanding of IDPs. Whereas the initial centre of attention has been on the internally displaced as victims in need of protection and assistance, the next step is to recognise the immense human resources that IDPs represent. They need to be given a voice. This will improve our understanding of their situation and enable us to better target our efforts on their behalf.

The book that is being launched today, *Caught Between Borders: Response Strategies of the Internally Displaced*, does give the IDPs a voice – indeed, several voices. And we owe it to them to listen. It is a groundbreaking contribution to enhancing our comprehension of how individuals, families and communities respond to the experience of displacement. I am sure that the book will offer insights that will benefit IDPs and their cause.

Today’s seminar will also give the internally displaced a face. Thorvald Stoltenberg, the former Norwegian

Foreign Minister and UN High Commissioner for Refugees, entitled his recently published memoirs *It’s a question of human beings*. We must get past IDPs as an abstract notion and appreciate that they are individuals, like you and me. Although they share certain aspects of the experience of displacement, the circumstances of their displacement and their reactions to it may be quite different. Each internally displaced person responds according to his or her character and background.

This notwithstanding, I still believe that IDPs have common elements and interests that make it worthwhile pursuing an international policy towards them as a broad category. Our challenge continues to be to fill in the large and small cracks that still trap millions and millions of our fellow human beings. My hope is that today’s event will help meet this challenge. I wish you every success.

