

UNHCR and emergencies: a new role or back to basics?

by John Telford

The fall of the Berlin wall was to usher in a new world order of peace and prosperity. The 'peace dividend' has proven short-lived.

Militarisation is rampant, from nuclear sabre-rattling in the Indian sub-continent, the first Pan-African war engulfing the Congo to the proliferation of murderous gangs in countries such as Colombia, Indonesia, Timor, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka (to name but a few). Successful voluntary repatriations of refugees (seen in Mozambique, Central America and Burma) proved ephemeral. Nowadays many refugee emergencies fester like incurable ulcers (Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Burundi, West Timor and Western Africa). The horrors of the hurried returns from Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and, more recently, West Timor will haunt the humanitarian community, UNHCR in particular, for years to come.

Working in emergencies has now become second nature to UNHCR staff. Whereas most UNHCR Duty Stations were formerly considered family-friendly, by the end of the 1990s half were categorised as 'non-family'. As it turns 50 and a new High Commissioner learns the ropes, what is UNHCR's role in emergencies to be? Do current financial difficulties indicate a critical loss of support? Is UNHCR being by-passed by governments and other key actors?

The politics of financial crises

Financial crises are cyclical in UNHCR. A decade ago UNHCR experienced a major gap between the budget and resources available. Refugee programmes, including camp water systems, were cut back. A staff retrenchment programme aimed to pare staffing back to the complement of 2,700 employed in 1987. This objective was not achieved. The Kurdish exodus from northern Iraq prompted an unprecedented level of donations - money, materials and staff -

which pulled UNHCR out of the doldrums. Former Yugoslavia, the Great Lakes and Somalia continued the expansion. As throughout its history, the number of UNHCR staff has continued to grow dramatically; whereas in 1959 it had 242 employees, by 1997 it had 5,491.

UNHCR's budget expanded almost three-fold in little more than ten years - from \$398m in 1983 to approximately \$1.2bn in the mid-nineties. Now, once again the period of office of a new High Commissioner coincides with a major shortfall between the agency's 'needs based' budget and donations received. Total income in 2000 of some \$700m fell well short of the budgeted \$1.1bn.

Irrespective of the wisdom of budgeting well above expected income, the shortfall will have very serious effects. Once more, programmes will be cut and staff made redundant. While some 'organisational fat' will and should be shed, refugees will again suffer.

Most governments state quite explicitly that they regard humanitarian aid as a component of foreign policy. When their interests are involved, governments seem to be able to provide unlimited funds. So-called financial crises are really not financial crises. They are political crises. Funding does not seem to be tied to the availability of cash to donor governments nor depend on economic cycles. Recessions do not necessarily coincide with reduced funding for UNHCR and periods of growth do not lead to increased resourcing of refugee programmes. While by no means synchronised, we are witnessing a general downward trend in donations from most Western governments at a time when most are enjoying unprecedented budget surpluses.

A donor giveth and a donor taketh away. Why the current contraction is happening is anyone's guess. Has the organisation become, as argued by many both internally and externally, less effective? Why is the plug being pulled now? Or are there other forces at play, such as the oft referred to 'bilateralisation'? These questions become especially important when we examine UNHCR's role in emergencies.

The perils of bilateralisation

While the 1999 Kosovo refugee emergency was by no means a representative UNHCR emergency scenario, its significance cannot be underestimated. Like it or not, the Kosovo crisis is currently shaping international emergency preparedness and response as few other previous operations have done. UNHCR's independent evaluation of the Kosovo crisis¹ frequently laments the bilaterali-

sation of the emergency response. Funding channelled through UNHCR was a

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pittance compared to that channelled directly by interested governments to international NGOs and to state emergency aid bodies, including the military.² Senior UNHCR officials bitterly lamented the widely recognised ignoring of UNHCR's multilateral mandate to coordinate. In turn, donors, host governments and NGOs were scathing about UNHCR's perceived incapacity to respond and to play a central coordinating and managing role.

There are several indications of the bilateralisation of emergency programmes. A dramatic change, with sweeping consequences for refugees, is that core funding for refugee programmes has decreased as a proportion of overall UNHCR expenditure. In ten short years UNHCR's activities have changed dramatically. Prior to the post-Gulf War crisis, the bulk of UNHCR's total budget was contained in the Annual/General

Programme (in 1988 72% of the total) with the remainder budgeted for Special Programmes. The former pays for core UNHCR refugee work in countries of asylum, the latter for whatever other UNHCR activities that donors wish to fund. Special Programme activities normally include returnees, internally displaced populations and even populations who have never moved from their homes, as was the case of the massive Sarajevo airlift. Special Programmes are essentially implemented at the behest of whoever pays.

It is widely accepted that there is a 'glass ceiling' of around \$400m for General Programmes. When the annual budget reached \$1.2bn, the total for General Programmes hardly changed. Thus the ratio of General to Special Programme spending has been reversed dramatically. Since the early 1990s General Programme activities have been by far the smaller part of UNHCR activities. Most of the budgetary growth has been for non-core (non-refugee) operations, taking place in countries of origin, rather than countries of asylum. In the 1990s governments have funded principally non-refugee programmes. The political decision of donors to focus increased assistance to non-refugee programmes has been facilitated by UNHCR's

expansionist strategy. UNHCR has willingly agreed to be contracted for more and more non-refugee activities. The direct, bilateral influence of governments on what UNHCR does (and, by extension, what it does not do) has grown. The negative effects are to be seen in UNHCR programmes all over the world.

Bilateralisation was very evident during the Kosovo crisis as UNHCR was systematically by-passed by governments and NGOs. The independent evaluation, in explaining the predominant role of non-multilateral actors, especially NATO forces, commented that:

"Donors ... prioritised national visibility over coordination, [some] NGOs ... failed to participate in any coordination mechanism at all" (para 432).

"External actors had an optional regard for [UNHCR's] coordinating authority" (para 322).

"The refugee crisis was not to be allowed to jeopardise the military operation" (para 37).

The International Council for Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) has further noted that "the entire concept of multilateralism has been weakened ... The bilateral

efforts of many governments and the intrusion of the military into the humanitarian sphere draw into question the dedication of states to the role and mandate of UNHCR and concepts of multilateralism".³

UNHCR complained bitterly that it did not receive the funding that would have permitted it to coordinate effectively. Governments funded NGOs, increasingly referring to them as 'our' NGOs. One influential Western government attempted to expel NGOs of another nationality from 'their' camp in Macedonia, on the pretext that they wanted only 'their own NGOs'. In this case it took UNHCR's intervention to assure even a veneer of multilateralism.

In Kosovo, as in Northern Iraq, Western governments funded NGOs directly. Resources received by agencies from their national governments exceeded the money they raised from appeals to the general public. This global trend has turned a handful of Western international NGOs into multinational corporate bodies, reinforced with governmental or inter-governmental (eg ECHO) funding. In most operations they can boast better technical and material resources than UNHCR itself. They agree to coordinate as much or as little as they choose, or as influential donors cajole or insist.

Reception centre for Kosovan refugees, Brazde, Macedonia





Zairean refugees crossing Lake Tanganyika

The mounting global evidence of the inexorable spread of bilateralisation does not necessarily mean that UNHCR has lost the support of major donors. UNHCR is needed, though not perhaps as before. The trend towards bilateralisation is neither all pervasive nor uniform. In some lower profile 'forgotten' emergencies it is still business as usual - little direct funding by donors to NGOs and no rush by others to usurp the coordination role or even, in some cases, to be there at all. 'Forgotten' emergencies are typified by the absence of the direct emergency response units of major humanitarian funders and organisations. There, UNHCR is called upon to continue its coordination and fund-channelling role. It almost seems as if the organisation is used as a safety net when the political stakes are not high.

New actors

A further sign of bilateralisation in emergency response is the spawning of donor and other inter-governmental emergency response teams or mechanisms. A multitude of new actors has come on the scene in refugee emergencies, most dwarfing UNHCR's resources. These include donor agency emergency teams, military humanitarian operations and inter-governmental bodies such as the European Commission. This phenomenon can currently be observed in Sierra Leone.

UN agencies, and particularly UNHCR, are being marginalised as non-traditional actors get involved in coordination. The role of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Kosovo is but one example. Multinational NGOs now provide an umbrella function on

behalf of governments and the UN itself. They sub-contract national, smaller international NGOs and even governmental bodies. Just as they once lambasted donors, governments and UN agencies, they are themselves now often criticised by their 'partners' for their perceived arrogance.⁴ This umbrella function transcends operational roles. The SPHERE project on agreed standards and indicators in emergency response has been a major success in a task which one would have seen as pertaining to a multilateral agency. Many of the standards and indicators had already been developed by UNHCR and its sister UN agencies over decades. The NGOs involved correctly point out, however, that UNHCR simply did not achieve the necessary degree of consensus around these standards.⁵ The NGOs got up and did it.

Implications for UNHCR emergency responses

It is perceived or fabricated donor interests which determine funding levels. In responding to the suffering of the Kurds and Kosovars the political and military stakes for the Western governments were deemed to be so exceptionally high that a swift and overwhelming response was called for. We must not forget that Western interests may or may not coincide with humanitarian need. While the death rates in the Gulf crisis were of emergency proportions, the Kosovo humanitarian 'emergency' bore little resemblance to that of the Great Lakes or indeed those in Western Africa, Burundi, Colombia or other parts of the world today. While the Kosovars suffered undeniable hardships and breaches of human rights, we should note the views of expert nutritionist Susanne Jaspars who has observed that

"the main nutritional problem among Kosovars [refugees in Albania and Macedonia] was not undernutrition but obesity".⁵ Another analysis noted that "over-supply of food aid [existed], together with a clearly well-nourished population ... many agencies were under pressure to distribute resources".⁷ Camps were constructed at vast expense and often to patently unacceptable standards by inexperienced humanitarian actors at a far higher cost per refugee than in comparable emergencies.

Not a year earlier, this author witnessed in Burundi listless and emaciated children in therapeutic feeding centres. A two (or more) tiered system of international protection and assistance has emerged, perhaps the single most significant development in modern humanitarian programmes. Some victims, through no fault of their own, are less equal than others. If ever there were a need for multilateralism, this is it - to see that meagre resources are applied with at least a semblance of equity.

Despite bilateralisation, UNHCR is needed, albeit grudgingly in some quarters. How else to explain the massive (though erratic) increase in funding in the last decade or the pained criticism when the organisation was late, absent or ineffective in both the Northern Iraq and Kosovo crises? Many governments and NGOs wanted UNHCR to lead and coordinate in both emergencies, albeit for diverse, and arguably vested, interests. As surely as funding has now decreased, so too will it become available again when perceived need presents itself. Even in this 'financial crisis', the total funds available to UNHCR are about 20% above the budget of a decade ago.

There is, however, yet another disturbing trend. UNHCR has drifted more and more into direct implementation of assistance programmes. This is despite the High Commissioner's mandated role to "administer ... funds ... for assistance to refugees [and] distribute them among the private and, as appropriate, public agencies which he [sic] deems best qualified to administer such assistance". A 1997 UNHCR evaluation of UNHCR's implementation arrangements highlighted a marked shift to direct implementation, as opposed to imple-

mentation through partners. In essence, UNHCR seems increasingly to be doing the work which could and should be carried out by others, especially host governments. This is instead of its more traditional channelling, guiding and international overseer role. In particular, UNHCR is mandated to facilitate "the coordination of the efforts of private

organisations concerned with the welfare of refugees". Is it pressure, competition or empire building that has

created this pull factor away from a leadership role? Without any doubt, UNHCR itself has a lot to answer for in facilitating this shift of emphasis and role.

The way forward for UNHCR in emergencies

The blue flag still has its function. Multilateral action to protect refugees will continue to be crucial. UNHCR has rightly been criticised for not playing its mandated role in emergencies. It is for the sake of refugees, above all, that UNHCR must be present, early and effectively, in emergencies. It is UNHCR's function to promote, to advocate, to oversee, to ensure, to administer, to facilitate, to support and to coordinate, hand in hand with partners - host governments, refugees and those who seek to assist be they individuals, NGOs or third country governments. Here is where UNHCR must act in emergencies. It does not need to have massive budgets to achieve this. It should not and cannot compete with large specialised NGOs and governmental and intergovernmental bodies. Direct implementation of assistance activities is unnecessary unless as a last resort.

Direct implementation can be damaging. UNHCR has been justly criticised for confusing implementation and coordination. The administration of its own resources and those of its contracted implementing partners have been seen by UNHCR as the entire emergency programme. This has been to the detriment of its broader coordination and leadership role, involving non-contracted partners, and communities. Local and national authorities and populations, in particular, are often excluded from UNHCR coordination mechanisms.

UNHCR does not need a new mandate, as some commentators have argued.

The agency needs to get back to basics

The agency needs to get back to basics. It needs imagination in perceiving how best to match donor interests and refugee needs without abandoning the latter. It must play its mandated role as a support to host communities and governments (who historically have provided most protection and assistance to refugees and will undoubtedly continue to do so). An overseer of universal (not selectively applied) standards, a guide to the less experienced, a centre of excellence and high quality refugee protection (including provision of assistance) is increasingly and desperately needed. To achieve this, UNHCR must be present on the ground before emergencies, ready and prepared to act as a catalyst and advocate.

What is required of UNHCR are fewer convoys and sacks of flour and more leadership in international refugee protection and assistance. UNHCR needs coordinators, strategic planners, technical experts and mature emergency managers with a clear vision of and commitment to their responsibilities towards refugees. Above all, they must have the imagination to carry them out.

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1 Downloadable at www.unhcr.ch/evaluate/kosovo/toc.htm

2 'Bilateralism in terms of funding was most marked in the EU. The top six EU contributors ... allocated USD 279 million ... (excluding military expenditures); of this UNHCR received USD9.8 million directly, or 3.5 per cent' (Para 47, p9)

3 *Talk Back*, Vol 2, No 1, 18 February 2000.

4 The author has heard such criticism, first hand, in Burundi, El Salvador, the Great Lakes region of Africa, Sri Lanka, the Balkans, Colombia and Mongolia, to name but a few countries.

5 Not all Western agencies have agreed with SPHERE standards and indicators. An influential group of French NGOs, in particular, argues that such norms are counter-productive and ill-advised.

6 *Field Exchange*, Emergency Nutrition Network, July 2000, issue 10.

7 Humanitarian Practice Group, Report 7, ODI, London, August 2000, p16.