

# A personal tribute to Roberta Cohen

by Francis M Deng

**Although I have received generous praise over the years for my efforts on behalf of the world's internally displaced persons as representative of the UN Secretary-General on the issue, I say, without hesitation, that without Roberta Cohen I could not have done what I did.**

It is with great pleasure that I take this opportunity to pay tribute to a dear friend and a close partner in the promotion of international response to the global crisis of internal displacement. Roberta helped pave the way for my appointment when she, representing the Refugee Policy Group (an

Roberta Cohen was critical to this complex, precarious, creative and, I believe, constructive complementarity of diverse approaches.

Our personalities were different but complementary. Anyone with a fraction of wisdom would not want to be on the opposite side from

Roberta, and I was fortunate enough to be naturally on her side and she on mine. Her challenge to my acknowledged tendency to favour a diplomatic, constructive engagement with governments contrasted with her inclination to be a more aggressive defender of human rights. This was always a

source of creative tension between us but we both realised the value of our complementarity and, over the years, inched toward one another.

Roberta Cohen played a critical role in mobilising the legal team that developed the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. Although she is not trained as a lawyer, she not only organised the meetings of the team but actively participated in the discussion of the substantive issues involved. Roberta was also actively engaged in the appraisal and development of international

institutional arrangements in response to internal displacement. She was also keenly aware of the role that regional organisations could play and worked diligently to foster our cooperation with them. And in line with her NGO background, she was an effective mobiliser of civil society for the cause. In addition, Roberta demonstrated her capacity for conducting and overseeing research not only through her pivotal contribution to our two-volume study – *Masses in Flight*<sup>2</sup> and *Forsaken People*<sup>3</sup> – and her own numerous articles but also by commissioning and supervising a series of studies on a variety of strategic topics and issues.

The space allotted for this brief tribute does not allow me to do justice to Roberta's contribution to all aspects of our work on the mandate. I was delighted that as Co-Director of the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, Roberta continued to work with my successor, Professor Walter Kälin, the Secretary-General's Representative on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons who had played a key role in developing the Guiding Principles as chairman of the legal team that developed them.

I will remain forever grateful to Roberta Cohen for her contribution to our efforts on behalf of the world's internally displaced, a venture in which we were full partners. Perhaps Richard Holbrook, the former US Ambassador to the United Nations, best expressed the bond between Roberta and me when he introduced us as Mr and Mrs IDPs. Our spouses concurred.

*Francis Deng served as Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons from 1994 to 2004.*  
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1. [www.unhcr.ch/html/menu2/2/chr.htm](http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu2/2/chr.htm)  
2. [www.brook.edu/press/books/massflgt.htm](http://www.brook.edu/press/books/massflgt.htm)  
3. <http://brookings.nap.edu/books/0815715137/html/index.html>



EC/ECHO/Peter Holisworth

independent centre of policy analysis and research on refugee issues), collaborated with several other NGOs to successfully lobby the UN Human Rights Commission<sup>1</sup> to place internal displacement on its agenda and to create a mechanism for international response to the crisis. The agreement on the appointment of a representative of the Secretary-General was a compromise, the lowest common denominator. However, in discharging the responsibilities of the mandate we were able to push the envelope diplomatically, cautiously, but, paradoxically, also aggressively.

IDPs in Darfur.