

European Commission focuses on 'forgotten crises'

by Simon Horner

DG ECHO, the European Commission's humanitarian aid department, pays special attention to helping the victims of ignored crises which often involve displaced populations living in exile for years or even decades.

Through its Humanitarian Aid service (DG ECHO), the European Commission puts particular emphasis on helping people caught up in 'forgotten crises'. For those who work in international relief the phenomenon is well-known. Some disasters are publicised globally, thanks to the presence of TV crews capable of transmitting stark images of unfolding tragedy into millions of homes across the globe.¹ Other crises – usually chronic situations where there is nothing 'new' to say – go unreported for months or years. The world forgets about them and it becomes more difficult to mobilise resources in favour of the victims.

The Commission's commitment to helping forgotten crisis victims is linked to its policy of providing humanitarian aid on the basis of need. DG ECHO's mandate specifically refers to helping those who are most vulnerable. This can only be done by assessing needs as objectively as possible and ensuring that the outcome is reflected in subsequent funding decisions. Clearly, the extent to which others are involved in providing support in a crisis is an element in the 'needs' equation. A high profile sudden disaster with many victims may prompt a big response from donors, private contributors and relief agencies while a creeping crisis (caused, for example, by drought) can struggle to attract both funding and the involvement of operational agencies with the expertise to spend the money effectively.

In view of the link between the visibility of a given humanitarian situation and the amount of aid its victims are likely to receive, forgotten crises merit special attention. This is why the Commission's

Humanitarian Aid department has developed a methodology for identifying such crises – and also why it is the main donor in many of the world's least prominent humanitarian hotspots.

Long-term displaced get forgotten

It is not surprising to find that human displacement is often a central element in the world's forgotten crisis zones. The media will report large numbers of people on the move and the events that prompted them to flee, because this is a 'dynamic' story. The situation of those living in supposedly temporary places of refuge for months, years or even decades – whether as refugees or IDPs – is less newsworthy because, by definition, it is static.

Camps for displaced people that have been around for a long time are different from those hurriedly erected to provide shelter in the early days of a sudden crisis. The rows of army-style tents that many people associate with refugees are likely to have been replaced by more solid structures, built with local materials (where available) and perhaps even resembling the homes of local people. Reliable water supplies, sanitation systems and other public facilities will have been gradually installed. In time the camp takes on the air of a settled community. In this absence of a 'crisis atmosphere', some people may be misled into questioning whether the situation is still a humanitarian one. Perceptions such as this add to the problems of agencies such as UNHCR, the World Food Programme (WFP) and the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) who are trying to support the long-term displaced.

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Three rarely publicised crises involving long-term displacement, where the Commission provides substantial assistance, are found in Algeria, Nepal and Thailand. Large refugee populations from neighbouring countries are concerned – between 100,000 and 200,000 people in each case.

Sahrawi refugees

Around 150,000 Western Saharans have been living in scattered camps around the Algerian city of Tindouf for more than three decades.² Daytime temperatures can reach 60°C in the summer. There are sudden blinding sandstorms and recurrent water shortages. Between 2000 and 2005, the Commission provided the Sahrawis with more than €66 million in humanitarian aid, making the EU far and away the largest donor. The funds have been used for a range of actions including the financing of a food buffer stock in case the WFP food pipeline is disrupted – which can happen if donor funding runs short. The Commission has provided drugs and supplies and training for Sahrawi health workers and has paid for supplementary food to diversify the refugees' diet beyond the standard provision of cereals, pulses, oil and sugar. The Commission has also supplied tents which, for cultural and climatic reasons, remain a feature of camp life in the Algerian desert. The Sahrawis' nomadic heritage is reflected in their tradition of living under canvas. In the baking heat of summer, when brick buildings rapidly turn into ovens, tents provide more bearable conditions.

In February 2006 the usually arid region of Tindouf was struck by torrential rains and there was widespread flooding. Three of the Sahrawi camps were particularly badly affected and an estimated 50,000 people were left homeless. Many brick structures literally dissolved. The Commission responded within 48 hours with fast track 'primary emergency' funding of €900,000. This covered urgent needs including the distribution of emergency food and the provision of tents, plastic sheets, blankets and mattresses. Sadly, even the highly unusual phenomenon of flooding in the Sahara elicited minimal media interest.

Camps in Nepal and Thailand

In Nepal internal political disputes – conflicts between the King and the parliament and fighting between government forces and Maoist rebels – do occasionally hit the international headlines. These generate humanitarian needs that the Commission tries to help address. The country's 'other' crisis, however, involving people mainly of Nepalese origin who were expelled from Bhutan, is rarely reported. The 106,000 refugees in Nepal – a figure equal to roughly 15% of the total population of Bhutan – have been living in seven refugee camps for 15 years.³ Discussions be-

tween the Bhutanese and Nepalese governments on a durable solution for the refugees have reached a stalemate, leaving the refugees in legal limbo.⁴ As the Nepalese authorities expect the Bhutanese refugees to remain in camps and not engage in economic activities outside them, the refugees have no other option but to depend on external assistance. For the past five years, the Commission has provided €2 million in humanitarian funding annually to meet the basic needs of the camp residents, in particular supporting the efforts of WFP and NGO partners. It has also channelled €4.9 million through UNHCR.

Donor support is also vital for the 150,000 Burmese refugees living in temporary camps just inside Thailand. Burma/Myanmar has been ruled by a military junta since 1962 and has been plagued by ethnic conflict, with reports of serious human rights violations. The prolonged humanitarian crisis suffered by the people of Burma is largely unknown. The difficult political and economic situation inside the country – where DG ECHO also funds programmes targeting the most vulnerable – means that there is no immediate end in sight to decades of exile. The refugees are completely dependent on external aid for food, education

and health services. Since 2000, humanitarian aid worth almost €41 million has been provided by the Commission for the camp residents. ECHO supports the distribution of basic food items – rice, mung beans and soybean cooking oil – on which 75,000 people depend. Basic health needs are met through ECHO-funded clinics run by local medical staff, and through the supply of drugs and medical equipment.

In each of the above situations, the populations concerned are stuck in their host countries, awaiting the resolution of the dispute or crisis that forced them to leave their homes. In some cases, their mobility is restricted, they are excluded from local job markets or they have difficulty accessing education and health services. Their plight may be chronic, rather than acute, but they still have basic needs without the means to cater for them. Humanitarian aid is about showing solidarity with and helping the most vulnerable and preventing suffering. We have a duty not to forget the victims of the world's forgotten crises.

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1. See G R Olsen, N Carstensen and K Høyen 'Humanitarian crises: testing the 'CNN effect'', FMR16 www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR16/fmr16.13.pdf
2. See R Farah 'Western Sahara and Palestine: shared refugee experiences', www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR16/fmr16.7.pdf and articles on pp58-60.
3. See R Gazmere and D Bishwo 'Bhutanese refugees: rights to nationality, return and property', FMR7, www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR07/fmr7.7.pdf
4. See personal testimonies on back cover.

Sahrawi refugees

