

In the vacuum of sovereignty: the international challenge of internal displacement

by Francis M Deng

The differences between the 12 million refugees and the estimated 25 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) around the world, as far as the international community is concerned, is that the former have crossed international borders while the latter have remained within their countries.

Findings from my country missions around the world, in my capacity as Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons, underscore the degree to which the expectation of internal protection by states for IDPs is, for the most part, a myth. The crises of national identity that are often at the root of the causes of displacement also affect the response of governments and relevant non-state actors to the humanitarian consequences of displacement, frequently resulting in vacuums of responsibility in the exercise of state sovereignty.

During missions, I normally ask the displaced persons I visit what messages they would want me to take back to their leaders. In one Latin American country, the response I got was: "Those are not our leaders. In fact, to them, we are criminals and our only crime is that we are poor." In a Central Asian country, the response was: "We have no leaders there. None of our people is there." In an African country, a senior UN official explained to the Prime Minister that their resource capacity to assist refugees in the country was constrained by the need to assist "your people", the internally displaced and other war-affected communities. The Prime Minister's response was, "Those are not my people. In fact, the food you give those people is killing my soldiers."

While not all governments view their displaced populations in the same way, it is true that the opposite is a rare excep-

tion, sometimes dictated by the nature of the displacement and the degree to which the government identifies with its displaced population. Even then, lack of capacity and other political considerations may affect the delivery of protection and assistance.

The core principle that has guided the work of the Representative has been to recognise the inherent nature of the problem of displacement as internal and therefore falling under state sovereignty and to postulate sovereignty positively, as entailing the responsibility to protect and assist citizens in need. This stipulation of sovereignty, which has gained increasing support in the international community, has proven to be a constructive and effective basis for dialogue with governments. The real question, however, is whether governments, in partnership with the international community, are effectively addressing the crisis of internal displacement and meeting the needs of the affected populations.

The international community and the governments concerned have indeed made significant progress in responding to the crisis. It is, however, tragically obvious that the problem remains acute in magnitude and scope. The challenge that the normative principle of sovereignty as responsibility poses for the international community is that it implies accountability. Obviously, the internally displaced themselves - marginalised, excluded, often persecuted - have limited or no capacity to hold their



national authorities accountable. Only the international community has the leverage and clout to persuade governments and other concerned actors to discharge their responsibility or otherwise fill the vacuum of irresponsible sovereignty.

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