

UNHCR for a Decade: “The Refugee Problem” Can Be Solved

Ogata Sadako

Looking back over her ten years as High Commissioner, the author stresses the importance of cooperation with other organizations and agencies and suggests some prescriptions for resolving the refugee problem.

When I began my term as High Commissioner the Cold War had just come to an end. During the past ten years, East-West confrontation has ceased and armed strife has changed from wars between states to ethnic or civil strife within nations. The tide of globalization is engulfing the world, and the movement of goods, capital, information, and of human beings as well, has become more dynamic than ever.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was fifty years old on December 14, 2000, which meant that I led the organization through one-fifth of its history. A few weeks after I took up my appointment in 1991, we faced the crisis of Kurdish refugees fleeing from Iraq. While we were still laboring over return of the Kurds, the cracks in the former Yugoslavia opened up and armed conflict spread from Croatia to Bosnia. In Africa, as well, tragic situations in Rwanda and other states produced a seemingly endless exodus. People fleeing from internal strife in one country would spill over the borders of neighboring countries and then the influx of refugees would become the source of new conflict. Responding to the needs of the final decade of the twentieth century, moreover, led to the transformation of the activities of UNHCR. In order to cope with the new realities we faced, I started to hammer out new

strategies and tried to take a personal lead in implementing the changes.

In Search of International Peace and Security

UNHCR's fiftieth anniversary last year was certainly not an occasion for celebration. That fifty years, after all, is an indication of how continuous the flight from fear and oppression has been during much of the last century and into the present one. Today UNHCR protects and supports more than 22 million refugees and returnees, including 5 million internally displaced persons. At this very moment one out of every 270 people in the world's population has been driven out of his or her home for one reason or another. It is painful to say, but I do not think there is any chance of eliminating the possibility of local conflicts erupting or recurring in some part of the world, or seeing the end of the forced relocation of people, for at least ten years to come.

How will the United Nations change in the twenty-first century? What should it try to achieve? Certainly the greatest, most important task for international peace and stability focusing on human security is dealing with the problem of refugees, or in the larger sense, with forced displacement.

Looking back over the past ten years of work

with UNHCR, I would like to review what we accomplished and what remains to be done, and then to offer some specific proposals, mainly with regard to international protection of refugees. Although UNHCR, with a staff of 5,000, is the largest humanitarian relief organization within the United Nations, it cannot accomplish its objectives single-handedly. It goes without saying that none of what I suggest can be accomplished without coordination with and cooperation by other U.N. agencies, national governments, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). I would like to stress the fact that 80 percent of UNHCR staff are stationed in the field in some 140 countries. Because these people are often working in remote locations, frequently putting their lives at risk, and active around the clock, UNHCR is in a position to report to the world what is happening on the basis of their experience.

Resolving Refugee Problems

UNHCR's most important accomplishment over the past decade is having saved the lives of millions of refugees and helping them to return to their homes. It assisted in the return of exiled members of the former African National Congress to South Africa after the abolition of apartheid. It facilitated the return of 1.7 million people to Mozambique and their resettlement after more than a third of the population was forced to flee in the wake of two decades of war. We oversaw the resolution of refugee problems in Cambodia and Central America, which had been torn apart by the effects of national liberation and Cold War enmities. We helped repatriate 400,000 Cambodians. The end of Cambodian repatriation from Thailand and Laos and the closing of the UNHCR center in Hong Kong marked the termination of the turmoil that has troubled the Indochinese peninsula for a quarter of a century. When I visited Mexico in 1999, I also attended the closing of the Guatemalan refugee camp there.

We have learned over the years that resolving refugee problems takes time. However, if processes like the Comprehensive Plan of Action for Vietnamese refugees and the International Conference on Central American

Refugees (CIREFCA) are undertaken seriously by concerned government agencies and are given the necessary resources, two or more responses can be combined to solve the refugee problem. They include voluntary return home, integration into the recipient locality and granting of citizenship, and permanent residence in a third country.

Signs of hope for resolution are starting to appear from some of the conflicts still going on. In Croatia, for example, Serbian refugees are beginning to return to their homes. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the return of minority group citizens is at last getting started. In Rwanda as well, efforts to settle repatriates are finally beginning to show results, but considerable funds are required to complete the task. Burundi is still at the crossroads between war and peace, but if peace can be secured, UNHCR will support the return of more than 500,000 refugees now under the protection of the Tanzanian government.

Unresolved situations, however, are still found everywhere. In the People's Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Liberia, and other areas of western Africa as well as in Afghanistan, ongoing armed conflict makes it almost impossible to deal with refugee problems. The Caucasus region has become locked in conflict, totally impeding any solution to the refugees' plight. In West Timor, meanwhile, 170,000 East Timorese voluntarily returned to East Timor, but after three UNHCR staff members were killed in September 2000, UNHCR was forced to withdraw its staff, while an estimated 120,000 of those wishing to return to the East remained in West Timor.

Elsewhere, at least 400,000 Sudanese refugees are spread over several countries in Africa, about 500,000 displaced people remain within Colombia, 100,000 people from Myanmar are living in border areas of Thailand, and 100,000 Bhutanese have found refuge in Nepal. In Angola there are roughly 2 million and in Ethiopia an estimated 1.1 million internally displaced people. The list is too long to enumerate in full, but one thing is clear: the political commitment and support of related national governments is essential if we ever hope to bring an end to these problems.

Protecting Refugees

Based on these developments over the past ten years, I would like to propose specific measures in three different areas toward the resolution of the refugee and displacement problem. First, the central target of UNHCR responsibilities is protection of people who have been driven out of their homes, but there is a need to reappraise the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which provides the legal basis for its protection activities. Second, in order to provide timely and effective protection for refugees, measures are needed to facilitate rapid dispatch of UNHCR staff and provide for their safety. Third, once emergency humanitarian relief has begun to function, assistance should be extended to development programs at an early stage in order to assure that refugee protection can be sustained.

At the end of 2000, it was estimated that some 150 million people are living away from their homelands, which is roughly 1 out of every 40 people in the world. Of these, about one-tenth, or 15 million, are refugees. Today, people fleeing their home countries out of fear of persecution mingle with the massive numbers who leave their homelands in search of work, educational opportunities, or reunion with families. No country has effective methods for distinguishing between those seeking political asylum and migrant workers seeking economic opportunity. Faced with a massive influx of people from outside, some countries in Europe and the Americas, where immigration laws were traditionally generous and protective, are being forced to adopt stricter immigration control policies. UNHCR has issued periodic warnings that indiscriminate immigration control policies can increase a country's vulnerability to the activities of illegal organizations that exploit some refugees. From now on, UNHCR must continue to play a leading, strategic role in international protection of refugees.

The year 2001 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the 1951 U.N. Refugee Convention, and so it is timely that UNHCR has begun worldwide discussion of the subject of international protection. The purpose of the discussion is not to renegotiate the content of the treaty, but rather

to develop new approaches, methods, and standards to make certain that it continues to function appropriately and effectively. There is great concern on the part of governments, agencies involved, and NGOs about how to respond to situations that were not envisioned when the convention was drawn up. UNHCR hopes to discuss these issues with them. Countries with a specific interest in rules of emigration and immigration and NGOs working for the preservation of human rights have expressed a desire to contribute actively to this discussion.

During the 1990s, the number of signatories to the 1951 U.N. Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol rose from 100 to 140. The European Union has recognized the need to coordinate protection policies and procedures. Although no significant agreements were reached on developing a new system for refugee protection at the Nice Summit in 2000, further efforts will continue to be made. Japan, too, where the birthrate has fallen at an unprecedented pace and the proportion of elderly people in the population is rapidly growing, faces the need to work out legal systems for accepting foreign labor and for dealing with refugees. A seminar held by Japan's Ministry of Justice in November 2000 on the nation's immigration policies was a praiseworthy effort indicating how seriously the government is trying to come to grips with these issues.

Refugees today more often flee as the result of strife and armed conflict than of government suppression, but spreading globalization has made these problems much more complex than in the past. It is all the more urgent, therefore, to quickly establish coordinated international frameworks for refugee protection. I hope that Japan will actively participate in the worldwide discussion on refugees being led by UNHCR.

Challenges for Humanitarian Relief

As noted earlier, today refugees are not only escapees from armed conflict but increasingly they can also be the cause of strife or pawns in struggles for power. As an unwanted corollary to this phenomenon, it is now recognized that humanitarian activities for the support and protection of refugees are often not the act of a

neutral, third party, but intervention supported by one of the parties to the conflict. This situation represents the most serious difficulty faced by humanitarian workers, including those of UNHCR in recent years. Without working among the refugees themselves, people giving support and protection cannot be effective, but at the same time, in an environment where relief workers themselves become the target of violence, nothing effective can be done. Relief workers are ordinarily present in an area prior to the outbreak of strife and also after the conflict has ended, and many are also present while the conflict is still going on. The dispatch of peacekeeping forces by the United Nations tends to be delayed for both political and military reasons, and in most cases, forces are not deployed at all. Much more necessary and feasible in these cases than what is supposed to be "humanitarian relief" would be various forms of support: cooperation with the administration of justice, training of police forces, and cooperation with local policing in logistics and communications.

The Brahimi Report that was submitted to the secretary-general of the United Nations last year offers many important recommendations on activities to secure peace: rapid response to crises, swift dispatch of fact-finding missions, importance of early problem-solving methods, importance of presence in the field, and so on. What it all boils down to is the need to regard in a different light the activities of humanitarian agencies like UNHCR conducted before or after a conflict. They should be considered as an auxiliary part of peacekeeping activities. As typically seen in Sierra Leone, threats to safety frequently extend across national boundaries, and so peacekeeping forces increasingly require a mandate to supervise areas that straddle borders. Obtaining such a mandate would naturally require the agreement of the countries of the region where refugees are present. If this kind of configuration had been supported, the situations that led, for example, to the killing of three UNHCR personnel in West Timor and one in Guinea in September 2000 might have been prevented. UNHCR is now working to enhance safety measures. It incorporates safety control measures, such as improved safety training and more security personnel, into all its operations.



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Ogata graduated from the University of the Sacred Heart in Tokyo in 1951. She received an M.A. in international relations from Georgetown University in Washington D.C. in 1953, and her Ph.D. in political science from the University of California at Berkeley in 1963. From 1978-79, she was envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary at the Permanent Mission of Japan to the United Nations. From 1982 to 1985, she was representative of Japan on the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. She was director of the Institute of International Relations at Sophia University in Tokyo in 1987-88 and has been dean of the Faculty of Foreign Studies at the university since 1989. Ogata assumed office as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in February 1991 and retired from the post in December 2000.

Efforts are also being made, through a newly-established Emergency and Security Service, to strengthen standby agreements and liaison with police and military forces.

However, as I have continually emphasized and reiterated, the issue of safety involves more than just the various U.N. agencies with which humanitarian relief workers are affiliated and the U.N. political organs and NGOs. All the countries concerned must give safety due priority and deal with it appropriately.

Toward of Growth and Coexistence

When the work of a humanitarian relief agency in a particular area comes to an end, often media coverage of the situation fades and the start of development assistance is delayed. The problem of the time gap between the resolution of a crisis situation and the beginning of a development program was placed on the agenda of the 1999 Economic and Social Council, became a matter of ongoing discussion, and is now

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awaiting specific responses from leading countries and concerned agencies. In January that year, I had enlisted the cooperation of Brookings Institution President Michael H. Armacost, and with the co-sponsorship of World Bank President James Wolfenson, called for efforts to overcome this problem. With the added support of U.N. Development Programme Administrator Mark Malloch Brown and others, we took that opportunity to begin regular liaison discussions with major donors, including Japan, the European Commission, and the United States. Japan has also established the Human Security Trust Fund within the United Nations aimed at providing concrete support for solution of this problem. In addition, it is very encouraging that, through collaboration with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which is the world's largest technological assistance agency, and with Japanese government cooperation, UNHCR was able to start up a joint project in Tanzania, whose objectives are to lighten the burdens of accepting refugees and to launch sustainable development after the refugees and UNHCR have departed. From now on as well, we hope to link bilateral support programs with multilateral humanitarian assistance utilizing UNHCR's experience and expertise, thereby gradually closing the time lag in settlement of repatriated people.

Moreover, to create lasting solutions for the refugee problem and to enable first steps toward conciliation following a dispute, UNHCR has begun "coexistence" projects based in local communities. These projects are designed with the hope that, through participation in cooperative joint projects begun on a small scale, people of different ethnic or tribal groups who have been at war with each other until yesterday will eventually enter a common dialogue of education and culture. Funded by the Human Security Trust Fund, pilot projects have already begun in Rwanda and Bosnia. We are optimistic that finely tuned assistance from the international community that is geared to local society will be instrumental in building genuine peace between peoples.

In closing, let me take this opportunity to solicit the concrete support of readers. More than half of the refugees in the world are chil-

dren. When refugees finally return to their homeland, or when their displacement within their own country is finally over, they need education in order to build new and better lives. Today, however, while most refugees, especially girls, may receive elementary level schooling, almost none of them continue with secondary schooling. To remedy this situation, I took the occasion of UNHCR's fiftieth anniversary to found the Refugee Education Trust. This fund celebrates the strength of character, endurance, and courage that the refugees have shown through all the adversities they have suffered and promises them a dream for a better tomorrow.

In January 2001, Mori Yoshiro visited sub-Saharan Africa, the first Japanese prime minister in history to do so, and toured a refugee camp in Kenya and a refugee support project in South Africa. In February, plans were moving ahead to form a suprapartisan parliamentary league for UNHCR. I am hopeful that people in Japan will develop a voluntary interest in the world's refugee problems, and that in the new United Nations, Japan will be active particularly in the field of humanitarian relief.



About
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