Causes of Refugee Problems
and the International Response

Luise Druke-Bolewski
Fellow and Visiting Researcher
Harvard University


This paper briefly considers the causes of refugee movements before analyzing the international response and suggesting necessary improvements and developments.

There are, at present, several ways to describe refugee causes; they include three models which, if integrated, summarize the causes of refugee-producing problems. Suhrke's model of conflict situations pinpoints the following types of conflicts that may produce refugees. She notes that protracted warfare, international wars and certain kinds of ethnic tension tend to produce major outflows, whereas conflicts such as elite rivalry, coups d'etat, and governmental suppression of critics lead to a trickle of a few, highly politicized individuals (Suhrke 1983). Beyer proposes the following categories of people of potential humanitarian concern: Convention refugees, victims of civil strife, conscientious objectors, self-exiles, victims of natural disasters, migrants and perhaps persons belonging to governments in exile or liberation movements (Beyer 1987, 12-15).

Finally, Rizvi's model, elaborated elsewhere in this volume, of primary factors (as enumerated in the 1951 Convention), secondary factors (as identified in the 1969 OAU Convention) and auxiliary factors (such as economic, ecological and demographic change) needs consideration.

These causes have elicited a variety of responses from the international community to approaching the present refugee problem. In this regard, several United Nations initiatives are particularly noteworthy. The Economic and Social Council of the United Nations recommended to the General Assembly for the first time in 1967 the creation of an office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, an initiative that remained unsuccessful despite several years of debate (United Nations 1967). In 1981, the U.N. Commission on Human Rights appointed the former United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadrudin Aga Khan, as Special Rapporteur to prepare a study on Human Rights and Mass Exoduses that was submitted the same year. This study has become a widely used reference on the subject. Among several important recommendations, the following are most relevant here:

(i) "humanitarian observers" to secure a United Nations presence in any given violent situation;
(ii) an "early warning system" to gather impartial information on underlying problems (such as ethnic, economic, political and social issues) in any given region for the United Nations Secretary-General, who would then act in an effort to contain the situation; and
(iii) a special representative for humanitarian questions to monitor situations that could give rise to new refugee situations and to depoliticize humanitarian crises through mediation (Sadrudin Aga Khan 1981, i-ii).
This report was followed in 1981 by the General Assembly resolution (United Nations 1981), initiated by West Germany, to appoint a group of governmental experts on international co-operation to avert new flows of refugees (Opitz 1985). This initiative resulted in final report on 13 May 1986 by the Group of Governmental Experts United Nations 1986a, 18). This report did not make any specific recommendations but reminded member States of their obligations to respect international principles, such as those contained in the United Nations Charter and other instruments, as well as to refrain from pursuing policies that would lead to new flows of refugees. The Group also recommended that the Secretary-General make full use of his competencies, give attention to questions of averting refugee problems, and improve co-ordination within the Secretariat for analyzing information for early assessments of situations that could cause refugee flows.

In addition, the group of 18 high-level intergovernmental experts, following a review of the Secretariat's operations, made another set of recommendations (UN 1986, 9; Supplement, 13b). The two groups of recommendations led the Secretary-General to establish the Office for the Research and the Collection of Information (ORCI). Its functions are to strengthen the institutional basis of preventive diplomacy and to break down barriers to peace-making with information and analyses (UN 1987). Three of these functions relate directly to refugee causes (Jonah 1988, 7):

(i) monitoring factors related to possible refugee flows and comparable emergencies;
(ii) providing early warning of developing situations requiring the Secretary-General's attention; and
(iii) carrying out ad hoc research for the immediate need of the Secretary-General.

Private initiatives include the Refugee Policy Group in Washington, which has been working with associated individuals and institutions on the subject since the early 1980s. With financial support from various sources, important groundwork for its current work on an early warning model has been done.

However, it is clear that more needs to be done and a number of possible initiatives can be identified. First, in terms of research, it would be important to establish a systematic study of the causes of refugee flows, distinguishing between root and proximate causes, and to consider both remedial and preventive action. Indeed, it would also be useful to prepare a map of vulnerable areas in the world where refugee situations might arise. Certainly, it would be useful to obtain detailed information from the first refugees in a potentially massive refugee influx concerning their reasons for flight, conditions in their home country, and the estimated number of people liable to move if nothing is done to alleviate or contain the underlying causes.

Second, in terms of intervention, United Nations or other international observers could be sent on short-term field assignments in an effort to depoliticize and pacify incipient situations that might cause refugees, such as in Bangladesh shortly after independence in 1971-72. This might involve "political management" through direct contact with concerned governments or via the encouragement of good neighbourly relations to alleviate or contain the severity of the refugee crises. Certainly, past international action in easing the plight of displaced people or refugees has been successful in some cases. In the Nigerian War, for example, the creation of zones of safety within the country resulted in practically no external displacement taking place. Similarly, after the coup d'État in Chile, establishment of safe havens under United Nations auspices permitted refugees from other countries and, a short time later, nationals fearing persecution to find a safe place to stay before leaving the country with safe-conducts provided by the military junta that had seized power.

Other creative approaches would include, as Coles has suggested elsewhere in this volume, the restoration of freedom of movement of people to their country of origin (in conjunction with a co-ordinated effort to help improve conditions in the country of origin for their turn if they so wish). An
important additional step is similar to the commendation of the Independent Commission for International Humanitarian Issues in its final report. This would be to create a central office for humanitarian issues within the Executive Office of the Secretary-General of the United Nations. On the basis of the formation collected by ORCI, this office could conceptualize a course action in a given incipient situation to alleviate the underlying use or reduce the severity if flight is the only alternative. Such an office could become the link between institutions that assist victims of humanitarian crises and governments that have the power to address the causes of these crises. The office would not only translate first-hand information into practical action but also monitor the implementation of United Nations humanitarian programs and take a lead in formulating and co-ordinating policies to alleviate or contain incipient refugee situations. This approach might allow for a more efficient co-ordination of tasks within the United Nations family and force the UNHCR always to respond to every border crossing, especially if one or a combination of ecological/drought/famine, demographic or economic factors had caused it.

References


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Foreword

The intense controversy that has surrounded the admission of refugees to Canada in recent years, and that led to new legislation being adopted in 1988, is not an isolated event. In fact it mirrors a much larger debate taking place in many other parts of the world. Thus, for example, across Western Europe, in the United States and in parts of Asia, many governments have introduced restrictive measures to control the flow of refugees into their countries.

This flurry of legislative activity has been both the cause and a response to a growing awareness of the problems and challenges that refugees pose. It is a recognition that these difficulties are not only mounting, but are also substantially different from those that existed in 1951 when the international community adopted the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

Many elements characterize this new situation, but a number of principal features can be readily identified. The world's population of refugees has grown at an alarming rate in recent years, increasing over the last decade to a total of between 11 and 15 million - a total that strains the capacity of the international community to adapt. The increasing ease of transportation has made many more countries accessible to refugee flows and has turned many - to their alarm - from countries of resettlement to countries of first refuge.

[1] On leave from UNHCR, the author is currently at Harvard University as a Fellow and a Visiting Researcher pursuing a Ph.D on the subject. The article represents views of the author and not necessarily those of UNHCR and is published under her sole responsibility.