



INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE



ICRC



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Christopher Anderson / Magnum Photos

Respecting the rights of civilian populations in armed conflict and other situations of violence is the best prevention against displacement.



Boris Heger/CRC

International humanitarian law

The four Geneva Conventions of 1949, which, since August 2006, have been ratified by every State in the world (194), constitute the foundations of international humanitarian law. They are supplemented by further agreements: the two Additional Protocols of 1977 and the Additional Protocol of 2006. Many provisions of international humanitarian law are now accepted as customary law – that is, as general rules by which all States are bound.

PROTECTING AND ASSISTING INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE

The displacement of people within their own countries owing to war or natural disaster is a matter of growing concern worldwide, especially among those involved in humanitarian work. This concern is amply justified: time and again, internally displaced people (IDPs) suffer extreme hardship that jeopardizes their very survival.

A host of dangers threaten IDPs, whether during their flight, while they are displaced, or even upon their return home or their resettlement elsewhere. The death toll among IDPs – especially among children, the elderly and pregnant women – frequently reaches alarming proportions, and the difficulties experienced by those left behind and by host communities further compound the problem.

Internal displacement is often the consequence of violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) during armed conflict or failure to comply with other norms intended to protect people in situations of violence, such as human rights law. When civilians flee a conflict zone, this is a good indication that the warring parties are indifferent to their rights under IHL or, worse, are deliberately targeting them. IHL expressly prohibits any party to an armed conflict from compelling civilians to leave their homes and affords IDPs the same protection from the effects of hostilities and the same assistance as the rest of the civilian population.



Legal framework

International humanitarian law expressly prohibits the displacement of civilians. In addition, the rules of IHL intended to spare civilians from the effects of hostilities play an important role in preventing displacement, as it is often violations of these rules that cause civilians to flee their homes.

Of particular relevance are:

- the prohibition on attacking civilians or civilian property and on indiscriminate attacks;
- the prohibition on starving civilians as a method of warfare and on destroying objects indispensable to their survival;
- the prohibition on reprisals against civilians and civilian property;
- the prohibition on using civilians as “human shields”;
- the prohibition on collective punishment, which, in practice, often consists in destroying homes and thus leads to displacement;
- the obligation for all States and all parties to a conflict to allow the unhindered passage of relief supplies and the provision of assistance necessary for the survival of civilians.

These basic rules protecting the civilian population apply in both international and non-international armed conflicts.

WHO ARE IDPS AND HOW DOES THE LAW PROTECT THEM?

The definition of IDPs most commonly used by the international community is the one found in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement issued by the United Nations:

“ ... persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border. ”

(UN doc. E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.2 of 11 February 1998).

Unlike refugees, IDPs are not the subject of a specific international convention. They are nevertheless protected – although not expressly referred to therein – by various bodies of law, including, most notably, national law and human rights law and, if they are in a State affected by armed conflict, IHL.

Under IHL, the displacement of civilians is prohibited. Should it nevertheless occur, IDPs are entitled to the same protection as any other civilians. The party in control of the territory to which they have fled must spare them from the effects of hostilities and ensure that their basic needs are met in terms of food, water and shelter.



Max Vaterlaus/CRC

Common threats to the security of IDPs

- direct attacks and ill-treatment
- increased risk that families will be torn apart and that children, in particular, will be separated from their parents or other relatives
- increased risk of rape or sexual violence against women and girls
- increased exposure to health hazards
- deprivation of property
- restricted access to essential goods and services, including health care
- exposure to collateral risks in attempting to meet essential needs
- risk of tension between host communities and displaced people
- presence of weapon-bearers in camps
- forced recruitment
- settlement in unsafe or unfit locations
- forced return to unsafe areas

WHAT ARE THE NEEDS OF IDPS?

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Persons affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence experience a wide variety of needs in the short, medium and long term. These include food, water, shelter and other essential items, security, physical and psychological well-being, assistance in restoring family links, health care, education and economic and social rehabilitation.

People are especially vulnerable when they are displaced, whatever the cause of the displacement. They are deprived, often brutally, of their ordinary environment, and this directly threatens their ability to meet their most basic needs, especially when families are torn apart or when relatives are killed or go missing.

For humanitarian action to be effective, it is of paramount importance to take into account all the needs of IDPs at every stage of their displacement. Only a comprehensive approach can ensure that assistance and protection – two interlocking aspects of effective humanitarian operations – are provided simultaneously. The needs of IDPs cannot be strictly divided into categories or sectors.



Phases of displacement

- flight (wherever efforts to avoid displacement were non-existent or have failed)
- arrival in host community or emergency shelter in temporary location, possibly a camp
- longer-term settlement in host community, camp or urban structure
- return to and reintegration in place of origin
- final resettlement (in place other than original home)

The primary responsibility for protecting IDPs and meeting their basic needs lies unequivocally with the States or the authorities that control the territory where the IDPs find themselves. Those in charge must refrain from displacing the population and, if displacement occurs, they must ensure that the IDPs are spared and protected, and that their needs are met. They can do this by guaranteeing conditions (for access to food, water, hygiene, clothing, shelter, medical care, etc.) that allow people to remain in their homes, by protecting those who are uprooted, and by promoting return whenever this is safe and material conditions are satisfactory. The return of IDPs very often presents a formidable challenge to the authorities and resident communities. All too often, the authorities are unable or unwilling to meet their obligations to protect and assist IDPs. When this happens, humanitarian organizations have a role to play in ensuring their survival.



The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (Movement) comprises the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (International Federation) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The Council of Delegates is the body where representatives of the ICRC, the International Federation and the National Societies meet to discuss matters of common concern.

HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Given the magnitude of the problem of internal displacement, it is generally recognized that a comprehensive response is beyond the capacity of any single organization to provide.

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The ICRC is therefore fully committed to implementing effective coordination with other players while preserving its own independence, neutrality and impartiality. For several years, the ICRC has been striving to develop efficient operational complementarity with other humanitarian organizations on the basis of real resources rather than intentions, in order to meet the challenges it faces in the most efficient way possible, and to provide those affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence with optimal protection and assistance.

In their humanitarian response, the ICRC and its partners within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement always seek to strike a balance between action undertaken to meet the specific needs of IDPs and more general efforts aimed at broader sections of the population. Support for an entire population may be necessary, especially since residents often share any available resources with IDPs and are therefore just as much in need of help as they are.



The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's Council of Delegates Resolution on IDPs

“ ... continuing to express its deep concern about the need to improve protection and assistance to the tens of millions of persons who have been forcibly uprooted and displaced by armed conflict, violations of international humanitarian law and human rights as well as natural or other human-induced disasters; and about people who have migrated to avoid untenable circumstances and find themselves in a situation of vulnerability in their new country of residence; noting the profound vulnerability that often accompanies the return of refugees and internally displaced persons (“IDPs”) to their places of origin; [...]

1. calls upon the components of the Movement to continue to pursue and develop their activities for refugees, IDPs and migrants, in accordance with their respective mandates and in respect of the Fundamental Principles, striving always to adopt a global approach addressing all stages of displacement – from prevention through displacement to return, resettlement and re-integration – as well as the needs of resident populations in accordance with the Principle of Impartiality. ”

Resolution 10, Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, 30 November – 2 December 2003.

Drawing on its long experience in various parts of the world, the ICRC has defined an operational approach towards the civilian population as a whole that is designed to meet the most urgent humanitarian needs of both host communities and IDPs.

In order to address both protection and assistance needs, the ICRC carries out an extensive range of specialized activities and these are assessed by highly skilled staff from all the fields concerned. The ICRC tailors its response to the different phases of displacement and therefore must be able to deploy and operate rapidly and meet long-term commitments.

The ICRC's protection and assistance activities are designed to restore acceptable living conditions and enable people to maintain an environment that is as close as possible to their usual one until they can become self-reliant again.

Promoting self-reliance among affected communities is one of the main aims of ICRC assistance programmes. By ensuring that people can meet their basic needs, these programmes help avoid displacement and, where necessary, improve the community's capacity to host IDPs or IDP camps, whose presence puts an additional strain on the resident population.



ICRC activities for IDPs

- interventions to persuade authorities and armed groups to fulfil their obligations to protect civilian populations
- efforts to restore family links
- distribution of relief material, such as food, water, essential household items, seed and farming tools
- first aid and surgery, hygiene and health-care programmes
- livelihood support programmes such as micro-economic initiatives, agricultural and livestock support
- mine-action programmes, including prevention
- provision of artificial limbs

In parallel, the ICRC strives to preserve existing coping mechanisms used by residents or IDPs, while avoiding any action that might increase the disparities between different groups and thus create or exacerbate tensions. It also facilitates reintegration where the circumstances allow. Long-term displacement requires a different approach and raises difficult questions for humanitarian organizations regarding the type of response and its duration.

The ICRC has repeatedly expressed its concern about the increasing tendency within the humanitarian and donor communities to consider the needs of IDPs and those of the resident population separately. Indeed, compartmentalizing the humanitarian response and splitting beneficiaries into categories – such as IDPs – entails the risk that certain affected groups, possibly those in greatest need, may be neglected.



*Fatuma, Gereida camp,
Darfur, Sudan.*

“ If there was no war, I would not be sitting here in front of you. I can’t take my children back to war, so I’ll wait until it ends. I hope I will be able to go back as soon as possible. If other people want to go back, I will follow them. And return with my father and mother. I am only a woman and cannot do it on my own.

Imagine – I am holding these bricks in the middle of the day. The heat is unbearable. But there is no choice. When my husband was alive I never did this kind of work. Now the only option is to do something for my children.

I can’t read. I never went to school. But I am desperate to educate my children.”

EFFORTS TO PREVENT DISPLACEMENT IN DARFUR

In Sudan's western region of Darfur, the security situation has deteriorated over the months despite the deployment of around 7,000 African Union peace-keepers and ongoing international pressure and mediation to resolve the three-year-old conflict. Clashes pitting government troops and allied militias against armed opposition groups continue to exacerbate communal tensions. Splinter groups and numerous small but well-armed local militias have sprung up. Lawlessness has become widespread.

Violations of IHL have affected the local population. Villagers are often afraid to venture out to tend their fields, fetch water, go to market or seek medical care. The traditional migration routes of nomads are sometimes blocked and rustlers steal their livestock. The economy has been stifled and food is often in short supply. Some two million displaced people are living close to urban areas, mainly in crowded camps, or as refugees in eastern Chad, dependent on aid. A further two million people are affected by the conflict. As conditions worsen, rivalries grow. After a series of security incidents, many aid agencies have had to reduce or abandon their activities.

The ICRC has repeatedly reminded all sides to the conflict of their obligation to refrain from attacking civilians, civilian property and public infrastructure and to ensure that people can move about freely. ICRC delegates have documented alleged violations of IHL, made confidential oral and written representations to the relevant parties and monitored their response. They have also endeavoured to raise awareness of IHL among the armed forces and other armed groups.

The ICRC has been present in Darfur since the onset of the conflict. Its activities include distributing seed, tools and basic household items; restoring the water supply; running veterinary programmes; deploying an emergency field surgical team; providing rural health-care clinics with medical supplies and supporting immunization campaigns. The ICRC also collects and delivers messages between family members who have been separated by the violence and helps to reunite them.

As the large international aid effort set up in urban IDP camps goes on, the ICRC focuses on assisting residents of rural and remote areas with the aim of helping them to regain a modicum of self-sufficiency and to ease tensions over resources in remote areas so that they will not be obliged to move to the camps. Supplying cash- and staple-crop seed and tools, rehabilitating existing water systems and assisting with the provision of animal health care are all ways in which the ICRC helps residents to maintain their livelihoods. Food is delivered in forms that require little cooking, thus reducing women's exposure to violence in their search for water and firewood.

Thanks to these efforts, many of the ICRC's beneficiaries have been able to remain in their villages and preserve their sources of income.





Elena, Bogotá, Colombia.

“ I am displaced because the armed groups forced us to cook, wash and do everything for them, or else they threatened to take our children away from us. I would like to have my own house one day in my village and return with my children.”

SUPPORTING IDPS IN COLOMBIA

Forty years of conflict in Colombia and the country's growing economic difficulties have led to a serious deterioration in the living conditions of several sections of the population, including IDPs and host communities. According to various estimates, between 1.8 and 3 million Colombians have been displaced since 1985, making them the third largest internally displaced population in the world. As the majority of IDPs cannot return to their places of origin, which are located in conflict-prone areas, they tend to flock to the poverty belts around the major towns and cities. There, they often face considerable difficulties trying to adapt to an urban environment. Exposure to crime, an unstable income, insecure housing, poor sanitation and lack of access to health care and education are all factors that make displaced households increasingly vulnerable.

Once displaced, farmers no longer have access to their primary asset – land – and can no longer grow their own food. They have no choice but to buy most of what they consume but their income is very limited. Since their skills are not easily transferable, they face major difficulties in trying to find work in the cities. Resources that they would otherwise use for education or health are diverted towards food. This is a serious concern in a society where nearly two-thirds of the population are under 18 years of age.

The ICRC believes that existing government policies to protect the civilian population need to be more thoroughly implemented. The mechanisms in place for assisting the displaced also need to be strengthened and adapted so as to enable IDP households to get back on their feet, both economically and socially. The barriers IDPs encounter when seeking help must be removed: existing social services and programmes must provide responses to their specific needs, such as training for adults who have to build up a different set of skills better suited to the new environment and the local job market.

Together with the Colombian Red Cross, the ICRC has delivered emergency relief including food, mats, blankets, hygiene kits and kitchen sets to tens of thousands of newly displaced people staying in temporary shelters until the security situation improves in their villages. In addition, the ICRC has launched a pilot project for IDPs in Bogotá involving the distribution of vouchers instead of food and other basic supplies. The vouchers can be redeemed in selected markets and shops, enabling beneficiaries to save on transportation costs.





FACILITATING THE REINTEGRATION OF IDPS IN LIBERIA

With large numbers of people returning home to destroyed villages after the peace agreement was signed in 2005, needs remained great. By the end of the year, over 80% of the estimated 300,000 IDPs had left the camps where they were staying. Unfortunately, the vast majority could not make it home before the onset of the rainy season, when it was too late to plant crops, and this made it difficult for them to start rebuilding their lives.

Homes had been destroyed during the conflict and agricultural land was overgrown after years of lying fallow. Public services such as health care, schools, water supply and sanitation were run-down or non-existent. Refugees and IDPs returned to their areas of origin with very little, and in some regions, their return rekindled ethnic animosities and land disputes.

The ICRC's priority was to provide protection and assistance for the significant numbers of refugees returning spontaneously to Liberia and the even larger numbers of IDPs going back to their places of origin. In areas that had absorbed the greatest numbers of returnees, it supplied people with agricultural tools and other relief items, and repaired or built health-care facilities and water and sanitation systems.

The ICRC extended similar support to other areas such as the south-east, which had been affected by protracted conflict and had experienced a major influx of returnees but had received little outside assistance. It also provided the health-care facilities it had rehabilitated with medical supplies and on-the-job staff training.



Lofo, Gorlu, Liberia

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L: Before the war erupted all my family were here. We worked hard together, we had enough clothes and grew and bought our own food. Things were fine here; we even had a pepper farm. My husband was a very friendly person. He treated me very well. There is no good life here in Gorlu since after the war. We have no food, no safe water and no hospitals. There are no schools for our children. If you don't have money your child can die from sickness.

Q: Why did you come back?

L: I was born here. My family is here.
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By late 2005, well over half of the nearly 600,000 Liberians in IDP and refugee camps had returned to their places of origin.

The ICRC's present activities in Liberia include reuniting displaced children with their families; collecting and delivering Red Cross messages; distributing seed, tools and essential household items to families; rebuilding and equipping primary health-care facilities; and repairing wells so as to provide safe drinking water.

Mission

The International Committee of the Red Cross is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of war and internal violence and to provide them with assistance. It directs and coordinates the international relief activities conducted by the Movement in situations of conflict. It also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.



Norman Ng / ICRC



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