The United Nations and the homecoming of displaced populations

by Tim Allen

According to UNHCR figures, in 1970 there were 2.5 million refugees in the world. In 1980, the figure was 11 million. By the early 1990s, the alarming spread of civil wars was prompting an average of 10,000 people a day to flee across an international border. In 1993, the estimated number of refugees had risen to 18.2 million. In addition there were at least 24 million people who been forcibly displaced within their own countries (UNHCR, 1993:1). *In 1994, the situation has deteriorated further, particularly in Africa. In the past few weeks, well over a million refugees have fled the fighting in Rwanda.

In the short to medium term the international response to these mass population movements has been an attempt to provide some basic necessities and to create situations in which the migrants can provide for their own subsistence. In the long run, it is generally assumed that matters will be resolved when people go home. To this end, representatives of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have highlighted the need to create conditions favourable for mass return movements (UNHCR, 1981; 1985; 1990; Hocke, 1986). At the 1991 Executive Committee Meeting, the High Commissioner again drew attention to this issue. She saw 1992 as the first year of a decade for voluntary repatriation, and stated that it was a basic aim of the organization to pursue every opportunity to facilitate it. During the early 1990s, returnee flows have certainly been considerable. They may have received less publicity than refugee flows, but in 1992 alone about 2.4 million refugees went home, many of them with the active encouragement of UNHCR. In addition,

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* References in brackets are to the bibliography at the end of the article.

internally displaced populations in certain countries have also been persuaded to return home, as the international community has appeared to offer a measure of security by means of military intervention.

This enthusiasm for repatriation and for protection of people within their own borders is commonly expressed as if it were uncontroversial. It is made to appear as if it builds directly on long-standing agreements and precedents. It is therefore rather surprising to discover that this is in fact not the case, and that very little information has been available about what has happened to those refugees who have returned home in the past. In a book-length report written by Gervase Coles for a Round Table meeting sponsored by UNHCR in July 1985, it was noted that "although voluntary repatriation has been proclaimed as, in principle, the most desirable solution to a refugee situation, it has so far not been examined in any depth by experts or scholars" (Coles, 1985). Two years later, the point was reinforced in a comprehensive survey of the literature on voluntary repatriation between developing countries, undertaken by Jeff Crisp at the behest of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) (Crisp, 1987a). Although Crisp unearthed a few good reports and articles, he discovered that many large-scale repatriations had hardly been examined at all, and few authors had made any serious attempt to investigate the experience of the returnees themselves.

No doubt one reason why the literature was so thin and limited in scope has to do with the difficulties involved in studying returnees. Many refugees are distinct groups in that they can claim a legally recognized status, are often surrounded by an alien population, and may be geographically concentrated. In some parts of the world, their lives are regulated on a day-to-day basis by government officials and aid agencies. In contrast, once they have crossed the border into their homeland, returnees are usually dispersed populations and in practice have tended to be left to their own devices. Moreover, the socio-economic ramifications of repatriation cannot be assessed adequately from a short-term perspective. Establishing farms, forming communities, creating local markets, becoming integrated into national politics and rebuilding infrastructures take time. A further problem is that many mass return movements occur in highly unstable situations, sometimes in a context of full-scale war. Independent research in these circumstances is likely to be dangerous or impossible.

However, there have also been other factors at work. Although the initial UN resolutions appertaining to refugees explicitly mentioned voluntary repatriation as a first solution, discussion about it at international meetings was bound up with the far-reaching political implications of the creation of the State of Israel and of the Cold War. UNHCR tended to avoid confrontations by disavowing direct responsibility for seeking or

implementing solutions to refugee movements. With the important excep-
tion of the repatriation of some 200,000 refugees to Algeria in 1962,
approaches to refugee problems during the 1950s and 1960s generally
emphasized integration into other countries.

Discussion of the topic remained difficult in the 1970s. Nevertheless,
several wars ended, at least temporarily, and further mass returns oc-
curred, for example to Nigeria in 1970-1971, to Bangladesh between 1971
and 1972, to Sudan after 1972, to Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-
Bissau between 1975 and 1977, to Zaire in 1978, to Cambodia in 1979,
and to Zimbabwe in 1980. As a consequence, voluntary repatriation was
finally forced onto the agenda at international gatherings, and in the course
of the decade the United Nations General Assembly identified return as
the solution to refugee problems in certain circumstances, notably where
the principle of self-determination was involved. At the same time, the
global refugee problem was becoming worse, and by the early 1980s
donor countries were expressing concern about the increasing levels of
funding required for emergency relief. The major refugee crises in Indo-
China, Pakistan and north-eastern Africa led to an enormous growth in
the UNHCR budget, and the organization came under pressure to reduce
its overall requirements. This, in turn, prompted interest in the possibilities
of actually promoting voluntary repatriation, and led to a different kind
of controversy over the issue.

In several situations UNHCR's interest in repatriation during the 1980s
coincided with an antagonistic attitude towards refugee populations in
host countries. Not only were refugees sometimes regarded as a security
risk in that they encouraged border violations, but the poverty of most
States receiving refugees combined with inadequate international assis-
tance meant that refugees were often viewed as being a drain on the local
economy. Representatives of the international community occasionally
came under pressure to encourage refugees to go back home, and concern
began to be expressed that UNHCR was becoming involved in repatriation
schemes which jeopardized the safety of refugees. Incidents of this type
were doucumented among Ethiopian refugees in Djibouti, Ugandans in
Sudan, and Salvadorians in Honduras (Crisp, 1987b).

Responding to criticism that it was in danger of abrogating its respon-
sibilities, in 1985 the Executive Committee of UNHCR passed a conclu-
sion stating that the organization had a legitimate interest in the conse-
quences of return and should have access to returnees. Such statements
reflected a growing consensus that the internationally accepted mandate
of UNHCR to protect specific persecuted populations should in some way
be formally expanded. But even with the easing of Cold War antagonisms,
agreement on a broader mandate was not straightforward. The govern-

ments of many States were opposed to international monitoring of their returned citizens' welfare, while some of the other UN organizations were concerned that UNHCR might end up becoming a development agency and would take over or supervise some of their own activities.

The matter was not resolved, and in spite of the clear and unequivocal statements made by senior officials, the approach of UNHCR on the ground has often seemed confused. It appears to be dictated more by hand-to-mouth responses to donor pressure than by a set of established principles or detailed knowledge of the local situation. In some parts of the world, UNHCR has continued to facilitate the return of populations to politically unstable locations. In Cambodia this was done in the face of vigorous criticism from other international agencies, and in the Horn of Africa there have recently been reports that the "voluntary" repatriation of Somali refugees is being encouraged by the deliberate cutting of food supplies to refugee camps. Elsewhere, the ill-judged efforts to promote repatriation against the wishes of refugees in the early 1980s have been abandoned in favour of strategies to actively discourage repatriation until security could be guaranteed in the country of origin. A well-documented example of this was the return of an estimated 170,000 Tigrayans to war-torn Ethiopia between 1985 and 1987 (Hendrie, 1992). Under US pressure, UNHCR attempted to prevent the refugees leaving Sudan, and ended up in the ludicrous position of maintaining that the refugees were being coerced when the bulk of them had already returned home of their own volition.

It was against this background in the early 1990s that the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) decided to initiate a programme dealing with returned populations. The aim was to investigate socio-economic aspects of particular mass repatriations, and to open the topic up for discussion among informed government officials and aid agency staff. The programme focused on the lives of returnees in Africa, and initial findings were presented at a series of week-long international symposiums held in Harare, N'Djamena and Addis Ababa in 1991 and 1992. The findings are being published in various books (Allen and Morsink, 1994; Allen, in press), and cannot be summarized in any detail here. However, it is worth making a few general remarks.

(1) Well-meaning international aid workers commonly overlook the fact that the movement of populations and the rehabilitation of damaged infrastructure is only a part of the problem. In most cases, it is the less visible costs of war that are more difficult to deal with. Roads can be rebuilt relatively quickly, fields can be cleared of secondary forest, seed can be distributed. Such inputs are important, but what economists call the "disarticulation of production" may take years to repair. The things

that make up a community are often invisible to outsiders. Little gifts, knowledge of the soils, acceptance of hierarchies, avoidance customs, flirting, a sense of duty, a complex network of debts, settlement of squabbles, assumptions about trust, a shared experience of the spirit world — all these things are part of the continual process of inventing and reinventing social life. When they have been set aside or destroyed they may be exceedingly hard to establish again. They are likely to take on new forms, and may be a focus for competition and conflict.

This is one reason for the frequent emergence of religious cults and of witch-cleansing movements among returned populations (for example in Mozambique and Uganda), and of outbreaks of violence towards women, some of whom may have found new economic opportunities in exile and may resist the imposition of controls by male relatives. It may also be a factor underlying the mendicant attitude of many returnees towards aid workers and government officials. Much has been written about the so-called "dependency syndrome" of refugee and returnee groups. It is usually assumed to be a consequence of having received relief supplies for so long. But many displaced Africans have received very little effective help from the international community, and an inability to mobilize around community leaders or respond to market incentives may be largely due to the weakness of social networks. Moreover, in a post-war situation, people are likely to look to the new government (or the international agencies which may be seen as the State's representatives) to demonstrate a capacity to provide services and meet basic needs.

Two further issues relating to the re-forming of communities should be mentioned. First, it seems reasonable to speculate that following a period of traumatic upheaval, particularly one associated with civil war, a large percentage of the population will be suffering from some form of mental or emotional disorder. There have been few insightful studies of mental health outside Western countries, but there are indications from psychological surveys of the prevalence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and from anthropological studies of spirit possession, that this is a huge problem. Second, most wars are nowadays fought with relatively cheap and easily available small arms, notably automatic rifles and landmines. Once these weapons have become widely distributed, it is very difficult to collect and remove them. It therefore has to be anticipated that a returned population will continue to experience the consequences of insecurity, usually in the form of low-level warfare or banditry. Populations settling in regions that have been heavily mined will face additional difficultes. Much of the best farmland may be unusable, and individuals may continue to be maimed or killed for generations (it is currently

estimated that there are over 100 million unexploded landmines in the world and thousands more are being laid each month).

(2) The label "returnee" needs to be treated with caution, particularly when attempting to compare one group of returnees with another, or returnees with refugees, or when examining an issue like repatriation in general. We are in fact imposing simplistic categories on complex social situations, and we classify together examples whose only similarity to other examples drawn from elsewhere in the world lies in the fact that the same label is used. The same type of difficulty can arise with respect to "refugees", but at least there is a legal definition of a refugee to fall back on. The very notion of "returnee" is ambiguous, implying conceptions of a homeland and of a population's shared values which may or may not exist.

Among exiled Zimbabweans and Namibians, the long struggles for self-determination and the political activities of resistance movements were instrumental in establishing a collective identity, which at least partially survived in the years following repatriation. But this was not the case for other African returnees. Many of the Ugandans and the Mozambicans who returned in the late 1980s had much more flexible attitudes to nationality. Crossing an international boundary into a neighbouring country and later recrossing into a homeland may not always be the enormously significant events that they seem to outsiders. Sometimes migrations may take place repeatedly as a way of making the most of a difficult environment, and in areas of long-term and unresolved war there may be no clear distinction between a "returnee", a "refugee", a "migrant" and a "stayee". An individual may even switch between these categories depending on whom he or she is talking to, and collective identity may be constructed as much out of the shared experiences of migrations as out of language or a traditional relationship with a particular territory. As a result, it is difficult to generalize sensibly about returnees is one region, let alone to do so at an international level. An insight about a specific group of returnees in Zimbabwe is less likely to be of direct relevance in Uganda than an understanding of the local sociological, political, historical, cultural and economic contexts. The term "returnee" is helpful in that it directs attention to populations which have persistently been overlooked, but it cannot be used simplistically as a defining category.

(3) Evidence from the UNRISD studies suggests that, at least as far as Africa is concerned, aid agencies have had a very limited capacity to mitigate the difficulties faced by populations when they are actually on the move, and that where UNHCR has attempted to control or coordinate events it has usually failed to do so. When refugees want to go home,

either because life in exile is impossible or because things in their country of origin have improved, then they will usually do so of their own accord irrespective of directives from United Nations institutions. In any case it seems that in most instances agencies are unable to mobilize adequate resources fast enough to transport thousands of people and their possessions. Even on occasions when sufficient aid has been allocated, it has rarely arrived before the migration has occurred. Following independence, refugees returned to Zimbabwe without assistance because they were determined to participate in elections. The majority did not return via official reception centres. In Uganda, the aid programme during the late 1980s had little impact either on encouraging return or on providing immediate help for returnees. The refugees left Sudan because the civil war spread to their areas of settlement, and back in Uganda they struggled to survive without significant quantities of relief food.

In both the above instances, UNHCR staff expended considerable efforts in registering and counting returnees. The reason for this was that humanitarian interventions were assessed in terms of the number of people who were supposed to have crossed borders, and not in terms of the outcome of such projects. Consequently, there was a tendency for agencies to exaggerate (or occasionally underestimate) figures for fund-raising purposes. But even if an attempt is made to collect data objectively, this can prove an impossible task. In Zimbabwe and Uganda UNHCR staff were constantly frustrated by the large number of people crossing borders informally and by the strategy adopted by some returnees of officially being repatriated more than once in the hope of obtaining donated items. Reported population figures were no more than guesses and subsequent census data indicate that they were not at all accurate. It was clearly useful for field staff to observe events at the borders (in the case of Zimbabwe this brought to light abuses by the Rhodesian security forces), but it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that resources might have been better used for visits to locations where returnees were actually settling rather than for time-consuming and often ultimately pointless bureaucratic arrangements at official reception centres.

(4) Several speakers at the UNRISD symposiums were also very critical of the way returnees are often treated as one undifferentiated mass, regardless of the needs, aspirations and capacities of individuals and of economic stratification and the particularities of social groupings. It was pointed out that categories such as "nationality", "community" and "tribe" are commonly used with little attempt to discover what these identities mean for the people so designated, and are frequently applied to conceptualizations of target returnee populations in ways that compound misconceptions. Partly as a consequence of this even where "top-down"

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aid schemes are run efficiently in terms of accounting to donors, distri-
bution of relief items and the installation of infrastructure, they may still
be largely tangential to the daily concerns of most of those whom they
are supposed to be assisting.

It would seem that efforts to provide relief and protection should be
flexible and should focus on responding to the changing situation on the
ground rather than on trying to direct or regulate it. In most situations there
is likely to be a need for development-oriented assistance as well as short-
term relief, but if resources are inadequate they should probably be
concentrated on helping the most vulnerable. This in turn requires an
understanding of what is actually happening, because it is not enough to
define the vulnerable as infants, the elderly, the disabled and women.
Invariably many of those suffering most will be quite specific groups.
Those at risk include an old man without sons, children of a mother for
whom no bridewealth has been paid by the father's family, or, as has been
mentioned, a woman who has either chosen or been forced to earn money
while in exile in ways that violate the customs of her people.

Taken together, the above points about returnee populations might
appear to boil down to a plea for UNHCR and other organizations to treat
situations on a case-by-case basis. But it is not as simple as that. At the
UNRISD symposiums there was tension between arguments put forward
for greater specificity and arguments put forward for greater consistency.
Sometimes the same participant would point out that returnees were being
treated as homogeneous populations and were being treated differently
from one place to another without reference to any internationally agreed
principles. In the early 1990s events have brought such tensions into the
foreground of global politics, with disturbing implications.

Partly because of recognition of the fact that repatriations have not
always meant an end to refugee problems and that relief efforts for
returnees have fallen short of needs, and also partly because of more
general shifts in international thinking about population displacement
since the easing of Cold War tensions, new strategies have been adopted.
For exemple, in Nicaragua UNHCR has developed a programme of
"Quick Impact Projects" (QIP). These are small, rapidly implemented
schemes which require one-time investments designed to satisfy urgent
needs at community level, and which have been presented as "a formula
for consolidating durable solutions" (Bonifacio and Lattimer, 1992). QIPs
have become an ingredient of other UNHCR returnee programmes, and
attempts have sometimes been made to have them taken over by other
organizations as part of longer-term aid. In Cambodia, for example,
UNHCR has arranged for some 45 QIPs to be supported by UNDP
following the closing of the UNHCR field offices in 1993. A potentially

more ambitious approach is being attempted in parts of north-eastern Africa, where UNHCR has tried to establish something called a Cross Mandate. Here, UNHCR is attempting to work as an equal partner with several other agencies, including NGOs. It tries to provide assistance to all the population in devastated locations. irrespective of nationality or of refugee or returnee status. QIPs and the Cross Mandate are significant developments because they do not prioritize the task of counting and registering refugees and returnees in unstable areas where nationality may be ambiguous, and they move away from the narrow, emergency relief orientation of assistance activities towards some form of integrated response adapted to local needs.

In several respects such experiments seem to be positive initiatives, which reveal that lessons have been learned from past mistakes. However, it is not yet clear that they illustrate the future overall direction for UNHCR planning in situations of mass return. Behind the scenes, major donors have continued to put pressure on the organization to reduce expenditure, and have not supported its involvement in development work. It has been argued that UNHCR should leave longer-term aid to others, notably UNDP and NGOs. To some extent, fund-raising for QIPs sidesteps this problem by maintaining that the aim is not development, but the setting-up of conditions in which development will be possible. UNHCR thereby seeks to become a "catalyst" for development, something which relies on close cooperation with implementing partners who will continue operating in the area. Unfortunately, tensions between UNHCR and the NGOs remain common. Moreover, a 1987 agreement between UNHCR and UNDP on guidelines for cooperation has not resulted in a standardized way of handing over responsibility following repatriation. For exemple, in north-western Uganda during the late 1980s UNHCR was unwilling to move away from a narrow, emergency relief approach. This was partly due to a lack of funds, but field staff argued that UNDP should be responsible for anything to do with development. The fact UNDP was not operational in the area was dismissed as irrelevant.

Such inconsistencies in the responses of the international community to the needs of returnees are even more apparent when it comes to the crucial issue of protection. Although there has been no official agreement to extend the terms of the UNHCR mandate to include returnees, some kind of protection does seem to be suggested by the presence of UNHCR staff at field offices in areas of return, and by their involvement in operations like QIPs. Furthermore, in the early 1990s, a commitment by the international community to protect some populations within their own countries was manifested by United Nations association with military

activity in Iraq, Somalia and the former Yugoslavia, Yet, in many awful situations no action has been taken at all. Support for suffering populations has even been withdrawn because they have moved the "wrong" way across an international frontier.

For example, in Sudan during the 1980s, hundreds of thousands of people became internally displaced as a result of war, drought and atrocities perpetrated by the government. They received little assistance, in spite of the publication of harrowing accounts of what was going on by Amnesty International and other human rights organizations. Those Sudanese who managed to cross into Ethiopia or Uganda were given support because they were accepted as proper refugees. However, this support was forthcoming only as long as they did not cross back into Sudan. In 1991, many of the Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia were attacked by the Oromo Liberation Front, and had no option but to flee into Sudan even though fighting was still continuing in their home areas. Instead of being defined as "returnees" they were classified as "displaced people", and both protection and assistance came abruptly to a halt. It has been reported that people subsequently died in their hundreds (Keen, 1992: 31).

Highlighting the plight of the Sudanese is not an argument for abandoning other afflicted groups. The point is that whatever the humanitarian motivations behind the returnee programme in Nicaragua or Cambodia and the sending of troops to Somalia or Iraq, it cannot be demonstrated that decisions have been made according to universally applied criteria. This results in dangerous ambiguities. An indirect effect of intervention to help some returnees may be to undermine the rights of refugees. The impression has been given that security may now be guaranteed by the international community within the borders of war-torn States. This makes it hard to explain to the governments of countries burdened with large refugee populations why they should continue to recognize UN resolutions on refugee status. In situations where the international community is intervening to create "safe zones", refugee-hosting countries may push refugees home, and other countries may refuse to allow them in. When nothing is being done to impose peace, refugee-hosting countries may assert that they are being treated unfairly. Governments may legitimately ask why should Somalia be "restored to hope" and not Mozambique, Angola or Sudan. Refugees may end up being used as pawns in the inevitable squabbles. It also needs to be asked if the UN is really committed to protecting people from their own governments, or from a breakdown of civil society. In places where the UN has intervened, is it in a position to monitor human rights over the long term? What will happen to the repatriated Cambodians now that UNHCR has withdrawn?

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There are no comfortable answers to such questions, but the extent to which the international community can grapple with the kinds of problems now confronting it depends on the UN being able to occupy the moral high ground and act according to generally accepted rules. Keeping the moral high ground and working within sets of rules are both extremely difficult enterprises. Nevertheless they have to be undertaken. When they are not, any influence the UN may have is rapidly undermined. A serious shortcoming of the present unstructured case-by-case approach to internal displacement and mass repatriation is that it can be viewed as serving the ends of the UN's main funders.

There is a clear and urgent need for the adoption of a fine-tuned procedural code which can be seen to regulate policy-making. This code might broaden the existing UNHCR mandate, but it will have to be acceptable to all (or almost all) governments and be variegated and so-phisticated enough to deal satisfactorily with the complexities on the ground. This is a time of uncertainty in international thinking about the return of refugees. There are grounds for concern in that lack of a clear overall strategy has led to confusion in the planning and implementation of assistance. But the present lack of clarity has also afforded a degree of openness about repatriation at international gatherings which has not been possible in the past. It is important for those anxious about the welfare of the world's displaced millions to seize the opportunity to put returnee as well as refugee needs and aspirations on the agenda of such meetings, and to keep them there by persistent lobbying.

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