

Chadian refugees wait at the Cameroonian border town of Kousséri after fleeing fighting between rebels and government in Ndjamena on Jan 7.

Preventive solutions to displacement

SUN
24/6/08
PG 14

comment by
António Guterres

DADAAB REFUGEE CAMP
(Kenya): After a half-decade decline in overall refugee numbers, global forced displacement is again on the rise.

For the second straight year, the numbers of refugees and conflict-generated internally displaced people grew to a total of 37.4 million last year – some 11.4 million refugees outside their homelands and 26 million people forcibly displaced within their own countries. And there are ominous signs that we are likely to see even more people forced to flee in the future.

The warning signs are evident here on the Kenya-Somalia border, where nearly 200,000 Somalis have sought refuge in the sprawling Dadaab Refugee Camp complex after fleeing the seemingly endless civil strife in their shattered homeland. And they continue to come – 20,000 since

January alone. Others have risked their lives to reach Ethiopia, Djibouti, Yemen and beyond, many saying they see no future at home. In the last three months, violence in Mogadishu has forced 50,000 more Somalis to flee, bringing the total who have fled the devastated capital since February last year to a staggering 850,000. Inside Somalia, more than one million people are now internally displaced, often beyond the reach of aid agencies.

Unfortunately, Somalia is but one of several epicentres of human displacement, which in today's world – with population flows propelled by a multiplicity of inter-related factors – is a far more complex phenomenon than it was in 1951 when UNHCR was founded.

Today, many of the barriers to human mobility have fallen and new patterns of movement have emerged, including forms of forced displacement that were not envisaged by the 1951 UN

Refugee Convention.

Conflict today may be motivated by politics, but at a deeper level, it can also be about economic mismanagement, bad governance and a host of other factors, including climate-induced environmental degradation leading to competition for water and other resources. The current downturn in the world economy and structural changes in global markets are having a huge impact on rising food and fuel prices. These in turn have an immediate and dramatic effect on the poor, including refugees and the displaced.

Extreme price increases are generating instability and conflict in many places, with the potential of triggering more displacement. Extreme poverty is itself a trigger of conflict.

Neat classifications of who is a refugee deserving protection and who is not are becoming increasingly blurred. This makes it all the more urgent that the

international community finds ways to address the increasingly complex root causes of displacement in a coordinated and comprehensive manner. The best solution is prevention. We need to better understand the triggers of displacement, including the nature of failed and failing states such as Somalia that are unable or unwilling to provide citizens with physical, material or legal security.

Policy frameworks must be found to ensure that the international community deploys all the tools at its disposal – aid, trade, diplomacy, security and relief – to help guide

countries from failure towards sustainable stability. This could go a long way in ensuring that people would not have to flee in the first place, or at least that refugees could soon go home to begin rebuilding when circumstances permit.

Meanwhile, ensuring access to an effective asylum process and the fair treatment of asylum seekers and refugees remain crucial. But it is becoming increasingly difficult in many countries, including those whose efforts to control illegal migration are failing to make a proper distinction between people who choose to move and those who are forced to

flee. All too often, refugees seeking safety are being turned away at borders in direct contravention of the 1951 Refugee Convention. While governments have a right to control their borders, such controls should be sensitive to protection concerns and the rights of refugees.

Refugees show incredible courage and perseverance in overcoming enormous odds to rebuild their lives. Ensuring that they get the protection they deserve helps all of us because refugee rights are human rights – rights that belong to everyone.

António Guterres is the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. World Refugee Day fell on June 20. Comments: feedback@thesunday.com

