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Briefing Paper

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REFUGEES AND THE THIRD WORLD

Within the last two decades the number of people fleeing persecution, internal disorder and war has led to large concentrations of refugees in some of the poorest countries of the Third World. For an increasing number of those living in camps and settlements in Africa, Asia and Central America little hope exists at present of political solutions which would allow them to return home in the near future. At the same time, the world recession is raising serious fears that flows of development and humanitarian assistance may not keep pace with the increasingly complex economic problems facing developing countries, and amongst the most vulnerable in these circumstances are the world's estimated 10 million refugees who must rely heavily on the generosity of others for their basic needs.

This Briefing Paper provides an overview of the current refugee problem in the Third World, and reviews recent trends and developments. It also considers how the international community responds, and examines the role played by Britain. Finally, it reviews the major issue of the type of aid which is appropriate to deal with the current refugee situation.

Current dimension of the problem

Who is a refugee?

The 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees provided the first international legal definition of a refugee as a person who 'owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country ...'. The Convention was drawn up with specific refugees in mind — those generated by World War II, who had fled their homes in Europe prior to 1951 — and was subsequently expanded in 1967 by a Protocol.

Thirty years later the global refugee picture looks altogether different, with a shift in both the kind of refugee and in the pattern of refugee movements. While a small number of refugees continue to leave countries in Europe (mainly the Eastern bloc) the vast majority now flee countries in the Third World. Moreover, around 90% of Third World refugees seek asylum in neighbouring Third World countries, with little prospect of resettlement in the industrialised countries of Europe, North America or Australia. A second characteristic of modern refugees is that in general they flee as part of a large refugee group. Today, refugees, mainly from rural areas, leave their homes at the last possible moment and are often incapable of travelling more than the minimum distance that affords some measure of safety. Moreover,

they seek refuge in areas often as poor as the ones from which they have fled, areas characterised by their susceptibility to natural disaster, by limited opportunity for agricultural expansion and by infrastructures considered incapable of meeting adequately the needs of the local population.

Their motives also tend to be different from those of earlier European refugees. For many Third World refugees a combination of factors precipitates their flight, not only political persecution, but wars and civil unrest. It is people in this category that have swelled refugee statistics so alarmingly in recent years. In response to the growing number of African refugees of this kind, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) drew up its own Convention in 1969 to include those fleeing from 'external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order'. Although the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol continue to provide the international legal framework for defining refugees, in practice protection is also provided to those in this new category.

'Internally displaced' people, who are forced to leave their homes because of war or internal disorder, but remain within their own countries, share many of the same characteristics as refugees who cross internationally recognised boundaries. They are not afforded the same international protection, although in special circumstances the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has been called upon to extend his 'good offices' to people made homeless in this way, although usually only in conjunction with a refugee problem within the terms of the Convention or a repatriation operation. Numbers of internally displaced people are impossible to quantify precisely, but at a conservative estimate they add at least another 1-2 million to overall refugee figures.

World toll

Table 1 provides estimates of refugee numbers, as defined by the various Conventions, in 1982. Refugee statistics must, however, be treated with extreme caution. Figures in this paper are those produced by official UN bodies, such as UNHCR, but these are open to question and often differ sharply from those published by other agencies. Because of its non-political status, UNHCR is unable, except through private and diplomatic persuasion, to announce its own estimates of figures and must rely on those produced by the host countries themselves. These can be suspect for a number of reasons. Firstly, different countries use varying criteria for determining refugee status. Secondly, large influxes of refugees make accurate counting extremely

Table 1. Estimated numbers of refugees, 1982

Africa	2,672,500
Asia	3,685,100
Europe	579,000
Latin America	299,800
Middle East	1,603,100
North America	1,356,000
	10,195,500
Palestinians	1,900,000
	12,095,500

Estimates, both globally and for particular countries, vary enormously from one source to another. The total of 10,195,500 is taken from *UNHCR World Refugee Map*, June 1982. It excludes Palestinian refugees who do not come within UNHCR's remit since in 1949 a separate UN body — the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) — was set up to provide humanitarian assistance and essential services to refugees in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The figure of 1.9 million Palestinian refugees shown above is quoted in *World Refugee Report 1982* by the US Committee for Refugees. UNHCR's figure of 1.6 million in the Middle East (shown above) includes Afghan refugees in Iran (but the US Committee for Refugees puts their number at only 110,000).

difficult, even when refugees are in designated camps, and accurate assessment becomes even more difficult for those who settle independently amongst the local population. But perhaps the most important factor is the inflation of figures by governments for both economic and political reasons; they may inflate figures as a political lever against the neighbouring country from which refugees have fled, or as a means of obtaining more aid. They may even deflate them to avoid the interest and possible involvement of other nations and international agencies. For these reasons estimates may vary by as much as 100%, and in practice operational agencies regularly deflate figures. Whatever the exact figures, however, it is clear that the current refugee problem is of very serious proportions.

Overview of major world refugee concentrations

While most countries harbour some refugees, there are certain areas and countries, particularly in the Third World, which have major refugee populations: N E Africa, Central and Southern Africa, Pakistan, Central America, and parts of the Middle East and S E Asia. A brief review of the current areas of concentration reveals not only the extent of the problem but also the considerable variation between the different types and causes of refugee problems. The reasons for the apparent growth in the number of refugees are equally varied and a matter of contention between commentators who variously ascribe them to the growing pains of newly independent countries with low levels of national allegiance, the spread of repressive and powerful central governments in these countries, growing regional competition and conflict, and continuing pressures generated by the East/West conflict. It is also recognised that the establishment of special schemes for refugees may itself act as a 'pull factor' encouraging economic migrants. To a certain extent, also, the growth may be more apparent than real, reflecting greater awareness of the existence and needs of refugees.

Africa has been officially described as 'the continent of refugees'. UNHCR estimates that there are at least 2.5 million refugees currently living in over two dozen African countries, many of which both produce and accept refugees. It is mainly within the last ten years that numbers have grown so rapidly, precipitated by increased armed conflict and civil strife, coupled with natural disaster and economic instability. The most seriously affected area continues to be the Horn of Africa, where approximately 1.5 million people have fled the fighting in the Ogaden and Eritrean regions and

have trekked mainly into Sudan and Somalia. In both countries, refugees, primarily women and children, have placed an enormous burden on the existing economic and administrative structures. Although the Horn of Africa continues to receive considerable international attention, there are also substantial numbers of refugees in Zaire, Burundi, Tanzania, Algeria, Uganda, Angola and Rwanda.

Within a period of three years *Pakistan* has attained the largest single national concentration of refugees, most of whom are from Afghanistan. While cross-border migrations, facilitated by tribal connections, have a long history in this part of the world, it was only after the coup in 1978, followed a year later by the Soviet invasion, that a steady flow of refugees occurred.

Initially Afghan refugees were predominantly members of the professional and business classes whose tribal or political ties put them at odds with the new regime, but now peasants, artisans and nomadic herdsmen have joined them in flight abroad. Today there are an estimated 2.7 million Afghans in Pakistan, 80% of whom are living in the North West Frontier Province with the remainder in the Province of Baluchistan.

Recent events in *Lebanon* highlight the continuing plight of the approximately 2 million Palestinian refugees. Their prolonged refugee status, with a second generation of refugees growing up knowing no other life, and their unresolved claims to a homeland serve to remind the international community of the need to find acceptable political solutions for all refugees, if major outbreaks of violence are to be avoided.

The majority of the 'boat people' from *S E Asia* have now been resettled in a variety of countries, including Britain. However, refugees still in countries of first asylum and awaiting resettlement number some 230,000, of whom as many as 190,000 are in Thailand. The Thai Government is incapable of absorbing any of the remaining refugees, partly because of its own economic problems but also because some refugees are from ethnic groups which are historic enemies of Thailand. The remainder of the Indochinese refugees awaiting resettlement are to be found in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, Kampuchea and Hong Kong.

Recent events in *Central America* have drawn attention to the approximately 280,000 refugees in that area. Most have fled from El Salvador and Guatemala, the two countries in the region most seriously affected by political violence. During the last two years there has also been an increasing number of refugees leaving Nicaragua, although an estimated 100,000 people returned to that country following the change of government in 1979.

Consequences for Third World countries of asylum

Most Third World countries with the largest concentrations of refugees in relation to population also rank amongst the poorest in the world (see Table 2) and face considerable economic, political and social consequences in granting asylum. Major refugee influxes can put an enormous strain on already fragile economic and social systems and limited natural resources. In the Horn of Africa, for example, the refugee movements between Ethiopia and Somalia have exacerbated the difficulties of a precariously balanced environment for livestock and humans, with frequent drought and deteriorating grazing land. In the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan there has been widespread deforestation by Afghan refugees and their animals. Refugees can also put a formidable burden on other limited resources, such as land, medical services, educational facilities and transport and compete with the

local inhabitants for goods, services and limited employment opportunities. While to date there have been few reported instances of communal violence between refugees and the local population, tensions undoubtedly exist, particularly when refugees are seen to enjoy favoured access to international assistance.

Table 2. Ratio of refugees to local population: top 20 countries

	Population (millions) 1982	Refugees (thousands) 1982	Ratio of refugees to local population ^a	GNP per capita US \$ 1981
Jordan	3.5	733.0	1 in 5	1,620
Somalia	4.6	700.0	1 in 7	280
Lebanon	2.7	235.1	1 in 11	—
Djibouti	0.5	31.6	1 in 16	480 ^b
Burundi	4.4	214.0	1 in 21	230
Belize	0.2	7.0	1 in 29	1,080 ^b
Sudan	19.9	627.0	1 in 32	380
Pakistan	93.0	2743.0	1 in 34	350
Syria	9.7	215.0	1 in 45	1,570
Australia	15.0	317.0	1 in 47	11,080
Canada	24.4	353.0	1 in 69	11,400
Angola	6.8	93.6	1 in 73	470 ^b
Zaire	30.3	325.0	1 in 93	210
Swaziland	0.6	5.8	1 in 103	680 ^b
Zambia	6.0	58.3	1 in 103	600
Tanzania	19.9	174.0	1 in 114	280
Nicaragua	2.6	22.5	1 in 116	860
Algeria	20.1	167.0	1 in 120	2,140
Uganda	13.7	113.0	1 in 121	220
Lesotho	1.4	11.5	1 in 122	540
UK	56.1	146.0	1 in 384	9,110

Sources: Population — Population Reference Bureau Inc., 1982.

Refugees — UNHCR *World Refugee Survey* 1982.

GNP — *World Development Report* 1982.

^a Often the ratio of refugees to local people is even higher than indicated because the refugees are concentrated in particular areas.

^b 1980 figures from *1981 World Bank Atlas*.

As well as the immediate effects on the local population, there are often longer term economic and political strains imposed on host governments by the presence of a large number of refugees. Many governments fear that international refugee assistance will become insufficient long before political solutions to their refugee problems can be found, leaving them to incorporate refugee assistance into their national development programmes, whose funds are already severely limited. The very presence of refugees could pose a political threat to the host country. Since few Third World refugees are prepared to relinquish the hope of returning home and some are engaged in military activities to this end, host governments fear political violence within refugee communities and military retaliation by hostile neighbours. Well-organised and armed exile forces, drawing support from refugee communities, can also pose a threat to host governments.

Given the possible consequences of offering asylum, many developing countries have been remarkably generous in their assistance to refugees. However, it is clear that they cannot be expected to cope on their own and that assistance from the rest of the world is essential.

International response

The responsibility for refugees rests, by internationally agreed practice, with the country first offering asylum. If its financial and administrative resources become overburdened, as has happened, for example, to Pakistan, Thailand and Somalia, the government can call upon assistance from other sources. Assistance is then provided, usually by a mix of multilateral, bilateral and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). However, the resources of the UN agencies have been declining sharply in recent years, and greater emphasis is now

being put on bilateral and NGO assistance. The problem of finance is exacerbated in some countries by the political preferences of the donors, who are more ready to support refugees of an acceptable political persuasion. For example, some Western governments have been more responsive to the plight of refugees from Afghanistan than from Central America.

International machinery

The main international instrument for coping with refugees is the UNHCR, established in 1951. Its mandate is two-fold: to provide international protection to refugees and to assist them towards finding 'durable solutions' to their problems. In the exercise of protection, UNHCR seeks to ensure that refugees are granted asylum with a favourable legal status. An essential element of this legal status is the principle of *non-refoulement*, which prohibits expulsion or forcible return of a person to a country where he may fear persecution. In addition, UNHCR seeks to ensure that refugees are treated in accordance with international legal instruments and, in their country of asylum, are as far as possible given the same economic and social rights as nationals. Durable solutions are of three types. For UNHCR, the most desirable is voluntary repatriation, although the present political climate in many developing countries makes this most difficult to attain. The second durable solution is local resettlement in the country of first asylum, to enable refugees to become self-supporting and productive communities as quickly as possible. Tanzania, Zambia and Sudan have all had some success in this. Finally, where neither of these solutions is feasible, there is resettlement in a third country, as occurred in the case of Indochinese refugees.

While durable solutions are being pursued, material assistance must be provided and initial emergency relief in the form of basic essentials such as food, water, shelter and medical aid are often required on a large scale and at short notice. UNHCR is not an operational agency in the sense that it organises its own relief programmes. Rather, its function is to channel funds to, and co-ordinate the activities of, other multilateral and voluntary agencies.

The role of the approximately 200 voluntary agencies operating in the refugee field is particularly important. They contribute funds for refugee assistance, sometimes exceeding those of official donors, and they are able to provide operational support in those cases where the host government is unable to implement a relief programme in full. Their non-official status enables them to act in cases where the host government is lukewarm or hostile to refugee assistance.

The UN refugee agencies are reliant upon financial contributions from UN member states and the UNHCR's funding is particularly vulnerable, being largely in the form of annual donations. In 1981 US\$838 million (ie US\$84 per refugee, on UNHCR figures) was contributed to the four major refugee agencies as follows: UNHCR \$444m, UNRWA \$192m, World Food Programme (for refugees) \$109m, and the Inter-Government Committee for Migration, which organises the transportation of resettlement cases, \$103m. The countries providing the largest contributions are the industrialised or oil-producing nations. In 1981, in order of magnitude the top ten contributors were USA, EEC (Community actions), Japan, Saudi Arabia, West Germany, Australia, Sweden, UK, Canada and Norway.

UK response

UK assistance to refugees, other than those resettled in the UK, takes the form of financial assistance and food

aid to international refugee agencies, either directly or through the EEC, and support for UK NGOs. The Overseas Development Administration (ODA) is the government department with primary responsibility for providing financial assistance in this field. Through its UN Department, it makes annual contributions to UNHCR and other multilateral agencies, and also responds to the special appeals made during the course of each year when refugee crises arise. Table 3 shows Britain's contributions to the general programmes and special appeals of the major multilateral refugee agencies during the period 1979-83.

Table 3. UK Government contributions to major refugee agencies, 1979-March 1983 (£m)

UNHCR General Programmes	18.50
UNRWA General Programmes	22.90
ICRC General Programmes	0.69
Special appeals: ^a	
Africa generally	3.25
Botswana	0.60
Chad	0.05
Lesotho	0.005
Rhodesia	1.15
Rwanda	0.03
Somalia	2.27
Sudan	2.08
Uganda	0.43
Zaire	0.75
Central America	0.62
Pakistan ^b	16.84
Bangladesh	0.65
Indochina generally	0.94
Cambodia	3.43
Thailand	0.11
Thailand/Cambodia	0.70
Cyprus	0.60
Lebanon	0.10

Figures provided by the ODA. In addition, £6m food aid was provided to UNHCR's general programmes and £1m to UNRWA's Lebanon Relief Programme.

^a The main recipients of aid to special appeals were UNHCR and ICRC.

^b Includes £6.22m food aid both bilaterally and via the EEC.

In 1981 the British Refugee Council (BRC) was set up to act as the focal point for British agencies working with refugees, either in the UK or abroad (eg Oxfam, British Red Cross Society, Christian Aid and Save the Children Fund). It provides a forum for refugee agencies to exchange information and agree on policy, which it then puts forward to government and international bodies, including UNHCR. Additionally, it manages operational programmes for refugees seeking settlement in the UK. Apart from administering part of the UK Government's aid to refugees, the NGOs raise substantial voluntary donations. Because of the variety of sources and channels, it is not possible to state the total amount of aid to refugees provided by the UK.

Humanitarian relief versus development aid

Thirty years ago when the UN Convention was drawn up and UNHCR was established, refugees were considered a temporary phenomenon, requiring short-term emergency assistance. However, the refugee crisis continues into the 1980s with no signs of abatement. For many Third World refugees there is little prospect of an end to the political and economic problems which precipitated their exodus or of permanent resettlement. Thus, the emphasis in refugee assistance programmes is shifting from the provision of emergency relief to the provision of assistance which will allow them to become integrated and self-supporting communities, of benefit to their countries of refuge.

While a large portion of multilateral relief agency expenditure is tied down in expensive maintenance programmes, there have been some examples where host governments and agencies have worked together

successfully to create self-supporting communities. In both Zambia and Tanzania, rather than settle refugees in supervised camps the governments set aside land and, with the assistance of UNHCR and other voluntary organisations, provided supplies and equipment. The settlements of Meheba in Zambia and Ulyankulu in Tanzania are now self-sufficient in food production and they are relatively closely integrated into the local economic and administrative structures.

But the replication of such schemes elsewhere is difficult. This is because it is much easier to secure finance for short-term emergency relief than for long-term programmes. This is partly due to institutional constraints. The present mandate of UNHCR does not allow it to participate in general development programmes, and its donor agencies insist that it should not take on the characteristic of a development agency. At the same time, many development agencies are reluctant to enter what they see as the domain of the relief agencies. In addition some host governments themselves are anxious to maintain a clear separation between official development aid and humanitarian assistance, especially where local integration is impossible or politically undesirable but refugees cannot be resettled elsewhere.

Yet, there have been some attempts to move towards more integrated development aid, one of the more interesting being in Pakistan. After agricultural settlement strategies, such as those already discussed in Tanzania and Zambia, were ruled out by UNHCR because of lack of land, a World Bank identification mission on income-generation was invited. This mission has formulated a project for employment creation for a small target population, comprising both Afghan refugees and local Pakistanis. The ILO, at the request of UNHCR, has also presented proposals for income generating programmes in the Sudan.

These proposals could represent an important trend for Third World refugee aid as there are no clear borderlines between either the social and economic problems created by a refugee crisis and those already existing in the host country, or between humanitarian assistance to refugees and development aid. Efforts to improve the living conditions of refugees cannot easily be separated from those designed to assist the local population if tensions between the two communities are to be avoided, and refugee programmes must be tied to longer term development planning.

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