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Towards resettlement of refugees in the African Great Lakes-area

Dammes den Hartog

Since the outbreak of several conflicts in the early 1990s, the African Great Lakes-area has had to deal with a great number of refugees of different origin. In 1994 conflict arose in Rwanda, causing a stream of over 2 million refugees to spill over the nation's borders into the (then republic of) Zaire, Burundi and Uganda. Conflict in neighbouring Zaire, caused another stream of refugees to wash over the region. Despite new conflicts in the new Democratic Republic of Congo, the region has known some sort of stable peace since December 1999; Peacetalks are being held in Burundi and war in Rwanda is practically over.

Since certain groups of refugees are already returning home on their own initiative, now is the time to channel the resettlement of these refugees. Until now the United Nations High Commissioner for the Refugees (UNHCR) has always dealt with this problem on a nation-state basis. This approach offers a reasonable amount of problems. First, there is no formalised deliberation *between* the countries in question on how to handle this question. This means that UNHCR has to perform the very difficult role of messenger between these countries, without getting the countries into contact on a multi-lateral basis. Second, groups of refugees often consist of one ethnic group. As their ethnicity is the binding factor within the group, there is often no real trust or perceived kinship with the federal government. Hence, UNHCR is then addressing the wrong actors. To counter these problems this policy memorandum discusses the possibility of a regional approach to the refugee-problem monitored by UNHCR.

Goal

The goal of a regional approach to the refugee-problem in the African Great Lakes-area is to channel the resettlement of refugees without triggering new conflict that might affect the whole region. By expressing this goal it becomes evident that regional deliberation is necessary and worthwhile to guarantee the safety and prosperity of the entire region.

Approach

The regional approach must come in to action through a Regional Board headed by UNHCR. The members of this board must be representatives from the different nation-states and representatives from the different ethnic groups. Through these formalised meetings they are encouraged to work on the safe resettlement of the different groups of refugees. In order to ensure full representativeness of the Regional Board all actors are encouraged to join. This means in particular without prior consultation of the nation-states as

to which ethnic groups to invite. UNHCR will play a neutral role of heading the Board, and making sure all decisions are fully carried out in joint force. Full formalisation will be provided for by making the Board the direct responsibility of UNHCR and by ratification on nation-level.

General advantages

Applying a regional approach in the form of a Regional Board will provide a number of advantages; not only for the region as a whole but also for the difficulty of the task of UNHCR.

- * Nations and different ethnic groups will get the chance to freely discuss and deliberate on possible ways of- and priorities in the resettlement of refugees.
- * Structural risk factors can be easier and earlier identified.
- * Formalisation of a Regional Board can provide a clearer legal basis for possible intervention by the joint forces of the Board or the UN.
- * A Regional Board can provide

for a better integration and understanding of the federal governments and the different ethnic groups.

- * Possible new conflicts can be easier identified and prevented.

A formalised Regional Board can provide for a better overall understanding between the various actors. At the same time it finds a perfect way around a number of problems relating to international action. First, there is always the problem of limitations of action for external players (UNHCR in this case). In this set-up the external player does not have an enforcing role, but rather a facilitating one. Second, usually problems arise in relation to the basic principles of sovereignty of a nation-state. In this set-up nation-states have chosen to be part of finding a solution and therefore will not challenge the carrying out of that solution. Third, it offers the best guarantee for the right to self-determination of the people. They are represented in the best way possible. Fourth, besides questioning the responsibilities of nation-state leaders it also questions the responsibilities of local ethnic leaders and involves them in the process of finding a solution.

Hurdles-to-be-taken

Since there are hardly any disadvantages to the Regional Board, it is better speak of certain limitations or hurdles-to-be-taken. In this respect the first condition for the safe resettlement of refugees must be stable peace. The development of stable peace in this area encounters a number of difficulties. These difficulties relate to two major threats. First, conflict in this area, unlike popular belief, does not originally stem from diversity. Rather it stems from pov-

erty, underdevelopment and political systems that marginalize or have marginalized large parts of the population for a long period of years. The ethnic conflicts that have arisen are mere consequences of those factors. In order to eliminate ethnic segregation and promote integration these above mentioned factors have to be countered. This is a long-term-process and therefore does not offer much hope for the short-term future. Still, open communication through the Regional Board might eliminate prejudice points of views and spark new enthusiasm for a multi-ethnic society. Second, a lot of weapons are still held by ex-combatants and the general public. In case of disputes it is not difficult to mobilise a large part of society. Therefore society always lies under the threat of lurking violence. It is therefore crucial that representation in the Regional Board requires a complete cease-fire, abolition of violence and where possible disarmament of the general public and plundering militia.

The second hurdle to take is to interest the actors in joining the General Board. As mentioned above these conflicts stem from years of poverty and in some cases oppression by the government. It is therefore not likely that all actors will want to sit at the same table discussing their combined future. Hence, UN diplomacy plays a vital role in interesting the various actors, emphasising their joint responsibility for the keeping of peace and economic development.

Third, the Regional Board will need funding. Not only funding for its programmes but also for organisational costs. Since the Board will be the direct responsibility of UNHCR, a part of the funding has to come from the

UN. The other part has to be funded internally, meaning by the various members. A specific key for costsharing has to be thought out.

Concluding, long-term problems like poverty and armament are still the underlying causes for ethnical conflict in the African Great-Lake Region. These problems have to be solved in order to ensure safe resettlement of refugees and permanent abolition of violence. Opening communication between the different parties might be one step in the direction of solving these problems. Through formalisation in a Regional Board the objective of open communication is best assured and maximized.

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