



The Facts Behind the Faces

A POLICY PAPER FROM THE CHICAGO COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS

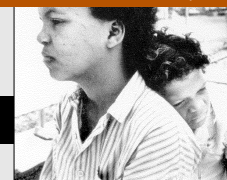


Photo by Chuck Chermey, Chicago Tribune

WAR AND HOMELESSNESS

by Les Brown, Samir Goswami and Bob Palmer

INTRODUCTION

The war in Afghanistan, and the resulting increase in the number of refugees and internally displaced persons, focuses our attention on homelessness at an international level. This policy paper represents an effort to examine homelessness created as a direct result of war, and to recommend ways to reduce conflict and prevent war.

WAR AND HOMELESSNESS: The International Picture

More than 30 wars are being fought in the world right now, mostly in Africa, central Asia and southwest Asia. A few, such as the war between the United States and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, are international conflicts. Most, however, are civil or revolutionary wars, occurring between governments and opposition groups within countries.

Conflicts over resources—land, minerals, energy—are the most basic and enduring causes of war. Clashing ideologies, including those influenced by political concepts or religion, and struggles to control other people can also lead to war.

War leads to homelessness by creating refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). At the beginning of 2001, the number of people of concern to the United Nations High Commissioner



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for Refugees (UNHCR) was 21.8 million, or 1 out of every 275 people worldwide. Of this figure, 12 million were refugees. In 1999, the 10 largest refugee populations came from Afghanistan, Burundi, Iraq, Sudan, Bosnia-

Herzegovina, Somalia, Angola, Sierra Leone, Eritrea and Vietnam. All these countries, except Vietnam, are currently at war.

The United Nations estimates the number of internally displaced persons at 20 million–25 million worldwide. IDPs have been forced to flee their homes but have not reached a neighboring country. Therefore, unlike refugees, they are generally neither protected by international law nor eligible to receive many types of aid. The UN does provide humanitarian

assistance to IDPs. However, continuing conflicts prevent many of them from receiving humanitarian assistance. Among those of concern to the UNHCR as of the beginning of 2001, are people living in war-torn countries, including Eritrea, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Azerbaijan, Colombia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Yugoslavia, Angola and Liberia.

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Effects of War on Local Populations

Refugees and IDPs face incredible hardships: poor physical and mental health; lack of personal safety; extreme poverty and malnutrition; lack of access to healthcare, employment and education; sexual exploitation and abuse. Lack of resources and political will forces refugees and IDPs to live in predefined locations that lack adequate shelter, housing, sewerage and hygiene infrastructure. Many are

(continued on reverse)

ostracized and face discrimination while residing in host countries; children are forced into labor and trafficking; many girls and women are forced into prostitution.

The effects of war, both internal and external conflict, in creating homelessness in Afghanistan is examined in the section below.

Afghanistan

A 1999 survey of Kabul's population indicated that 83 percent of those interviewed had been displaced from their homes at one time or another. At the end of 2000, approximately 4 million Afghans were living as refugees in neighboring countries. In addition, approximately 2 million Afghans were internally displaced because of conflict. Determining accurate numbers is difficult because of the transfer of resources from humanitarian and civil improvements to military efforts to sustain conflict and the overburdening of local resources caused by forced migration.

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world, much ravaged by 20 years of conflict. After a communist government seized power in 1978, Afghanistan became a Cold War battleground between the United States and the then Soviet Union. The United

States provided military assistance to the strongly Islamic opposition forces known as the Mujahedin, and the Soviet Union supported the communist government. This conflict and its resulting social repercussions, such as famine, drought and the inability of a sagging infrastructure to sustain and support its population, led to displacement of thousands of refugees to neighboring countries (e.g., Iran and Pakistan). The Soviets withdrew in 1988. The conflict was then replaced by war among the Taliban (many of

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whom were Mujahedin warriors) and local warlords for control over Afghanistan.

Since the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan, hundreds of thousands of Afghans have been forced to flee. Their eventual repatriation is complicated by the destruction of an already weakened infrastructure and by tribal conflict over the establishment of a new governing body.

Recommendations

The number of existing conflicts indicates that countries around the world, including the United States, have not yet developed the political will to truly foster and engage in nonviolent forms of conflict resolution, thereby avoiding increased homelessness. Billions of dollars have been allocated in the federal budget to build our defense systems and new weapons for war while, in comparison, funds directed toward the prevention of conflicts and war are minimal. The United States has developed and continues to build a military industrial complex that depends, in part, on the export of arms throughout the world.

To prevent war and the homelessness it causes, we need to ensure that a global economic system adheres to principles of justice, equality and the protection of human rights. Priorities should be reordered to reflect a greater emphasis on the following:

- Developing and implementing a nuclear arms reduction treaty that is equitable in its reduction of existing stockpiles and in its enforcement of regulations to serve as disincentives for the production of future nuclear arms.

- Ensuring a just and equitable mechanism for community reinvestment by multinational corporations. Such mechanisms would require multinational corporations operating business ventures in developing countries to allocate funds to the creation of resources such as healthcare, affordable housing and renewable energy.
- Supporting unionization and international standards to protect labor and the environment. At present, with the help of the World Trade Organization, multinational corporations push to eliminate all perceived barriers to trade, including labor and environmental regulations.
- Promoting the growth of free, equitable and democratic societies. For example, canceling the world debt would enable indebted countries to begin creating more economically just democracies.
- Establishing new, and enforcing existing, mechanisms for global nonviolent conflict resolution.
- Ensuring resources for the repatriation and/or development of displaced populations.
- Working to empower local communities to create sustainable development initiatives.
- Enforcing existing and new standards and protocols to curb involuntary human trafficking.

