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# REPATRIATION UNDER CONFLICT

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World Refugee Survey: 1990 in Review

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REPATRIATION UNDER CONFLICT

The background to any contemporary refugee report tends to be doleful and bleak.  In the 1980s the number of refugees doubled to approximately 15 million persons in need of protection and assistance while the budget of the United Nations High Commisioner for Refugees (UNHCR) remained relatively frozen.  While going through a donor-initiated financial crisis, UNHCR also had the disorienting problem of three High Commissioners in just over one year.  For refugees, the increase in their numbers combined with inadequate contributions from donors and weakened institutional capacity has meant: malnutrition for refugee children in Ethiopia and Malawi; cuts in educational programs and other means for building human hope and capacity; deferral or cancellation of voluntary repatriation programs to Angola and Mozambique, of local integration programs in Somalia, and in development-oriented assistance programs in Iran, the Sudan, and Pakistan; and delays in responding to the Liberian refugee crisis.

The number of refugees is increasing due to a lack of durable solutions to refugee problems.  The three durable solutions are voluntary repatriation to the country of origin, local settlement in the country of first asylum, and resettlement in a third country.  A durable solution requires the integration--citizenship or permanent status--of a refugee into a society.  For many refugees only long-term temporary asylum is available.  The increase in the total number of refugees is not due to any recent increase in the outflow of new

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refugees.  Rather, the problem is that once on the refugee register, many refugees remain there, seemingly forever. Refugees from the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and the early 1980s are still on the assistance list, along with their children and grandchildren.  Refugee problems demand durable solutions, not only because of the cost and burden on host countries and the international community, and the waste of the refugees lives but because in their second, third and fourth generation refugees can be a violent and destabilizing social ulcer.  In October 1990, Rwandese refugees in Uganda invaded their homeland:  "Rwandese refugees, people who have been in exile--stateless and spiritually homeless--for three decades, people whose long-term pain and frustration provide the context from which the war has sprung."[1]

Beyond the tragedy of becoming a refugee is the additional tragedy that almost no country is willing to accept responsibility for refugees.  A few countries receiving ethnic kin provide not only shelter but also the rights and privileges of citizenship.  Otherwise, the truth is that no one welcomes or wants refugees; countries want to be rid of the problem or somehow pass the buck to others.  The responsibility for refugees is shared by all, which really means that no country takes responsibility for a durable solution.  Most host countries, no matter how hospitable, see refugees as a burden that should be shared with the international community. Refugees may be well-treated but they will not become citizens or permanent residents; rather the hosts insist that eventually

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the refugees exercise the best solution, to return home.
Some refugees are able to escape this limbo of waiting to go
home by resettling in third countries; however, the number of
refugees resettled each year is so small that the worldwide
total of refugees continues to grow.  If the number of refugees
is to be reduced, it will be by means of voluntary repatriation.

This article describes the process of voluntary
repatriation of refugees and the decision-making of refugees
confronted with unsatisfactory options.  It presents some patterns
of repatriation that have emerged from an International Study of
Spontaneous Voluntary Repatriation.  We believe that many of the
beliefs and principles commonly applied by governments,
international assistance agencies, and the public to the problem
of voluntary repatriation do not fit the reality of contemporary
repatriation both with regard to the situations in which it is
likely to occur and the most common forms it will take.

The contemporary international beliefs and principles
regarding repatriation assume that return to one's homeland will
be purely voluntary, will be assisted and monitored by
governments and international agencies under the terms of a
tripartite agreement between the United Nations High
Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the governments of the
refugees' country of origin and the country of asylum, and that
the refugees' complete safety and socio-economic integration
will be assured.  For example, at the last meeting of UNHCR's
Executive Committee, the representative of the Holy See

indicated the:

> need to ensure that voluntary repatriation - the best
> solution to uprooting - really was voluntary. In order to
> do that refugees must be told what opportunities for
> reintegration into their home countries they would
> actually have, and it must be ensured that they could
> return in complete safety.

Unfortunately, it is the rare refugee situation that will allow
for such orderly and organized return.  International activities
based on the above assumptions may be irrelevant for the needs
of most refugees.

The changing nature of refugee problems has altered the
contemporary practice of voluntary repatriation.  For a while
during the 1960s and early 1970s many refugees were able to
repatriate after the successful conclusion of struggles for
independence and liberation from colonial rule.  However, for
more than a decade, most refugee-producing conflicts have
involved the newly-independent states and have been based on
issues of internal nation-building, revolutionary change, or
conflicts with neighbors.  This has caused, in the words of
former High Commissioner Hartling, "the massive arrivals of
refugees in low-income countries where often no durable
solutions are at hand."

Today, most voluntary repatriations occur under conflict,
without a decisive political event such as national
independence, without any change in the regime or the conditions
that originally caused flight.  Countless individual refugees
and sizeable groups of well-organized refugees return home in
the face of continued risk, frequently without any amnesty,

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without a repatriation agreement or program, without the
permission of the authorities in either the country of asylum or
of origin, without international knowledge or assistance, and
without an end to the conflict that caused the exodus.
Returning refugees to their homelands under these circumstances
will require new thinking about voluntary repatriation and the
ways of promoting it.

The refugees are the main actors in the contemporary
practice of voluntary repatriation.   They are the main
decision-makers and participate in determining the modalities of
movement and the conditions of reception.  Refugee-induced
repatriation is a self-regulating process on the refugees' own
terms.  The refugees apply their own criteria to their situation
in exile and to conditions in their homeland and will return
home if it is safe and better by their standards.

### RECENT REPATRIATIONS

Below are brief descriptions of five recent repatriations;
to Namibia, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, and El Salvador.
Only the first example, Namibia, fits the conditions for orderly
and organized, internationally assisted repatriation.  The other
repatriations are more ambiguous and disorderly.  Where the
returns are organized, that organization is induced and
controlled by the refugees.

NAMIBIA.  Joyous occasions are relatively rare when dealing
with refugee problems.  One such date was 21 March 1990 when
Namibia became independent after decades of struggle.  In
anticipation of independence 43,387 Nambian refugees were

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repatriated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) from Angola, Zambia, and 40 other countries. The refugees were registered while in exile, airlifted home, processed in reception centers, given rehabilitation assistance by a number of international agencies, and one year of food rations and material assistance to facilitate their integration into local society.

MOZMABIQUE. Mozambique is not as fortunate as Namibia; independent since 1975, it continues to be racked by nighmarish civil war. The RENAMO insurgency practices terror tactics against civilians, with many instances of massacre and mutilation of innocents. Mozambique has produced over one million refugees and a roughly equal number of internally displaced persons. Yet, in 1990, UNHCR reported that 4,400 refugees returned to Mozambique with UNHCR assistance, but that "as of 31 December 1989 ... the number of returnees from Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe was 208,000 persons, the great majority of whom had returned spontaneously." The lion's share, 98% of the Mozambican refugees, returned of their own accord, with little or no international assistance to a homeland in conflict.

TIGRAY. In 1985, some 68,000 Tigrayan refugees returned from the Sudan to Ethiopia at the height of the drought and famine, during a period of stepped-up military activity. The first returns occurred while massive numbers were still evacuating central Tigray. The return was aided by the indigenous Relief Society of Tigray (REST) and "protected" by the Tigrayan

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People's Liberation Front.  Both UNHCR and the United States

Government actively opposed the return, and only the Sudan gave

limited assistance.  Despite great fears, most refugees returned

home in good health, but without adequate agricultural inputs to

securely re-establish themselves. Indeed, in 1986 even larger

numbers (77,000) returned; some with limited international

assistance.  By the end of 1987, 164,000 of the original 190,000

Tigrayans to enter Sudan had returned home.

AFGHANISTAN.  Afghanistan has produced the largest current

refugee exodus; approximately six million refugees fled to

Pakistan and Iran in the last decade due to internal

revolutionary change backed by the 1979 Soviet invasion.

Despite the Soviet withdrawal of its troops in early 1989, the

internal war has not ended; Muslim resistance forces battle

against the Soviet-supported Kabul regime.  New fighting

continues to create refugees and discourages the return of those

in exile.  Furthermore, UNHCR reported that "the experience in

1989 showed that certain groups had often actively discouraged

or prevented spontaneous return movements."  It is charged that

some guerrilla groups oppose any repatriation and have laid

mines on road along which refugees pass and have mobile military

units to prevent the return of refugees.  Nonetheless, UNHCR

reported:

> There were indications that sizeable spontaneous return
> movements were taking place in 1990 to rural areas in the
> south and south-western parts of Afghanistan, with the
> possibility that up to 150,000 persons would have returned
> by the end of the year.

In the same vein, last year's World Refugee Survey reported:

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Thousands of people every month were estimated to have returned to their homes in rural areas. Spontaneous returns of internally displaced persons out of Kabul and other towns were reported to the rural parts ... that had been especially hard hit in the war. ... Many of the returnees were men coming in advance of their families to clear fields and repair damaged homes. Rural areas, for the most part, remain outside government control.

EL SALVADOR. As a last example of the varieties of repatriation, one needs to examine the masivas, the large-scale refugee-organized returns from camps in Honduras to communities in El Salvador "still considered zones of conflict." For most of a decade in Honduras, the Salvadoran refugees were virtual prisoners in closed camps under constant harassment from a suspicious and dangerous Honduran military. Although they felt hopeless about their life in Honduras, the Salvadoran refugees did not feel powerless. They organized to return as a community so they "could take control over their own lives and confront their enemies as an organized force." There had been many individual refugee returns from the camps; but it was believed that even though those individuals had returned discreetly, without calling attention to themselves, they were subject to torture, jail and massacre in El Salvador. "In contrast to the individual refugees ... the refugees participating in the masivas were intentionally testing the political space in El Salvador."[2]

Between October 1987 and late 1989 there were four masivas from the Mesa Grande refugee camps, ranging from 800 to over 4,000 refugees. Nearly 8,000 refugees returned to areas of conflict. The State Department reported that the Salvadoran

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Government:

> originally planned to place the returnees in the less
> conflictive zone of southern Usulutan Department and
> provide land, building and farming materials, and other
> basic needs.  Refugee leaders, however, rejected the
> proposal and insisted that the returnees be allowed to
> repatriate to areas of their choice from where many had
> originated.  The government eventually agreed to their
> demands.

In May 1989, the refugees in Colomoncagua camp announced they
were ready to return together to "build peace"; a few months
later the refugees at San Antonio camp made a similar
declaration.  The State Department reported:

> On November 18, [1989] approximately 1,250 refugees left
> the Colomoncagua camp, the largest in Honduras, and
> crossed the border, *disregarding Salvadoran Government and
> UNHCR immigration and repatriation procedures*.  The
> refugees repatriated in the middle of the FMLN [Farabundo
> Marti Liberation Front] November offensive.

The Salvadoran refugees in the first <u>masiva</u> established "a
pattern of confrontations about disagreements between the
refugees and private agencies on one side, and the Salvadoran
Governmenton the other."[3]  These conditions also challenged
UNHCR's "traditional role as a humanitarian and apolitical
mediator."  Fagen and Eldridge have noted that:

> The refugees initiated the <u>masivas</u> and took charge of
> their own organization and preparation.  ... The four
> Mesa Grande repatriations were all confrontational. ...The
> collective repatriations were intended to demonstrate that
> the refugees could control their own lives; hence they
> challenged terms of repatriation they considered to have
> been imposed upon them rather than initiated by them ...
> regardless of whether the decisions might be in their
> long-term interest.
> In insisting on points which they knew would be
> rejected the refugees also wished to demonstrate to the
> Salvadoran Government the extent of their international
> support.[4]

Of the five repatriations described above, only the Namibian repatriation fits contemporary international assumptions, beliefs and principles regarding return. If the refugees had not engaged in independent decision-making and organizing, the returns to Mozambique, Tigray, Afghanistan, and El Salvador would not have occurred. Those four refugee-induced returns total approximately 543,000 refugees, and they are not the only refugee-induced returns in the last few years.

What has happened to the tired, poor, huddled masses of refugees, the passive, powerless wretched refuse yearning for international assistance and guidance? The international system has failed to provide durable solutions for refugees. As a result, some refugees are taking matters into their own hands and becoming major actors in the repatriation process.

In the last few years UNHCR has made significant efforts to more actively promote voluntary repatriation. In several Central American repatriations UNHCR undertook innovative measures to protect refugees, remain in contact with all parties, and promote return. Nonetheless, despite its importance as a durable solution, voluntary repatriation, particularly under conflict, is a difficult solution for UNHCR to implement. Given the irregular nature of many contemporary refugee movements, many refugees never register with UNHCR while in the country of asylum. The forces controlling the area to which the refugees return may not be those of the sovereign government recognized by the UN. Countries of origin often assume returnees are part of an insurgent movement and thus

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refuse to approve their return.  Many refugees fear that going
through official channels to repatriate and being "turned over"
to their government would put them in danger or mark them as
suspect.  Lastly, although UNHCR's tripartite approach to
repatriation is useful and important, its pace is often slow and
does not reflect the refugees' own pace and criteria for
decision making.  In many situations, refugees return on their
own rather than wait for formal action by UNHCR.

Voluntary repatriation has received relatively little
study.  Several studies are now underway at the Refugee Policy
Group and at the United Nations Research Institute for Social
Development.  The study--International Study of Spontaneous
Voluntary Repatriation--on which this article is based is the
oldest.  It supported by the Ford Foundation, the Intertect
Institute, Michigan State University, Georgetown University's
Hemispheric Migration Project, and the Canadian International
Development Agency.  Both the Refugee Policy Group and the
University of Manitoba have assisted the study.  Complete or
partial case studies include Afghanistan, Cambodia, Sri Lanka,
Ethiopia, Burundi, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.


## VARIETIES OF REPATRIATION

Generally, if international agencies and governments do
not initiate, manage and organize a voluntary repatriation the
international agencies refer to it as an unorganized or
spontaneous repatriation.  However, as the Tigray repatriation
shows most clearly, the failure or inability to provide

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international repatriation assistance does not mean there is a lack of organization. REST, TPLF, and the Sudanese Commissioner for Refugees (COR) provided substantial organization. They had woefully inadequate resources, unfortunately, due to the lack of international participation.

To a certain degree, it is better to avoid labelling types of repatriation and to concentrate instead on examining the range of repatriation experiences. It is useful to think of types of repatriation as lying along several continuums or spectrums. Amongst the possible continuums would be (1) whether a repatriation is unassisted or organized and by which actors; (2) the degree to which a repatriation is purely voluntary, encouraged, induced, or forced; (3) whether it is an individual, small group, or more sizeable collective return; and (4) a political conflict spectrum reflecting the degree to which there has been a significant change in the original cause of flight. Today, most repatriation occurs under far from ideal conditions. The repatriations occur under conflict and raise serious questions of coercion and protection.

Some of the points along a repatriation under political conflict spectrum would be: (1) return after fundamental political change such as independence (Zimbabwe, Namibia); (2) return after a political settlement or major political change (Nicaragua); (3) return after a political settlement that does not end the political conflict and which leaves the contending parties with substantial political and military power (Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Angola); (4) return to areas not

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controlled by the government of the country of origin (may be controlled by a rival political force or by local forces) (Tigray, Afghanistan, El Salvador, Cambodia); (5) return to a country controlled by the government that originally caused the flight (Guatemala); (6) return caused by deteriorating political security conditions in the host country (the post-1985 return from southern Sudan to Uganda, 1989-1991 return from Somalia to Ethiopia); and, (7) forced return of impressed refugees to a conflict zone (Khmer Rouge).

## REPATRIATION PATTERNS AND DECISIONS

In examining refugee-stimulated repatriation under conflict it is necessary to take a split screen view of two interacting factors, the pattern of repatriation and the purpose of refugee decision-making. These two factors interact and drive the repatriation process.

In our conceptual framework there are four main phases of repatriation: (1) the 'ricochet' effect; (2) relocation-stimulated repatriation; (3) community and alienation; and, (4) major repatriations. The pattern of these phases is not rigid, the process may be drawn out or short-circuted. The progression through the phases may flow smoothly or be jumbled by events. The key factors driving the events are the assistance decisions and attitudes of the host country, changing conditions within the homeland, the location of the refugees in their refuge, and the evolution of refugee communities at sites where refugees are concentrated. Also influencing this process is the fact that most borders are relatively porous allowing refugees to visit

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and communicate with their homeland.

## Decision-Making

On one side of the split-screen is the nature and purpose of refugee decision-making which interacts with the pattern of repatriation. There are two points to note about refugee decision-making. First, not all refugees are alike; there will be differential responses to forced location often rooted in different levels of mobility, urbanization, education, and economic status amongst the refugees. Second, we are examing refugee responses over a long period of time. The refugee community will behave differently at the beginning, generally a conservative risk-aversive response, than years later when greater initiative and risk taking will be apparent.

Our view of refugee decision-making views the refugees as making "rational" choices amongst unsatisfactory options, striving for an outcome that achieves relative security and some small degree of control over their lives. We assume that refugee actions are purposeful; their behavior may be interpreted as directed to the attainment of a goal. Refugees make choices for some purpose, and we must understand those purposes. Indicating that a choice is "purposeful" or "rational" does not necessarily mean that it is careful or conscious, that it lists all alternatives and consequences, estimates and defines probabilities and preferences. Many people simplify complex decisions by relying on habit, instinct, simple cues, and trial and error. The assumption of purposeful choice implies simply that, after taking account of people's

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perceptions, values, and beliefs, we can model their decisions by asserting that they act as if they make such calculations." [5]

Although refugees are commonly thought of as powerless, and they are certainly relatively powerless, it is well to recall that the decision to flee, or to stay, or to return home, is an action and a choice. [The choice is often influenced by geography; those near the border cross it and become refugees; others, far from the border, flee to the cities and become internally displaced persons. Their status differs, but the cause of flight is often identical.] For almost everyone the process of becoming a refugee is a transition from relative security and prosperity to uncertainty and poverty.

The decision to flee obviously reflects the refugee's belief that his or her power over others and level of self-control are now inadequate to provide protection from insult, injury, imprisionment or death. Thus, flight represents an attempt to utilize whatever power, control and mobility the person still possesses to escape from a threatening situation to safety. There are usually other alternatives available, to stay or to flee internally. Refugees make their moves to flee, to repatriate, to accept settlement or resettlement because of decisions that compare alternatives.

In comparing alternative decisions refugees attempt to conserve and strengthen their control over their own lives and to reduce the possibility that further stress will occur. The basic response of refugees is a conservative one to limit change and disruption. Not surprisingly, refugees seek security. They

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cling to old behavioral patterns, old institutions and old goals.  In clinging to the familiar, refugees attempt to move the shortest distance not only in space to remain in contact with a familiar habitat, but also in terms of the psychological and sociocultural context of their lives.

Initially, refugees can be expected to follow a conservative strategy.  They cope with the stress of flight to an unfamiliar habitat by clinging to the familiar and changing no more than is necessary.  They attempt to transfer old skills and farming practices.  They attempt to relocate with kin, neighbors, coethnics so as to recreate the security of an encapsulating community with familiar institutions and symbols.

In the "relocation" phase of repatriation, refugees consider the move to refugee camps or further inland to settlements as a threat to their identity.  It would move them from a known to an unknown world, further away from kin and familiar territory. "The refugees [Mozambicans] don't appear very happy at being sent further away from the border.  They actually cross it from time to time, to 'stay in touch and see how the situation is developing.'"[6]  Returning home to a previously established social identity with rights and obligations can be seen as allowing the refugee to retain more power and stability and control over his own life.

The passage of time is likely to alter the refugees' approach to decision-making but not the goal of the decisions-- security and control.  Rarely will the transition stage, marked by a conservative response, be shorter than two years.  Where

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refugees play an active role in reconstructing their lives and communities and so reestablish a positive image of themselves, the transition stage may be relatively short.

The later stage of decision-making is marked by increased initiative and risk taking [which may only be to pre-flight degrees of risk taking.]  The turning point is when the refugees have regained much of their former standard of living and degree of self-sufficiency.  Local leaders emerge capable of pushing local interests vis-a-vis the hosts and government officials. The initial dependency of the refugee community is abandoned and an outward-looking and dynamic leadership emerges.  Refugees organize themselves into more effective political units for obtaining benefits from the external environment.  This organization requires the passage of time, but also gives the refugees a sense of control over their own  community.  Such organizing can be encouraged by NGOs, by growing confidence in the international presence and delivery of supplies, and enhanced by organizational skills of resistance-connected refugees.  The refugees' willingness to take risks may focus on repatriation if the community's condition in the host country is hopeless, isolated, or precarious.

Conservative risk-aversive refugees will act as individuals and will avoid contact with government and international agencies.  [They will be suspicious of anything official.]  They will repatriate spontaneously.  Over time, as initiative and risk taking re-emerge in the refugee community, the refugees will be willing to confront their hosts, their

homeland, and the international community with requests for officially-sanctioned, but refugee-stimulated repatriation.

## Patterns of Repatriation

On the other side of the split screen, actively interacting with the refugees' desire for security and some degree of control over their lives, are the events in exile: "ricochet" repatiations; relocation-stimulated repatriation; return by refugees alienated from the emerging refugee community; and, major repatriations.

*Ricochet*: If the exodus was sudden, such as a result of military action or a "stampede" away from danger, a substantial number of people who might not have felt personally threatened or whose sympathies were not in line with the majority of the refugees will immediately seek ways to return.  These initial repatriations will be spontaneous and unassisted and can be termed "ricochet repatriations".

*Relocation-stimulated repatriation*: The next phase is the host government's round-up of refugees scattered along the border and their movement to refugee camps to facilitate aid to and control of the refugees.  At this point, refugees must decide whether to accept host government control and reside in the camps or try to elude the authorities and find a place to live away from other refugees.  For those who stay in the camps, repatriation will inevitably become a less immediate option. But for those refugees who settle outside the camps, repatriation is more likely to be a viable alternative, especially if they are unable to find work in the country of

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asylum.

*Community and alienation:*  One of the more interesting common denominators found in the case studies is the formation of politically organized, cohesive communities by uprooted peoples.  Rounded up by the host government and relocated to refugee camps refugees are placed in unaccustomed communal situations which may change their way of life and crowd them in amongst strangers.  In these circumstances refugees show and impressive ability to organize and cohere as a new community with its own mores and values.  Frequently, refugee organizations are formed that ally with insurgent groups. Refugees come to believe that their situation is a key part of the political equation in the struggle of their group for social, cultural or economic change.

Some refugees will be indiffernt or alienated from the emerging refugee community, its values and common cause.  These aloof refugees, seeking control over their own lives, are candidates to move away from the camp or settlement or to repatriate.  "We must not forget that, like governments, refugee leaderships are not immune to the attractiveness of repression in order to achieve a political goal or maintain stability within the community."

As time passes, the available space for repatriation is likely to increase.  At home, the locus of the conflict may change; the levels of violence may decrease; political or economic changes may occur.  The border may become more porous as a result of internal changes in the homeland.  Cross-border

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trade may normalize, providing an opportunity for families in the camps and spontaneously-settled refugees to send "scouts" back to check on conditions and to find out if it is viable for small numbers of people to go back.  Returns by internally displaced persons to particular regions will be carefully noted by refugees and may trigger some repatriation.

Inevitably, some scouts will report that people can return with a relative degree of safety.  Gradually more and more people will begin to leave.  They are generally people who are on the periphery of the mainstream refugee community, or those who feel they no longer "belong".  The refugee organizations may oppose the return of these less committed refugees, feeling that repatriation somehow undercuts the political and/or moral position of the refugee community.  Repatriations during this period may expand the political space at home, although not significantly.

*Secondary relocation-stimulated repatriation*: At some point, in almost every refugee situation, the host government will decide, or propose, to relocate or transfer refugees from refugee camps near the border to camps or formal settlements further inland.  This relocation may be dictated by political concerns, as in the case of Guatemalans in Mexico, or operational concerns, as in the case of Sudan.  Whatever the reason, the relocation decision forces the refugees to decide whether to accept the transfer and the disruption it is likely to cause to both the refugees' lives and to the established sense of community, or to leave the camps and either attempt to

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integrate into the surrounding communities or repatriate.
"Relocation, they feared, would sever their links with El
Salvador and inevitably lead them to abandon any reasonable hope
of one day returning home."[7]

A key consideration is the perceived breakup of the sense
of community that has evolved in the camps. The emotional
stress of having to move yet again and form yet another
community prompts many refugees to choose to repatriate. While
few refugees may cite the relocation as the primary cause, the
fact that a substantial number of returns begin when transfers
start underscores the importance of this event. If more
refugees show an interest in repatriation than the existing
political conditions and organization of assistance allows, then
organizational attitudes start to change, and agencies working
with the refugees begin to actively seek ways to expand the
space for repatriation.

The first organizations to actively assist repatriation
are the refugee-controlled organizations. No longer are those
who are repatriating deemed the "alienated"; many are the core of the
refugee community. The fact that many mainstream refugees are
returning, apparently successfully, serves to enlarge the
political space in the homeland and draws the attention of
outside organizations to the repatriation process. Governments
on both sides of the border must now make decisions regarding
the limits of their involvement. The host country will
naturally seek to encourage repatriation, while the country of
origin may be unable to decide how to respond to the

repatriation challenge.

In the country of origin, the civil government, the military and various political, social, ethnic and economic groups may have different political agendas. Inevitably, as the number of returnees increases, the government will seek to either control the repatriation or benefit politically from the return. If the government wants to control the return, it will usually seek the participation of the UNHCR.

*Major repatriations*: UNHCR participation is the final stage in the reptriation process. In response to governmental pressures (usually from the host government and then from the country of origin), UNHCR will begin to provide assistance, in some cases reluctantly. Whether or not this is carried out as part of a formal tripartite agreement may depend on the way the repatriation is perceived by the international community.

Once repatriation becomes formalized under UNHCR, two very divergent patterns may emerge. In some cases, a formal agreement will lead to a decline in repatriation because some refugees fear being registered and being brought to the attention of their government, while others may delay their return while they wait for assistance programs to be established and implemented. In other cases, however, while formal repatriation agreements may produce little organized return, they can improve the political space for repatriation. Tripartite agreements enable UNHCR and NGOs to operate in the country of origin, they spur development of civilian refugee aid agencies in the homeland, and they facilitate the refugees'

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ability to communicate home and develop better information on
conditions. The large-scale unorganized returns to Mozambique
and Afghanistan may reflect this process.

CONCLUSION: REPATRIATION UNDER CONFLICT

What is described above is a very unsatisfactory
situation. The ability of refugees to take matters into their
own hands and organize repatriations is a hopeful sign. But
often they are forced into this position by hopelessness,
danger, and lack of assistance. Iran has charged that: "For the
refugees, reduced assistance constituted an attempt to force
them to return to their country." What is the connection
between malnourished refugee children in Malawi and "spontaneous
repatriation" to Mozambique? The masivas to conflict zones in
El Salvador grew out of the hostile, hopeless situation in the
closed refugee camps in Honduras. Attacks on refugee
settlements in Southern Sudan have driven hundreds of thousands
of refugees back to Uganda.

The international community has failed to provide durable
solutions for millions of refugees. It compounds this failure
by repeatedly declaring that voluntary repatriation is the most
desirable solution, and by failing to effectively promote the
other two solutions--resettlement and local integration. The
international community also fails to effectively promote
voluntary repatriation. At the 1990 Extraordinary Executive
Committee of UNHCR, several countries of origin, such as Angola,
Ethiopia, and Somalia, complained bitterly that "refugees were
awaiting the helping hand of the international community in

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order to return home" but the funding crisis had reduced
repatriation programs.

Repatriation is not a panacea. Where is "home" for those
in exile for thirty years or for those born in exile? Hostile,
ill-prepared homelands still embroiled in conflict are not ideal
arenas for re-integration and protection.

Nonetheless, despite significant protection worries, there
is a need to actively promote voluntary repatriation, even under
conflict. In an imperfect world that only offers long-term
temporary asylum to most refugees, there is a need to assist
refugees to go home. Rather than a passive international
approach, repatriation should be actively promoted even before
the formal end of hostilities. And repatriation should be seen
as a tool for reducing confrontations along tense borders, for
expanding or securing zones of peace and stability for
returnees, and possibly as an encouragement to talks between
between the adversaries.

NOTES

1.    Roger Winter, "Preface," in Catharine Watson, "Exile from
Rwanda: Background to an Invasion," U.S. Committee for Refugees
Issue Paper, February 1991.

2.    Patricia Weiss Fagen and Joseph Eldrige, "The Salvadoran
Repatriations From Hunduras," draft case study report to the
International Study on Spontaneous Voluntary Repatriation, July
1990.

3.    Ibid.

4.    Ibid.

5.    Peter C. Ordeshook, Game Theory and Political Theory: An
Introduction, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

6.    Annick Billard, "Biding Their Time: Mozambicans in
Zambia," Refugees, August, 1986.

7.    Michael S. Barton, "Honduras: A Difficult Dialogue,"
Refugees, August, 1985.