

Why people become refugees politics essay



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By this definition, internally displaced persons (IDPs) who are often mistakenly referred to as refugees, do not qualify as refugees because they have remained inside their home countries under the protection of their own government (UNHCR, online, 2001-2010). Since the 1951 convention on refugees, there have been several refugee crisis situations worldwide. In its annual report for 2010, UNHCR estimates that about 43.3 million people are forcibly displaced – the highest figure since 1990. According to UNHCR, 27.1 million of these people are internally displaced people and 15.6 million are refugees (Foy, online, 2010).

This crisis presents at least two aspects – humanitarian and security. First, people have the basic right to live without fear of persecution, however many do not and face untold hardship. Apart from the high financial cost of migration, refugees become exposed to human rights abuses and face the risk of an uncertain future. Second, refugees are a security risk to the international community. This risk could be social, economic or political and can affect relationships between the country where these refugees originate from and the country where they seek refuge. They may also change the nature of the country where refuge has been sought. For example, Pakistan blames its Kalashnikov culture on the Afghan refugees (Bali, 2010).

According to Moore & Shellman (online, 2004), most observers contend that forced migration burdens the economies of nations and regions.

Considering the above impact of refugee flow, this essay aims to highlight the causes of refugee movements and explain that while the immediate reason for migration may have resulted from persecution, policies of repression, armed conflict, or a violent breakdown of a civil society, the

underlying causes may result from a deeper complex interplay of pressures from politics, economics, ethnicity, environment or human rights, further complicated by internal and external interacting factors (UNHCR, 1993).

Violent Conflicts

According to Hakovirta (online, 1993), the primary cause of refugee flows is violent man-made conflict. Obviously, there is strong evidence to support the correlation between violent conflicts in Third World countries and refugee outflows. Countries like Senegal, Jamaica, and Bhutan that have not had violent conflicts have not produced noticeable numbers of refugees, while most countries that have been involved in very violent conflicts like Bangladesh, Kampuchea, and Afghanistan have been key producers of refugees (Hakovita, online, 1993). Hakovita explains that if consideration is given to key producers of refugees since the 1950s until 1993, and a comparison is made between their scales of refugee production and that of the intensity of their conflicts, it becomes reasonable to infer that the more relentless the war is, the greater the scale of the refugee flow. This is reflected in Table 1 below.

Table Scale of War and Refugee Outflow in 27 Contemporary Cases
(Hakovirta, online, 1993, p. 41)

Total Cumulative Refugee Outflow (during conflict)

Total (Civilian + Military) War Deaths

Less than 200, 000

20, 000 – 100, 000

100, 000 – 200, 000

200, 000 – 500, 000

Less than 100, 000

Guinea Bissau

1962 – 74

Nicaragua

1981 – 88

Chile

1973 – 74

Philippines

1972 – 89

Mozambique

1965 – 75

Tibet

1956 – 59

100, 000 – 250, 000

Western Sahara

1975 – 87

Congo/Zaire

1960 – 65

Nicaragua

1978 – 79

El Salvador

1979 -89 –

Uganda

1971 – 79

250, 000 – 750, 000

Rhodesia/

Zimbabwe

1972 – 79

Chad

1980 – 87

Somalia

1988 – 89 –

Angola

1961 – 75

Algeria

1956 – 62

Rwanda

1956 – 65

Uganda**1981 – 87****Angola****1975 – 89****Over 750, 000****Ethiopia/Ogaden****1976 – 89 –****Mozambique****1981 – 89 –**

However, Hakovirta notes that this is not a perfect correlation as there have been countries with significantly bloody conflicts that did not produce major refugee exodus. Malaysia, Kenya and Colombia are but a few examples. Thus while violent conflicts are directly responsible for major refugee outflows, there are underlying interactive features of societies that cause wars and/or interact with wars to produce refugees. These interactive features include whether or not the government is oppressive and suppressive, the sort of rapport between various social groups and the government, the nature of social, ethnic and religious cleavages, and the ideologies that divide the country. In order to understand these interactive features, one must consider two types of wars: non-ethnic and ethnic; both of which are largely political.

Non-ethnic Wars**Political Tensions**

Non-ethnic civil wars incorporate those hinged on differences in class, region, or ideology, or an armed political power tussle by political and/or military

factions. However people are not targeted because of ethnic distinction. Examples include the civil wars in Cambodia (conflict between the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party backed by Vietnam and the Khmer Rouge backed by China), and Angola (conflict between the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola government backed by Cuba and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola movement backed by the U. S). Both cases produced 117, 500 and 237, 000 refugees respectively (Weiner, 1996). Other cases include the conflict between FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) guerrillas and the military supported regime of President Duarte in El Salvador that produced 248, 000 refugees, as well the conflict in Laos between the defeated royalists and the Communist Pathet regime (Weiner, 1996).

Other forms of non-ethnic wars that generate refugees include interstate and anti-colonial conflicts. Interstate wars, though not as prominent as internal wars, have previously been the cause of significant refugee flows. The Israeli-Arab wars of 1948 and 1967 generated an estimated 2, 658, 000 refugees (Weiner, 1996). According to Weiner, one of the largest refugee flows since after World War II was due to the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. The Soviet Union was invited into Afghanistan by the ruling government to help fight the opposition in 1979. The resulting civil war saw Pakistan and Iran each hosting over 1 million refugees in 1981 and 3 million refugees by the end of the 1980s (UNHCR, 2005).

Ironically, the interstate war between India and Pakistan in 1972 was due to the flow of 10, 000, 000 Pakistani refugees into India as a result of the civil war in Pakistan in 1971. This caused economic and social instability in India

that forced India into the war in order to stop this massive inflow of Pakistani refugees (Warchat. org, online, 2008).

Relatively few refugees resulted from anti-colonial wars. This was because in most of these wars, the indigenous population chose to fight not flee. Also, the colonial masters restricted violence by limiting the use of their military might (Weiner, 1996). According to Weiner, in the 1960s and 1970s, French and Portuguese colonies in Africa witnessed refugee flows from anti-colonial wars. However by the early 1980s, Namibia and the contested region of Western Sahara were the only remaining sources of refugees resulting from anti-colonial wars.

Refugees generated by interstate and anti-colonial wars represented 21 percent of the total number of refugees in 1969, 67.7 percent in 1982, and 45.7 percent in 1992. Arab-Israeli conflicts no longer produce new refugees, and the conflict between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan metamorphosed into an internal conflict in Afghanistan after the Soviet Union withdrew in 1989 (Weiner, 1996).

Foreign Intervention

The Cold War that preceded the early 1990s witnessed the Soviet Union and the United States providing ideological, political, economic, and military aid to those who presided over governments or who opposed governments. This often instigated proxy wars, insurrections, and armed resistances (Keely, 1996; Schmeidl, online, 1997). According to Schmeidl, while internal conflicts prevailed between governments and insurgency groups over the distribution of political power and state resources, foreign governments frequently used

them as pawns in the game of political camaraderie. This provided the environment for severe human rights violations. As a result, refugee situations were exacerbated in El Salvador, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Horn of Africa, Nicaragua, and Angola (Keely, 1996).

The clash of democratic American political ideology in South Vietnam and that of Communist Soviet Union in North Vietnam led to the Vietnam War that produced a massive refugee exodus following the fall of the Saigon regime in 1975. The hundreds of thousands, who ventured across the perilous South East Asian seas, became known as the boat people (UNHCR, 1993; historylearningsite. co. uk, 2000-2010). Table 2 below shows the cumulative arrival of Vietnamese Boat People in East and South East Asia between 1976 and 1992.

Table Cumulative Arrival of Vietnamese Boat People in East and Southeast Asia between 1976 and 1992 (UNHCR, 1993)

Hong Kong

Indonesia

Japan

Macau

Malaysia

Philippines

Rep. of Korea

Singapore

Thailand

Others

191, 950

112, 584

10, 295

7, 144

254, 467

51, 660

1, 348

32, 288

116, 883

4, 304

[http://bp1. blogger.](http://bp1.blogger.com/_L6pDyjqqsvY/Rs-n3ANI6HI/AAAAAAAAAGzI/CHEpnV_efMU/s400/boat+people.jpg)

[com/_L6pDyjqqsvY/Rs-n3ANI6HI/AAAAAAAAAGzI/CHEpnV_efMU/s400/boat+people. jpg](http://bp1.blogger.com/_L6pDyjqqsvY/Rs-n3ANI6HI/AAAAAAAAAGzI/CHEpnV_efMU/s400/boat+people.jpg)

Figure 1 Journey of the Vietnamese Boat People (Gateway Pundit, 2007)

Ethnic Wars

Ethnic Tensions

According to Keely (1996), the philosophy of a politically organised nation-state provides for opposing features e. g. religion, ethnicity, ideology, etc, each theoretically having a potential of producing a new state. However, a new state may create instability and dislocation, thus this is resisted by already existing states. Ideally, governments try to implement policies of national integration or nation-building. Here, multi-ethnic states confront the difficulty of harmonizing these policies with their political veracities (Keely, 1996). This creates tension. Thus, according to UNHCR (1993) refugee flows have been largely due to conflicts within states rather than between states.

Keely (1996) comments that one way in which a state tries to implement national integration is by adopting the identity of one of the dominant groups and other groups are required to adapt to the dominant culture. In such cases it is expected that power, land, jobs, and other social benefits would be distributed equally among the groups. However, there have been cases where the ruling dominant group has not been willing to integrate other groups structurally, especially minority groups (Keely, 1996). In many of such cases, this has promoted oppressive and suppressive conditions for the outcast ethnic groups. The ethnic tensions created become prone to political abuse by factions seeking to raise support.

According to UNHCR (1993), where ethnic groups are not properly represented in political institutions and there is lack of an independent judiciary, fair law enforcement or credible free elections, people may be persuaded that an armed resistance is necessarily the only way to achieve

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meaningful change. In the resulting conflict and consequent refugee outflow, politics and ethnic tensions can be seen as root causes. Ethnic conflicts may result in refugee flow either where ethnic groups that are territorial based are fighting against the central government for self determination or where territorial dispersed ethnic groups are being persecuted by another group or by the central government (Weiner, 1996).

In some cases, some minority groups may be perceived as impediments to nation-building, unable to blend into a single national identity. Here 'ethnic cleansing' becomes a solution to national integration (UNHCR, 1993; Keely, 1996). According to Keely, this may be achieved through mass population transfer as in the case of Greece and Turkey after the First World War and the case of India and Pakistan after they were divided. In the case of more violent ethnic cleansing, forced expulsion is employed as in Yugoslavia where ethno-national wars erupted from 1991 to 1995. This resulted in a massive flow of refugees. See figure 2 below.

Refugees and displaced people from the former Yugoslavia since 1991
(map/graphic/illustration)

Figure 2 Refugees and Displaced People from Former Yugoslavia since 1991
(UNEP/GRID-Arendal, online, 2008)

Figure 3 Bones of massacred Tutsis (obtained from PPU, online, 2010) Another kind of ethnic cleansing involves genocide. In 1993 political tensions in Rwanda witnessed the majority Hutu tribe fiercely opposed to any Tutsi involvement in government (Peace Pledge Union, online, 2010). In 1994, the Hutus accused the Tutsis of killing the Rwandan Hutu President
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after the President's plane was shot down. This triggered a campaign of genocide against the Tutsis. Moderate Hutus who were not anti-Tutsi were also targeted. By the time the tragedy was over, at least 1 million people had been butchered. Over 2 million Hutus fled over the borders for fear of reprisals - a 'well-founded fear'. It is estimated that at least 1 million of them sought refuge in neighbouring Zaire - now the Democratic Republic of Congo (BBC News, online, 2008; PPU, online, 2010). In 1996, the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimated that about 63, 000 refugees (mainly Tutsis) moved to northern Burundi, 170, 000 Hutu refugees migrated to Burundi, while about 500, 000 refugees fled to Tanzania (CDC, online, 1996). http://www.ppu.org.uk/genocide/xgenopicts/rwanda_bones150.jpg

Ethnic resistances may also take the form of a revolution or an ethno-national war for independence. Ethno-national wars for independence have been a major cause of refugee movement and dominated the decade after the end of the cold war. In 1970, when West Pakistan failed to accept the clamour for self-determination by East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), this led to secessionist demands by East Pakistan in 1971 (GlobalSecurity.org, online, 2000-2010). The agitation for independence by East Pakistan stemmed from growing political opposition to the then autocratic government. This was made worse by the government's neglect of its relief responsibilities when catastrophic floods struck East Pakistan (Gendercide Watch, online, 199-2002). The resulting ethno-national war provoked an exodus of an estimated 10 million refugees who sought refuge in west Bengal in India (GlobalSecurity.org, online, 2000-2010).

Economic Causes

Ethnic tensions can be exacerbated by severe economic decline or poverty. The genocide in Rwanda originated from economic friction due to the demand for land. This subsequently degenerated into political tension that led to conflict. When a dominant ethnic group tries to advance its economic standing over the other national groups, bitter politically explosive disputes over the allotting of resources erupt. Minority groups are often turned into scapegoats by governments trying to avoid blame for the economic decline (UNHCR, 1993). Weaker states are very susceptible to internal violence especially where states lack credible means of peaceful resolution of conflicts or proper means of seeking redress where rights have been violated (UNHCR, 1993). Countries in such conditions are havens for armed resistance and hence violent conflicts. In some cases, the central government become so economically weak that it virtually ceases to exist and lacks the capacity to protect its people (Weiner, 1996).

Keely (1996), refers to this situation as 'state implosion'. Most Third World countries are relatively young and are being run under economic, political, and administrative structures which to a great degree, were imposed on them by colonial masters. According to Keely, state implosion incorporates the absence of an established government in charge of state affairs, lack of an educational system and health care facilities, lack of basic social amenities, improper and archaic economic organization, and a worthless monetary system. This is characteristic of many third world countries and is often due to decolonization. Anarchy prevails, with many groups including the state, fighting for control of the spoils while the people and state lack

any form of national security as in the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, and Liberia.

In countries like these, commercial greed in addition to economic imperatives combined with political and social disputes are all exploited and manipulated by warlords, business men, and politicians from inside and outside these countries. Forced labour is employed and populations become forcibly displaced (UNHCR, 2006). In barely sustained economies, wars obstruct the production, supply and distribution of food resulting in famine and disease that pose more threats to the people than the war itself. This was the situation in Sudan during its civil war. Many of the estimated 60, 000 people that died either starved or gave in to diseases. The conflict further damages the already fragile economy leading to an exacerbated refugee crisis.

Human Rights Violation

There are cases where the central government is so powerful that it results in oppression and human rights violations. This is usually the case with autocratic and revolutionary governments. According to Schmeidl (online, 1997), many authors like Smyser (1987), Ferris (1987), Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo (1989) concede to the 1951 Refugee Convention's conclusions that unsatisfactory reports of human rights abuses from oppressive regimes is a significant cause of refugee outflow. Some of the largest refugee flows have been from autocratic and revolutionary regimes. This was the case after World War II in China after the Communist revolution, Cuba after Fidel Castro's revolution, and Iran after Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic revolution. In Spain, Greece, Portugal and several Central and Latin American countries,

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people fled the coming to power of repressive right-wing regimes (Weiner, 1996).

The Communist Khmer Rouge rule over Cambodia from 1975 to 1979 witnessed one of the most horrendous periods of brutality after the Second World War. The cyclone of abominable crimes involved large scale torture and murder of political opponents and ethnic minorities, forceful expulsion of huge populations, and subjecting much of the populace to overextended labour in agricultural fields. This left over 1.5 million people dead out of the state's population of 7.3 million people (Ratner, Abrams & Bischoff, 2009). As of 1969, there were 4,252,000 refugees fleeing from authoritarian and revolutionary regimes. However, this had dropped significantly to 132,000 by 1992 (Weiner, 1996) after the collapse of the Soviet Union and other Communist regimes in Eastern Europe.

Environmental Causes

According to UNHCR (1993), there is an obvious relationship between environmental deterioration and refugee flow. The decline of the natural resource foundation, in addition to population statistical pressure and constant poverty can result in or worsen ethnic, political, social and economic tensions. The UNHCR (1993) observed that the parts of the African continent that are most affected by soil erosion, drought and other environmental problems are the main hosts of armed conflicts, chronic famine and therefore refugee flows. According to UNHCR (1993), in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, the synthesis of rapidly increasing residents, drought and the contention between nomads and settled farmers exploded into violence along many fronts. In the Senegal River basin, disagreements over

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irrigable land added to the migration of thousands of people from Senegal and Mauritania across their shared border in both directions (UNHCR, 1993). Also, in 1992 the effects of drought during the civil war in Mozambique severely exacerbated the effects of the war on the civilians that in one year, 100, 000 of them fled to neighbouring Malawi (UNHCR, 1993).

Conclusion

A refugee is someone who has fled his/her country because of a justifiable fear of persecution due to religion, nationality, race, member of a particular social group or political opinion and cannot or does not want to return to his/her country because of that fear. Refugees face humanitarian problems, burden the economies of host countries, and pose security risks to the international community. This makes it important to determine and understand the causes of refuge flows. A war is usually the direct instigation of such a fear and subsequent flight. This war may be within or between states. However, such a conflict may have underlying causes that may have resulted from tensions from a complex interplay of pressures from political, ethnic, and economic disputes. Environmental degradation is also one of the interactive factors that exacerbate refugee flows.

While some governments lack the capacity to provide security for their minority groups from aggression from dominant groups, others governments are involved in gross human rights violations of its own people; either social classes or ethnic minorities and political dissidents.

Cases exist where secessionist groups or armed factions seeking to possess political power violently attack sitting governments. Also, populations

seeking independence from their colonial masters resort to armed conflict. In many of these conflict situations, the involvement of other foreign countries that have provided ideological, political, economic, and military aid has either been directly responsible for the conflict or has exacerbated the conflict and consequently generated or exacerbated refugee flows.

Environmental degradation like desertification and soil erosion resulting in drought and farming or in disputes over scarce irrigable land has also contributed to economic, political and ethnic tensions which in turn have resulted in many violent conflicts and thus the generation of refugee flows.