

Asia

Some 2.7 million people were estimated to be internally displaced by violence and human rights abuses in Asia at the end of 2005, many of them trapped in long-lasting conflicts with few prospects for political solutions that would allow for their sustainable return and reintegration. The most notable exception in 2005 was the peace deal to end the conflict in Aceh (Indonesia) which could eventually pave the way for the return of large numbers of IDPs. More than 300,000 people are estimated to have been newly displaced during the year, most of them in the Philippines and Burma, but also in Nepal and India. Return movements were observed in the Philippines and – on a smaller scale – in a number of other countries of the region, although return conditions generally were not conducive to durable reintegration, mainly due to continued insecurity and lack of infrastructure and social services. Overall, the decrease of the total number of people internally displaced by conflicts in the region – a trend observed since 2001 – continued during 2005. In comparison, the number of refugees originating from Asia stood at 3.1 million.

In most of the 11 Asian countries monitored by the IDMC, armed conflicts between governments and rebel movements fighting for autonomy or control of the state remained the primary cause of displacement. Competition over land and resources and the exclusion and marginalisation of ethnic or religious minorities from the economic development process are at the heart of many of the conflicts of the region. Burma remained the worst internal displacement crisis in Asia, with at least 540,000 IDPs trying to survive virtually without external assistance or protection. Large-scale displacement accompanied by human rights violations also occurred in Nepal, the Philippines and India. The IDP situations in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Uzbekistan remained largely unchanged with little or no displacement, but also few if any returns.

Conflict-induced displacement in Asia is dwarfed by the magnitude of forced population movements caused by development projects and natural disasters, including the October 2005 south Asia earthquake affecting millions of people, and the Indian Ocean tsunami, which displaced 1.8 million people in Asia alone.

Conflict patterns and main causes of displacement

During the last decades, Asia has been the scene of a multitude of armed conflicts, ranging from interstate war and sectarian and ethnic conflict to guerrilla warfare and organised crime. These conflicts nevertheless share some common patterns that can be traced back to a common colonial legacy and incomplete state-building processes, which have created nations often characterised by a weak civil society and profound social and economic inequalities, where ethnic and indigenous minorities have been politically, socially and economically marginalised.

While economic development has been followed by improved living standards and increased levels of democratisation in several countries of the region in the last two decades, the exclusion of social and ethnic minorities from the economic and political development process has also led to sharpening perceptions of inequality and injustice. Compounded by the rapid

economic, social, and demographic transformation taking place in the region over the last decades and by increased competition over land and resources, many of the tensions have led to horizontal or vertical conflicts between rival ethnic or religious groups or between the state and rebel groups fighting for autonomy or control of the state. In Nepal, for example, the Maoist rebels have managed to capitalise on the frustration of a rural population completely left behind in a development process from which only a small elite has benefited.

The forced assimilation of minorities and relocation policies involving large population movements have often directly caused displacement or have planted the seeds of future conflicts. State-run relocation programmes after the Second World War in Indonesia, Bangladesh (Chittagong Hill Tracts) and the Philippines (Mindanao), aimed at increasing control over territory,

A woman at Chaman Babrak, a settlement for IDPs in North Kabul. Since the end of the Taliban regime, many returning refugees found their homes destroyed, forcing them to live in small settlement camps. (Photo: Lana Slezić)



have all directly contributed to creating demographic and socio-economic changes heightening ethnic and religious tensions. In north-eastern India, migrant influxes and land disputes have led to the emergence of militant groups fighting for autonomy. Yet another example is Turkmenistan, where relocation decrees resulted in the forced displacement of political dissidents and ethnic minorities. Furthermore, in some cases, the political predominance and economic success of state-sponsored migrants have led to stigmatisation by the local population and open conflicts leading to displacement.

In most countries affected by internal displacement, people have above all fled fighting between governments and rebel movements struggling for autonomy or secession from a central state perceived as exploitative and unwilling to take the interests of their region or ethnic group into account. This has been the case in Burma, Sri Lanka, Indonesia (Aceh, Papua), Indian-administered Kashmir, Bangladesh and the Philippines (southern island of Mindanao). In some cases, such as in Burma, the Philippines or Indonesia, government armies have been the main displacement agents as they try to weaken the resource base of insurgents. The US-led “war on terror” has in some cases further exacerbated existing conflicts as it has been used by

governments as a justification to step up military operations against rebel groups labelled as terrorists. Operations carried out with reference to the “war on terror” led to new displacement in Pakistan and the Philippines.

Some IDPs have been victims of repeated displacement because they live near rebel strongholds where fighting regularly takes place. The continued presence of armed groups near their homes is both an obstacle to return and a major element of uncertainty for those who have decided to do so and have tried to re-establish a livelihood. This is the fate of many people living in the Muslim-populated areas of Mindanao where fighting between the government and separatist rebels has displaced nearly one million people in 2000 and 400,000 three years later. Some communities have been affected twice, with their houses and livelihood yet again destroyed by the fighting.

In Asia, millions more are displaced due to development projects that have been initiated to meet increased demands for energy resources and water. There are cases where dam-building and other infrastructure projects have ousted entire villages without respect for the rights of the inhabitants and often with only partial or no compensation. The main victims of

Displaced women and their children in makeshift shelters at Kirin Khola IDP camp in Nepal. (Photo: Tomas van Houtryve)



such projects are the poor, indigenous and marginalised groups.

Natural disasters are a major cause of displacement in Asia as well. The Indian Ocean tsunami which hit several Asian countries in December 2004 displaced 1.8 million people, and the south Asia earthquake in October 2005 affected millions in Pakistan, India and Afghanistan, displacing an unknown number of people. In addition, millions of people lose their homes every year to floods, especially in south Asia.

New displacement in 2005

The Philippines was the country with the largest number of people newly displaced during 2005. Altogether more than 160,000 people were forced to flee their homes because of fighting between government forces and various rebel groups in Mindanao. Many of the newly displaced returned to their homes soon after fighting abated, but there were still some 60,000 IDPs in Mindanao at year's end. Most people were displaced in February when government forces launched a massive attack on Muslim rebel positions on the island of Sulu, stronghold of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). The clashes lasted for several weeks and displaced more than 85,000 people. Armed encounters with other Muslim rebel groups such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Movement (MILF) – the largest

rebel group of the country – and the communist NPA also caused new displacement during the year, mainly in the Muslim-populated areas of Mindanao. However, despite such incidents, the ceasefire agreed upon between the government and the MILF in July 2003 continued to hold relatively well during the year with both sides confident of reaching a final peace agreement in 2006.

In Burma, the military government's objective of increasing control over minority areas through a policy of forced assimilation and repression of autonomy movements has resulted in decades of conflict that has displaced and devastated the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians. At least 540,000 people were internally displaced as of October 2005, either in hiding or in relocation sites, including some 87,000 people newly displaced due to conflict or human rights abuses between May 2004 and May 2005 alone. Relations between ethnic groups and the government generally deteriorated following the ousting in October 2004 of the reformist Prime Minister Khin Nyunt by hardline factions within the army. This presaged an increase in raids against ethnic groups along the border with Thailand, as well as the western border with Bangladesh.

The human rights situation in Nepal continued to markedly deteriorate during 2005, with both the government and the Maoist rebels stepping up their

military activities and committing widespread abuses against civilians. In February 2005, King Gyanendra seized total control of the state's institutions and declared a state of emergency, suspending all civil liberties and intensifying the war with the Maoist rebels. Although the state of emergency was lifted a few months later, many restrictions remained in place. The hard-line approach pursued during 2005 to deal with the insurgency and the subsequent deterioration of the situation is likely to have led to an increase of the rural exodus towards the main cities and to India. In April 2005, some 30,000 people fled their homes in the southern district of Kapilvastu following violence caused by government-supported vigilante groups. A temporary ceasefire, unilaterally declared by the rebels in September, helped to reduce the level of violence, but both sides continued to commit human rights violations, including abductions and killings of civilians. In the first days of 2006, with no sign that the government would reciprocate the truce, the rebels announced the end of the ceasefire and the full-scale resumption of their armed struggle against the monarchy.

In north-east India, conflicts over homeland and skirmishes between ethnic rebel groups continued to displace people during 2005, especially in the states of Assam and Manipur. In Assam, at least 40,000 people were displaced during November and December 2005 due to fighting between the Karbi and Dimasas tribes.

Little information is available on the situation of the displaced in Papua, but it is believed that counter-insurgency military operations initiated at the end of 2004 in the central highlands have continued during 2005. Thousands of Papuans have reportedly been forced to seek refuge in the jungle with no access to food or basic services¹¹³. A UNDP mission concluded in August 2005 that widening social disparities and growing tensions between the local population and settlers had increased the potential for conflict in the region¹¹⁴.

Human rights and humanitarian needs

In general, IDPs across the continent receive inadequate assistance and live without any established or predictable source of support.

In Sri Lanka, many IDPs live in over-crowded and under-funded "welfare centres" in the north and east of the country. Surveys have concluded that displaced people in "welfare centres" face serious psycho-social problems such as high rates of suicide, dependency attitudes, loss of self-esteem, alcoholism and depression.

Also, displaced people still face safety risks although violence has generally subsided since the 2002 ceasefire. Security concerns affecting internally displaced people included extra-judicial killings, arbitrary detentions and harassment by soldiers at checkpoints. Sri Lanka was already hosting some 360,000 IDPs prior to the Indian Ocean tsunami, which killed some 30,000 people in the country and displaced over half a million. While most tsunami victims received adequate help, relief organisations did not have access to a large number of IDPs in the Vanni region, which is controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels; many IDPs there were also affected by the tsunami. An aid-sharing deal between the Colombo government and the LTTE, which would have enabled aid money to reach the Vanni, fell through due to heightened political tensions. The UN and aid organisations repeatedly criticised the fact that tsunami victims had easier access to aid than conflict victims. With tensions increasing at the end of 2005, an early resolution of the aid issue and finding durable solutions for Sri Lanka's IDPs seemed unlikely.

The humanitarian needs of the displaced were generally accompanied by protection concerns. In some countries, governments provided little if any protection to the displaced and were sometimes themselves the perpetrators of human rights violations. Where this was the case, such as in Burma or in Papua, IDPs were forced to seek refuge in the jungle where they remained without any access to basic services or to food for extended periods of time.

In Burma, an estimated 92,000 internally displaced are hiding in the forests where living conditions are extremely harsh. Many displaced do not receive any external assistance and are deprived of all basic services. They are exposed to hunger, inadequate shelter and lack of medical services. However, the internally displaced and other conflict-affected populations have also developed a range of coping strategies. A survey by the Thailand Burma Border Consortium found that IDPs have developed early-warning systems, threat management practices, child protection measures and strategies for avoiding landmines¹¹⁵.

The conflict between Maoist rebels and the government in Nepal, which has seen more than 12,000 people killed and hundreds of thousands displaced, has had a particularly negative impact on children. Fear of being forcibly recruited into Maoist forces or sent to "political education" classes have prompted many parents to send their children away to safer areas, mainly to the major cities and to neighbouring India. Forced

to work to survive in urban areas, many of these children do so in exploitative conditions and are reportedly exposed to high risks of sexual violence. It is estimated that some 40,000 children have been internally displaced in the past 10 years, with 10,000 to 15,000 only in 2005. In July 2005, a report by Save the Children estimated that the number of children who flee to India every year could reach 70,000¹¹⁶.

In India, reports from relief camps for IDPs in Assam and Tripura have documented that the displaced face hunger and lack educational and medical facilities.

Slow return due to protracted conflicts

While major repatriation operations were launched in 2002 in the three countries most affected by displacement in Asia in recent years – Afghanistan, Indonesia and Sri Lanka – return during 2005 has been slow. This has been a trend since mid-2003. The reasons are manifold, but slow reconstruction, unresolved land and property disputes, volatile security situations and lack of assistance and self-reliance opportunities are the main reasons why return has not moved forward as hoped.

In Afghanistan, fewer than 8,000 IDPs returned during 2005, as compared to some 20,000 in 2004, 70,000 in 2003 and 400,000 during 2002. Many of those who returned in 2002 and 2003, including returning refugees, did not manage to re-integrate successfully. In the light of reduced humanitarian and reconstruction operations since 2003 and throughout 2005, the sustainability of the return movements of IDPs and refugees remains questionable. Apart from insecurity and a lack of economic opportunities, the main problems faced by returnees and displaced people were issues related to land and property. An estimated 153,000 people remained displaced in Afghanistan, with the largest concentration in the south of the country near Kandahar. While violent attacks were on the increase in the south and east, successful parliamentary elections in September 2005 and a gradual improvement of the security situation in many parts of the country have raised hopes for renewed donor commitment.

Return movements remained also very limited in Sri Lanka during 2005 due to ongoing tension between government forces and the LTTE in the north and east. Generous aid distribution to tsunami victims has

caused widespread concerns about insufficient aid provided for the equally needy people displaced by the conflict. Some 380,000 people have returned in 2002 and 2003, albeit often not in safety and dignity. Apart from landmines, returning IDPs face safety threats, property dispossession, landlessness and a lack of basic infrastructure and basic services. A political solution to the conflict is a prerequisite for renewed international reconstruction engagement and the dignified return of the remaining 350,000 IDPs.

With the exception of Papua, Indonesia is now largely in a post-conflict recovery phase with no new significant displacement recorded during 2005. Although there are officially no IDPs left in the country since the government's re-classification of the remaining displaced people as "vulnerable" in January 2004, tens of thousands of people, mainly in Maluku province and Central Sulawesi, were reportedly still waiting for a government termination or empowerment grant in 2005. Return to Central Kalimantan was still reported as problematic for Madurese IDPs living in East Java, mainly because of the continued hostility of the local population, while the situation appeared more hopeful for the Javanese displaced from Aceh to North Sumatra. While bringing death and destruction in its wake, the tsunami also paradoxically contributed to ending Aceh's longstanding armed conflict. A peace deal was struck between the GAM rebels and the Indonesian government in August 2005, and in December the rebels officially put an end to their 30-year-long struggle.

In the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, the internally displaced from the civil war that ended in 1997 continue to await a solution to continuing land disputes. In December 2005, the IDMC undertook a fact finding mission in Bangladesh. One of the conclusions from the mission is that the risk of internal displacement in the country is rising as minorities face increased persecution and continue to lack protection from the authorities.

In Indian-administered Kashmir, violence and sabotage acts by separatist militants continue to hamper the return of the between 250,000 and 350,000 displaced Kashmiri Pandits who have fled the Kashmir Valley since 1989 due to persecution, killings and massacres. In Pakistani-administered Kashmir, the conflict-affected population is believed to have returned to their villages after the ceasefire between the two



A displaced Afghan family sits around a fire in a destroyed building in Kabul, Afghanistan. (Photo: Reuters/Ahmad Masood, courtesy www.alertnet.org)

countries. It was unclear at the time of writing to what extent the earthquake of October 2005 affected their reintegration.

National and international response

The response provided by national authorities to the crisis of internal displacement in the Asia-Pacific region continued to vary greatly from one country to another. While a number of Asian governments view internal displacement caused by conflict as a strictly internal problem, others have requested external aid to assist the internally displaced population.

The governments of Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Indonesia and the Philippines have all collaborated with the international aid community to provide assistance to the internally displaced in their respective countries. This cooperation with the international community has generally been accompanied by the formulation of IDP strategies to assist in the protection and assistance given to the displaced and their return to their homes. In a positive development during 2005, Nepal, which so far had provided a very limited and discriminatory assistance to its displaced population, made steps to

improve its response. Towards the end of the year, the government initiated the drafting of an IDP policy.

In Sri Lanka, the international community, with UNHCR as UN lead agency for internal displacement, engaged actively in dialogue and coordination with the government. However, widespread coordination problems and the fact that the government and the LTTE could not reach an agreement with regard to tackling the protracted IDP situation impeded the return process. These problems must also be seen in the context of an increasingly radicalised Sri Lankan government and rising political instability. The allocation of unspent tsunami-funds to conflict IDPs will remain an issue during 2006.

During 2005, the Afghan government continued to collaborate with the UN in an effort to implement the national IDP plan adopted in April 2004, which aims at promoting the return and reintegration of IDPs by 2007. The plan envisages the reintegration of the displaced through area-based development plans benefiting the displaced as well as the host communities. National and local authorities were expected to take over from international agencies the full responsibility for the displaced by the end of 2006.

In some cases, national governments denied all humanitarian access to internally displaced populations which means that very little is known about the actual displacement situation. This has been the case in South Waziristan, Pakistan, where both media and humanitarian actors have been barred from documenting the human suffering caused by security operations by Pakistani troops against Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters believed to be hiding in the region. In Papua, travel bans imposed by the military to some areas affected by displacement have restricted the conducting of needs assessments and reportedly prevented humanitarian assistance from reaching the IDPs.

Despite increasing international pressure, the government of Burma continued to deny any involvement in forced displacement and remained unwilling to accept any external assistance for the displaced. In December 2005, UN Security Council members received a closed door briefing on the situation in Burma and several Western governments, among others the US, are pushing for continued UN scrutiny. The leading regional organisation, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), also confronted the military junta by demanding the release of detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners and steps to "expedite" the restoration of democracy.

IDPs in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan remained largely ignored by the international community. Partly due to government travel restrictions in both countries and due to the highly politicised context that encompasses much of Central Asia, international agencies operating in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have been unable to assess the protection and assistance needs of IDPs. As the governments were the sole agent of displacement in both contexts, international agencies fear that raising sensitive political and human rights issues with relevant national authorities could endanger their programmes or even their presence in the two countries.

Contrary to European, African or American regional organisations which have endorsed or acknowledged the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, none of Asia's regional organisations have done so. In general, Asian regional organisations do not intervene or engage in mediation in internal conflict situations, even faced with situations which could create region-wide instability such as the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, the Muslim insurgency in southern Thailand, the recent political violence in Uzbekistan, Islamic rebel violence in the southern Philippines and instabilities in Indo-

nesia caused by Islamist and separatist movements. However, ASEAN's decision in December 2005 to send a ministerial delegation to Burma to assess the political and human rights situation may indicate a shift in the organisation's policy.

The United Nations plays an essential role in helping many Asian governments assist their displaced populations. In countries where it has had a strong involvement over the past years, such as Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and to a lesser extent the Philippines, the UN continued during 2005 to provide material and technical support while also, where possible, starting to slowly hand over responsibilities of some rehabilitation and recovery programmes to national or local authorities.

While the UN did not address internal displacement situations in countries with governments opposed to external involvement in their IDP crises, including in India, Burma and Uzbekistan, it stepped up its response elsewhere in the region. In Aceh and Sri Lanka, the massive humanitarian operations launched in the wake of the tsunami also benefited people displaced by conflict, despite clear inequities in aid distribution between tsunami and conflict IDPs in both countries. In response to the deterioration of the humanitarian and human rights situation in Nepal, the UN reinforced its presence in the country during the year and, in October, launched Nepal's first Consolidated Appeal.