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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Internally Displaced Persons Lack Effective Protection

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United States General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

August 17, 2001

The Honorable Joseph Biden
Chairman
The Honorable Jesse Helms
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate

Internally displaced persons--those forced to flee their homes because of armed conflict and persecution but who remain within their own country—are among the most at-risk, vulnerable populations in the world. They typically differ from refugees only by the fact that they have not crossed an international border as refugees have. Governments are responsible for protecting and aiding their own citizens; however, some cannot do so or actively persecute groups of their citizens, thus creating a displacement crisis. When this happens, international organizations, such as the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Committee for the Red Cross, acting in response to international humanitarian and human rights law help protect and assist the estimated 20 million internally displaced persons in over 50 countries. The charters of these organizations, and their governing bodies,[1] acknowledge the sovereignty of each state to deal with internally displaced persons as an internal matter but also recognize the obligation of international organizations to help address humanitarian and human rights crises.[2]

[1]The governing bodies of these organizations, comprised of representatives of member states of the organizations, set overall policy and direction. The governing body of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees is its Executive Committee. The Commissioner also reports to the General Assembly annually through the Economic and Social Commission, a U.N. body of member states that promotes humanitarian and social issues and recommends actions. The governing body of the International Committee for the Red Cross is the Assembly of the International Committee of the Red Cross, whose president is also the president of the organization.

[2]For example, the Charter of the United Nations states that one of its purposes is to achieve international cooperation in solving problems of a humanitarian character and to promote and encourage respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. The U.N. Charter, article 2(7), also states that nothing contained in the charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters that are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state. The International Committee of the Red Cross is formally recognized in the 1949 Geneva Conventions, which give it the right to take actions on behalf of civilian populations.

The U.S. government, which spends about $2.5 billion annually in humanitarian aid, provides assistance to the internally displaced, principally through the Department of State (State) and the U.S. Agency for International Development. State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration provides grants to international organizations that work with the internally displaced, while the Agency for International Development's Bureau for Humanitarian Response provides similar grants and also direct assistance. These bureaus, as well as the U.S. Missions to the United Nations in New York, Geneva, and Rome, are responsible for working with the international organizations to ensure U.S. interests are met.

Because of your concerns about human rights violations and other issues related to displaced persons, you asked us to assess (1) whether international organizations' efforts have adequately protected internally displaced persons and what impediments these agencies face, (2) whether international organizations have met the food and other assistance needs of displaced populations, and (3) whether the U.S. government has a coordinated and effectively managed program to help protect and assist internally displaced persons.

To assess the level of protection and assistance international organizations provided to the internally displaced, we surveyed field-level officials from the United Nations, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and nongovernmental organizations that conduct activities in 48 of the more than 50 countries with internally displaced populations. Our survey provided field level views on what international organizations and the U.S. government are doing to provide physical security for the internally displaced and supply them with basic necessities--food, water, and shelter. The criteria we applied in our assessment of these activities was based on standards set forth in the 1998 publication, *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*.[3] We supplemented the survey information with (1) meetings with U.S. government, United Nations, Red Cross Movement, and nongovernmental organization officials at the headquarters, regional, and country levels and (2) case study fieldwork in

[3]The *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, based on international human rights and humanitarian law, have gained international standing and acceptance. They have been referred to by courts in several countries and have been recognized and accepted by various intergovernmental bodies, including the U.N. General Assembly, the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, and the U.N. Economic and Social Council. We also consulted the *Handbook for Applying the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution Project on Internal Displacement, 1999).

Burundi, Colombia, and southern Sudan. Collectively, these countries have 1.5 million to 2.5 million internally displaced persons. (See app. I for a complete description of our scope and methodology.)

Results in Brief

International organizations have been unable to secure effective protection for internally displaced persons as set forth in the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, although they have made some effort to do so. Field-level officials of such organizations in 48 countries who responded to our survey indicated that internally displaced persons are subject to direct physical attack or threat in 90 percent of the countries, forced migration in 58 percent of the countries, and the sexual assault of women in 46 percent of the countries. A primary reason for this situation was that ongoing armed conflicts, or governments themselves, citing sovereign rights of states, prevented the organizations from taking more effective action. However, even within these circumstances, the organizations had undertaken only limited protection measures. For example, although a simple visible presence of international monitors is one of the most effective means to prevent harm to internally displaced persons, international organizations did not provide monitors or assign staff to help provide protection for the internally displaced or the number of staff assigned for this purpose was small. Insufficient resources provided by the international donor community was cited as a factor for these shortfalls. Also, international organizations have been reluctant to challenge governments about their human rights responsibilities, as called for by the *Guiding Principles*, for fear of offending these governments and being asked to depart. International organizations also have not established country-level working groups to coordinate protection activities for the internally displaced among the organizations, nor have they developed practical training about protection issues for officials providing relief assistance.

When international organizations could obtain access to internally displaced populations, they generally met their food and shelter needs during the emergency or flight stage of the displacement. For example, in Burundi, Colombia, and southern Sudan, we observed that international organizations usually delivered sufficient food, health care, shelter, and water to displaced persons to sustain life during the initial stages of displacement. However, as the emergency phase transitioned into longer-term displacement situations, international organizations were less effective in meeting the continuing needs of displaced populations. For example, in Colombia, farmers internally displaced by fighting in the drug-

producing areas were initially provided adequate food and shelter during the first 90 days of their displacement, but when they moved to secondary cities or urban areas, such as Bogota, they received little or no assistance. Furthermore, nonlife-sustaining help such as supplying clothing, education, psychosocial activities for traumatized persons, and employment opportunities generally were not provided or were provided only to a limited extent.

The Department of State does not have an overall policy for addressing the issue of internal displacement, as it has for refugees, nor has a lead office been designated to direct and coordinate overall U.S. action in this area. Some State and U.S. Agency for International Development officials said that this has hampered effective management of programs for the internally displaced because of overlapping mandates and duplication in areas such as analysis, planning, and program delivery. Despite this, we found that officials of each agency were generally aware of each other's activities. We also noted that the State Department's annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* contains limited discussion of internal displacement issues and the human rights abuses that displaced persons suffer. Moreover, the report does not focus on the problem nor does it have a standard definition or format for reporting on the internally displaced that would allow for systematic data gathering and analysis regarding the issues.

This report recommends that the Secretary of State direct the Permanent Representative of the United States to the United Nations to (1) work to advance more proactive policies and programs to protect and assist internally displaced persons and (2) seek the implementation of in-country protection training programs and the formation of country-level protection working groups. We also recommend that the Secretary of State include a focus on internal displacement issues in State's annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*.

The Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the United Nations, and the Red Cross Movement commented on a draft of this report. Each organization generally agreed with our analysis and our recommendations—and State noted they are actively working to address them. State and the United Nations both cited a lack of resources as a reason for some concerns raised in our report, and State also pointed to limited access to displaced populations and physical danger to relief workers as obstacles to greater activism on the part of international organizations. We agree that limited resources and access are significant

impediments to effective protection and assistance programs for internally displaced persons. These are core issues that international organizations cannot resolve without member states' support. Nevertheless, we believe that the steps we suggest in this report to improve the situation for the internally displaced can be taken by international organizations with existing resources. The United Nations and the Red Cross Movement also noted that although the report focuses on those who are displaced due to armed conflict and persecution, others displaced by natural disasters and economic hardship have similar needs.

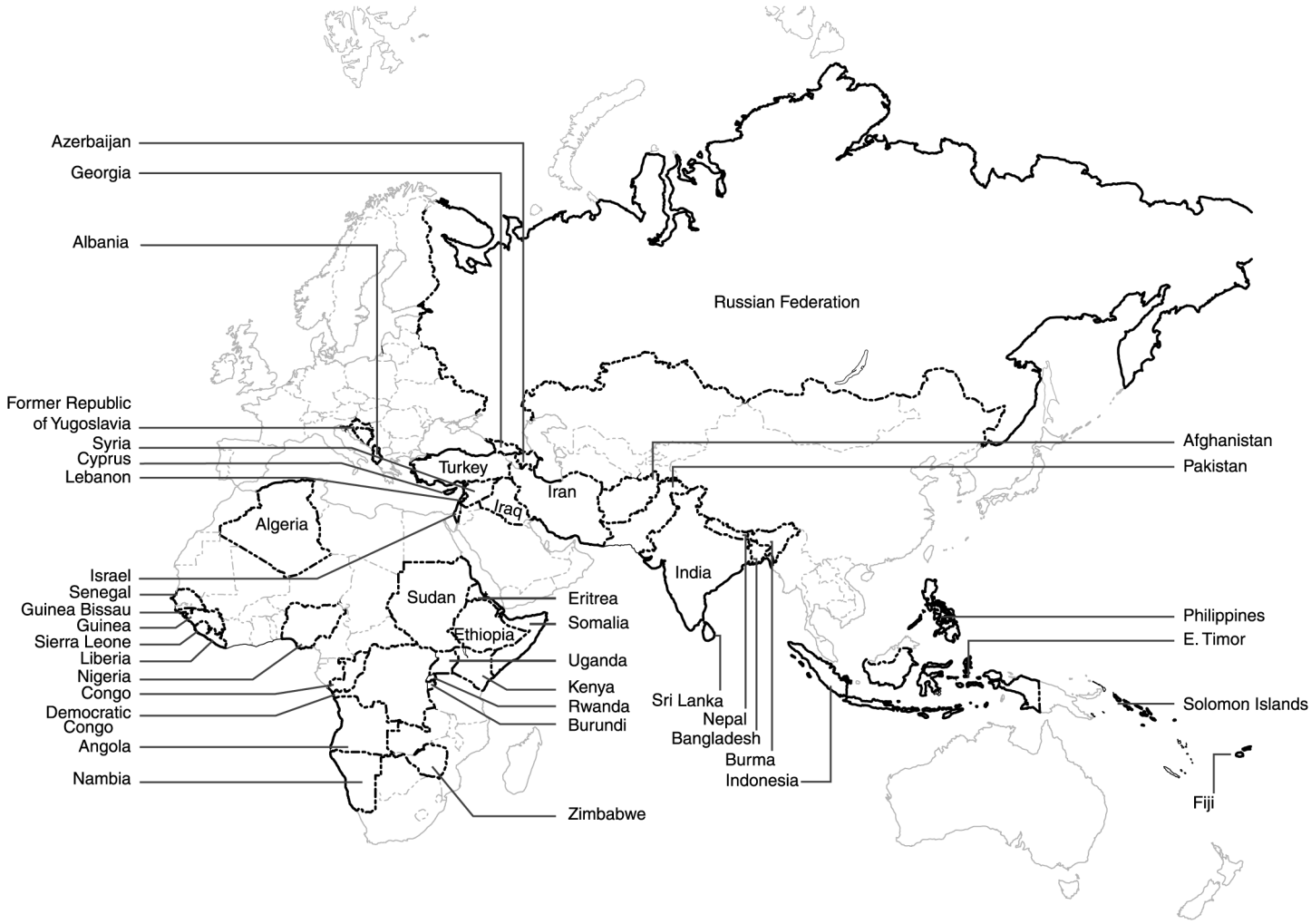
Background

The U.N. Secretary-General's Representative on Internally Displaced Persons estimates that there are 20 million internally displaced persons in the world, scattered across more than 50 countries. (Fig. 1 depicts the countries with internally displaced persons from which we received surveys.) However, lack of access to some of these populations due to insecure environments and governments' assertions of sovereignty prevents international organizations from obtaining accurate accounts of the numbers, locations, or physical conditions of a large percentage of displaced persons. Further complicating the issue of internal displacement is the lack of a universally accepted definition for "internally displaced persons," including criteria for determining when a person no longer should be considered displaced.[4]

[4]The most widely used definition for internally displaced persons is contained in the 1998 *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, which defines them as "persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border."

Figure 1: Map of Countries With Internally Displaced Persons, 2001

Note: Map shows 48 countries with internally displaced persons from which we received surveys.

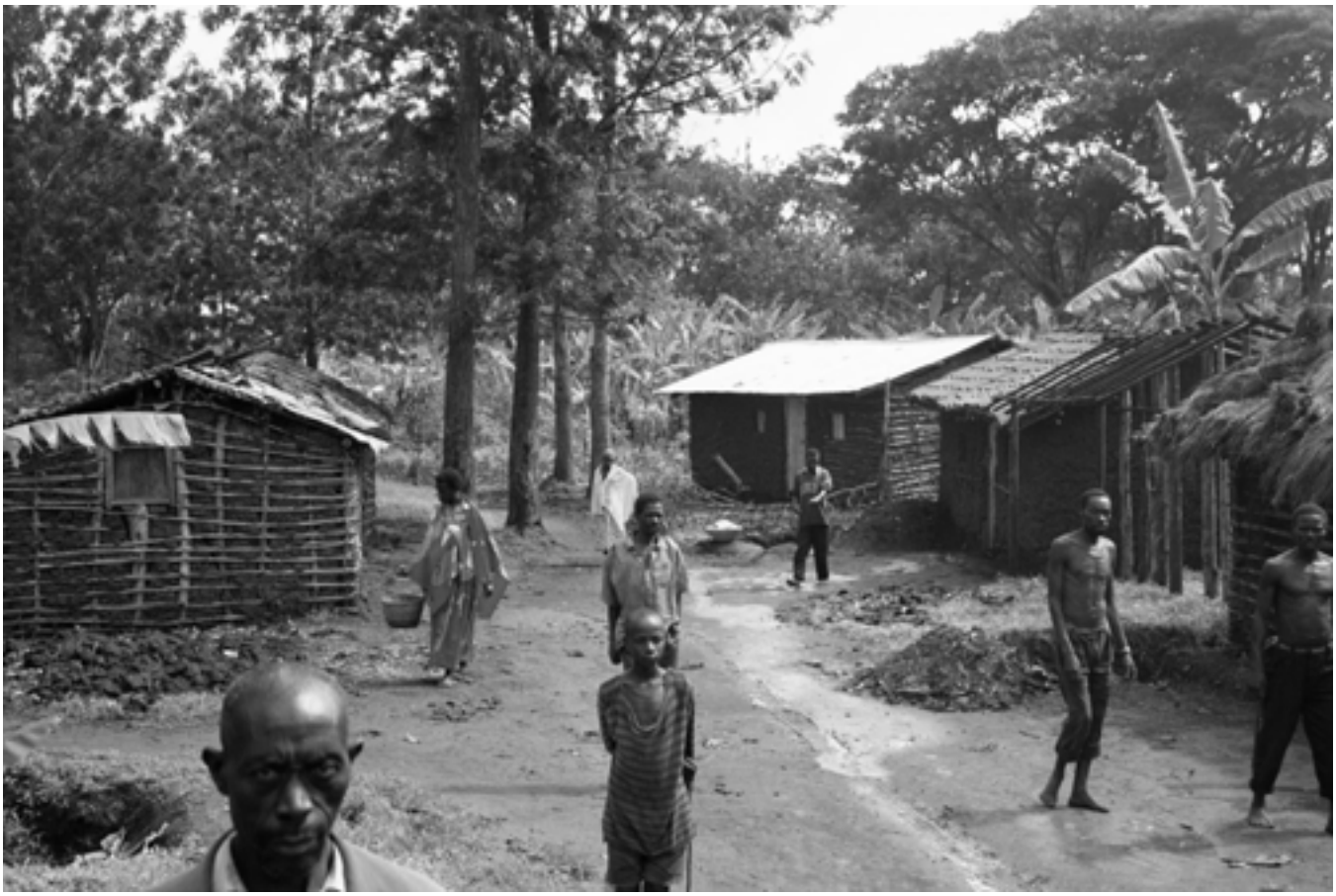


Source: Compiled by GAO from survey responses.

Since the end of the Cold War, the number of internally displaced persons has grown steadily (and now surpasses the number of refugees), as has the international community's awareness of their plight. By all accounts,

internally displaced persons suffer extreme deprivation; are subject to threats to their physical security during flight and while displaced; and are unlikely to have adequate shelter, health care, and the ability to earn a livelihood. Mortality rates among internally displaced populations are much higher than among stable populations, especially among the more vulnerable segments of the populations—children, the elderly, and pregnant women. Women and girls are especially vulnerable to sexual assault, rape, and discrimination in receiving assistance. Psychological and social distress due to violence and the breakdown of family and community structures is endemic in internally displaced populations. (Fig. 2 depicts a community of internally displaced persons in Burundi who are receiving assistance from the U.S. Agency for International Development.)

Figure 2: Community of Internally Displaced Persons in Central Burundi, 2000



Source: GAO.

The plight of the internally displaced generally did not begin to draw the attention of the international community until 1992, when the U.N. Commission for Human Rights requested that the Secretary-General appoint a special representative to study the problems of the internally displaced and devise solutions to improve their situation. Despite a subsequent series of reports, books, briefings, and U.N. resolutions identifying shortcomings in and recommending solutions for the international community's response, little progress was made in addressing the needs of internally displaced persons throughout most of the 1990s. Prompted into action after strong criticism from the U.S. Representative to

the United Nations in early 2000, international organizations began a period of reassessing their policies, programs, and coordinating mechanisms.

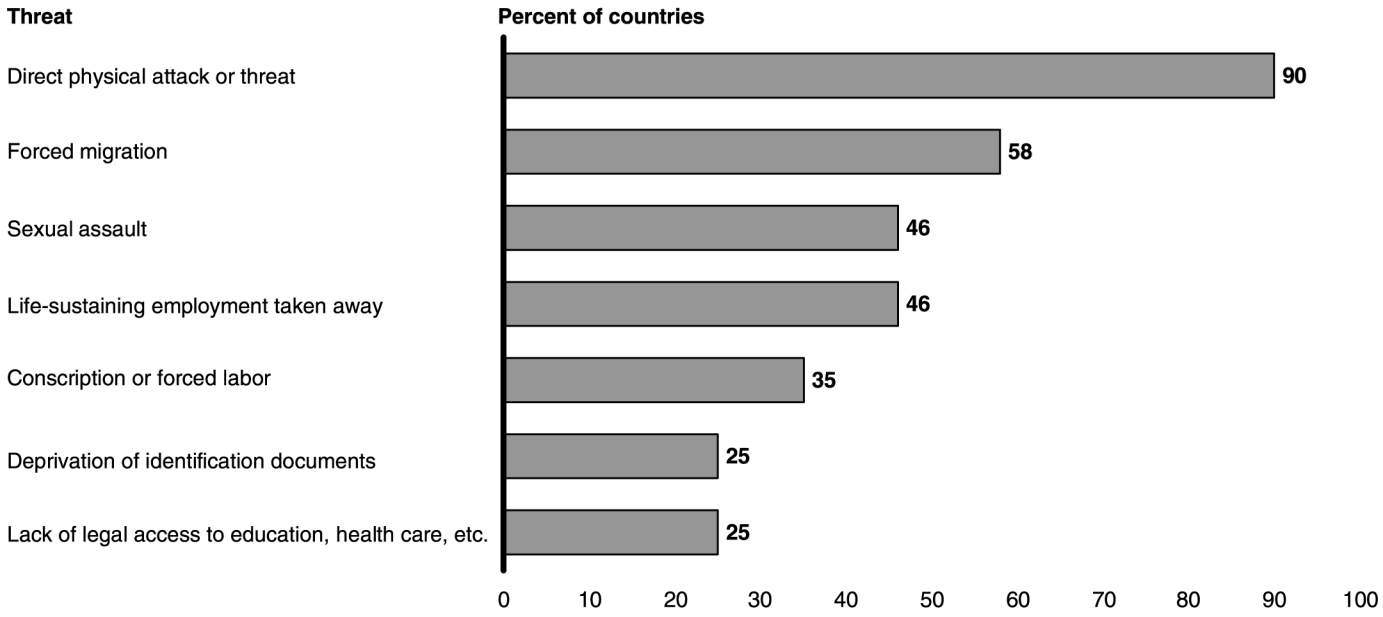
Many Internally Displaced Persons Lack Protection

Field-level officials of international organizations in 48 countries who responded to our survey reported that some modest success had been achieved in extending protection interventions to internally displaced persons. Nonetheless, international organizations' officials also reported that they have not been able to secure adequate protection for internally displaced persons in most countries we surveyed. Several obstacles prevent international organizations from protecting displaced populations, including the limitations of working in active war zones, attacks on and death threats to aid workers, and government assertions of sovereignty that block the organizations' access to displaced persons. While these limitations hamper their work, international organizations often have not taken proactive measures they could have taken to protect internally displaced persons, such as being more assertive on protection matters, implementing training programs on protection issues for relief workers, and establishing country-level coordination mechanisms.

International Organizations Are Unable to Secure Effective Protection for Internally Displaced Persons

International organizations have generally not been able to secure for internally displaced persons the fundamental rights set forth in the *Guiding Principles*. The vulnerability of internally displaced persons is reflected by our survey responses, which indicates they are at risk of direct physical attack in 90 percent of the countries and at risk of forced migration, sexual assault, and conscription or forced labor in many countries. Figure 3 provides data on various types of protection threats faced by internally displaced persons.

Figure 3: Threats to Internally Displaced Persons, 2001



Source: GAO survey.

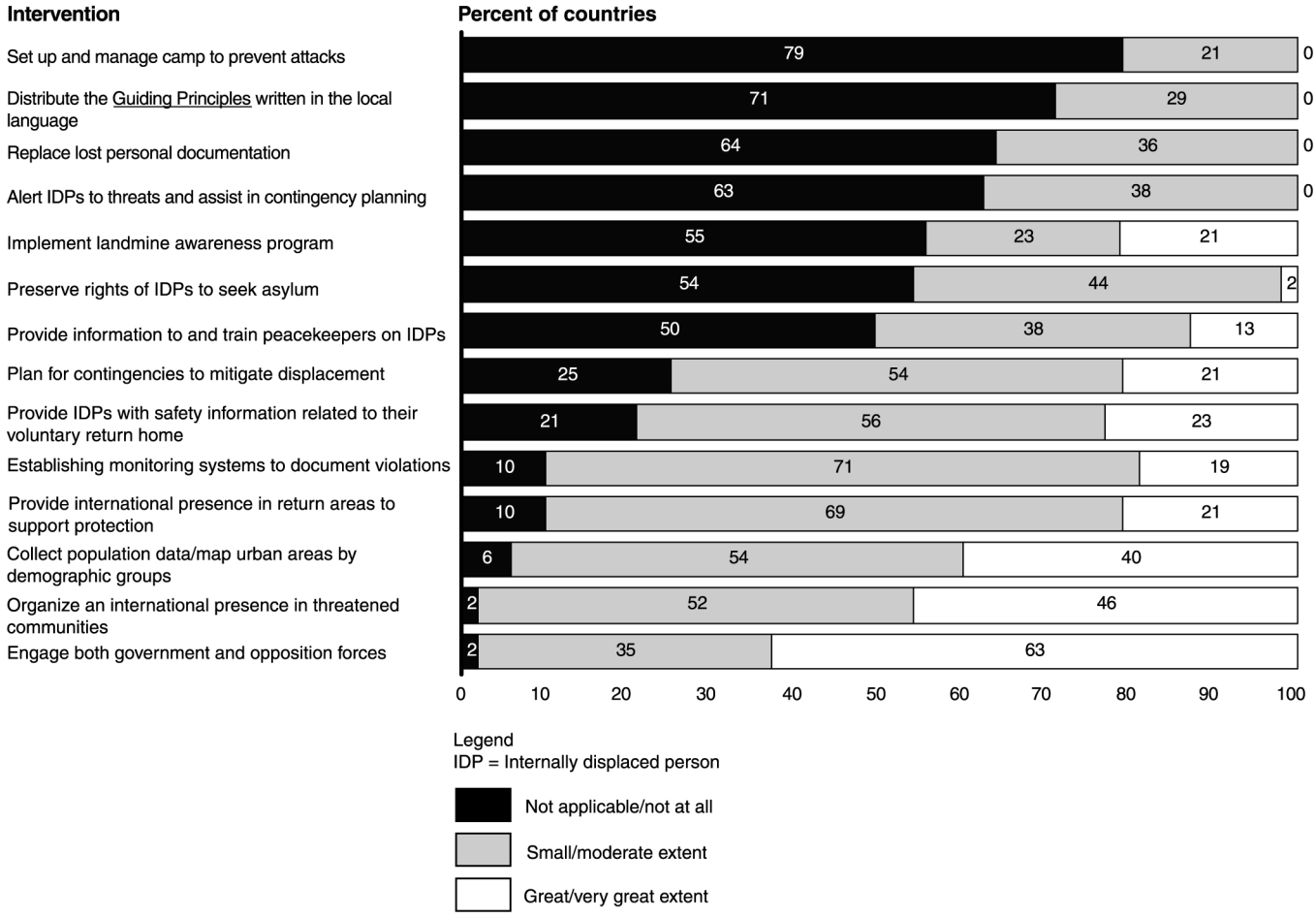
According to human rights officials, based on existing international humanitarian and human rights law, international organizations act to help ensure the internally displaced have protection and are afforded the fundamental right to be free from the threats noted in Figure 3. In some instance (such as in Kosovo), organizations are explicitly mandated by the United Nations and their governing boards to provide protection and assistance to internally displaced persons. To accomplish this, the organizations undertake protection activities in almost all countries we surveyed. For example, as shown in figure 4, in 63 percent of the countries, the organizations reported that to a great or very great extent they are engaging and meeting with both government and opposition forces to try to get them to respect the rights of internally displaced persons. In 79 percent of the countries, international organizations indicated they are to some extent providing the displaced with information about a voluntary return to their homes. In 90 percent of the countries, international organizations said they are, to a small extent or greater, establishing systems to document human rights violations of the displaced.

Overall, however, the extent of protection activities is limited, and in many countries some protection activities are not being carried out at all. A senior official of the International Committee of the Red Cross told us that there is not a single country in the world that can serve as a successful model for the protection of internally displaced persons. From providing core protection actions, such as providing a visible in-country presence of international staff to help protect the displaced, to replacing lost personal documentation and preserving the right to asylum, to alerting the displaced about threats, international organizations have taken limited action. Figure 4 shows the extent to which protection interventions identified in the *Guiding Principles* had taken place in the 48 countries from which we received survey responses.[5] Only 1 of the 14 protection interventions—engaging both government and opposition forces—was being undertaken to a great or very great extent in at least half the countries. Conversely, 7 of the 14 interventions were not being undertaken in half the countries.[6]

[5]The *Guiding Principles* provide a framework for the protection of internally displaced persons and affirm the right of individuals to be protected from arbitrary displacement and the responsibility of governments and other authorities to prevent such displacement. While the *Guiding Principles* are intended for governments and armed opposition groups, the principles also serve as a standard by which to deliver protection and assistance and to monitor and assess the extent to which international human rights and humanitarian law are being observed.

[6]In figures 3 and 8, "not applicable" answers were treated as "not at all" responses. In all but three instances, fewer than 10 percent of survey responses were answered "not applicable." However, with few exceptions, such as for the interventions pertaining to managing camps and landmine awareness, respondents should not have answered "not applicable." An example of an inappropriate "not applicable" answer was the category asking if the *Guiding Principles* were distributed in the local language.

Figure 4: Extent of Protection Interventions for Internally Displaced Persons in 48 Countries, 2001



Source: GAO survey.

External Factors Obstruct Protection Efforts

Several factors inhibit the international community's response on protection matters. The danger of operating in conflict zones and the personal security risks to aid workers are major limitations to involvement in protection matters. (In 75 percent of countries in our survey, humanitarian organizations indicated that personal security fears impact their ability to provide protection or assistance to internally displaced persons.)[7] State sovereignty is also a significant factor, as many countries, such as Algeria, Burma, and Turkey, bar international involvement with their internally displaced populations. In August 2000, the Group of 77, a group of more than 130 developing countries, blocked the U.N.'s Economic and Social Council from endorsing a U.N. approach to dealing with internally displaced persons for fear that humanitarian intervention and protection of human rights would infringe upon their countries' sovereignty.

Finally, scarce or declining budgetary resources provided by the international donor community inhibit agencies from expanding their protection (and assistance) activities. According to officials of these organizations, it is difficult to get the funding they request for refugees and other specifically mandated programs; and there is increasing donor fatigue because of humanitarian crises that have been ongoing for years without resolution. Given this environment, officials said it is even more difficult to get funding for internally displaced persons, who outnumber refugees by nearly 2 to 1 and where no international organization has an absolute right to intervene to protect and assist them. Table 1 shows the amount of funds international organizations' requested from international donors in 2000 and the shortfall from their budget requests.

[7]For example, since 1996, in Burundi, five expatriate relief workers were murdered, and numerous officials have been attacked or forced to evacuate due to death threats. Since 1990, 23 World Food Program staff members have been killed in the line of duty in Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda.

Table 1: Organizations' Budget Requests, Actual Funds Received, Percentage of Shortfall, and U.S. Contribution, 2000

Dollars in millions

Agency	Budget request	Actual budget	Shortfall percentage	U.S. contribution
International Committee of the Red Cross	$671	$540	19%	$122
U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees	930	693	25	239
U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights	53	44	17	7
U.N. Development Program[a]	1,100	645	41	80
World Food Program	2,117	1,685	20	796
U.N. Children's Fund[b]	254	149	41	110

[a]Includes core or regular budget only.

[b]Includes emergency budget only. U.S. contribution includes emergency and regular budget.

Source: Specified agencies.

International Organizations Are Cautious in Challenging Governments

According to numerous relief and human rights officials we spoke with, their organizations and their representatives at the country level are often reluctant to speak out and challenge governments on protection matters for fear of jeopardizing relationships and continued access for ongoing relief or development programs. In Sudan, for example, U.N. officials told us some of its offices were often reticent about pressing the Khartoum government on its restrictive flight clearance process in the south (impeding emergency relief efforts) due to concern of putting at risk U.N. development activities in the north. Also, in Burundi, the U.N.'s Humanitarian Coordinator (the lead U.N. official in country) was criticized by U.N. agency, nongovernmental organization, and U.S. government officials for weak leadership: the Coordinator was said to be more interested in maintaining good relations with the government than in serving as the main advocate for humanitarian and internally displaced persons' concerns. Furthermore, U.N. Resident Coordinators[8] from several countries were unwilling to respond to our survey on internally displaced persons despite assurances of confidentiality because of their concern about antagonizing the host government if their participation in the survey became known.

According to Department of State officials, in some internal displacement circumstances, international organizations have little leverage to affect the conduct of governments toward their citizens. In those cases, international forums, such as the U.N.'s Security Council or Economic and Social Council, offer the best opportunity to address issues of internal displacement within the context of underlying political and security factors. For example, the U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations advocated increased assistance and protection for the internally displaced in the U.N. Security Council and in other forums. As a result, U.N. officials said this raised the awareness of the plight of the internally displaced, prompted other governments to respond, and prompted an assessment of international organizations' policies, programs, and coordinating mechanisms on the internally displaced.

[8]Within the U.N. system, the Resident Coordinator is the highest-ranking official in country and is responsible for representing the United Nations before the host government and for coordinating the various U.N. agencies' relief and development programs.

Gaps in Field Presence and Protection Coverage

Organizations with the mandate and staff expertise to provide protection—the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the International Committee of the Red Cross—are often not present to take a proactive role in the protection of internally displaced populations, according to representatives from these international organizations and protection experts. Despite a March 2000 policy pronouncement by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees to become more engaged with the internally displaced, we found the number of internally displaced persons assisted and country programs in place declined in the last year (from 5 to 4 million and from 13 to 11, respectively), although the total number of worldwide displacements are reported to have remained relatively stable. According to State Department officials and other knowledgeable observers, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights has few officials working directly in the field and currently lacks the capability to intervene in human rights situations. As for the International Committee of the Red Cross, it has a specific protection mandate during armed conflict, but it generally does not conduct protection activities for displaced populations caught up in nonconflict circumstances. Table 2 shows the number of countries where these organizations said they have a staff presence and engage in protection activities.[9]

Table 2: Countries With Internally Displaced Persons Protection Activities, 2001

Organization	Number of countries with internally displaced persons protection activities
U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees	11
U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights	7
International Committee of the Red Cross	48

Sources: Specified agencies.

[9]The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and the Red Cross Movement in their comments on a draft of this report provided new statistical data on the number of countries where they had protection activities and the number of protection personnel posted in a country, which in some cases exceeded the data we report. We adjusted the numbers in some instances, but our analysis indicates that the data reported reflect a more accurate account of protection activities now being carried out by the organizations. This is because we include only protection-related persons and activities and excluded assistance activities and personnel.

During our fieldwork, we observed in two of the three countries we visited, that despite the presence of hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons, agencies did not have protection officers to monitor conditions or had assigned only two or three officers for this purpose. Protection experts acknowledge that a simple visible field presence is sometimes the most effective means to prevent harm to internally displaced persons. (Fig. 5 shows International Committee of the Red Cross staff accompanying Rwandan civilians fleeing ethnic fighting in 1994.) In our three case study countries, only the International Committee of the Red Cross in Colombia provided a robust staffing presence of significant size (54) to help monitor conditions and provide protection activities. In Burundi and southern Sudan, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees did not have a protection presence even though there were refugees repatriating into internally displaced communities. In Burundi, none of the agencies were engaged in protection activities directed toward internally displaced persons, although geographically nearly half the country is experiencing internal displacement. According to officials from these organizations, the number of protection officers working in these countries is not sufficient given the level of threat against internally displaced persons. Table 3 shows the number of protection officials assigned in Burundi, Colombia, and southern Sudan in 2000 to 2001.

Figure 5: Rwandan Civilians Fleeing Ethnic Fighting, 1994

Source: International Committee of the Red Cross.

Table 3: Number of Protection Staff Present in Burundi, Colombia, and Southern Sudan, 2000-2001

Organization	Burundi	Colombia	Southern Sudan
International Committee of the Red Cross	2 staff	54 staff	2 staff
U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees	2	11	0
U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights	3	6	0

Source: Specified agencies.

No Coordination Activities

International organizations do not have mechanisms at the country level to promote and coordinate actions that could help protect the internally displaced. Unlike international organizations' efforts to provide assistance (e.g., food aid and health care) to internally displaced persons where there are established working groups to share information and plan and coordinate action, there are no counterpart coordination mechanisms for protection concerns. For example, in our three case-study countries, we were told that there was little to no discussion among international organizations concerning protection issues. There were no focal points to raise the profile of protection or ensure its place on the agenda of those organizations working in the field. Officials engaged in protection activities in these countries told us that because there are no established mechanisms to share information, there is a lack of (1) basic information on where protection officers are posted, (2) common thinking and approaches to protection, and (3) knowledge about what protection interventions work or do not work.

We noted that in countries where international organizations have not assigned staff to monitor for protection concerns, the organizations do provide relief assistance and are often in direct contact with displaced persons and are knowledgeable about their conditions. However, according to U.N. and other international organization officials, they have not established working groups or other mechanisms in these countries that could alert the international staff about potential dangers to the internally displaced or provide advice about how to record and report on abuses they witness in their routine of providing assistance.

Protection Considerations Not Incorporated Into Assistance Programs

Officials in the field who provide assistance to internally displaced persons lack knowledge about how to incorporate protection considerations and techniques into their assistance activities. As was shown earlier in figure 3,

79 percent of the countries in our survey indicated that no action is taken to set up and manage camps for internally displaced persons to prevent attacks, such as ensuring vulnerable female-headed households are not isolated to remote areas in the camp. Relief officials told us there is little consideration given to protection concerns when designing programs--their focus is on providing assistance as quickly as possible. Forty percent of the countries in our survey also indicated that no training had been received on how to undertake protection actions for internally displaced persons, although officials we spoke with stated they would strongly welcome such training.

During our fieldwork, we found numerous examples of how relief agencies both incorporated and failed to incorporate protection measures into the design and implementation of their programs. These examples include:

- In southern Sudan, protection considerations were taken into account when water bore holes were drilled in locations that drew internally displaced populations away from conflict zones into more secure areas.
- In Burundi, when relief workers did not take into consideration the timing of bulk food deliveries during periods of intense fighting (as opposed to dispersed deliveries in locations outside the battle zone), the result was armed attacks and theft of supplies by combatants.
- In both Colombia and southern Sudan, the provision of assistance to internally displaced persons, while equally vulnerable local populations were ignored (as opposed to provision of some aid to both communities), led to conflict between the two groups.

Recognizing that the state of training for internally displaced persons issues has been deficient, in March 1998 the U.N.'s Inter-Agency Standing Committee ordered the development of a comprehensive training program focused on protection issues for the international organizations working with the displaced. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees was tasked with developing the training module for protection but did not do so until the end of 2000. To date, no training has occurred.

Protection Interventions Can Have Positive Impact

Despite the overall poor state of protection for internally displaced persons, we learned that practical actions, as advised by the *Handbook for Applying the Guiding Principles* were successful in the countries we visited. Even in highly insecure environments, reasonable advocacy on the part of senior officials and the presence of human rights observers and monitors can have positive effects. For example,

- In Colombia, International Committee for the Red Cross protection officers negotiated with rebel and paramilitary groups to relocate internally displaced individuals and families away from areas where death threats were being issued; they also successfully negotiated with these groups to resolve kidnappings and prevent executions by death squads.
- In Burundi, the U.S. Ambassador sent demarches (diplomatic messages) to the highest level of the Burundi government in mid-2000 challenging government troops who were intimidating patients in rural health clinics near the capital Bujumbura. This helped end the troops' harassment and occupation of the rural health clinics, which were used heavily by displaced populations.
- In southern Sudan, the government and factional commanders increased the risk to internally displaced persons by requiring that food drops and the provision of aid be provided in strategic locations at specific times to coincide with their strategies. The relief organizations tailored methods to circumvent these requirements and safely accomplish their relief goals. (Fig. 6 shows a food airdrop in southern Sudan.)

Figure 6: A World Food Program Food Delivery Airdrop in Southern Sudan

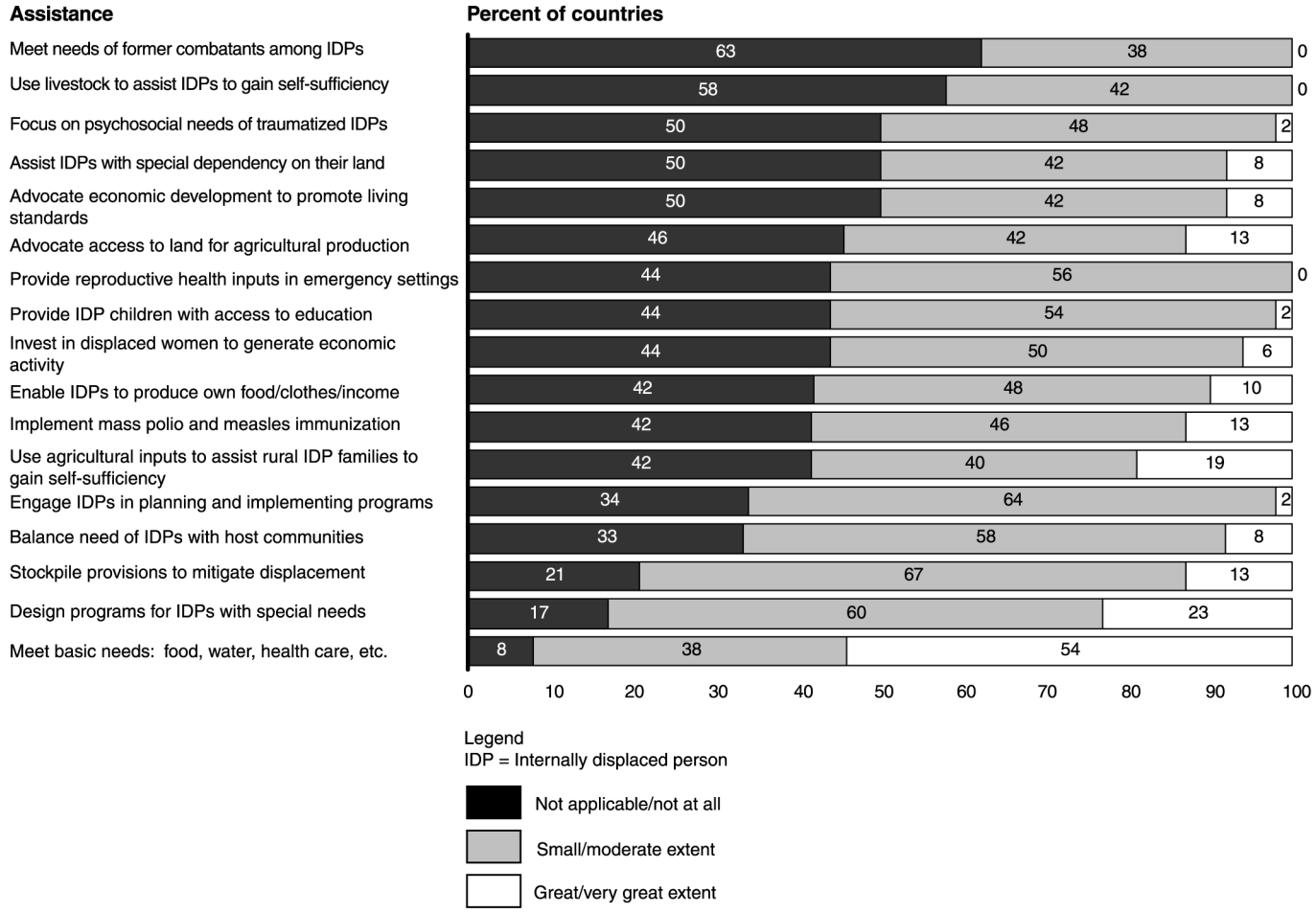
Source: World Food Program.

Immediate Assistance Needs Reported Being Met, But Longer-Term Needs Remain a Challenge

Overall, international organizations believe they have been generally successful in meeting the emergency food needs for those internally displaced persons to whom they have access. However, in numerous countries with active emergencies and hostile, insecure environments, such as in Burundi, and southern Sudan, large numbers of internally displaced persons were outside the reach of international organizations' relief efforts, according to relief experts to whom we spoke and observed during our case study fieldwork.[10] Other emergency assistance provisions such as health care, water and sanitation, and shelter were also generally being provided to displaced populations, although to a lesser extent, according to relief officials with whom we spoke. According to our survey, 54 percent of countries reported that basic needs, such as food, water, and health care, are being met to a great or very great extent. Figure 7 provides the results of our survey on the extent to which assistance interventions identified in the Guiding Principles have taken place. In Colombia, for example, largely through the combined efforts of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the World Food Program, the emergency needs (food, shelter, and health care) of the internally displaced were reported being met during the first 90 days of displacement.

[10]Access to humanitarian assistance is one of the most pressing problems affecting internally displaced persons. According to the *Guiding Principles*, the primary duty and responsibility for providing humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons lies with national authorities. However, international organizations have the right to offer their services in support of the internally displaced. Key organizations with the mandate to provide humanitarian assistance include the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, the Red Cross Movement (National Societies, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies), the U.N. Development Program, the World Food Program, and the U.N. Children's Fund.

Figure 7: GAO Survey of Assistance Interventions Taking Place for Internally Displaced Persons in 48 Countries, 2001



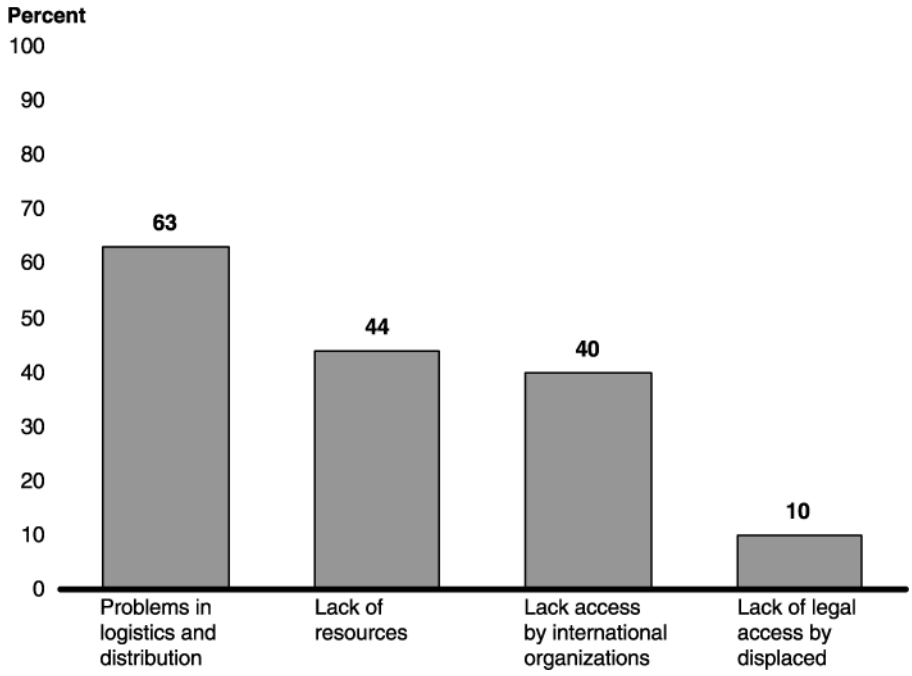
Source: GAO survey.

Gaps in Assistance Programming

Although international organizations were generally able to meet the initial emergency needs of the internally displaced, we found a number of programming gaps in the overall response scheme. First, international organizations were less effective in meeting the assistance needs of internally displaced persons after the initial displacement phase. In southern Sudan, for example, we were told that internally displaced persons who relocated to nonconflict areas were generally not receiving assistance from international organizations. Gaps in assistance areas we

identified include providing clothing, education, and income-generation training and opportunities; psychological and social assistance for traumatized persons; and nonfood items, such as kitchen utensils, tools, and personal hygiene items. Figure 8 provides information from our survey of country-level officials on why internally displaced persons were not receiving assistance. Foremost among the obstacles were problems in assistance logistics and distribution.

Figure 8: Reasons Why Internally Displaced Persons Were Not Receiving Assistance

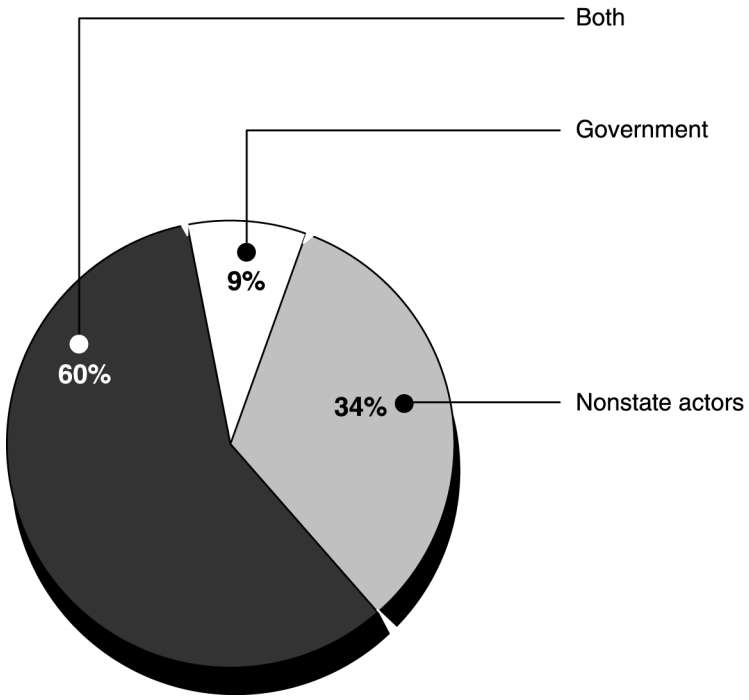


Source: GAO survey.

Also, internally displaced persons who were congregated in camps or identifiable communities were more likely to have their assistance needs met. In contrast, those displaced persons who were dispersed throughout the countryside, such as in Burundi, or merged into urban communities, such as in Colombia, were generally not receiving assistance, according to U.N. officials with whom we spoke. International organizations have difficulty identifying and obtaining access to these populations, as some internally displaced persons purposely keep a low profile for fear of

discrimination or retribution at the hands of the government or rebel groups. Figure 9 provides officials views on whether the source of protection threat to internally displaced persons comes from the government, nonstate actors (such as rebel groups), or both.

Figure 9: Perceived Sources of Threat to Internally Displaced Persons



Note 1: Nonstate actors include opposition and rebel groups.

Note 2: Numbers do not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: GAO survey.

Internally displaced persons were thought to be generally less likely to receive assistance the more time had lapsed since their initial displacement. According to relief and development experts we spoke with, there is a tendency among donors and aid agencies to provide short-term relief assistance rather than longer-term development or life-sustaining assistance. This funding and program trend particularly affects internally displaced persons, since most internal displacement situations are long-standing in nature. Similarly, assistance to internally displaced persons is negatively affected by international organizations' difficulty in transitioning

or redirecting their programs from the immediate relief phase to the longer-term rehabilitation/development phase.

Finally, the volatile nature of complex emergencies often results in sudden surges of mass displacement. In two of our case study countries—Burundi and Sudan-- fighting accompanied by drought had resulted in the sudden movement of thousands to tens of thousands of people within the last few years. According to relief officials, international organizations do not have adequate food reserves to respond immediately to these quick surges in displacement populations. For example, according to World Food Program officials, the organization only had a 1 month reserve of food for Sudan, and only 40 percent of its food appeal for Burundi had been met. During our fieldwork in central Burundi, we were told of rising levels of malnutrition caused by displacement and drought, and relief officials were fearful that a failure in the upcoming harvest could lead to significant food shortages. According to U.N. officials, it takes a lead time of 5 to 6 months before requested food aid is delivered in-country.

U.S. Government Lacks an Overall Policy and a Lead Office for Internally Displaced Persons

The U.S. government addresses the needs of the internally displaced by providing funds to international organizations and by directly implementing programs. However, the U.S. government does not have an overall policy or agency-specific guidelines for dealing with internally displaced persons, nor has the Department of State designated a lead office to help coordinate and direct the U.S. government's response for internally displaced persons. According to State officials, the lack of a lead office has been identified as a problem and discussed within the department, but no policy decisions have been taken to address this issue. Some State and Agency for International Development (USAID) officials said that as a result of a lack of policy and a lead office, the U.S. government has difficulty coordinating and managing its programs to aid the internally displaced. A study by the State Department's Office of Policy Planning and an assessment by the former director of the USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance concluded that the absence of a U.S. policy for internally displaced persons has resulted in limited awareness, overlapping bureaucratic mandates, and fragmented and duplicative efforts. The reports noted the multifaceted nature of displacement crises and that U.S. efforts were undermined by the absence of a single, responsible office managing the interrelated assistance, protection, advocacy, peace processes, and international cooperation components. Both studies concluded that U.S. humanitarian interests would be better served with clear policy direction and senior leadership within the federal bureaucracy on internal displacement issues.[11]

[11]See *Interagency Review of U.S. Government Civilian Humanitarian and Transition Programs* (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, Jan. 2000), and *The U.S. Government and Internally Displaced Persons: Present, But Not Accounted For* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution Project on Internal Displacement and the U.S. Committee for Refugees, Nov. 1999).

Difficulty Managing U.S. Government Policy Response

We identified six offices within State and USAID that directly assist internally displaced persons, plus several other agencies and offices that are involved in such related functions as intelligence gathering and representing U.S. interests in international organizations. The Department of State's Bureau of Population, Migration, and Refugees and USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Response are the two main sources of U.S. assistance to internally displaced persons. Based upon our discussions with officials from these agencies and a review of program documents, we found that there is duplication of effort and little coordination among the various agencies. For example, in Colombia, we learned that the World Food Program received funds from four different U.S. funding sources—State's Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration; USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives; the Department of Agriculture; and Plan Colombia—to support the same type of food assistance programs. However, the evidence shows that this funding was provided without coordination and knowledge about whether this would be complementary or duplicative. Furthermore, these offices were not able to determine how much of the $2.5 billion the U.S. government spends annually on humanitarian assistance goes to internally displaced persons, because agencies do not track how much money they spend on internal displacement.[12]

According to State and USAID program officials with whom we spoke, there are numerous drawbacks to not having a lead office or interagency working group to direct policy and activities related to internally displaced persons activities. Some of these drawbacks are listed as follows:

- Responding to crises is inefficient. It takes longer and is labor intensive to launch a response to an internal displacement crisis, as planning meetings are ad hoc and usually staff generated.
- There is no lead office or person to settle policy disputes among various agencies. For example, in Sudan, State and USAID had unresolved disagreements over aid policies and the content of assistance inputs to refugees and internally displaced persons, resulting in confusion among the nongovernmental organization implementing partners about which groups should be provided assistance.
- It is unclear whom to consult within the U.S. government. It is difficult for regional bureaus and other programming offices to take a proactive

[12]USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance is the only U.S. agency to track funding to internally displaced persons. It estimates expenditures of $123 million in 20 countries in fiscal year 2000.

role for their countries or areas of responsibility. In the critical area of providing protection for internally displaced persons, we were told that good intelligence information exists about protection threats against internally displaced persons, but without a lead office to receive the information and direct it, the information does not pass smoothly to the organization needing it, as was the case in Kosovo and Rwanda.

- There is no senior-level representation or single voice to consider and address internally displaced persons' issues during political-military crises deliberations within the highest level of the U.S. government.
- There is no clear locus of accountability for internal displacement issues within the U.S. government, especially on policy issues.

According to the acting Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration, there are pros and cons to designating a lead office, some of which were pointed out in the interagency review. Primarily, the issue of internally displaced persons involves human rights, diplomacy, political-military affairs, humanitarian concerns, and designating a lead office either within State or USAID could skew the U.S. approach toward one of these concerns. Without a thorough review of all concerns and the related organizational structure of several departments, it would be difficult to determine if a designated lead would improve the situation. He said that the current administration is addressing the issue through improved coordination and cooperation among the offices involved. Furthermore, there is a coordinating committee led by the National Security Council that could be used to address specific situations. However, he said that if problems arose in coordinating a U.S. government response to internally displaced persons, the administration might consider designating a lead office.

Funding for Internally Displaced Persons

There is no overall policy on the funding priority for internally displaced persons within the U.S. government. The Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration and USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs each has general legislative authority to address the assistance and protection needs of persons in need, such as provisions authorizing contributions to international organizations, assistance to victims of disasters and complex emergencies, help for victims of human rights abuses, and aid to those needing food assistance.[13] But the legislation does not specifically refer to internally displaced persons. Thus, according to Department of State officials, the Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration does not see itself as the initial source of the U.S. government response to the internally displaced and has not requested appropriations for these populations. Similarly, USAID officials told us that internally displaced persons are not a direct focus of development assistance monies provided under the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act. Officials from both agencies told us that they interpret their current statutory authorities as putting a priority on funding for refugees, development, or emergency programs. Therefore, they manage their funds to meet these legislative priorities with no overall direction to coordinate their efforts on internally displaced persons.

Reporting on Internally Displaced Persons Is Insufficient

The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended, requires the State Department to report annually to the Congress on the status of internationally recognized human rights. Although internally displaced persons are particularly vulnerable to human rights violations, the Department of State's annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* do not contain much information on the subject. These reports generally serve as an authoritative source and a basis for advocacy by U.S. diplomats both bilaterally and in international forums.

[13]The Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1962 (22 U.S.C. 2601 et seq) and the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended, (22 U.S.C. 2151 et seq) provide the primary statutory framework for assisting internally displaced persons.

Our examination of several country reports[14] in State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2000* and a Brookings Institution analysis of 1996 and 1997 reporting,[15] indicated that State generally provides only a cursory account of internally displaced persons. In eight country reports we examined for 2000, three country reports provided some information on specific incidents of displacement, three reports noted that internal displacement exists and made estimates of the populations affected; but two reports made no mention of internal displacement issues, although such issues existed. The country reports neglected or provided insufficient information on the protection and assistance problems that internally displaced persons face or the conduct of the government and opposition groups toward these populations. For example, the country report for Afghanistan noted only that drought and conflict were causing an increase in internal displacement. Furthermore, there is no standard format for reporting on internal displacement that would allow for systematic data gathering and analysis. Unlike a standard format for reporting on refugee issues, discussion of internal displacement issues are dispersed throughout various sections, for example, freedom of movement, respect for political rights, and torture, making identification of internally displaced persons reporting difficult in the lengthy country reports. In addition, the reports use various terms to refer to internally displaced persons—"IDPs," "forcibly displaced," and "village re-evacuation"—increasing the difficulty in identifying internal displacement issues and sometimes blurring the distinction between internally displaced persons and refugees.

Conclusions

Although some protection has been provided to internally displaced persons, international organizations have been unable to meet the protection needs of internally displaced persons in most locations, partly because of the danger of operating in conflict zones, the presence of personal security risks to aid workers, and the decline in budgetary resources, but also because international organizations have not taken a proactive approach toward protection. Also, international relief workers have not received training on how to incorporate protection considerations and interventions into their assistance activities, and in the three countries

[14]The countries reviewed included Afghanistan, Algeria, Burma, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and Turkey.

[15]*IDP Coverage in State Department Human Rights Reports* Brookings Institution Memorandum (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, Aug. 24, 1998).

we visited, international organizations do not coordinate their protection actions within the countries in which they operate. Without such coordination, international organizations are unable to share basic information about the location of their protection officers and effective approaches to protection interventions. The U.N. Security Council is one forum where these matters can be addressed in the context of underlying political and security factors.

The U.S. government has no overall policy or lead office to coordinate its efforts for dealing with internally displaced persons. Instead, government activities aimed at this effort are dispersed among different agencies and offices. Some State and USAID officials believe that providing assistance to the internally displaced in this way is labor and time intensive, lacks a locus of accountability, and leads to duplication of activities. Although the Department of State is required to provide the Congress with an annual report on human rights violations, these reports include only limited information about the treatment of internally displaced persons. Moreover, the country reports do not have a standardized format for providing information about the internally displaced and their human rights condition that would allow concerned parties to access the information readily. Increased and more systematic reporting that provided some focus on internally displaced persons would identify what we found to be a significant problem and would provide U.S. government and international and nongovernmental organizations' officials with country-level data to craft a cohesive program and policy response.

Recommendations for Executive Action

To strengthen the international response to the plight of the internally displaced, we recommend that the Secretary of State and the Permanent Representative of the United States to the United Nations (1) work to advance more proactive policies and programs to protect and assist internally displaced persons and (2) seek with other member states to strengthen international organizations' protection efforts by encouraging them to implement a training program for international organizations and to form country-level protection working groups. We also recommend that the Secretary of State include a focus on internal displacement issues in State's annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

State, USAID, the United Nations, and the Red Cross Movement provided written comments on a draft of this report. (See app. III to VI) Both State and the United Nations emphasized that lack of resources seriously undermines international efforts to address the protection and assistance needs of the internally displaced. This report recognizes that shortfalls in funding for internally displaced persons programs have had a negative impact on the international response; nevertheless, we believe our recommendations can be implemented by international organizations within existing resources.

State said this report is useful in drawing attention to the phenomenon of internal displacement and identifying areas of concern that the State Department and USAID are working to address. State agreed with our recommendations to work toward more proactive programs to protect internally displaced persons and in-country training programs and working groups for protection. Concerning our recommendation for improved reporting on internal displacement in its annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, State said that it recognizes the importance of reporting on issues related to internally displaced persons and stated that such information is found throughout the report. State said it strives to use systematic language when referring to internally displaced persons, and it will continue its efforts to report on internally displaced persons.

USAID stated that the report identifies issues of concern that it is actively working to address. USAID agreed with our recommendation to work with other countries and international organizations to advance programs that protect and assist internally displaced persons. Regarding the report's discussion about the lack of an overall policy and a lead office for addressing the issue of internal displacement, USAID noted that its efforts are directed by the *Foreign Assistance Manual*, which states that "AID/OFDA has responsibility for assisting people displaced within their own country as a result of natural or man-made disasters." State said that there are pros and cons to designating a lead humanitarian office.

The United Nations and the Red Cross Movement noted that steps are being taken to improve coordination among international agencies at the headquarter level and that initiatives such as the U.N.'s Senior Inter-Agency Network on Internally Displaced Persons are examining the institutional arrangements within and between the United Nations, the Red Cross Movement, and nongovernmental organizations. We recognize that some coordinating activities have been recently initiated; however, as discussed

in this report, we believe particular focus should be placed on improving country-level coordination mechanisms, especially in the area of protection.

The World Food Program, the World Health Organization, the High Commissioner for Refugees, the Brookings Institution, and the Norwegian Refugee Council provided technical comments on this report, which we incorporated as appropriate.

As we agreed with your offices, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution of it until 30 days from the date of this letter. We will then send copies of this report to the Chairman and Ranking Minority Member of the House Committee on International Relations, the Secretary of State, the Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.N. Secretary General, and the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. We will also then send copies to others who are interested and make copies available to others on request.

Please contact me at (202) 512-4128 if you or your staff have any questions about this report. Other GAO contacts and staff acknowledgments are listed in appendix VII.

Harold J. Johnson, Director
International Affairs and Trade

Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

At the request of the Chairman and the Ranking minority member of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, we assessed (1) whether international organizations have adequately protected internally displaced persons, and if not, what impediments these agencies face; (2) whether international organizations have met the food and other assistance needs of displaced populations; and (3) whether the U.S. government has a coordinated and effectively managed program to help ensure the protection of and assistance to internally displaced persons.

To assess whether international agencies have adequately provided protection and assistance to internally displaced persons, we interviewed officials and analyzed policy, program, and budgetary documents from the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, the World Food Program, the U.N. Development Program, the U.N. Children's Fund, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. We met with officials and reviewed reports pertaining to humanitarian and internal displacement issues from numerous think tanks and nongovernmental organizations, including the Brookings Institution's Project on Internal Displacement, the U.S. Committee for Refugees, InterAction, and the Norwegian Refugee Council.

To assess the extent to which the U.S. government coordinates and manages its efforts to ensure protection and assistance to internally displaced persons, we interviewed officials and analyzed policy and program documents from the Department of State's Office of Policy Planning; the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration; the Ambassador at Large for War Crimes Issues; and the U.S. Missions to the United Nations in New York City and Geneva, Switzerland. We also analyzed a judgmental sample of country reports from the Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2000* to determine the extent to which the issue of internal displacement is addressed. We met with officials and analyzed program documents for the U.S. International Agency for Development's (USAID) Bureau of Humanitarian Response, including the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, the Office of Transition Initiatives, and the Office of Food for Peace.

We also developed a field-level survey that was completed by U.N. Resident and Humanitarian Coordinators and officials from the Red Cross Movement and nongovernmental organizations. The survey solicited information on demographics, the effectiveness of international programs,

and program management of aid and protection efforts for internally displaced persons. The survey asked for information based upon criteria set forth in the normative framework of protection and assistance principles outlined in the 1998 U.N. *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* and included modifications based upon recommendations from relief and protection experts from the United Nations, the Red Cross Movement, and think tanks.

We sent an electronic copy of the survey directly, and through points of contact at the headquarters of the United Nations, the Red Cross Movement, and nongovernmental organizations, to field-level officials in more than 50 countries. A total of 120 usable surveys from 48 countries were returned from the various organizations; an additional 10 surveys were received but could not be used because key questions were not answered. The number of surveys returned from each country varied from one to eight. To provide equal weight to the opinions coming from each country, we computed a countrywide average response for each item. Thus, the unit of analysis was the 48 countries, rather than the 120 surveys.

For questions that asked for a "yes" or "no" answer, the countrywide answer was coded "yes" if 50 percent or more of the respondents from the country responded "yes." Countrywide mean ratings were also computed for questions that asked for the extent to which aid/protection concerns were being addressed (rating scale: 1 = Not applicable/Not at all, 2 = Small extent, 3 = Moderate extent, 4 = Great extent, 5 = Very great extent). The countrywide means were rounded (and collapsed to three categories) so that the percentage of countries at each point on the extent scale could be ascertained. If the countrywide mean was 1.00 to 1.49, the aid/protection intervention was judged to be not occurring at all. If the mean was 1.50 to 3.49 or 3.50 to 5.00, the intervention was characterized as occurring to a small/moderate extent or a great/very great extent, respectively. Because we were unable to determine the total number of countries or officials that received the survey in each country, we were unable to project the findings with a specified degree of precision to the population of all countries with internally displaced persons.

We also performed fieldwork in our case study countries of Burundi, Colombia, and southern Sudan to determine the effectiveness of international organizations' responses to the protection and assistance needs of internally displaced persons. These three countries are experiencing long-standing internal displacement crises, with large population movements and programs operated by the U.N. system, the Red

Cross Movement, nongovernmental organizations, and the U.S. government. During our fieldwork, we met with officials from these organizations responsible for providing protection and assistance to the internally displaced. We also met with other donor governments and their aid agencies, with host government and opposition groups involved in the displacement crisis, and with internally displaced persons who were recipients of international assistance. We observed first-hand assistance programs designed to assist displaced populations and attended coordination meetings by country teams. Due to security concerns, we were unable to travel within southern Sudan; however, we met with agency and nongovernmental organization officials in Nairobi and Lokichoggio, Kenya, who conduct relief activities in southern Sudan both within and outside the U.N.-sponsored Operation Lifeline Sudan program.

We performed our review from September 2000 through June 2001 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Country Profiles: Burundi, Colombia, and Sudan

Burundi

Burundi is a poor, densely populated country in East Africa. More than 90 percent of the country's 6.6 million population is dependent on subsistence agriculture for survival. Over 3 million people—half the population—needed food assistance in 2000 because of drought or war. Burundi's majority ethnic Hutu and minority ethnic Tutsi populations have struggled against each other for economic and political power for 30 years, with a small number of Tutsi elite having dominated the country's politics and military since independence in 1962.

Periodic military crackdowns slaughtered hundreds of thousands of people during the 1970s and 1980s. The victims were overwhelmingly Hutu. The first democratic election in 1993 elected a Hutu president. However, elements within the Tutsi-dominated military assassinated the President in 1993, triggering a wave of violence. A 1996 coup eliminated the rest of the democratically elected government, and the Tutsi elites shifted back into power. An insurgency by Hutu rebels and a counterinsurgency campaign by the government have claimed tens of thousands of lives and caused mass internal displacement in an ongoing civil war that continues today.

The military has pursued a regroupment policy starting in 1996, requiring an estimated 350,000 persons (mostly Hutus) to live in forced regroupment camps, to prevent those living in the countryside from supporting the rebels. The camps had inadequate sanitation and insufficient access to water, food, shelter, and medicine, according to the U.S. Committee for Refugees. International organizations could not reach many of the government's forced regroupment camps due to inadequate infrastructure or because they were prevented from doing so by security forces.

The government's and the rebels' human rights record are poor, according to the Department of State's human rights report. Combatants on both sides deliberately uprooted civilian populations and targeted displacement camps for attack. Government forces and rebels committed large-scale atrocities against civilians. According to Amnesty International, the armed forces and rebel groups have continued to show complete disregard for human life, acting with little or no accountability. Scores of civilians were killed in ambushes. Humanitarian workers were also killed and attacked. On numerous occasions, rebel groups killed unarmed civilians in reprisal for alleged collaboration with the government or for failing to support them.

The U.S. government has made humanitarian relief its priority response in Burundi. Inadequate harvests during the last three seasons due to conflict and drought have caused severe malnutrition in several provinces. USAID-funded programs implemented by nongovernmental organizations and U.N. agencies primarily focused on life-sustaining activities such as food security assistance (provision of livestock, seeds, and tools), health care, and supplementary nutrition programs. In fiscal year 2001, the U.S. government provided an estimated $5.8 million in food aid and another $3 million to combat HIV/AIDS and promote human rights and democracy. In addition, the U.S. government is a significant contributor to the programs of the World Food Program and the U.N.'s Children Fund in Burundi. Figure 10 shows a USAID-assisted family.

Figure 10: Members of a Teenage-headed Household That Receives Food Security and Shelter Assistance from USAID, 2000

Note: The smallest child is age 4 and suffers from stunting due to chronic malnutrition.

Source: GAO.

Colombia

The roots of the conflict in Colombia go back to a power struggle between liberals and conservatives in the late 1940s. Between 1947 and 1957, the fighting claimed more than 300,000 lives and forced more than 1 million Colombians to abandon their homes, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross. In subsequent years, rural defense groups sprung up in various parts of the country. Some of them turned into guerilla groups with strong Marxist leanings. In later years, paramilitary

groups appeared. The addition of a flourishing drug trade combined to create a complex and violent civil conflict that has resulted in the cumulative displacement of millions of people.

Attempts to end the violence over the years have produced neither substantive agreements nor a decrease in the levels of violence. In 1999, the Colombian government launched Plan Colombia, a $7.5 billion, multiyear strategy designed to support the peace process, an antinarcotics strategy, democratization, and the provision of humanitarian assistance.

However, the Colombian government faces serious challenges, as armed paramilitary groups, guerrillas, and narcotic traffickers exert influence over more than one-third of the country's municipalities. Furthermore, the government's human rights record is poor. According to the Department of State's human rights reporting, government forces commit serious abuses, including extrajudicial killings. Members of security forces collaborate with paramilitary groups that committed abuses, in some instances allowing them to pass through roadblocks, sharing information, or providing ammunition and supplies.

Paramilitary groups and guerillas were responsible for the vast majority of political and other killings, according to the Department of State's human rights report. Throughout the country, paramilitary groups killed, tortured, and threatened civilians suspected of sympathizing with guerrillas in an orchestrated campaign to terrorize them into fleeing their homes, thereby depriving guerrillas of civilian support and allowing paramilitary forces to challenge the guerrilla groups for control of narcotic cultivations and strategically important territories. The two main guerrilla groups—the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN)—are reported by the Department of State to regularly attack civilian populations and commit massacres and summary executions. They are also reported to have killed religious and medical personnel.

Plan Colombia is being supported by the U.S. government with a $1.3 billion assistance package that was approved in June 2000. In addition to drug eradication and interdiction efforts, U.S funding is supporting (1) democracy programs and the peace process, (2) reduction of opium and cocoa cultivation through alternative development, and (3) assistance to internally displaced persons. USAID programs were focused on providing assistance to internally displaced persons in the reestablishment, or post-flight, stage of displacement. This phase of displacement represents a

major gap in the international community's response in Colombia. USAID-funded activities focused on secondary cities bearing the brunt of internally displaced populations and included food-for-work community projects, income generation and long-term economic opportunities, primary education, and shelter. State-funded activities of the World Food Program and the Pan American Health Organization focused on areas of capacity-building to improve health care delivery to displaced persons and supplementary feeding programs for women and children. Figure 11 shows Colombian women engaged in an income generation project.

Figure 11: An Internally Displaced Persons Community Outside of Bogota, Colombia, 2001

Note: Women manufacturing low-cost clothing items sold in retail stores and local markets in Colombia.

Source: GAO.

Sudan

Sudan, geographically the largest country in Africa, has been at war nearly its entire independent existence. The conflict started just before independence in 1955, when the ruling north refused to share power with the south. This phase of the conflict, which lasted 17 years and claimed several hundreds of thousands of lives, ended in 1972 with the signing of a peace agreement in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. However, fighting resumed in 1983 when southern black troops in the national army created the Sudanese People's Liberation Army and demanded a change of government in the capital, Khartoum, and a fair share of the resources for all regions in the country. In addition to the conflict between the regular army and the Sudanese People's Liberation Army, fighting has raged between various militias allied with these two parties.

The civil war, which is estimated to have resulted in the death of 2 million persons, and the internal displacement of several million more has continued into its 18th year. There has been no significant progress toward peace in years and Department of State officials believe the current situation is likely to go on indefinitely. Neither side appears to have the ability to win the war militarily, although oil revenues have allowed the government to invest increasingly in military hardware. Presently, the government controls virtually all of the northern two-thirds of the country but is limited to garrison towns in the south.

The drive for oil and territorial control over newly operational oil fields is now central to the conflict that has long been rooted in racial, cultural, religious, and political differences. Government forces have pursued a scorched earth policy aimed at removing populations from around a newly built oil pipeline and other oil production facilities. These forces have killed and injured civilians, destroyed villages, and driven out inhabitants in order to create an unoccupied security zone, according to Department of State reporting. The government has also blocked or harassed humanitarian relief operations.

The Sudanese People's Liberation Army has been guilty of property theft from nongovernmental organizations and U.N. agencies operating in the south, according to the Department of State. Militia factions have manipulated humanitarian aid programs to gain food for their troops and have conscripted new soldiers from camps housing refugees and internally displaced persons. The militias are also guilty of committing serious human rights abuses. According to Amnesty International, militia forces frequently change sides depending on their perceived interests or the

supply of arms. The government pursues a policy of providing support and weapons to the various militia commanders and encouraging interfactional fighting. It is estimated that more people have died as a result of interfactional fighting between militias than in armed encounters with government forces.

Since 1991, the United States has provided $1.2 billion in humanitarian assistance to Sudan. Because the government of Sudan is involved in gross human rights violations and support of international terrorism, the United States provides only humanitarian assistance in government-controlled areas but both development and humanitarian assistance in opposition-controlled areas. USAID programs provide emergency food and nonfood aid (blankets, kitchen items, and plastic sheeting) in areas of displacement and resettlement. With increased emergency needs related to the many active conflict zones and large simultaneous displacements, USAID is providing life-sustaining assistance to extremely vulnerable populations. Most assistance is provided through Operation Lifeline Sudan, which is a consortium of U.N. agencies and more than 40 international nongovernmental organizations. In fiscal year 2001, the U.S. government provided an estimated $4 million in direct program assistance, in addition to U.S. contributions to the programs of international organizations, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and the U.N. Children's Fund.

Comments From the U.S. Department of State

United States Department of State
Chief Financial Officer
Washington, D.C. 20520-7427

JUL 31 2001

Dear Ms. Westin:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "FOREIGN AFFAIRS: Internally Displaced Persons Lack Effective Protection," GAO-01-803, GAO Job Code 711562.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

If you have any questions concerning this response, please contact Jane Zimmerman, Deputy Director, Office of Multilateral Coordination and External Relations, Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, at (202) 663-1477.

Sincerely,

Larry J. Eisenhart
Acting

Enclosure:

As stated.

cc: GAO/IAT - Mr. Johnson
State/OIG - Mr. Atkins
State/PRM/MCE - Ms. Zimmerman

Ms. Susan S. Westin,
Managing Director,
International Affairs and Trade,
U.S. General Accounting Office.

Department of State Comment on GAO Draft Report
"FOREIGN AFFAIRS: Internally Displaced Persons Lack Effective Protection,"
GAO-01-803, GAO Code 711562

This report is important and useful in drawing attention to the phenomenon of internal displacement, increasingly the hallmark of conflict and humanitarian emergency in the post-cold war world, and to the problems in responding effectively to the needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs). The report identifies several areas of concern that the State Department and AID are working to address.

We applaud the report's recommendations to work with the UN system to have it take a stronger, more pro-active approach to internal displacement. We also agree that "protection" is one of the biggest gaps in IDP humanitarian assistance, and we are considering ways to help address that problem. However, it should be noted that one of the greatest obstacles to activism by the UN - be it the Security Council or organizations such as UNHCR and WFP - is lack of resources. Resources are also a key component in attacking the chronic causes of internal displacement through development activities. While UN and donors alike recognize the need to better coordinate relief with development to prevent the recurrence of conflict and ensure durable resettlement and reintegration, the resources are simply not sufficient - or not properly applied - to regularly accomplish that task.

We would also like to stress the key importance of access to displaced beneficiaries. This is not only a matter of permission and/or cooperation on the part of the sovereign government in whose territory the displaced are located, but is also a matter of security. With many international and locally hired humanitarian relief workers losing their lives annually (and many more suffering harassment, crime, and other threats), protecting and assisting IDPs can be a life-or-death issue to the humanitarian worker as well as the IDP. Many IDPs simply cannot be reached because of security concerns. At some level, the international community has the responsibility for establishing security through security organs (such as peacekeeping operations or military interventions by alliances of the willing) rather than demanding that humanitarian workers risk themselves in what are essentially battlefield conditions.

We believe the report might have included more analysis on the wide typology of internal displacement. While some of the displaced are indeed like "internal refugees," in need

of both protection and assistance, there are many other types or characteristics, reflecting the many situations in the contemporary world that produce displacement. For instance, in countries such as Colombia and Angola, "old" displaced persons have often settled in or around cities, where they now may be more like urban migrants in need of development assistance. In other cases (e.g., within Macedonia today), the displaced often find refuge with kin; in these situations, any assistance program should aim at the host community as much as the IDP. It should be made clear that humanitarian response agencies should focus their energies and resources on those displaced whose "profiles" fall in their mandates and authorities; other types of victims of displacement might be better dealt with through human rights advocacy or economic development programs.

Regarding U.S. Government response to crises of internal displacement, the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (State/PRM) and AID's Bureau for Humanitarian Response (AID/BHR) each have important responsibilities and programs with significant amounts of resources. PRM bears responsibility for multilateral responses through ICRC and UNHCR in providing protection and assistance to IDPs. State/PRM and AID/BHR work collaboratively to maximize the effectiveness of their contributions.

Regarding the conclusions, we agree with Recommendation 1 on working with the UN to develop more pro-active policies. The State Department is doing this in a number of ways: as President of the UN Security Council in January 2000, the United States convened a session devoted to IDPs and challenged the UN to define a predictable and accountable system for addressing the protection and assistance needs of IDPs. Since that time the State Department, AID, and the U.S. Missions in New York and Geneva have all pressed for better coordination in the field and stronger advocacy in the UN system. In March 2001, State/PRM Acting Assistant Secretary Alan Kreczko wrote a letter to the recently appointed UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, Under Secretary General Oshima, to reinforce our message. In May 2001, State/PRM and AID/BHR advocated this position at the annual oversight meeting of ten major donors to the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). State/PRM and AID/BHR provided financial support for the UN "IDP Network" project, which is cited in this report. The Department of State has also worked to highlight IDP response in the governing bodies of the key humanitarian response organizations, including UNHCR, WFP and UNICEF. In July

2001, Ambassador Betty King stressed the importance of the IDP issue in the annual U.S. statement to ECOSOC.

Recommendation 2, asking the UN to focus on training and better in-country coordination, is part of the agenda of the UN's Emergency Relief Coordinator, and is a policy we have strongly supported.

Concerning Recommendation 3, State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) recognizes the importance of reporting on issues relating to IDPs within the framework of the *County Reports on Human Rights Practices*. DRL echoes PRM's concerns about security and access to IDPs, noting that in many situations restricted access and tenuous security limit the amount of information available about IDPs. DRL gathers information about IDPs from various sources for inclusion in the *Country Reports*, as applicable. Along these lines, DRL notes that the *Country Reports on Human Right Practices* for 2000 provide coverage on IDPs in many more countries than the Brookings Institution analysis or the GAO's review would indicate. For example, IDPs are covered in 17 of the reports in Africa. There are other examples of extensive coverage of IDPs, including but not limited to Colombia, Indonesia, Russia, and the Balkans.

In countries where internal displacement exists, information related to IDPs' human rights is found throughout the *Country Reports*, but is most concentrated in Sections 2.d. and 1.g. Section 2.d., titled "Freedom of Movement within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation," contains information about refugee policy, including IDP issues. This section should contain an approximate number of IDPs, describe causes of their displacement, and address issues regarding the government's treatment of the group, including allowing access to humanitarian organizations and other actors. Section 1.g. is an optional section titled "Use of Excessive Force and Violations of Humanitarian Law in Internal Conflicts." In countries where there is a significant armed conflict, this section outlines violations of humanitarian law by the armed actors as they relate to the conflict. Issues that may be covered in this section include the use of land mines, rape as a war crime, armed attacks on noncombatants, as well as the government's response to the needs of IDPs. Natural catastrophes that result in the displacement of large numbers of persons would generally be addressed only if these IDPs became the victims of human rights violations.

Throughout the report, DRL strives to systematize language used when referring to IDPs, and other groups as well. When

the government or other actors violate IDPs' human rights, incidents and patterns are also mentioned in the sections that describe such abuses. For example, if IDPs were subject to torture, arbitrary arrest, of limitations on freedom of speech or religion, the pertinent sections of the report would contain information about those abuses also. In all applicable reports in which IDP issues exist, DRL will continue its efforts to report systematically on human rights violations against IDPs.

Finally, we would note for the record that the Acting Assistant Secretary said that there are pros and cons (vice drawbacks, at p. 31) to designating a lead humanitarian office.

GAO Study Comment

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DRL/CRA:JDubrow
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Comments From the U.S. Agency for International Development

U.S. AGENCY FOR
INTERNATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT

JUL 31 2001

Mr. Harold J. Johnson
Director
International Relations and Trade
U.S. General Accounting Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Johnson:

I am pleased to provide the U.S. Agency for International Development 's (USAID) formal response to the draft GAO report entitled "FOREIGN AFFAIRS: Internally Displaced Persons Lack Effective Protection." (July 2001)

The draft report identifies several issues of concern that USAID is actively working to address. USAID agrees that internally displaced persons as a class have special protection and assistance needs, and issues of state sovereignty often complicate that assistance to these populations. Increased coordination is needed among international donors and implementers to ensure that the displaced receive the short-term and long-term assistance they require. USAID also supports the draft report's recommendations that the United States work with other countries and international entities to continue to advance programs that protect and assist internally displaced persons.

We are also pleased to note the draft report's conclusion that emergency assistance for internally displaced persons is usually delivered in an effective and efficient manner. USAID prides itself on the speed and efficacy of its humanitarian responses in meeting critical needs.

While a USAID priority is meeting the humanitarian needs of the displaced, it is important to note that displaced persons make up only one element of a broader vulnerable population within a given emergency and host country; crises are also felt by those in a society who do not leave their homes. Food shortages, civil unrest, loss of livelihoods and limited economic growth affect displaced and non-displaced alike. For this reason, USAID, as a matter of policy, seeks to target assistance to displaced persons within the larger relief to development continuum.

USAID's overall responsibility within the U. S. government for assisting internally displaced persons is grounded not only in its emergency assistance expertise but also in its long-term development mandate. USAID programs meet the emergency

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needs of the displaced and USAID development programs facilitate reintegration of the displaced into their society and their participation in the long-term development of their country. USAID's integrated response efforts conform to the general policy guidance for all U.S. government foreign affairs departments and agencies as recorded in 2 FAM 066.3 paragraph d which states that "AID/OFDA has the responsibility for assisting people displaced within their own country as a result of natural or manmade disasters."

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the GAO draft report and for the courtesies extended to us by your staff in the conduct of this review.

Sincerely,

Richard C. Nygard
Acting Assistant Administrator
Bureau for Management

Comments From the United Nations

UNITED NATIONS NATIONS UNIES

POSTAL ADDRESS – ADRESSE POSTALE: UNITED NATIONS, N.Y. 10017
CABLE ADDRESS – ADRESSE TELEGRAPHIQUE: UNATIONS NEW YORK

REFERENCE:

7 August 2001

Dear Mr. Johnson,

I am writing in reference to your request for comments on the study conducted by the United States General Accounting Office (GAO) on Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). As a number of United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations have already provided you with specific observations, I should like to focus my comments on the global efforts to strengthen the international response to the plight of IDPs.

As you may be already aware, the Secretary-General, at the recommendation of the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), in May approved a number of actions aimed at strengthening institutional arrangements, at both the headquarters and field level, for IDP response. These recommendations were based in part on the findings of the Inter-Agency Network on Internal Displacement, which was established last year to help identify gaps and propose solutions for improving the international response to internal displacement.

Chief among these recommendations is the establishment, within OCHA, of an Internal Displacement Unit to help promote a more effective inter-agency, operational response to internal displacement and support the ERC in his role as the coordinator of the international humanitarian response to IDPs.

The Unit will do so by providing a nucleus of expertise on IDP issues that can better help guide and inform the international response to IDP crises. In particular, the Unit aims to help support the mainstreaming of the internal displacement issues into the work of UN agencies, international organizations, as well as governmental and non-governmental actors. To this end, training will be a major task of the Unit.

In the area of protection, I aim to move forward with the operationalization of protection measures for internally displaced persons. To that end, the Unit will include a protection expert that will provide specialized support in this regard.

Mr. Harold J. Johnson
Director, International Affairs and Trade
United States General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C.

Measures will also be put in place to strengthen the capacity of Resident/Humanitarian Coordinators and other field actors in the design and implementation of IDP country plans. This could include, in some cases, the appointment of advisors on internal displacement or the designation of a lead-agency for internally displaced persons.

I believe that these measures represent an important step towards improved inter-agency response and I am personally committed to the early and effective implementation of them in order to improve the response to IDP needs.

That being said, a strengthened international response to the needs of the displaced requires increased and sustained government support, in particular for the transition from relief to development. For instance, the UN inter-agency appeals for humanitarian funding in 2001 are at present only 41 percent funded. In Angola, where internal displacement affects millions, only 43 percent of the humanitarian appeal has been funded. While the Unit will also seek to address the problem of chronic under funding for IDPs needs through greater advocacy and resource mobilization, the active engagement of donors will continue to be critical to our success.

To that end, I welcome the opportunities suggested by your report to engage and coordinate, especially at the field level, in an effective partnership with USAID's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration and other branches of the United States Government on this issue.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you, or the esteemed members of Congress, like additional information regarding internal displacement or the UN's efforts to improve its response.

Yours sincerely,

Carolyn McAskie
for Kenzo Oshima
Under-Secretary-General
for Humanitarian Affairs

Comments From the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

COMITÉ INTERNATIONAL DE LA CROIX-ROUGE

Geneva, 25 July 2001

Dear Mr Johnson,

Thank you for sending a draft copy of the United States General Accounting Office Report entitled "Internally Displaced Persons Lack Effective Protection", to ICRC President Jakob Kellenberger, who has asked me to reply on his behalf.

The ICRC is glad to have the opportunity to comment on the Report and on the issues it raises. We would also be pleased to take part in any hearing on this subject that might be held at the Congressional level.

The following general remarks represent the views not only of the ICRC but also of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

The report gives a comprehensive view of the subject on the basis of information provided by organizations with field operations, but also by others, in particular think tanks, that maintain no presence in the field.

We have noted that the report focuses on "those forced to flee their homes because of armed conflict and persecution". However, the definition of internally displaced persons (IDPs) provided by the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, to which the report refers, includes other causes of displacement, such as natural disasters and economic hardship. The protection needs of the various categories of IDPs are different and call for a humanitarian response tailored to each specific case.

The Report is critical of an alleged lack of coordination mechanisms in the field. It makes no mention, however, of coordination initiatives under way in New York and Geneva, such as the Senior Inter-Agency Network on Internally Displaced Persons and the Unit for IDP Coordination, or of coordination within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

Mr Harold J. Johnson
Director, International Affairs and Trade
United States General Accounting Office (GAO)
Washington , DC 20548

We would also like to emphasize the following points, which relate specifically to the ICRC:

The ICRC's mandate and activities

The ICRC is a neutral and independent humanitarian organization entrusted by States with the task of protecting and assisting victims of armed conflict and internal violence and their direct results. As part of the civilian population affected by those situations, IDPs clearly fall within the ICRC mandate. Therefore, in accordance with its mandate and especially since the adoption of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, the ICRC has been protecting and assisting IDPs as well as the besieged, the elderly and others who are obliged to remain in their homes and may find themselves in situations as dire as those faced by IDPs. Indeed, their inability to flee may make their plight even worse.

While logistical problems may impede the ICRC's access to civilians, including IDPs, security concerns continue to be the main obstacle.

The ICRC conducts protection training courses for its staff on a regular basis. It also carries out dissemination programmes and instructs arms bearers (government and opposition groups) and the general population in international humanitarian law.

Such activities, along with constructive dialogue with all parties to the conflict based on mutual trust, are aimed at preventing violations of international humanitarian law and displacement of civilians. The ICRC prefers persuasion to denunciation as a working method. In addition to the wide variety of tasks the ICRC performs in the field, making confidential representations to the authorities is an important part of its protection work.

The workshops on protection organized by the ICRC since 1996 and the enclosed booklet entitled "Strengthening protection in war" are among the fruits of extensive discussions and shared experiences among numerous international organizations, UN agencies and NGOs. Another document will be published in the coming months by the ICRC in cooperation with UNHCR, UNICEF and several international NGOs under the title "Guiding principles on unaccompanied and separated children".

Legal framework

International humanitarian law is applicable in situations of armed conflict and is binding on both States and armed opposition groups. Thus IDPs in countries affected by armed conflict are protected under the terms of this law, as stated in the 1949 Geneva Conventions, which are universally accepted (189 States Parties). For this reason, we would recommend that a reference to international humanitarian law be made in the report.

We hope these comments will be useful to you and remain at your disposal for any further information you may require.

Yours sincerely,

Jean-Daniel Tauxe
Director of Operations

GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contacts

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Acknowledgments

In addition to those named above, Patrick Dickriede, Norman Thorpe, Jack Edwards, Ernie Jackson, Zina Merritt, and Rona Mendelsohn made key contributions to this report.

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