



Internally Displaced Persons in Nepal: Neglected and Vulnerable

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Abstract

This article examines Nepal's policies regarding internally displaced persons (IDPs), and aid efforts by international aid agencies and donors. Ten years of conflict (1996-2006) between the Nepal government and the Maoists was a main cause of the displacement of many people. Although the international community acknowledged that the armed conflict between Maoist forces and Nepal security forces contributed significantly to the displacement, the crisis did not receive enough international attention until recently. Ongoing violence in some districts of Nepal continues to pose major challenges to many returnees and to the peace process. The contradictions and tensions existing within Nepal's IDP policies create further strains, especially on individuals and families displaced by Nepal security forces. Researchers, policy makers, and international agencies need to be aware of the geopolitical factors that could endanger the effectiveness of aid distribution to displaced Nepalese.

Keywords: Aid, Development, Conflict, Displacement, Migration, Nepal

1. Introduction

In recent years, conflicts involving forced migration and human rights violations, as in the case of Nepal and other countries in South Asia, have attracted international attention. The armed conflict between the Maoist guerillas of Nepal's Communist Party and the royal armed forces, which began in the late 1990s, produced one of the worst humanitarian crises in Nepal. Caught between the Maoists and government army forces, many were forced to move in search of security and economic opportunities. For many displaced persons, particularly women and children, displacement further increased vulnerability to poverty, violence, discrimination, and exploitation. Years of conflict have had devastating effects on the country's economy and infrastructures. Although some Nepalese have crossed international borders, many remain displaced within their own country. Despite being rated one of the worst displacement scenarios in the world, the plight of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Nepal has received limited attention, either internationally or from Nepal's political parties. This paper examines the roles that the armed conflict between the Maoists and government armed forces played in Nepal's displacement crisis. Also, it will analyze responses to the crisis by the Nepal government, Maoists, and international aid agencies.

This paper will argue that the armed conflict contributed significantly to the internal displacement crisis in Nepal and that the government failed to fulfill its obligations toward IDPs through its policies. Additionally, nongovernmental organizations and international aid agencies have provided inadequate services to IDPs through their programs. Not only has the displacement crisis created logistical and humanitarian nightmares, but it also poses serious threats to national and international security and puts the lives of displaced people at risk. Tackling the issues of IDPs in Nepal requires cooperation between government and development agencies.

2. Internal Displacement in Nepal

Internal displacement is increasingly a global crisis. It is estimated that every year, 25 million people in more than 50 countries are forced to abandon their homes, land, and communities as a result of internal conflicts, communal violence, or human rights violations (Deng, 2004, p. 18). The term *internally displaced persons* refers to persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a

result of or in order to avoid conflicts, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border (Rai, 2005, p. 8).

IDPs are often deprived of essentials such as shelter, security, food, education, and community. Displacement in Nepal is increasingly gendered; women and young girls constitute “the largest percentage of the internal stuck” (Manchanda, 2004, p. 239). In addition to lacking access to basic needs, many IDPs are identified as enemies of the state and are therefore vulnerable to state persecution. Ironically, if these people crossed international borders, they would fall under the category of refugees whose protection and assistance are guaranteed under the 1951 Refugee Convention as established by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (Rai, 2005, p. 9).

Socioeconomic and political changes in the post-Cold War era led to the proliferation of internal conflicts in many countries. Often, the majority of those displaced are women, children, and the elderly (Deng, 2004, p. 21). Governments in countries experiencing internal conflicts are facing external pressures to manage the conflicts and address the humanitarian crisis resulting from the violence. Despite the growing number of IDPs worldwide, the international community rarely intervenes with internal displacement; it is assumed that states are responsible for providing protection and assistance to citizens within its borders (Manchanda, 2004, p. 238). International intervention can be seen as threatening or undermining state sovereignty. However, this view of sovereignty is problematic and limited, as people are caught up on both sides of internal wars (Rai, 2005, p. 9). Recognizing the complexities involved in internal displacement, the UN has made changes to its policies regarding IDPs. These changes serve to promote better cooperation between governments and international aid agencies in dealing with the displacement issue effectively.

In South Asia, and specifically in Nepal, the increase in armed conflict between the Maoists and government armed forces has contributed significantly to the widespread displacement of people (Human Rights Without Frontiers, 2005; Sahadevan, 2002, p. 103). In Nepal, human rights violations and increased insecurity resulting from the armed conflict between Maoist guerillas and the Royal Nepalese Army has generated waves of population movements within the country and across its borders since 1996 (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2008). Ten years of bloody armed conflict have resulted in approximately 13 000 deaths, and an estimated 200 000 people have been displaced (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2006; Upadhyay & Sherchan, 2003; USAID, 2008b).

Until recently, Nepal’s dominant political narrative has been constructed around a Hindu kingdom established by the Shah dynasty (Manchanda, 2004, p. 240). The revolution that occurred in 1950 was followed by the declaration of a new constitution. The 1959 election and the formation of a parliamentary system signified the country’s transition toward democratic process (Riaz & Basu, 2007, p. 125). However, this experience was short-lived. In 1962, King Mahendra dismissed the elected government and suspended the constitution and parliamentary system. The King replaced the parliamentary system with the *panchyats* (partyless) system, through which he became the absolute decision-making figure (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2008). The political situation in Nepal did not significantly alter after the inauguration of Mahendra’s son, King Birendra. Soon after assuming his new role, Birendra introduced an amendment that reaffirmed centralized power, and further restrictions were imposed on political parties (Manchanda, 2004, p. 239).

Nepal’s socioeconomic system is based on the centuries-old caste system, in which power and wealth is held by a small elite class consisting of Brahmin, Chettri, and Newar caste members (Manchanda, 2004, p. 240). Up until 1950, the country had no public service systems (e.g., education and healthcare) or public infrastructures (Devkota, 2007, p. 296). The income gap between different classes, in conjunction with the lack of public infrastructures, contributed to the country’s poverty crisis.

Since the 1950s, Nepal’s economy has depended largely on foreign aid for development (Devkota, 2007, p. 293). The newly elected Nepali Congress embarked on a series of land reforms beginning in 1959 that aimed at reducing the power of landlords, along with a restructuring of socioeconomic and bureaucratic systems (Manchanda, 2004, p. 242). The signing of the Technical Cooperation Division in 1952 marked the beginning of Nepal’s acceptance of foreign aid (p. 296). However, uneven regional, urban, and rural development and the widening income gap increased inequalities among social classes and regions. Changes in Nepal politics during the 1960s shaped the country’s economic development. Under the partyless system during the 1960s, the state seized absolute control over the country’s production and distribution (Sahadevan, 2002, p. 105). As such, the partyless system was mostly responsible for the growth or the loss of socioeconomic development in Nepal. From the 1960s to the 1990s, Nepal’s economic growth was perceived as “sluggish, though better than during the autocratic rule . . . before 1950” (Devkota, 2007, p. 298). Further, the economic growth in Nepal since the 1950s only benefited a small class of people while the majority of the country’s population continued to live in poverty.

Poverty continued to rise in Nepal from the 1970s onward and affected those “mostly in rural areas where 85 percent of the population resides. . . . Poverty increased at the rate of 3.1 per cent between the mid-eighties and the mid 1990s, the highest rate in South Asia” (Devkota, 2007, p. 286). The poverty rate has been further exacerbated by the conflict between the Maoists and the government. Since the early 1990s, Nepal’s government implemented several development

projects that sought to improve the economic system in the country. Despite these changes, there appeared to be “a gap between the formulation of policies and its actual implementation” (Human Rights Without Frontiers, 2005, p. 5). Consequently, the majority of Nepalese continue to live in poverty, a situation that heightens tensions between the government and society.

Nepal's dependency on foreign aid has increased, with about two thirds of the annual budget being supported by foreign donations, grants, and loans (Devkota, 2007, p. 293). According to one study, Nepal's total foreign aid debt in 2005 was estimated at \$3.12 billion (p. 294). In addition, a large portion of the foreign loans provided to recipient countries are returned to donor countries in the form of investment profits (Dunning, 2004, p. 411). Foreign aid thus created rather than relieved the economic burden for the majority of the population in Nepal. Mismanagement, lack of governmental accountability, and corruption are also main contributors to the widespread poverty and income inequalities across the country (Upreti, 2006, p. 37). Together, these factors contribute to the tensions and conflict between the government and oppositional forces such as the Maoists.

The rise in poverty, in conjunction with the armed conflict, forced many people in Nepal to migrate to urban centers and across national borders for security and better economic opportunities (Riaz & Basu, 2007, p. 125). The UNHCR (2008) estimated that approximately 100 000 people were internally displaced in 2006. Many displaced Nepali are migrating to countries in East, Southeast, South, and West Asia, as well as Canada, in search of employment and better lives (Devkota, 2007, p. 293; WOREC Nepal, 2003). Devkota estimated that 8 million Nepali worked overseas in 2006. Those who work abroad send remittances to their families and thereby ease the country's economic burdens and contribute to the country's annual GDP. However, increased violence resulting from the conflict between the Maoists and the government threaten to undermine Nepal's economic progress.

3. The Maoist Conflict and the Politicization of IDPs in Nepal

The Maoist conflict, or the People's War, was an armed conflict that began in 1996 between the Maoist guerillas and the Nepal government, with the goal of overthrowing the Nepal monarchy and establishing a new republican state (Hutt, 2007, p. 17; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2006; Manchada, 2004, p. 240; Refugees International, 2008; Upreti, 2006, p. 35). Many Nepali, especially marginalized individuals and groups, supported the Maoists at the beginning of the conflict. Much of the initial public support for the Maoists stemmed from the Maoists' harsh dealings with the perpetrators of injustice and corruption (Human Rights Without Frontiers, 2005). However, support soon declined as members of Maoist forces practiced indiscriminate killings of civilians (Hutt, 2007, p. 20).

The conflict between the Maoists and the government entered a new phase in 2001. A series of political crises during this year posed further threats to the country's monarchy and increased the number of displaced persons (Devkota, 2007, p. 308). The royal massacre that occurred on June 1, 2001, and the subsequent ascension of King Gyanendra Shah signaled a new phase of Nepal's political development (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2006). Unsatisfied with Prime Minister Deuba's performance, King Gyanendra dismissed Deuba and declared a state of emergency that allowed him to take over executive powers. In October 2001 he indefinitely postponed parliamentary elections (Upadhyay & Sherchan, 2003). During the same period, the King declared the Maoists “terrorists” and ordered a military crackdown on the insurgency (Refugees International, 2005). The crackdown generated new waves of violence that spread quickly throughout the country, and Nepal's economy declined dramatically as a consequence (Devkota, 2007, p. 308; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2006; Refugees International, 2005). For example, tourism, a major source of revenue for the country, decreased exponentially, as did trade with India, Nepal's key trading partner. In 2005, the Refugees International organization estimated that 60 percent of households were chronically food insecure, being able to cultivate only six months of food from their land (Refugees International, 2005). During this period, certain rights were suspended, such as the right of assembly, the right to freedom of thought and expression, and the right not to be held in preventive detention without sufficient grounds (Upreti, 2006, p. 39). Additionally, those suspected by the government of aiding the Maoist forces through practices such as providing food, shelter, and financial assistance were often the target of Royal Army violence. The majority of these deaths occurred during “encounters” in which many civilians “were shot dead in their house and in custody days after their arrests” (Upadhyay & Scherchen, 2003, p. 8). Many were forced to flee from their homes as they feared being charged by the security forces of being Maoist supporters or spies.

Displacement in Nepal is closely tied to the patterns of armed conflict. In many parts of the country, the continuation of violence caused the closures of public service facilities such as schools and hospitals, as well as local businesses (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2006). The widespread of violence further increased vulnerabilities of IDPs and thereby added to the instabilities in the country. The prevalence of violence became a major concern among human rights organizations.

Compared to other groups of people in Nepal, poor people from remote and rural areas are more affected by Maoist violent activities. Tactics such as forced recruitment, abduction, extortion, and other human rights violations carried out by Maoists forced many to move away from their villages and communities (Upreti, 2006, p. 45). Forced recruitment of

children into the Maoist army became a major cause of the displacement of children and youths in the country. Children as young as 14 are reportedly recruited and often serve as porters, spies, and sentries (Human Rights Without Frontiers, 2005). The fear of being accused as government spies has forced many to flee from their homes (Hutt, 2007, p. 23).

In 2004, UNDP Nepal Human Development placed the country's level of human development "among the lowest in the world" (Human Rights Without Frontiers, 2005, p. 6). In the following year, Nepal was classified as one of the countries worst affected by displacement (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2008). However, the displacement crisis in Nepal received limited attention from the government and international agencies. This limitation is reflected in the absence of targeted assistance to address the most immediate humanitarian needs. No survey has been carried out to assess the vulnerability of IDPs on the basis of different indicators such as access to shelter, food, drinking water, sanitation, medicine and care. (Human Rights Without Frontiers, 2005, p. 9)

In addition, limited knowledge about the total number of IDPs and the conditions of the dislocations pose serious problems to the effective provision of aid. Whereas Nepal's government retained control over urban centres, most rural and remote areas of the country are under the Maoists' jurisdiction (Upreti, 2006, p. 46). In particular, the government has neglected or been unable to control Nepal's midwestern areas (e.g., Rukum, Rolpha, Salyan, and Jajarkot) which have thereby become hotspots for insurgency and further contributed to the displacement of many people (Riaz & Basu, 2007, p. 138).

4. Living Conditions of Internally Displaced Persons, and State Responses

Unlike in the early years of the conflict, the majority of those who are currently being dislocated belong "to more disadvantage groups of society and have had to struggle to make ends meet" (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2006, p. 7). Because most displaced persons came from farming communities, most are "unprepared for making a living in urban areas" and as such often work in low-paid and exploited conditions. Those with capital have found the transition to urban life less challenging than those who were poor (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2008). The rise in numbers of IDPs moving to urban areas has also led to increases in real estate and rental prices, which make it more difficult for poor IDPs to find affordable accommodation in major cities such as Kathmandu (Europe External Policy Advisory [EEPA], 2007). The limited access to adequate housing has imposed further strains on many IDPs' lives.

Although displacement affects people differently, research has identified women, members of the Dalit caste, people with disabilities, children, and seniors as being the most vulnerable displaced persons in Nepal (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2006). Whereas historically it has been men who migrate, increasing violence has forced many women and children, particularly those from rural and remote districts, to migrate in order to escape violence and discrimination (WOREC Nepal, 2003). IDPs—and especially women and children—are particularly vulnerable to a series of threats that include human trafficking, prostitution, and forced labor.

In the course of their flight, many IDPs have lost or left behind their documents. Many administrative structures no longer exist, and most IDPs do not have the opportunity to replace their lost documents. Additionally, the government has yet to take "concrete measures to facilitate the issuance of new documents to replace those left behind or lost" (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2006, p. 7). Consequently, the lack of documentation proves to be a challenge for IDPs in accessing public services in urban centers and participating fully in the democratic process, for example by voting.

For displaced children who lack proper documents, access to education is difficult in certain regions of Nepal (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2006). Displaced children are vulnerable to various threats such as forced conscription, child trafficking, sexual exploitation, and child labour (EEPA, 2007). An estimated 40 000 Nepalese children have been displaced since 1996 (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2006). Rather than migrating to major urban centres, most displaced children cross into neighboring countries such as India in search of economic opportunity (OCHA, 2008).

The performance of the Nepali government toward IDPs has been under criticism by international organizations. In particular, the government's definition of IDPs included those who were displaced by Maoist forces, but it excluded people who were forced by governmental forces to move away from their homes (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2006). Those who were forced by state security forces to flee their homes found little incentive to register as IDPs because they often did not qualify for government assistance (OCHA, 2008). Furthermore, the "fear of ending up on an IDP list which would fall into the hands of the Maoists also convinced many that there was nothing to gain from registering as an IDP" (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2006, p. 4). As a result, many IDPs in Nepal are unaccounted for.

In addition to lack of recognition of those who are displaced by the government, critics also point out how Nepal has failed to spell out a coherent set of practices and policies to address the protection and assistance needs of IDPs. Moreover, Nepal's government has been generally reluctant to acknowledge that there has been a displacement crisis in

the country caused by the fighting between the Maoist insurgents and governmental forces. (Human Rights Without Frontiers, 2005, p. 10)

Governmental failure or unwillingness to address the displacement crisis has thus further increased the vulnerability of IDPs. The absence of systematic monitoring systems of population movement by both international and national authorities also made it difficult to assess the scope of displacement since the beginning of the conflict, thereby preventing the provision and distribution of effective aid. Responding to international and internal pressures, the government of Nepal drafted a new IDP policy in 2006. However, critics rejected the government's IDP policy because it ignored a number of [UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement] principles and recommendations and failed to address the main weakness of previous state policies on IDPs, i.e. the politicisation of IDP definition excluding people displaced by state forces. Other major weaknesses included the absence of an implementation plan, which should provide clear guidelines to district-level government representatives as well as the lack of financial resources from the state. (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2006, p. 8)

Although changes have been made by the government through financial incentives to assist IDPs returning home, government workers at the district level are often unaware of financial assistance for IDPs who return (OCHA, 2008). Consequently, many IDPs are uninformed about the availability of assistance that they are entitled to, and this lack of knowledge has important implications on their returning.

Demand for the improvement of IDPs' status and living conditions transformed into a series of protests organized in 2005 by the Maoist Victims' Association. The protests demanded that the government recognize the status of IDPs and their humanitarian and human rights needs and concerns (Human Rights Without Frontiers, 2005). Unfortunately, these demands were met with violence carried out by government security forces. This action did not follow the UNCHR's Guiding Principles, which specify that IDPs have the right to request and receive protection and humanitarian assistance from their state authorities and that "they shall not be persecuted and punished for making such a request" (Human Rights Without Frontiers, 2005, p. 10).

There have also been documented cases of arrests by government security forces of IDPs living in camps. For example, on June 5, 2005, Nepali police broke into the Khaullamanch IDP camp in Kathmandu and arrested about 80 people (Human Rights Without Frontiers, 2005). Many of these detainees reportedly disappeared while in police custody. In addition, the police reportedly used violence against children, women, and elderly people (OCHA, 2008).

Increased protests at the beginning of 2006, in conjunction with international pressures, forced the King to end his autocratic rule and restore the multiparty system. Additionally, he lost power and control over the army (BBC News, 2008). The end of autocratic rule ushered in a new sense of optimism and hope, as well as fear. Meanwhile, the continuation of violence in rural and remote communities contributed further to the displacement crisis in Nepal.

5. Challenges to Nepal Autocratic Rule

Following weeks of nationwide protests in 2006, the King publicly announced the end of monarch rule and reestablished the parliament (Hutt, 2007, p. 25). By the end of the year, the Maoist leadership declared a ceasefire. This action created opportunities for peace talks among the leaders of the political parties. The election scheduled for June 2007 did not actually take place, because negotiations between the Maoist leaders and Nepal's major political parties fell through on October 5 of the same year (Sharma, 2007). The Maoists reportedly walked out from a talk with the government in September 2007 after the political parties rejected Maoist demands to abolish the monarchy in the upcoming election and "introduce full proportional representation" (Sharma, 2007, p. 6).

The Maoists won 102 seats following the April 10, 2008, election; as a result, according to one Western news agency, the Maoist party had "a good chance of securing an absolute majority" (BBC News, 2008). Following the victory, Maoist leader Prachanda proposed the integration of the Party's army into the existing state army and police forces. This proposal generated great concern among leaders of other parties and in the international community (Adhikary, 2008). On August 16, 2008, Nepal's Internet news agency, nepalnews.com (2008), reported that Nepal's three major political parties (the Maoists, the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist [UML], and the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum [MJF]) had reached an agreement to form an alliance. It should be noted that at the time there was no agreement among party leaders about the future role of the monarch and the disarmament of the Maoists. Although these changes offer new hopes for most IDPs, reports of ongoing conflict in western and northeastern regions in Nepal have forced many more out of their homes.

6. International Response to Nepal's Internal Displacement Crisis

As mentioned previously, protection for IDPs is limited within international law because of the concern over national sovereignty and the assumption that states that follow international human rights and humanitarian guidelines, such as Nepal, are obligated to provide assistance and protection to IDPs within their borders (Human Rights Without Frontiers, 2005). However, as we have seen, Nepal's IDP policies are filled with contradictions and discrimination against those who are forcibly displaced by governmental armed forces. In addition, in a press release issued on January 11, 2008, the

UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) stated that “bombings, killing, abductions, demands for ransom and other forms of threats aimed at political opponents and civilian populations continue to hinder the ability of the state to deliver basic services in the country” (UN News Centre, 2008).

Although international aid agencies and donors are well aware that the armed conflict between Maoist forces and Nepal security forces has been the main cause of displacement of people throughout the country, the crisis has received limited attention from the international community (Human Rights Without Frontiers, 2005; Refugees International, 2008). On April 22, 2005, in a statement released during a visit to Nepal, Walter Kalin, the UN Secretary-General’s Representative on the Human Rights of IDPs, suggested that the IDP crisis in Nepal has been “largely overlooked and neglected” (quoted in Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2006, p. 8). Kalin also found that violence perpetuated both by the Maoists and government armed forces was one of the major causes for widespread displacement in Nepal. Kalin suggested that although the displacement crisis in Nepal “is not a humanitarian crisis in the usual sense, there are reasons for grave concerns about the humanitarian and human rights situations” (quoted in Brookings, 2005). He also made several recommendations to the then-King’s new IDP policy. He recommended that the government implement as soon as possible a comprehensive national IDP policy that will provide for the rights and needs of all conflict-induced displaced persons in the country and which is in accordance with Nepal’s international human rights obligations, as expressed in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement; condemn the emergence of self-defense or vigilante groups and discourage them from taking the law into their own hands; adapt national legislation to assure adequate protection of the human rights of IDPs, including with regard to registration as an IDP and voting; [and] train national and local authorities, both civil and military, on the rights of IDPs and the protection of the civilian population. (Brookings, 2005)

However, as we have seen, many of the recommendations made by the UN human rights representative did not make it into the new IDPs policy introduced by the King in 2006. Additionally, the UN representative urged the Maoist Party to respect the basic principles of international humanitarian law, in particular the fundamental distinction between combatants and non-combatants and common article 3 of the Geneva Conventions; [and] make a public commitment to adhere to the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, which is also addressed to non-State actors. (Brookings, 2005)

Since 2005, a number of IDP studies have been conducted by major international aid agencies with the goals of improving the understanding of IDP issues and promoting sustainable solutions for those who are displaced. International aid agencies such as USAID participated in projects that aimed at “increased national capacity to transition to peace, building strong and representative government, establishing the rule of law and ending human rights abuses, and addressing social inequality and poverty” (USAID, 2008a, Overview section). Local NGO organizations such as INSEC assisted the return of many IDPs to their homes in various regions of Nepal. In 2007, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) established the Information, Counseling and Legal Assistance (ICLA) project to help with the return of IDPs in Nepal (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2008). However, the escalation of violence threatened the withdrawal of services and financial aid of international aid agencies and donors. For example, the decision made by the Canadian government in 2005 to withdraw aid in one midwestern district of Nepal was influenced mainly by the rise in Maoist insurgency. Other donor countries such as Germany, Switzerland, Britain, Finland, Japan, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway suspended rural development projects in the same district (Asian Pacific Post, 2005). The withdrawal has significant effects on the local population, who depend on these aid agencies for access to public services such as health and education. Although the signing of the 12-point peace agreement between the Maoists and the government has renewed interest within the international community, some aid agencies and donors remained skeptical on whether peace is possible (USAID, 2008a).

In 2007, donors contributed about US \$72.6 million in aid to Nepal. On January 11, 2008, the UN pledged US \$104 million toward humanitarian and development efforts to help Nepal recover from the 10 years of armed conflict. Further, the UN decided to allocate US \$29 million to help IDPs and refugees. The Common Appeal for Transition Support (CATS) consisted of 61 development projects developed earlier this year to address immediate needs of food, nutrition, security, health, and disaster response. The establishment of these projects enabled aid workers to “assist internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees and children affected by armed conflict” (UN News Centre, 2008). A number of IDPs reportedly returned to their homes with the assistance of cooperative efforts by aid organizations such as OCHA, UNHRC, IRC, and Nepal Red Cross since the beginning of 2008. OCHA also works with the Nepal government to formulate guidelines that would improve returning conditions of IDPs (OCHA, 2008).

The recent election results have renewed international aid organizations’ interest in funding development projects in Nepal. For example, on July 22, 2008, the director of infrastructure at the World Bank’s International Finance Cooperation (IFC) offered to finance 25 percent of the total investment for building the Upper Karnali Hydropower Project (Sarkar, 2008). Despite these changes, the situation of IDPs in Nepal show little improvement.

7. The Politics of Returning

The return patterns of IDPs in Nepal are characterized by “sporadic return movements” (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2006, p. 5). The re-establishment of a multiparty government, the signing of the 12-point agreement between the Maoists and other parties in 2005, and the signing of the Code of Conduct in May of the following year allowed IDPs to resume rights over their land and property and encouraged many to return to their homes (OCHA, 2008). These agreements reflected Maoist and government commitment to provide assistance to IDPs. On January 27, 2008, during a meeting between Baburam Bhattarai and the Maoist leaders, a senior Maoist leader claimed that “the properties and lands seized by Maoists would soon return to their owners” (nepalnews.com, 2008). The news generated new optimism and hope among IDPs. Additionally, the forming of a newly democratic government following the recent election encouraged many to return home. However, ongoing human rights violations in conjunction with the absence of governmental forces, unresolved land disputes, lack of security, and lack of access to essential public services in many areas made returning impossible for many displaced persons.

Violent acts such as killings, torture, abduction, and extortion of civilians continue to be prevalent in areas under Maoist control. The establishment of a “people’s court” by the Maoists in rural areas was perceived by international organizations and many displaced persons in Nepal as “failing to guarantee people’s right to security and physical integrity” (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2006, p. 6). In some eastern districts of Nepal, differential treatment toward different groups of IDPs contradicted the Maoists’ earlier commitment to “respect the safe, dignified and unconditional return of all IDPs” (p. 6).

In the early part of 2008, the government stopped registering displaced persons. According to Pushpa Pandey, an IDP protection coordinator of the Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC), “this is a matter of serious concern” (IRIN, 2008b). This latest decision reinforced Nepal’s discriminatory IDP policies and thereby contributed to the displacement crisis. In June 2008, a report published by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) estimated that 50 000 to 70 000 people are still unable to return home because of a lack of security and public services (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2008). Those who were unable to register as IDPs are seeking help from the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and INSEC. So far, the NRC has helped more than 1000 registered IDPs families and are expecting more in the upcoming months (IRIN, 2008a). Violence continued to cause serious havoc to socioeconomic infrastructures throughout the country. Gopal Siwakoti of the International Institute for Human Rights, Environment and Development (INHURED) commented that “There will be renewed displacement and a crisis if the current violence is not controlled” (IRIN, 2008c). At the same time, the country was gearing up for the April election, and there were doubts whether the election would take place given the continued violence and instabilities.

According to a UN news story published on March 30, 2008, a total of seven Maoists had been killed since February 5, and increased Maoist violence against oppositional parties and voters was also reported (United Nations News Service, 2006). Despite this, Maoist leader Prachanda stated that the party is “fully committed to the peace process and multi-party democracy and to rebuild this country” (BBC News, 2008).

In the Terai region, tensions between two ethnic groups, the Madhesi and the Pahade, led to communal violence. The violence has led to ethnic clashes and the displacement of both groups, with most displaced being Pahades. [In the first week of May, 2008] nearly 90 families fled in fear of the militant group Madhesi Tigers in Bara, Siraha and Saptari districts, 400km southeast of the capital (IRIN, 2008c).

Madhesi families also reported being displaced, including “those who do not support the militant groups” (IRIN, 2008c). Employment workers, media, human rights aid workers, and middle-class and wealthy landowners are among the targets of violence. Many newly displaced Madhesi take refuge in other safe areas of the Terai region such as Biratnagar, Inarwa, and Janakpur. According to an international aid observer, the current trend of displacement in Nepal “is quite a different form of displacement and it is likely that the displaced families will never be able to return to their homes” (IRIN, 2008c, Dangerous Trend section).

8. Conclusion

As we have seen, patterns of displacement in Nepal are closely tied to the dynamic of the armed conflict between the Maoists and the Nepal royal armed forces that began more than 10 years ago. Despite the dangers posed by conflict-induced displacement, researchers, policy makers, and international agencies often have only a partial understanding of the displacement crisis in Nepal. This paper demonstrates that forced migration within the context of Nepal IDPs is complex and must take into account differences of gender, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic backgrounds within the displaced population. Most often, women and children have by far been the worst affected by the conflict. The vulnerabilities to violence and discrimination that they experience prevent them from gaining employment and access to public services (e.g., health and education) and thus undermine their contributions to Nepal’s reconstruction process. For most Nepalese, inability or reluctance to return home contributes to a feeling of dislocation.

In tackling the issue of IDPs, the Nepal government needs to acknowledge the extent of the IDP problem, improve the registration process, and develop short-term emergency aid packages and long-term programs to assist IDPs with their return and reintegration. Although a significant effort has been made by international aid agencies to help with the return of IDPs, many Nepalese have not witnessed improvements in their lives. In examining the armed conflict between the Maoists and the Nepal government, the goal of this paper has been to analyze the relationships between aid, economic development, and migration. Since the 1950s, foreign aid and loans have been fused into Nepal socioeconomic and political structures and practices. This fusion effectively shapes class, religious, and ethnic relations between groups and undeniably plays a role in Nepal's ongoing armed conflict. Although the link between politics and aid serves to benefit government interests, it clearly undermined the humanitarian aspect of aid itself. As we have seen, the control of foreign aid by elites in Nepal has severe consequences for the impoverished and displaced.

The decline in state authority over the years and the rise in militant movements such as the Maoist movement increased vulnerabilities for IDPs, especially women, children, and the elderly. As the conflict intensified, many were forced to flee from their homes. Increased rates of displacement have important effects on people's security, health, and socioeconomic well-being. The displacement situation in Nepal is a serious problem that requires immediate cooperative efforts of state and international intervention and assistance. Ongoing violence, instability, and the lack of development in conflict districts mean that the government needs to take a more active role in creating favorable conditions for safe returns of the displaced and improving security in conflict regions. This must be done through cooperating with international aid agencies and donors.

Recent increases of aid to IDPs in Nepal reflect the growing numbers of displaced people. By examining Nepal's IDP policies and aid efforts by international aid agencies and donors, this paper calls attention to the geopolitical factors that could potentially endanger the effectiveness of aid distribution to displaced Nepalese. Despite various ceasefire agreements and peace negotiations, the continuation of violence in some districts of Nepal becomes a major obstacle to the return of IDPs and to the peace process. Recent attempts for peace between the Maoists and other political parties and new outbreaks of violence in certain districts of Nepal must be monitored closely to ensure security for the safe return of IDPs.

Note: Since the time this article was written, a series of new political events had occurred in Nepal.

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