

Review – People Forced to Flee

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, MAY 17 2023

People Forced to Flee: History, Change and Challenge
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Oxford University Press, 2022

It is now over 70 years since nations drew up the landmark 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees in the wake of World War II. *People Forced to Flee*, and its accompanying podcast, mark this milestone. It notably comes at a time of enhanced cooperation between the UNHCR and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) – now integrated in the United Nations (UN) family. Oxford University Press proudly produced this as it's latest in a long line of publications, stretching back to 1993, that were previously titled *The State of the World's Refugees*.

The volume traces the history of asylum from ancient to modern times. It then explains how the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees outgrew post-war Europe to eventually become a global framework. Sequential chapters review international responses to internally displaced persons and the communities in which they live, including in the context of climate change and disasters. Relevant special sections examine how new partnerships have been widening UNHCR's funding base, improving data, evidence and analysis, strengthening innovation and investments in locally-led responses.

Overall, *People Forced to Flee* juxtaposes pessimism at the growing scope of forced migration across the globe, with a discussion of the UNHCR's record on lasting solutions to forced displacement, the lessons learned, and prospects to unlock more. In doing so, it also charts the growing recognition that forced displacement constitutes an essential development and humanitarian challenge.

Justice for the Forcibly Displaced

A strength of this impressively-sized *tour de force* by the UNHCR (some 539 pages with copious illustrations) is that it avoids institutional circumspection on the UN's failures. Sidestepping even implicit tones of self-congratulation, it is a call for action to help desperate people, who are forced to flee. Importantly, this study does not shy away from affirming the need for judicial action. It traces the expansion of efforts to hold those who cause displacement – the perpetrators of severe human rights abuses – criminally liable. These subjects are recurrent themes in the series, and the balance of success and failure as of 2022 is discussed with the level of nuance that one would expect from a study associated with this respected UN agency.

People Forced to Flee reviews the recent operations of one of the most vital international organisations for humanity, including international responses to forced displacement *within* borders, as well as *beyond* them, and the protection principles that apply to both. It reviews where they have been used with consistency and success, and where they have not. At times, the strength and resolve of the international community seems strong, yet solutions and meaningful solidarity are often elusive. Taking stock of this today – at this important anniversary – is all the more crucial as the world faces increasing forced displacement. As this series and its latest rendition show, any effective response depends on the commitment to international cooperation set down in the 1951 Convention: a vision often compromised by efforts to minimise responsibilities. One of the primary purposes of the UNHCR's commitment to this major research on forced migration is to delineate the 1951 Convention in practice. Largely, this latest volume

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succeeds in this endeavour.

There is growing recognition that “doing better” is a global imperative. Among those fleeing, the most pain is arguably being experienced in low- and middle-income countries, persisting for generations. Refugees and the displaced face barriers to improving their lives, contributing to the communities in which they live, and realising solutions. Humanitarian and development action has the potential to be transformational, especially when grounded in local contexts. *People Forced to Flee* examines how increased development investments in education, health and economic inclusion are helping to improve socio-economic opportunities for forcibly displaced persons and their host communities. In 2018 for instance, the international community reached a Global Compact on Refugees for more equitable and sustainable responses.

People Forced to Flee also imaginatively looks at the potential responses to define the next 70 years. As forced migration becomes ever more complex, and international and regional inter-connectors metastasise, this volume shows that UNHCR is consistently formulating new multi-sectoral reactions. Among the most prominent are likely to be better prophylactic measures to stabilise regional population flows, and to de-escalate forced migration. The UNHCR, with other lead operational field agencies such as the UNDP, has already made some progress in this regard.

As this study shows, criticism may focus mainly on the negative side of these operations – that is, that it amounts to regional containment. While this UNHCR series traditionally contemplates the future scope of organisational displacement response, this volume says little about the thinking which predominates among the most concerned member-states – that is, that displacement flows should be discouraged by “in-country” programming. Seen from the most benevolent perspective, these strategies discourage flow by improving regional life experience against the major UN social indicators. From a more negative point of view, this may be perceived as entailing a concomitant discouragement to the many who have good cause to seek the protection of the 1951 Convention. Perhaps because of its close association with UNHCR, this volume rather skates around the delicate issue of dissecting the relative merits of economic against human rights “pulls and pushes” in the continuum of motivations for seeking asylum.

The Continuing Challenge for UNHCR

People Forced to Flee comes at a time when the agency which sponsors it has not sought to disguise the problem’s scale. At the book’s launch, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi noted that “[refugee] numbers have climbed every year over the past decade ... Either the international community (will) address this human tragedy, resolve conflicts and find lasting solutions, or this terrible trend will continue.” Just before, the displaced figures (flows caused by war, violence, persecution, and human rights abuses alone) stood at 89.3 million. This is well over double the 2013 figures, according to the UNHCR’s Annual Global Trends Report. Taking into account refugees and other forms of displacement together, we are heading towards a 200 million scale challenge in this decade.

As *People Forced to Flee* demonstrates, and as High Commissioner Grandi appealed during its launch: “We need more resources to face this crisis.” Indeed, citing the World Bank, the UNHCR highlighted that 2021 was remarkable for the number of conflicts that escalated, with 23 countries that have a combined population of 850 million “facing medium- or high-intensity conflicts.” As this UNHCR study also shows: “Most refugees were, once again, hosted by neighbouring countries with few resources. The number of asylum seekers reached 4.6 million, up 11%”.

Pioneering Refugee Studies Research

For those who wish to undertake further research beyond this comprehensive book, there are pathways in the digital version of the study to reference papers in the field. To mark the 70th Anniversary of the 1951 Convention, the UNHCR commissioned essays which canvass contemporary issues such as displacement drivers; socio-economic inclusion; improving data and evidence; and unlocking political barriers to engagement. They represent the perspectives of a broad array of partners in forced displacement responses, and inform the research for this book.

People Forced to Flee is best read in conjunction with other contemporary analyses of international response, so that

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the data offered by UNHCR is placed in context. Recent landmark studies of the UNHCR include, “Forced Displacement Trends and Responses in the Horn” by Tsion Tadesse Abebe; “Educating the Forcibly Displaced”, by Dina Abu-Ghaida and Karishma Silva; “Internal Displacement, UNHCR and the International Community” by Samuel Cheung; and “COVID-19 and Forcibly Displaced People”, by Isabel Arciniegas Guaneme.

Conclusions

At the time of writing, several UN members states, including the United Kingdom, are proposing *de facto* breaches of the 1951 Convention to seek to dissuade “small boat” arrivals from intermediary countries, where asylum seekers “bypass” a 1951 status claim, because of alleged “destination preferences”. This is as contentious an issue as the country’s arrangement with Rwanda on status-determination. The globalisation of voluminous population movement throws up vexed challenges for those fleeing, and for host communities.

Few matters in international affairs carry such a sense of prescient urgency. Already the problem is not just on our media headlines, but also on our own shores and in everyone’s neighbourhood. Far from being confined to scholarly debate, it is difficult to conceive of a subject more emotive or indeed emotional. In the media-feed which followed this book’s release, a number of facts are pertinent. Outside of Europe, internal displacement (alone) reached 53.2 million last year, driven by conflict in Myanmar, Tigray, and the Sahel (particularly Burkina Faso and Chad). The UNHCR warned that the “speed and volume of displacement is still outpacing the availability of solutions for those displaced”.

However, as UN High Commissioner for Refugees Grandi highlights, this report also contains “glimmers of hope” for international response. These operations are carefully and quite objectively delineated in *People Forced to Flee*. Its writers have laboured to accumulate a mass of the most recent data on refugees and the displaced, and on the response. It would have been very easy for its collective authorship to mount a robust defence of UNHCR, but instead they have exposed organisational weaknesses rather than mere “soundbites of UN success”. It is the most comprehensive study to date, and constitutes vital reading for students of International Relations.

About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.