The Effects of the Changing World Order on the Protection of Displaced Persons and Migrants:
The Field Perspective
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The Danish Refugee Council (DRC) in cooperation with the Danish People Aid (DPA) has been present in North Caucasus since 1997. Initially DRC implemented a small shelter programme in North Ossetia. But with the resumption of fighting in Chechnya in the so-called second Chechen conflict and the ensuing displacement of some 300,000 persons DRC started emergency assistance distribution among the affected population, including both displaced persons and vulnerable groups of the remaining population. Since 1999 DRC has implemented a programme of emergency assistance and simultaneously an integration programme for victims of the first Chechen conflict. In 2002 some 400,000 beneficiaries received assistance in the form of emergency assistance, shelter activities, social and economic rehabilitation.

In April of 2002 the federal authorities declared that the military phase of the conflict in Chechnya was over. In the wake of the tragic hostage-taking in a Moscow theater in October 2002 where a group of militants - or terrorists if you will - took 700 hostages, the planned withdrawal of troops from Chechnya was shelved and military operations were intensified. Attacks from militant groups were intensified as well, also targeting the civil administration in Chechnya, as evidenced in the bomb-attack on the administration seat in Grozny on 27 December, killing 90 persons and injuring hundreds. The atrocities of the conflict are well-documented by human rights organisations such as Memorial and Amnesty International.

As of 31 January there were 96,961 IDPs in Ingushetia, the neighbouring republic of Chechnya. It is estimated that some 140,000 persons remain internally displaced within Chechnya. In addition, however, it is estimated that 70% of the population of Chechnya are vulnerable and in need of humanitarian food assistance. The intensified fighting since late 2002 has not eased the situation of the civil population.

Implementing a humanitarian programme in the midst of ongoing conflict presents a number of challenges. Issues of security of humanitarian aid workers as well as upholding the principles of the humanitarian imperative, impartiality, neutrality and the respect of human rights are of paramount importance.

The security of humanitarian staff working in North Caucasus is a continuous challenge. The main threats to staff are kidnapping, mines and unexploded ordnance and collateral damage i.e. being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

After almost a year without incidents of kidnapping Nina Davydovich, an aid worker of the Russian NGO Druzhba was abducted in Chechnya in July of last year. She was released only on 7 January allegedly against ransom. In August Arjan Erkel, the head of Medecins Sans Frontieres in Dagestan was abducted in the capital of Dagestan. Up until now there has been no information as to his fate. In a show of solidarity the UN and NGOs suspended humanitarian activities for the duration of last Thursday 13 February, the day that marked six months of Arjan Erkel's abduction.
DRC staff have on two occasions suffered collateral damage, in one incident injuring a staff member escorting a food aid convoy. In June of last year a DRC convoy of aid workers was hit by an unidentified explosion, four of our staff were lightly injured.

The safety of humanitarian aid workers has made tight security measures a necessity. For the seven expatriate staff working in the DRC humanitarian programme in North Caucasus this means working under guard, movements are irregular to undermine predictability of staff whereabouts and static security measures with respect to living and working areas are in effect. The 400 local staff members working mainly in Chechnya are also working under security precautions, but not under guard. The North Caucasus programme is exceptional in the sense that nowhere else has DRC continued working under such massive security precautions. However, the humanitarian needs and the conviction that a presence did make a difference prevented DRC from pulling out.

Access to beneficiaries also continues to be a challenge. The authorities on a monthly basis by way of the so-called mashutna lists approve access to Chechnya, which allows expatriate staff entry into the republic. However, movement within Chechnya is conditioned upon the security of chosen routes. While access is not denied, the continued military action continues to challenge the security of the provision of humanitarian assistance.

One of the main protection concerns relating to IDPs is ensuring a safe haven. Of the IDPs in Ingushetia only 17% are housed in tented camps, while 28% are housed in spontaneous settlements and 55% are housed with host families. For many of the IDPs housed with host families, they are beginning to feel obliged to relocate. The only option open is to return to Chechnya, although many IDPs do not feel it is safe to return.

In the beginning of December one of the six tented camps in Ingushetia was closed down. Of the 1,400 IDPs in the camp, the majority returned to Chechnya, while a smaller number found accommodation with host families, in spontaneous settlements or with relatives in the other tented camps. While a 20-point plan for the return of Chechen IDPs before the end of 2002 was signed between Ingush and Chechen administrations in April last year, the remaining five tent camps are still in place. However, the concern relating to the inadequate living conditions in the tent camps have led to attempts to find alternative and more sturdy shelter. At the same time, the Chechen administration estimates are that approximately 20% of the IDPs will not return but will seek local integration.

The principle of voluntariness, safety and dignity of return is also a protection concern. The authorities have reiterated their commitment to the principle of voluntariness. The means of ascertaining the voluntariness of return is continuously a subject of dialogue between the federal and local authorities and the international community. And furthermore, the IDPs housed with host families are finding it increasingly difficult to continue putting strain on their hosts. The continued fighting and the generalised violence in Chechnya further hamper ensuring that the return takes place under conditions of safety.

Within Chechnya, IDPs are housed either with host families or in collective centres or Temporary Accommodation Centres (TACs). In September of last year two tented camps in Znamenskoye were closed down and the inhabitants moved to TACs in Grozny. Subsequent interviews of the relocated IDPs indicated that they were not comfortable with their relocation to Grozny.

The access to legal status, documentation and other civil and social entitlements is a further protection concern. In April 2001 the authorities suspended the registration of new arrived Chechen IDPs. This means that any returned IDPs who are displaced again cannot re-register as displaced. Because DRC carries out its own registration of beneficiaries, we have been able to continue the registration of displaced persons and provide assistance to them wherever they are.

The backbone of the DRC emergency and rehabilitation programme is the registration of IDPs and the vulnerable population. DRC maintains 15 information centres and mobile registration teams. In this way the DRC registration database is updated fortnightly and provides the humanitarian community with updated figures on IDP movements. Thus, while the federal registration only
counts 66,000 IDPs the number as registered by DRC shows a total of 96,961 as per 31 January. The registration database has been supplemented by a series of household surveys in Chechnya, surveying the socio-economic status of the Chechen population. DRC is presently carrying out a survey of the entire Chechen population with a view to targeting the assistance and programming rehabilitation activities. The survey has so far shown that up to 70% of the population are vulnerable and in need of food aid. A further indication of the vulnerability of the population directly resulting from the continued conflict is to be seen in the demography of both the IDP population and the remaining population. The registration database indicates that there are missing males in the age group between 17 and 60 both within the IDP population in Ingushetia and in the Chechen population as a whole. In terms of gender specific protection concerns, young men would seem to be an especially vulnerable group.

The continued conflict and the intensification of fighting in the last months have increased the vulnerability of the Chechen population. The rehabilitation and reconstruction, which will be required following a decade of conflict, is enormous. At a time when the international community is preparing itself for another humanitarian crisis in the Middle East, the world may easily lose sight of the continued needs of the population of Chechnya.