

The manipulation of refugee populations

Parties to conflict, including rebel movements, host countries and other States, both within and beyond the regions directly concerned, have often made use of refugee populations in the quest to attain their political and military objectives. It is this manipulation for geopolitical purposes that often presents the greatest threat to refugee security. In such situations refugees may be held hostage by elements that are not bona fide refugees and they may also be denied access to the objective information required making decisions about their future.

The targeting and intimidation of humanitarian personnel

Parties to conflict more and more expect humanitarian organisations to care for the victims of war. At the same time, those parties have increasingly subjected humanitarian personnel to intimidation and violence with the tragic results that have been witnessed in locations such as Burundi, Indonesia, Guinea and, most recently in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The political, legal and security void that exists today, clearly aggravates risk to humanitarian personnel.

Security has reached the top of the agenda

In such a complex and increasingly difficult and dangerous environment for humanitarian action, the security of peoples, of refugee and IDP populated areas and humanitarian personnel, has come to the top of UNHCR's agenda.

The flight by civilian populations intermixed with military elements has led to a growing militarisation of refugee sites, with an increased presence of armed elements and weapons in camps. Such militarisation severely affects the neutrality of refugee camps such as we saw in the Great Lakes of Africa and in West Africa. This weakens the ability of host states to maintain law and order and it can provoke armed attacks on refugee sites by countries of origin and their allies, such as was the case in Kosovo and Albania. It poses a serious security threat, not only to refugees but to local communities, as well as to humanitarian personnel.

Security and the role of UNHCR

The primary responsibility of host states for the physical protection of refugees and the maintenance of the humanitarian and civilian character of refugee camps and settlements is a well-established principle. At the same time, however, it is also increasingly recognised by the international community that there is a need to support host states which are unable to discharge such responsibilities. In particular, States have called upon UNHCR to provide advice, training and technical assistance to host states. UNHCR's activities in this domain have covered a wide range of activities and actions adapted to situation specific circumstances.

Let me give you some examples:

- UNHCR supported the "Contingent Zairois pour la securite dans les camps" during the Rwandan refugee crisis
- During the Kosovo emergency UNHCR disseminated protection guidelines relating to refugee security