

## A. Introduction

This Briefing Paper is intended to serve as the basis for a broader discussion of the central and motivating question of the workshop on "Security in Refugee Populated Areas", to be held Friday, October 29 to Saturday, October 30, 1999 at the Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which is: why do security problems arise in refugee populated areas (RPAs)?

RPAs refers to areas, usually border regions, that have experienced the brunt of an influx of refugees, where refugees are initially settled, and where most of them continue to live. Although refugees distribute themselves throughout the host country, by migrating into towns and other parts of the country, in very few countries do refugees have total freedom of movement. Refugees are usually confined to a zone designated by authorities, and usually referred to by name, such as 'Ngara', 'Goma', 'NWFP', 'the Burmese border' and so forth. For convenience, this paper will refer to refugees, connoting those who have crossed a border, but we include returnees since we are interested in what happens to refugees when they go back. (Much of the paper is also applicable to internally displaced people.) "RPA" thus refers either to a refugee or returnee populated area.

By security problems we mean threats to physical safety stemming both from military attacks and the breakdown of humanitarian-based law and order.<sup>1</sup> Physical safety and security implies conditions that allows people to live without fear of physical harm, i.e., the absence of threats to life and limb, including verbal threats and intimidation, and the psychological trauma that comes from observing at close hand violence done to others, and from living in conditions of fear. RPAs are afflicted with security problems, having increasingly become zones of military activity, violence and crime. Refugee camps in particular are often places of outright danger, both for refugees and relief workers, and, by virtue of their destabilizing effect, for those living around them. In many cases, security problems have been compounded by the response of governments, which has often been to close borders to refugees and to impose other restrictions on them. In some cases, these responses have aggravated security problems, for example, concentrating large numbers of refugees in camps can lead to increased security problems. Camps and refugees are widely used and targeted in the conduct of war and conflict.<sup>2</sup> In the post-Cold War context, host governments' view of refugee camps, including their willingness to prevent or allow militarization of camps, is motivated by regional and border politics. This was graphically illustrated during the Great Lakes refugee crisis from 1994-1997,<sup>3</sup> but the situation also occurs elsewhere, for example in southern Sudan, along the Thai-Burmese border, and along the Tanzanian-Burundian border, to name only a few cases. Now, as ever, refugees and camps are part of the political strategies of host and sending governments, as well as those actors supporting these governments behind the scenes. When refugees repatriate, they often do so in conditions of unresolved conflict and insecurity.

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<sup>1</sup> In a refugee context, 'to protect' implies either to provide physical shelter, or to use legal authority to secure the rights and freedom of those at risk. For discussion of the definitions of security, see Goodwin Gill 1996; Kourula 1997: 14-15.

<sup>2</sup> "...in many instances, large-scale movements of people - whether from, to or within their country of origin - have been deliberately provoked or engineered by the parties to armed conflicts, with the specific intention of furthering their political and military interests." UNHCR/OAU 1998. Regional Meeting on Refugee Issues in the Great Lakes. Kampala, 8-9 May 1998. Paper 1, Regional Protection and Security in the Great Lakes Region, p.2.

<sup>3</sup> Boutroue, Joel. 1998. *Missed Opportunities: The Role Of The International Community In The Return Of The Rwandan Refugees From Eastern Zaire*. Center for International Studies, M.I.T. Cambridge, Massachusetts.