

of the settlements and their use as bases for cross-border raids took them outside the (protected) category of 'refugee camps' and removed any lawful justification for UNHCR's continued presence." (Goodwin Gill 1996).²⁴ An example of where UNHCR did withdraw is the Atrush refugee camp in northern Iraq, where in 1997, UNHCR terminated its assistance and withdrew after it stated that the humanitarian and nonpolitical nature of the camp had been compromised.²⁵

It is difficult to discern a pattern in the response of relief agencies when it comes to withdrawal: much depends on the politics of the situation as well as the likelihood of things improving. UNHCR withdrew from Atroush camp, but they did not withdraw from the Goma camps in eastern Zaire. In May 1993, Medecins sans Frontieres (Belgium) withdrew most of its women workers from camps in northeastern Kenya after reports of a high incidence of assaults on refugees and aid workers. In northern Uganda in 1996, Oxfam, the largest NGO operating there, withdrew its staff after a series of assaults including abductions and robbery. In eastern Zaire, however, MSF withdrew, as did other NGOs, but Oxfam remained.²⁶

There are several problems related to withdrawal from militarized camps. As with trying to screen out combatants, there are problems of degree. When should agencies withdraw? UNHCR has supposedly clear guidelines relating to this exercise, but even then it is difficult to determine the right time. Another problem is that if agencies do withdraw, the 'protection by presence' they afford disappears, and refugees are left even more vulnerable and without basic assistance. This was the case in the refugee settlements in northern Uganda, when Oxfam and other agency staff withdrew in 1996.

2) *Location of Camps.*

A second explanation for military attacks on camps and other refugee settlements is that they are either too close to the border with the sending country, or located in conflict zones, and thus more likely to be

²⁴ Speaking of the situation in eastern Zaire in 1994, when the camps became militarized and were no longer able to protect the refugees, Guy Goodwin Gill says,

In such situations, a deeper knowledge of law, principle and history will ensure that policies at least have a rational basis other than a general feeling that someone has to do something about all that's wrong in the world. UNHCR's mandate is not to provide food and relief to the needy, but to provide protection. In the face of the international community's unwillingness to take the necessary supportive steps, UNHCR's inability to fulfil its primary responsibility to provide international protection to refugees ... ought to have prompted a decision to withdraw. Such decisions are not to be taken lightly, of course, and they are not made any easier by the continuous inflow of substantial funds for operations in less than ideal conditions; but there are, after all, other agencies capable of meeting human and material needs, and able to do so in complex situations without putting mandate responsibility and constituents at risk.

Guy S. Goodwin-Gill, "Refugee Identity and Protection's Fading Prospect," (Revised, expanded and updated version of a paper presented at the Conference on 'Refugee Rights and Realities', University of Nottingham, 30 November 1996)

²⁵ As described by Roger Winter (WRS 1998): "Hunger strikes and protests ensued. UNHCR offered to assist individual refugees who left the camp, and more than half the camp population did relocate farther away from the Turkish border. Some NGOs protested. USCR did not. Not all people who flee are refugees. Not all people who flee are deserving of international protection. To protect the real refugees, we need to expose and separate the combatants (and criminals) who hide among them. ... these situations call for "tough love" from the humanitarians, for holding fast and not allowing our good intentions to be manipulated."

²⁶ The decision by NGOs to withdraw from insecure situations has intriguing research possibilities. More case material and analysis could point to patterns and would yield important findings.