

# Dams, Guns and Refugees



Larry Armstrong

**Irresponsible development and environmental conflicts displace rural people, especially when the tensions lead to violence.**

Peter Penz

**F**IFTY YEARS AGO, Bengalis on the banks and the waters of the Karnaphuli River in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) saw something out of the ordinary. A strange small watercraft was being paddled up the river. It contained three Europeans wearing tropical helmets; one man in the back seat and two boys sharing the front seat.

These were not colonial Britishers who had “stayed on” after independence. Rather, they were partly Jewish *Ostdeutsche* who were displaced on the German-Russian front of World War II. I was one of the boys in the front seat. The craft was a German-produced *Klepperboot*, a collapsible kayak, with a wood frame and rubber skin.

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What happened to my family is an instance of the massive population displacements of the 1940s, especially in Europe, but also in South Asia,

during the partition of British India into India and Pakistan. Moreover, it illustrates what often happens to those forced to move. Once displaced, the chances are always higher that the new home will not be permanent. In this way we ended up in East Pakistan. Such uprooting applies also to people displaced because of environmental degradation or development, what we might call "environmental" and "development" refugees. This group was ignored by the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees and has been widely neglected in development policy making.

Paddling up the Karnaphuli River we eventually passed a paper mill at the edge of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, which a quarter century afterwards witnessed a civil war that illustrates well the complex connections between development, displacement and conflict. The paper mill was a major marker of the new economic development of this region. Huge bamboo rafts floated down the river system from the hills to supply pulpwood for the mill. (A few years later my father became chief engineer at this factory.)

The hills were inhabited by non-Bengali hill people practicing *jhum* (shifting hillside cultivation). The terrain, hilly and with thin tropical soil, is quite differ-

ent from the lowlands of the Ganges-Brahmaputra delta that makes up most of Bengal. Agriculture consisted of cutting and burning the wild vegetation on a patch of hillside, using the ashes to enhance the earth's limited fertility and cultivating it for a year, then moving on and leaving the old field fallow for several years before returning to it. The dozen or so hill tribes had migrated into this region a few centuries ago from the east (possibly having originated in southern China).

The next sights in our expedition were the first structures in the Karnaphuli River of what was to become the Kaptai Dam, an even more important marker of the development of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The Karnaphuli River collects its waters in the hill tracts and then flows into the Bay of Bengal, its mouth forming the harbour of Chittagong, which lies outside the hill tracts. When the Kaptai Dam was completed and filled (after I had left with my family to immigrate to Canada), 100,000 Chakhma and other tribal people were pushed out of the valleys and forced back to the hillsides (often having to relearn *jhum*, which some of their fathers and grandfathers had earlier been persuaded to abandon by development officials).

The example of the Kaptai Dam is just one of a multitude of instances of displacement by development. Worldwide millions of people are forced to move by development projects and processes every year. It is a phenomenon of truly massive proportions, but receives little international attention because no organization tracks the plight of these people or compiles global statistics on their movements.

Development-induced displacement does not just take the form of building dams, but also includes logging in forests, setting up tree plantations, introducing cattle ranching or mechanized agriculture, opening mines, building transportation corridors (roads, railway tracks, canals) and establishing industrial plants. The pursuit of nature conservation can even be carried out in a manner that displaces traditional users rather than supports them in their livelihoods. In the 1980s, this kind of conflict emerged in the Indonesian part of New Guinea. Organisasi Papua Merdeka, an indigenous-peoples insurgent force, declared the World Wildlife Fund to be an enemy because the latter cut off traditional access to forest resources for Papuans and led to the removal of 102 Papuan families.<sup>1</sup>

In 1971 a spiral of autonomy efforts, state repression

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*Opposite: Refugees trek across the desert in the Gharb Darfur region of western Sudan. It has been estimated that over five million Sudanese have either been internally displaced or forced out of the country since 1955.*



## **The famines in the Sudan were not simple “natural” disasters, but were very much connected with the war.**

and bloody brutality in East Pakistan led, after India's military intervention, to the secession of the province as the independent state of Bangladesh. Turbulent politics in the new state brought to power a president who concluded that the Chittagong Hill Tracts were underpopulated and underdeveloped and was a region to which landless peasants from the densely populated delta could be resettled. (Indonesia pursued a similar policy with respect to its outer islands, under the label of “transmigration”, and Brazil adopted such a policy with respect to Amazonia, under the slogan “land without people for people without land.” The people already living there clearly didn't count.)

Instead of tackling the problem of injustice in the distribution of land in the national heartland, the Bangladeshi government pursued a policy (officially denied<sup>2</sup>) of providing provisions to the migrants to sustain themselves while they established a new livelihood in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The migrants claimed the land the hill people had left fallow; it had belonged to the hill people by customary use rather than formal title. (International aid seems to have been implicated, but mostly inadvertently, and several donors pulled out once this approach to “development” became apparent.)

The earlier displacement by the Kaptai Dam had already led to the formation of an underground tribal movement that, from the mid-1970s, resorted to violence. The new settler invasion – not unlike what happened on a much larger scale in the Americas in earlier centuries – contributed to a major enlargement of the insurgency. The Bangladeshi state, in turn, militarized the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Atrocities were committed on both sides and it was claimed that genocide was being perpetrated against the hill people. The war and the civilian violence associated with it then led to the flight of many hill people to India (legally to the state of Tripura, illegally to the state of Mizoram). Around 1990 there may have been about 100,000 tribal refugees in India.

### **Sudan's war famines**

These numbers are small in comparison to the extent of displacement in the civil war in Sudan, round two of which began in 1983 and has yet to be ended. Round one took place from 1955 to 1972, begun at the time of Sudan's independence. Round two should have ended with a recently signed peace agreement between the government and rebel forces in South Sudan – but a newly sparked conflict and humanitarian crisis in Darfur in the west of Sudan means that the arena of

conflict has simply shifted from one region to another.

Explanations for this war have to be provided at two levels at least, one cultural and historical and the other economic and environmental. The first is that the Suud, the great swamp region through which the Nile flows, divides Sudan into north and south, with very different cultures. The North is Islamic and Arabic-speaking and the South is non-Arab and mostly non-Islamic, containing such large ethnic groups as the Dinka and Nuer, as well as many smaller ones. (In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Northerners had brought slaves from the South to slave markets in the North.)

The ostensible trigger for the second civil war was the restriction of self-government for the South and the imposition of Islamic religious law on the region. But it also involved a redrawing of provincial boundaries so as to place newly discovered oil fields as much as possible in the North.

Moreover, there were deeper environmental conflicts. In 1970, a law was passed to transfer to the state all land where there was no formal title by the occupants. This was followed by the introduction of mechanized agriculture and the control of development in the South by elites from the North. Such economic-environmental conflicts then reinforced politico-cultural conflicts resulting from the attempt to Islamicize and Arabize the South. Although the current Darfur crisis does not involve the religious dimension of the North-South conflict, it shares a similar pattern of conflict over land and resources, in this case between Arab-speaking nomads and non-Arab-speaking cultivators.

The resulting war has been estimated to have caused two million deaths, four to five million internally displaced people and half a million refugees in neighbouring countries. What is significant about the deaths is that most of them were not direct war casualties, but due to famine. The famines in the Sudan were not simple “natural” disasters, but were very much connected with the war. Sometimes they were a side effect of the ruthless pursuit of the war, but at other times they were a deliberate tactic to drive people out. All that needed to be done was to disrupt agriculture and pastoralism, especially in a time of drought, so that the collapse of livelihoods would do the rest in removing people.

Another egregious example of deliberate environmental degradation as a tactic of war is the case of Saddam Hussein's draining of the Mesopotamian marshes in southeastern Iraq. The action served to drive out the Shia Marsh Arabs, who had provided a base for



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the uprising in that region encouraged by the US after the 1991 Gulf War.

### Environmental impact

The new homes of displaced people take many forms. In Sudan, for example, the predominant forms are refugee camps and urban shantytowns, although there is probably also much dispersed resettlement in abandoned or unoccupied areas. Refugees from the Chit-tagong Hill Tracts moved to state-run camps in India that had a reputation for being particularly wretched. Much depends on the extent of governmental responsibility assumed for the displacement and on how resettlement is organized.

Even when displacement is organized by international humanitarian organizations through refugee camps, with the displaced thus relatively separated from the incumbent inhabitants, refugees have had an impact on the environment. Refugees have been said to cut trees to get fuel wood and construction materials or provide the demand for others to do so and thus induce deforestation. Refugee settlements, such as in Malawi, Guinea and eastern Sudan, have been deemed

to have caused soil erosion and overcultivation and consequent soil depletion, and they are thought to have led to excessive pumping of groundwater and water pollution, such as in eastern Congo and Kenya.<sup>3</sup>

Richard Black in his book, *Refugees, Environment and Development*, argues that the actual evidence for this is patchy.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the environmental degradation resulting from the situation of refugees has certainly been used in political rhetoric and to justify more restrictive policies. This is illustrated by Tanzania's refugee policy. This country had the reputation of having a most hospitable policy towards refugees from surrounding countries. That changed in the 1990s, when Tanzania made it more difficult to find asylum on its territory and even forced refugees back to where they had come from. Environmental degradation by refugees has been given by the government as one major rationale for this shift in policy.

Environmental stereotyping and xenophobia aside, refugees can easily be put into a position where it is difficult for them to survive without engaging in activities that have detrimental environmental impacts, such as when cooking fuel is not provided as part of

## Arab Marshland Water Rises with Hussein's Fall

**MILITARY TANKS** ploughing their dusty way from Kuwait into Iraq just over a year ago crossed a desert terrain that is now seeing new life – water is returning to the marshlands of Mesopotamia. It is a restoration of relationships, not simply ecology.

The 20,000 square kilometres of reedbeds, lakes and mudflats between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers once supported an incredible diversity of endemic and migratory species. This is the homeland of an ancient culture with a unique relationship to land: the Ma'dan, or Marsh Arabs lived exclusively on the bounty of the wetlands for 5000 years. But over the past ten years, damming and drainage for oil and agriculture – and as a form of reprisal for the rebellion of the Marsh Arabs against Saddam Hussein – left over 90 percent of the fertile valley dry and deserted.

Within days of Hussein's fall from power, local people began knocking down the dikes withholding water from the marshes. But without technical expertise, haphazard flooding could poison the marshes with the salt build-up from evaporation.

The international community has responded rapidly to

what a 2001 UNEP report describes as one of the world's worst environmental disasters. Tools and technical expertise from across the world are being gathered to help locals revive this precious ecological and cultural resource.

According to Barry Warner, director of the Wetlands Research Institute located at the University of Waterloo, biodiversity monitoring is the focus of the Canadian contribution. The US and Italy are focusing on hydrology, engineering and geochemistry. With the headwaters of the two rivers also controlled by Turkey, Iran and Syria, this international co-operation is vital to the restoration of the ecology and culture of what some consider the site of the mythical Garden of Eden. ♀

*Christina Rehbein is a masters student in the Department of Environment and Resource Studies at the University of Waterloo, Ontario.*

### Follow up

UNEP has reports and details about the restoration project: [www.grid.unep.ch/activities/sustainable/tigris/index.php](http://www.grid.unep.ch/activities/sustainable/tigris/index.php)



basic supplies. There can also be inadequate environmental planning in the establishment of camps, which is often done under emergency conditions that sideline environmental considerations.

Such impacts can then certainly lead to conflicts with the host community. They can reinforce other reasons for being suspicious of refugees, such as historical ethnic tension, economic competition and exclusive attention by humanitarian organizations to the needs of refugees without regard for the deprivations of nearby native communities. In the absence of special efforts to avoid these problems, refugees can find that they have been displaced from one conflict arena to another.

### Protection and prevention

Following the Second World War and its massive displacements, a UN Convention on Refugees was signed in Geneva in 1951. It addressed those displaced by state persecution. While that definition has been broadened somewhat in practice, those displaced by development, environmental degradation and civil war – usually internally – are not covered by it. And it is certainly not evident that asylum would be the answer to such displacement.

State authorities have the first responsibility to protect their citizens and their natural and socio-political environments. That means that the development policies and projects governments pursue must be justifiable – not just economically, but also in terms of their impacts on displacement and the environment. Following this principle would make certain development plans, such as some big dams, illegitimate. Those projects that are deemed justifiable should minimize their negative impacts and ensure remedial action is taken to address any social and environmental impacts.

Furthermore, preventive action is needed to minimize the possibility of environmental disasters or their

consequences, as well as the possibility of armed conflict. If such prevention is unsuccessful, state authorities have the responsibility to protect people against death, illness and deprivation and not use such dangers as political strategy. Domestic civil society can contribute by providing humanitarian assistance, but even more important is the role of citizens in monitoring and criticizing on-the-ground developments and state action or inaction.

Beyond that, there is also an international level of responsibility. We are all part of a global political system, in which states have the responsibility to protect the interests of their citizens. If they do not do so, the onus of responsibility extends to the international community.<sup>5</sup>

The first requirement here is for the international community to not participate in processes that harm people without adequately compensating or rehabilitating them. That means that governments such as Canada's need to carefully scrutinize the kind of development they participate in. In other words, they should make development assistance conditional on the least amount of displacement and the responsible treatment of the displaced, regulate their businesses accordingly and restrict the sales of military supplies so they are not used to repress people with legitimate grievances.

A second requirement (which applies also to the civil-society sector of the international community) is to pay particular attention to the needs of those threatened by development, environmental changes and war when providing development and humanitarian assistance. When it comes to those displaced across borders, the international community in particular needs to provide assistance to the states that take in the bulk of the refugees, as a matter of equity in the international distribution of the humanitarian and environmental burden.

A final requirement is to actively prevent harm, by promoting early warning systems with respect to war, famine, other environmental disasters and displacement, and to make the prevention of harm within states an important aspect of international diplomacy. Instead of treating such matters as the sovereign privileges of states immune to international commentary and judgment, they need to become a regular and not merely exceptional part of the concerns of the international community. ♣

*Peter Penz is an associate professor in environmental studies and was until recently the director of the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University, Toronto, Ontario.*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> P. Penz, "Colonization of Tribal Lands in Bangladesh and Indonesia: State Rationales, Rights to Land, and Environmental Justice," in *Asia's Environmental Crisis*, M.C. Howard, ed. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 37-72.

<sup>2</sup> The Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, Report: *Life Is Not Ours: Land and*



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