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Refugees and IDPs Increasingly Involved in Internal Conflicts—New Report Far Fewer Small Arms in Refugee Camps Than Widely Believed

Refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) are increasingly involved in internal conflicts due to militarization in Uganda, Sudan, Somalia, and throughout the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), finds a new volume launched today by the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey and the Bonn International Center for Conversion. *No Refuge: The Crisis of Refugee Militarization in Africa* provides compelling evidence of the specific relationships between arms flows and refugee and IDP militarization with examples from Guinea, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda.

‘Not only are they being killed and injured in greater numbers, but they are frequently recruited into local militia and armed to defend their livelihoods closer to home,’ said Robert Muggah, who edited and contributed to the volume. Even where donors and relief agencies are making practical efforts to redress refugee and IDP insecurity and militarization on the ground, they are often only compensating for the failure of asylum and country-of-origin states to meet their responsibilities.

Yet cross-border militarization of African refugees and IDPs appears to be declining in comparison with previous decades, reveals *No Refuge*. It also shows that there are in fact far fewer small arms and light weapons in camps than is widely believed.

Armed conflicts can generate vast numbers of refugees and IDPs. UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, estimated this year that there were 9 million refugees worldwide, and more than 25 million IDPs, most of them in Africa. More than half languish in protracted situations and face an uncertain future. In such circumstances, camps are prone to ‘militarization’ and, it is claimed, represent a threat to international peace and security. Large concentrations of refugees and IDPs are believed to act as a magnet for arms flows, and consequently, political violence, forced recruitment and training, and cross-border attacks.

Such militarization was quietly tolerated during Africa’s independence wars, but today it is actively condemned. The Chadian government, for example, recently expressed concern over reported flows of arms and munitions into Darfuran refugee camps. Kenya has long been preoccupied with camps doubling as trans-shipment points and the appearance of AK-47s in nomadic communities and on the streets of its capital, Nairobi. Worryingly, on the basis of limited evidence, governments in industrializing and developing countries are restricting asylum and condoning forced repatriation, thereby eroding core principles of refugee law and the protection of civilians.

No Refuge reveals that militarization does not take place in a vacuum: its scale and intensity is shaped by the region or host nation’s history and political and security environment. The recent decline in cross-border militarization is partly attributed to reductions in global refugee flows, but also to the timely and country-specific interventions and strategies applied by certain hosting states and international agencies, as well as the increase in the number of UN-authorized peace operations.

No Refuge also finds that over the past decade, certain UN agencies and affected states have redoubled their efforts to demilitarize camps and settlements. They have consciously moved away from coercive and forcible disarmament, an approach that proved disastrous in countries such as Rwanda in the mid-1990s. UNHCR, for one, has introduced practical interventions such as the enhanced screening of borders, the relocation of camps away from international frontiers, community policing, and the deployment of international observers to positive effect in Guinea, Tanzania, and Uganda. Together with the UN Department for Peacekeeping Operations, UNHCR has also carried out the repatriation of foreign ex-combatants or ‘armed elements’ as part of larger disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programmes underway in the DRC and Rwanda.

As this is a new area of activity for the agency, challenges and achievements need to be evaluated. The volume confirms that the introduction of practical measures to enhance the protection of displaced populations by disarming militia groups and local defence units and dismantling large camps with appropriate safeguards would go a long way to improving conditions on the ground.

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