

## **Exodus within Borders: The Uprooted who Never Left Home**

By Roberta Cohen and Francis M. Deng

According to the United Nations, since October 7, 1.9 million Gazans—representing 85 percent of the strip's population—have been forced to flee their homes, but remain trapped in the Gaza Strip. Their plight contributes to the growing number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) across the globe. Amid war and conflict, climate-related disasters, and other humanitarian crises, tens of millions of people each year flee their homes to escape danger—but the majority of them never cross international borders. According to the Geneva-based Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2022 saw a record 71.1 million internally displaced people, more than double the number in 2012.

“These displaced persons are at the greatest risk of starvation, have the highest rates of preventable disease, and are the most vulnerable to human rights abuses,” Roberta Cohen and Francis Deng wrote in a 1998 essay. Deng, a Sudanese diplomat, served as the first Representative of the UN Secretary-General on IDPs, and, from 1994 to 2004, Cohen served as his senior adviser. Together, they helped put the plight of IDPs on the international agenda.

At the time of writing, there were roughly 20 million internally displaced people worldwide, but Cohen and Deng could see that this phenomenon was quickly becoming “the newest global crisis.” And this catastrophe was unfolding under the world's nose. Unlike refugees, who had a system—however dysfunctional—of international protection and assistance, “those forced from their homes who remain under their government's jurisdiction are not covered by any international arrangements.” Cohen and Deng argued that when a state failed to provide protection and assistance to its citizens, the international community was obligated to act—even if it meant setting aside principles of sovereignty and noninterference.

Today, the number of IDPs continues to skyrocket, but there is more attention to them at the international level. “The steps taken over 25 years to address their plight must not only be recognized but built upon with urgency,” Cohen wrote in a recent email to Foreign Affairs. In 1998, Cohen and Deng called for “strategies to prevent genocide and other crimes against humanity that lead to displacement.” And Cohen says that this is still what is missing today. There “is too little attention to the political settlements needed to resolve the disputes and inequities at the heart of conflicts causing displacement,” she wrote. “What conflict and displacement cry out for, and for which there is no substitute, are political solutions and reconstruction plans to help reintegrate displaced populations in accord with human rights and humanitarian norms.”