

Communique

Expert Conference in Geneva on Armed Non-State Actors and the Protection of Internally Displaced People

An expert conference exploring the complex relationship between armed non-state actors (NSAs) and internal displacement, co-organised by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and Geneva Call, took place in Geneva, Switzerland on 23 and 24 March 2011. The conference built on the latest issue of [Forced Migration Review on Armed non-State actors and displacement](#).

The conference considered the role that NSAs have played in relation to internal displacement. It noted a marked correlation between countries and regions where NSAs operate and where forcible movement of populations is taking place. In this respect NSAs are active in at least half of the countries affected by conflict-induced displacement.

The relevant legal and normative framework was discussed, and participants explored the links between NSAs and internal displacement in a number of country contexts. They analysed the impact of NSAs on internal displacement, both negative, such as through the forced displacement of populations, forcible return or the prevention of return, and positive, such as co-operating in the provision of assistance or in respect of voluntary and safe return. The perspectives of former and current NSA members were presented and discussed. In addition, various types of commitments that NSAs have made in regard to Internally Displaced People (IDPs) were reviewed. It was found that the most frequent and readily available were bilateral agreements between NSAs and the State. These agreements generally contained provisions relating to the protection of civilians, rather than IDP-specific measures.

On the second day the conference discussed the impact of NSAs on particular categories of people amongst the displaced - specifically women and children - and took the opportunity to consider the perspectives of governments and multilateral actors. Finally the meeting considered the opportunities and challenges for humanitarian actors engaging with NSAs in respect of displacement.

The conference recognised that while IDPs benefit from the same protection as other civilians they have particular vulnerabilities because of their displacement. Encouraging examples where NSAs had made commitments to ensure the protection of the displaced were identified. It was noted that interventions to ensure their protection should take into account the fact that they already have their own coping strategies.

The conference heard that humanitarian engagement of NSAs varies not only in respect of the specific circumstances but depending on the phase of displacement. For instance, advocacy may be

brought to bear to seek to prevent displacement, ensure humanitarian space and access to communities or to promote durable solutions.

Perceptions of NSAs' relationship with IDPs may not always be accurate; It was noted that in some instances IDPs may prefer to stay in, or return to, areas under the control or influence of NSAs. Also there may be instances where IDPs, rather than being the victims of NSA violations, may actually be pushing NSAs to commit such violations against other civilians. In this respect the necessity for humanitarians to base their response on careful analysis was emphasised.

A restrictive legislative and policy environment was identified as a major challenge to humanitarian engagement of NSAs to promote the protection of IDPs. In this respect terror listing poses a particular challenge.

In closing, participants provided a series of recommendations, including:

- the need for researchers and practitioners to deepen their comparative understanding of the coping strategies developed by internally displaced communities in regard to NSAs;
- the need to further detail the role of various NSAs in the phases of the displacement cycle;
- the importance of better translating research about displacement and NSAs into sound humanitarian policies and programming, including by establishing clear principles of which agencies should engage and for what purpose.

The conference was organised by the **Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre**, an international body established by the Norwegian Refugee Council, which monitors conflict-induced displacement worldwide, and **Geneva Call** which is dedicated to engaging armed non-state actors to promote humanitarian norms. The two organisations brought to bear their respective networks to ensure that the conference benefitted from the expertise of a wide range of participants. Representatives of governments, international organisations, civil society and NGOs, and NSAs themselves, participated in the conference **financially supported by the Governments of Norway and Switzerland**.

A conference report will be published shortly.

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