

Briefing Paper

Committee: SOCHUM

Topic: The Question of the Spread of Localised Crime in Areas with High Populations of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

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Summary

As of the end of 2023, the global population of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) reached a record high, driven by armed conflict, widespread violence, and climate-induced disasters. Unlike refugees, IDPs remain within the borders of their home countries and do not benefit from the specific international legal protections afforded by refugee status.

When large populations are forced to move, they often settle in marginalized urban areas or temporary camps within host communities. This rapid influx severely strains local resources, infrastructure, and law enforcement. The intersection of mass displacement and localized crime is a complex crisis of vulnerability. Displaced populations, often stripped of their assets and the right to work, are uniquely susceptible to exploitation by human traffickers, gangs, and organized crime syndicates. Furthermore, extreme poverty can drive increases in "survival crimes" (such as petty theft), while competition for scarce resources like water, housing, and jobs can ignite violent tensions between host communities and IDPs.

The mandate of SOCHUM in this context is to address the humanitarian and social dimensions of this crisis. Delegates must focus on strategies that protect vulnerable IDPs from criminal exploitation, support the infrastructural capacity of host communities, and foster economic integration to remove the desperation that fuels illicit economies.

Definition of Key Terms

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) – Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border.

Survival Crime – Non-violent, low-level illicit activities - such as petty theft, illegal street vending, or trespassing—committed by individuals strictly to meet basic human needs (food, shelter, medicine) when no legal avenues for survival are available.

Host Community – The local population and geographical area that receives and accommodates displaced persons. Host communities often bear the immediate economic and infrastructural burden of mass displacement.

Human Trafficking and Smuggling – The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of people through force, fraud, or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit. IDPs are highly targeted for forced labour and sexual exploitation.

Protection Gap – The deficit in legal, physical, and social security that IDPs experience because their own national government—which holds the primary responsibility for their safety—is often unable, or in some cases unwilling, to protect them.

Background Information

The Vulnerability-Crime Nexus

The narrative that IDPs bring crime is a frequent misconception that fuels xenophobia and internal political friction. The reality is that displacement creates environments where crime thrives due to a collapse of the rule of law. When people flee conflict zones, they lose their livelihoods and social safety nets. Arriving in unfamiliar territories, often without legal documentation, they are excluded from the formal economy.

Organized crime groups exploit this desperation. In regions like Central America or the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), cartels and armed militias actively recruit from IDP camps, offering food, protection, or income in exchange for participation in illicit activities like drug trafficking or illegal mining. Furthermore, displaced women and unaccompanied minors face severe risks of gender-based violence and human trafficking.

Strain on Host Communities

Mass displacement rapidly alters the demographic and economic landscape of host areas. A sudden population increase strains public services: housing prices skyrocket, wages in the informal sector plummet due to a surplus of labour, and public utilities (water, electricity, healthcare) become overwhelmed.

This environment of artificial scarcity frequently breeds resentment. Host communities may perceive IDPs as burdens or threats to their security and economic stability. This tension can escalate into localized violence, hate crimes, and discrimination against the displaced, further marginalizing them and pushing them toward the illicit economy for survival.

The Urbanization of Displacement

Historically, IDPs were housed in localized, UN-managed camps. Today, the vast majority of IDPs flee to urban centres, settling in informal slums or shantytowns. While cities offer the illusion of better economic opportunity, these informal settlements often lack basic policing, sanitation, and governance. This urban anonymity makes it incredibly difficult for humanitarian agencies to locate

and assist IDPs, simultaneously making them easier targets for urban street gangs and organized crime rings.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Colombia – Colombia has one of the world's largest IDP populations, a legacy of decades of internal armed conflict involving government forces, paramilitary groups, and guerrilla organizations (like the FARC and ELN). Displaced Colombians often flee to urban centers like Bogotá or Medellín, where they are frequently targeted for extortion and forced recruitment by urban gangs (Bacrim).

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) – The DRC faces a massive, complex displacement crisis driven by resource wars and ethnic violence in its eastern provinces. IDP camps here are highly militarized and frequently attacked by armed groups. The breakdown of law and order means that IDPs are routinely subjected to violence, looting, and exploitation by the very militias they are fleeing.

Sudan – Following the outbreak of conflict in 2023, Sudan has experienced the largest internal displacement crisis globally. Millions have fled to relatively safer provinces or neighboring countries. The sudden collapse of the national economy has led to widespread looting and localized crime as both displaced persons and host communities struggle to survive without access to food, cash, or basic services.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – Although primarily tasked with protecting refugees (those who cross international borders), the UNHCR has an expanded mandate to assist IDPs in specific circumstances, leading the global "Protection Cluster" in humanitarian emergencies to safeguard displaced people from violence and exploitation.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) – The UNODC works to combat transnational organized crime. In the context of IDPs, the UNODC focuses heavily on identifying and dismantling human trafficking and smuggling networks that prey on vulnerable displaced populations.

Timeline of Events

1998 – Publication of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement: Formulated by Francis Deng, the Representative of the UN Secretary-General on IDPs. While not a binding treaty, this document established the international standard that IDPs have the right to be protected against criminal violence and exploitation.

2005 – Humanitarian Reform (The Cluster Approach): The UN introduced the "Cluster Approach" to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian response. UNHCR was assigned leadership of the Global Protection Cluster, specifically tasking it with the safety of IDPs.

2009 – The Kampala Convention (African Union): The African Union adopted the first legally binding continental treaty aimed at protecting and assisting IDPs. It specifically mandates that member states must protect IDPs from armed groups and criminal networks.

2016 – The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants: While focusing heavily on cross-border movement, the UN General Assembly recognized the profound vulnerabilities of IDPs and the need to protect them from human trafficking and organized crime.

2022 – Action Agenda on Internal Displacement: The UN Secretary-General launched this agenda to shift the global response from purely humanitarian aid to sustainable development, recognizing that prolonged economic marginalization drives crime and instability.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

1. Encampment Policies

Historically, governments attempted to manage displaced populations by confining them to designated camps, often guarded by military or police forces.

- Success: Made it easier to deliver centralized humanitarian aid (food, water, medicine).
- Failure: Camps often became militarized, overcrowded, and targets for armed groups. Confinement prevented IDPs from working, fostering total dependency and creating black markets within the camps themselves.

2. Increased Militarization of Host Areas

Governments have frequently responded to rising crime rates in areas with high IDP populations by deploying the military or heavy-handed riot police.

- Success: Sometimes achieved short-term suppression of gang activity.
- Failure: Often led to human rights abuses, arbitrary arrests of innocent IDPs, and deepened the mistrust between the displaced population and the state.

3. Anti-Trafficking Task Forces

Through the UNODC, various nations have set up specialized police units to dismantle the trafficking rings that exploit IDPs.

- Success: Has disrupted major transnational syndicates.
- Failure: Tends to address the symptoms rather than the root cause. Without addressing the extreme poverty of the IDPs, new traffickers quickly replace the arrested ones.

Possible Solutions

1. Right to Work and Economic Integration

The most effective way to reduce survival crime and vulnerability to gang recruitment is to integrate IDPs into the formal economy. SOCHUM could urge member states to grant immediate, temporary working rights and legal identification to IDPs, allowing them to earn a legitimate wage and contribute to the host community's tax base.

2. Community-Based Policing and Trust Building

Traditional, militarized policing often alienates IDPs. Solutions should focus on community policing models where law enforcement works alongside community leaders from both the displaced and host populations. This builds trust, encourages the reporting of exploitation and trafficking, and reduces friction.

3. Strengthening Host Community Infrastructure

To prevent localized crime driven by resource scarcity, international aid must be directed not just at IDPs, but at the host communities themselves. By funding local schools, hospitals, and water sanitation projects in areas receiving IDPs, the UN can mitigate the economic shock and reduce inter-communal resentment.

4. Decriminalization of Survival Crime

Judicial frameworks should be adjusted to recognize the difference between organized crime and survival crime. Diverting IDPs who commit minor, non-violent offenses away from overcrowded prisons and into social support programs prevents them from being hardened by the penal system or recruited by prison gangs.

5. Safe Reporting Mechanisms

Because many IDPs lack proper documentation, they fear reporting crimes (such as extortion or domestic violence) to the police, lest they face eviction or harassment. Establishing "firewalls" between law enforcement and immigration/internal security agencies can allow IDPs to report crimes safely without fear of punitive action.

Guiding Questions for Delegates

- Does your nation currently host a significant IDP population, and how are domestic law enforcement agencies managing the intersection of displacement and security?
- How can the international community differentiate between IDPs engaging in survival crimes due to extreme poverty versus those coerced into organized criminal syndicates?
- Should international humanitarian aid be made conditional on a host government's willingness to grant economic and working rights to internally displaced persons?

- How can states balance the legitimate security concerns and infrastructural strain of host communities with the fundamental human rights of the displaced?

Useful Links

1. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC): <https://www.internal-displacement.org/>
2. UNHCR Data Portal: <https://data2.unhcr.org/>
3. UNODC Report on Trafficking in Persons: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/global-report-on-trafficking-in-persons.html>
4. The Kampala Convention Text: <https://au.int/en/treaties/african-union-convention-protection-and-assistance-internally-displaced-persons-africa>