

Population Growth and Refugees

INTRODUCTION

Nimpala has witnessed both high rates of population growth and extraordinary levels of internal population movement in the past two decades. The number of involuntary movement of populations within the territory remain higher than any other nation in the world. Yet actual figure remain relatively speculative, with no official census occurring since 1983. Planning for the next census is underway but funding and internal disputes have slowed the process.

By the end of the civil war more than 3 million people had been displaced from within the country and close to a million more had fled across the Northern and Southern borders. This large number of displaced communities continues to place significant strain on the countries basic infrastructure, economy, and potential for reconstruction. The IDPs and refugees arrived in waves and have settled in different locations and various patterns depending on the period of movement and capacity of the government at that period.

The challenge is to improve the conditions in these settlements while simultaneously preventing additional waves of displaced groups. Both actions from militant groups, motivated by ethnic tensions, as well as loss of natural resources due to environmental degradation is sparking the population movement. Halting displacement will simultaneously require parallel actions to halt environmental degradation.

POPULATION GROWTH

Although there has been no official census recently, an household survey focusing on health issues has been the best resource for the current estimates. The 1983 census placed the population at roughly 18 million people. The current rough estimate suggests Nimpala's population has grown up to 27 million people.

URBAN CENTERS

An estimated 40% of the capital's total population are IDPs. Following the peace treaty and cessation of violence, there were two periods of refugees returning to their homes, resulting with large population movements. The first was immediately after the peace treaty where large numbers of Akola returned from the South. The Presidential office set up arbitration courts to help mitigate the disputes that were arising from land conflicts and people who settled land after it had been left by the original owners. It is thought that this first way brought approximately 200,000 returnees within the first year.

REFUGEES AND IDPs

During the 1990's, the lack of coherent government oversight and management, as well as common ethnic ties to neighbors lead to a large movement of refugees into Nimpala, estimated between 750,000 and 1 million. While many of these refugees have returned in the past decade, Nimpala is estimated to have officially recognized 175,000 while close to 400,000 are estimated to have returned. The selection and construction of the location these sites rarely consider the environmental vulnerabilities, resources, or potential impacts. There are no legal obligations when selecting sites to conduct environmental impact assessments or requirements for water availability, etc.

There are continued pressures from refugees streaming across the Northern border. The continued violence and ethnic tension in Country B has continued to put pressure on the cross-border population movements. The influx of Maqqara has maintained a steady stream of refugee camps in the North, primarily with Maqqara are taking refuge in weakly protected areas and increasing pressure on resources often shared with Ragat neighbors. The increase in Maqqara from the North has raised concerns about shifting population balances and the potential for outside provocation. The exact percentages of returnees going back to the Eastern and North provinces remains unknown. The large urban areas are experiencing very rapid growth, often estimated at 450% within the pre- to post- civil war 30 year period.

The Akola are returning in increasingly greater numbers from Country D across the Southern and Western borders. Some settlements were constructed with minimal infrastructure while others had are unable to support any populations challenging government and international organizations ability to support these camps. Some of the temporary settlements are going on 20 years old with minimal renovations or improvements. The United Nations, NGOs and the national government worked collaboratively to set up camps and temporary locations for these populations which were not intended for this quantity of people or this long a time. Therefore the living conditions in these settlements are in most cases appalling: crowded, unsanitary, and dangerous.

MANAGEMENT AND OVERSIGHT

The refugee camps are the responsibility of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) with partners with the government's Commissioner for Refugees as well as a range of other institutions and organizations. A significant and undocumented number of refugees have moved into existing communities and are not counted in efforts to monitor refugee movements.

IDP camps have far less oversight and clear management. A wide variety of actors have control or responsibility over these camps, ranging from the government, local authorities to militant groups and international NGOs. The availability of funds, technical assistance, and support are highly variable, resulting with various degrees of organization and standards. It also limits availability of standardized information.

CONCLUSIONS

The enormous number of people displaced will have detrimental consequences for the surrounding natural environment. Maintaining the camp populations' health and well-being presents a significant challenge to the government and international community.

CRITICAL CONCERNS PRIOR TO RETURN

There are several pre-conditions required prior to large-scale return of displaced populations:

- Resolution of the original conflict and root causes along with protection and physical security restored.

- Revived local economy with capacity for job absorption at a greater rate than where they are leaving.
- Ability to return to homeland safely with possessions.
- The costs of return should be affordable or covered by various institutions.
- Provision and accessibility of resources and local services.