

North-east India's forgotten IDPs

by Monirul Hussain

Misguided policies have displaced millions in the seven states of north-east India. The needs of environmental, development and conflict-induced IDPs have been ignored. India lacks a national IDP policy and the government systematically refers to internally displaced persons as 'migrants'.

Although the north-east is rich in natural resources it has remained under-developed, isolated and perpetually vulnerable to violent ethnic conflicts. Over 30 rebel groups are active in a region which is home to 200 of India's tribal groups. As a result of continuous environmental degradation, floods, riverbank erosion and landslides have become endemic, leading to huge loss of life and population displacement. It is estimated that at least three million peasants have been displaced in recent years by erosion of prime agricultural land by the River Brahmaputra.

Dams have displaced massive numbers. The Dumber Hydroelectric Project in Tripura forced the relocation of about 200,000 tribal people. The Pagladiya Dam Project in Assam, if implemented, will displace about 105,000 people. Indian government plans to construct 145 more dams in an ecologically fragile region highly vulnerable to earthquakes are being strongly contested by affected communities. If we combine all the categories of development-induced displacement with the displacees of urbanisation, it is likely to involve a further three million people. As in the rest of India, most development-induced IDPs are tribal people.

Agendas for resolution of the region's conflicts do not consider IDPs and focus only on measures to provide incentives for insurgents and criminal elements to stop fighting. It is difficult to ascertain the exact number of IDPs in the region as the state does not keep proper data. For the state to acknowledge the existence of IDPs would be to admit 'state failure'. Due to the inaccessibility of conflict zones and security regulations it is extremely difficult, if

not impossible, for scholars or journalists to investigate the situation. Most of north-east India continues to remain off-limits to foreigners.

Some conflict-induced IDPs have been living in camps for more than a decade. Most IDPs receive little medical care and their children have access neither to formal education nor to health services. Though some receive food aid, it often arrives sporadically and is insufficient in quantity and nutrition. Within the IDP communities it is women and children who suffer most. IDPs lead dehumanised lives in camps in which no intergovernmental or international organisations are present. No effort is made to provide land for those unable to return home.

If we look at the IDP issue from the Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction model developed by Micheal M Cernea,¹ we find that all the IDPs in the region suffer from landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalisation, food insecurity, increased morbidity and mortality, loss of access to common property rights, social disarticulation and disintegration.

Lack of action to redress environmental degradation, building of more dams and sharpening of exclusivist ethnicity and its resultant violence are likely to increase displacement. Indian civil society and the authorities need to look afresh at the whole gamut of environmental, developmental and political issues driving displacement in the north-east. The national authorities need to conduct surveys in conflict-affected areas to document the number of internally displaced and their needs. India urgently requires a clear-cut IDP regime based on the UN Guiding Principles

on Internal Displacement.

Professor Monirul Hussain teaches at the Political Science Department of Gauhati University, Assam. He recently completed a SSRC-sponsored study of development-induced displacement of population in north-east India and is the editor of Coming out of violence: essays on ethnicity, conflict resolution and peace process in north-east India, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2005. Email: monirulhussain@hotmail.com

See the Global IDP Project's India Country Report: www.db.idpproject.org/Sites/IdpProjectDb/idpSurvey.nsf/wCountriesb/India

1. www.forcedmigration.org/guides/fmo022/fmo022-4.htm

FMR Editorial Advisory Board

Although the EAB members' institutional affiliations are listed below, they serve in an individual capacity and do not necessarily represent their institutions.

Paula Banerjee
Calcutta Research Group

Kine Brodtkorb
Norwegian Refugee Council

Stephen Castles
Refugee Studies Centre

Mark Cutts
OCHA Inter-Agency Internal Displacement Division

Jens-Hagen Eschenbächer
Global IDP Project

Kemlin Furley
UNHCR

Erin Mooney
Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement

Bahame Tom Nyanduga
Special Rapporteur on Refugees, IDPs and Asylum Seekers in Africa

Nick Roseveare
Oxfam GB

Dan Seymour
UNICEF

Jeremy Stickings
DFID

Richard Williams
ECRE