

The Traumas of Displacement

David G. Hutton

Most refugees, regardless of geographical and historical circumstance, must cope with extreme and frequently life threatening conditions. In the past decade, much has been written of the Vietnamese Boat People and their harrowing experiences of flight. More recently have come the reports of civilian massacres and "ethnic cleansing" in the Balkans. In Africa, where famine is as much an enemy as guns and bullets, the death toll continues to rise.

An assessment was carried out on the conditions of the displacement and flight of Ethiopian, Laotian, Vietnamese, Chilean and Salvadorean refugees resettled in Winnipeg. Of the 115 refugees surveyed, fully 90 percent believed that their lives had been at least "sometimes" in danger while living in their country. Almost 60 percent reported that were "frequently" or "always" in danger. Many, either prior to or during their flight, had been imprisoned (32 percent), physically assaulted (30 percent), and/or attacked by a government or rebel force (31 percent). Over one-third reported of a death (44 percent), abduction or disappearance (37 percent) of an immediate family member, relative, or close friend.

Just over two-thirds of the sample rated the conditions of their country prior to their departure as "somewhat" to "extremely" adverse. The most cited reasons for flight, of which at least one was reported by 83 percent of the refugees, included the need to secure personal safety (40 percent), the desire to attain personal freedom (35 percent), and the wish to escape government persecution or harassment (33 percent). Only 14 percent of the refugees had sought resettlement for the purpose of bettering their own lives.

Approximately two-thirds of the sample, and 88 percent of the Ethiopian and Asian refugees, fled their countries "illegally" —the governments neither knew of nor consented to their leaving. Conditions encoun-

tered during this period were rated as "very" or "extremely" adverse by 45 percent of the refugees. Of those who fled overland or by sea, again predominantly Ethiopian and Asian in origin, 73 percent believed that their lives had been "frequently" or "always" in danger. Exactly one-quarter of these refugees had lacked adequate transportation while 30 percent had gone without food and/or water. Attacks,

by pirates or a military force, were reported by 31 percent of the refugees.

The data clearly reveals a common experience of pain and adversity among refugees. Practitioners, as well as researchers, must be aware of both the past which many refugees bring to resettlement as well as the possible impact of trauma upon their capacity to adapt to the demands of involuntary migration. ■

Table 1: Conditions of Displacement and Flight			Table 2: Experienced Events		
Factors	I #	II %	Factors	I #	II %
Reasons for fleeing country			Personally experienced		
personal safety	46	40	imprisonment	37	32
attain personal freedom	40	35	assault (inc. torture and rape)	34	30
escape government persecution	38	33	rebel/army attack	36	31
improve children's future	25	28	piracy	13	11
economic improvement	16	14	fought in war	13	11
escape war	13	11	injury/illness	13	11
family reunification	11	10	Immediate family		
other	8	7	death	21	18
Feeling of danger in country of origin			abduction or disappearance	34	30
never or seldom	11	10	imprisonment	31	26
sometimes	36	31	assault	34	30
frequently	35	30	injury/illness	15	13
always	33	29	Relative/close friend		
Level of adversity in country of origin			death	51	44
none or a little	37	32	imprisonment	27	23
some	34	30	abduction or disappearance	42	37
very	30	26	assault	29	25
extreme	14	12	injury/illness	22	19
Fled country legally			Flight		
yes	45	39	lacked transport	21	18
no	70	61	lacked food and/or water	22	19
Feeling of danger during flight			loss of direction	20	17
never	12	10	bad weather	16	14
seldom	22	19	refused landing	9	8
sometimes	19	17	Notes:		
frequently or always	62	54	I — Number of refugees sampled		
Level of adversity during flight			II — Percentage of sample		
none	28	24	<i>David G. Hutton is currently working on an interdisciplinary doctoral program in refugee disaster relief at the University of Manitoba. This research note is based on data collected as part of his master's thesis.</i>		
slight	20	17			
some	15	14			
very	25	22			
extreme	27	23			