

VIRTUAL EVENT

2026 CONFERENCE ON INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE

Thursday, April 23
9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. ET

Refugees International SFS GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY School of Foreign Service Institute for the Study of International Migration ODI Global UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER Congress of IDP Councils



Summary of the meeting

This report summarizes the 3rd major conference on Internal Displacement, focusing on the ways that IDPs protect themselves and support accountability measures which are central to transitional justice. The conference also provided an opportunity for the launch of the *Oxford Handbook on Internal Displacement*.

Opening Remarks

After welcoming participants, Sarah Miller (Refugees International) introduced **Paula Gaviria**, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of IDPs who began her remarks by emphasizing both the profound impact of displacement on women, men and children and the importance of IDP participation in decisions that affect their lives. On this 28th anniversary of the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, it is distressing to see that solutions for IDPs continue to be elusive although humanitarian and development agencies are beginning to devote more attention to supporting IDPs to find protection-centered solutions. We need to move beyond symbolic inclusion of IDPs to recognize that they are problem-solvers and agents for solutions. Their voices are essential to any discussion of IDPs.

Panel 1. IDPs, self-protection and community protection

Tamar Joanian, Senior Community-based protection officer, UNHCR, moderated the panel, introducing the three panelists:

- Ahmed Mhanna, Executive Director of Programs and Operations, Palestinian Housing Council;

- Lucky Karim, Rohingya human rights advocate, the founder of Refugee Women for Peace and Justice and a Refugees International alumni fellow; and
- Ana María Diez, President, Coalition for Venezuela

Tamar Joanian turned first to Ahmed Mhanna, asking that in light of Gazans' repeated cycles of displacement, what does protection mean for IDPs in Gaza and what strategies have they developed to protect themselves?

Ahmed Mhanna noted that he had been displaced 11 times in Gaza since 7 October 2023 and separated from his wife, children and parents for more than two years. Displacement for Palestinians has been a chronic continuous reality since 1948 – one that has never ended. Protection doesn't just mean safety – it means 'survival with dignity.' Families in Gaza have opened their homes to others – relatives, neighbors, and strangers. Hosting families is part of the protection system. IDPs in Gaza have organized themselves, forming committees. They aren't waiting for international agencies. They know who is at risk and how to resolve disputes in crowded settings. They offer their own land for displacement sites, they stabilize and preserve the community. Without community, there is no protection.

He noted the case of Jana, a 12-year old girl in northern Gaza who wanted more than anything to return to school. Palestinian teachers volunteered and the first classes were held in a tent but Jana returned to school. IDPs are not only in need of protection – they are providers of protection.

Tamar Joanian then turned to Lucky Karim, a Rohingya refugee from Myanmar, asking how IDPs are able to protect themselves in a country ruled by an authoritarian government?

Lucky Karim began by noting that there are 3.6 million IDPs in Myanmar, 1.6 million of whom are in Rakhine state. Since the 2021 military coup, the humanitarian situation has become much worse. It is hard for families to communicate with family members in other parts of the country or in Bangladesh and there is no mechanism for cross-border aid. Airstrikes and bombs continue, making it difficult for IDPs to self-organize. Humanitarian aid is sorely needed; people are dying of hunger and cross-border aid is needed.

Tamar Joanian then asked **Ana Maria Diez** from Venezuela about IDPs in Venezuela, noting that the situation there is different and that one size doesn't fit all. Ana Maria Diez reported that most displacement has been across borders as evidenced by the large number of Venezuelan refugees. Less is known about internal displacement, although estimates are that at least one million people are IDPs. Even less visible is the plight of indigenous communities in Venezuela who have been displaced from their land but who don't see themselves as IDPs. Their land has been taken from them, illegal mining has forced them to

move to cities. They are unable to return to their ancestral homes and health systems have collapsed. Some are at risk of being trafficked. Silent ethnocide is taking place and IDPs can't speak out because of the risk.

Tamar Joanian highlighted the intersectionality of displacement situations, evident in Venezuela where the effects of displacement are compounded by ethnic marginalization and where those who speak out about the situation are themselves at risk. She then asked the three panelists for recommendations to governments, other IDPs and humanitarian actors.

Lucky Karim responded that IDPs need protection from armed actors, access to humanitarian aid and ways to communicate with their families and other IDPs. As the Arkin Army controls land in Rakhine state, it is a politically dangerous situation for IDPs to organize and advocate for better conditions. Donors need to speak up for IDPs – as it is hard for IDPs to speak for themselves in such an environment. Fundamentally, of course, the root causes of the conflict need to be addressed.

Ana Maria Diez picked up the need to protect local defenders, particularly indigenous leaders, and to provide safe havens for them. More cross-border interventions are needed, particularly in the Guajira where there is really no difference between Colombians and Venezuelans and mass atrocities need to be prevented. Colombian and Venezuelan NGOs need to work together, to learn from each other which is what Coalición por Venezuela is trying to do.

Ahmed Mhanna noted how similar the three situations are – where IDPs are not protected by the state or by anyone, and they are protecting themselves. But the humanitarian system still treats IDPs as recipients not as actors. Given their essential role in protecting themselves, why are they still at the margins of decision-making? There's a lot of emphasis on resilience, but resilience is what people do when systems fail. Protection is a right – not a favor. If communities are at the center of protection, why aren't they at the center of decision-making? IDPs are experts in protection – we shouldn't have parallel systems. Protection means more than survival – it means respecting the dignity of human beings.

In the discussion with the audience, Tamar Joanian remarked that the self-protection examples shared are central and compelling evidence of the agency of IDPs in protecting themselves. This agency should be recognized and supported, without creating parallel approaches that risk undermining it. At the same time, recognizing and strengthening self-protection efforts must not result in shifting responsibility away from actors who bear primary accountability for protection.

In response to a question about the *Guiding Principles*, Ahmed Mhanna said that translating them into legally-binding obligations of states could help their situation, but that investments in local NGOs are also needed. Paula Gaviria agreed that legal obligations are important but that local participation is more important and asked what does localization mean in this context? Ahmed Mhanna reminded participants that there is no government in Gaza and when ICRC in 2003 moved to Southern Gaza, 1 million people were left behind. These 1 million people relied on local organizations and UNRWA for more than six months; local organizations provided the only safety and organized system to protect people. Tamar Joanian asked how can we incorporate peace and security into humanitarian protection systems? Paula Gaviria responded that there is a trend to shifting away from emergency humanitarian response to early engagement of development actors. This can change everything.

Finally, Tamar Joanian asked that as funds shrink and the number of IDPs increases, what concrete strategies can be put in place to save lives? Lucky Karim responded that the needs of people who are directly affected are beyond those that can be addressed by humanitarian organizations. We need support for community-led initiatives. Ahmed Mhanna said that localization is the only way to ensure a transition between emergency response and recovery. Ana Maria Diez concluded that with the failure of humanitarian action, we see a failure of protection.

Oxford Handbook on Internal Displacement

Yana Liubymova, Congress of IDP Councils in Ukraine, introduced David Cantor, editor of the brand-new Oxford Handbook on Internal Displacement and Director of the Refugee Law Initiative. **David Cantor** explained that the 600-page Handbook was a major collaborative project, involving six project leads and 70 authors who produced 45 relatively short chapters. Representing diverse disciplinary and regional perspectives, the Handbook includes six sections, including concepts, drivers, regions, impacts, experiences, assistance and protection challenges, solutions and the role of data. **Utz Pape**, World Bank and editor of the section on impacts of internal displacement, reported that his analysis found that IDPs experience deepening poverty and inequality, disruption of core human development systems, and losses of housing, land and poverty. He concluded that the effects of displacement are systemic -- not just temporary shocks -- and that the social and economic consequences of displacement can be long-term. **Elizabeth Ferris**, Georgetown University and author of the chapter on local integration, explained that the research process had been truly collaborative with authors reading and commenting on each other's chapters. She also recognized that practitioners often do not read academic papers, not

seeing their relevance to their day to day work, but noted that the Handbook's format makes it easy to see what research concludes about a particular issue.

Panel II: Displacement, Justice, and Accountability

Megan Bradley, McGill University, moderated this panel, noting that the topic of how we promote accountability, particularly through transitional justice mechanisms, such as trials, truth commissions and compensation programs, are intended to prevent future violations and foster reconciliation.

She introduced the three panelists for this session:

- Laura Marcela Borrero Fierro, Attorney, Specialist in Administrative Law, Colombia
- Tetiana Shevchenko, First Deputy Head of the State Archival Service of Ukraine
- Hardin Lang, Vice President for Programs and Policy, Refugees International.

Laura Borrero, internally displaced person, IDP leader and member of the National Victims' table of Colombia, began by noting that Colombia has experienced six decades of internal displacement and that there is no peace without justice and no justice without recognition of the victims, including IDPs. In Colombia, within the framework of the transitional justice process, different institutions were created, which are not limited to the judicial aspect, but seek to respond comprehensively to the causes and consequences of the conflict including a special jurisdiction for peace, a truth commission and a unit dedicated to searching for missing people. Accountability mechanisms have to address structural causes, mandate participation and consider new horizons. Reminding participants that internal displacement continues in Colombia, transitional justice mechanisms must not only focus on the past but address current and future displacement, including recognizing that internal displacement is a violation of human rights, that transitional justice must be broad and well-articulated and that IDPs themselves must participate in the process.

Megan Bradley affirmed that justice can't be justice without the participation of IDPs and others victimized by the violence.

Tetiana Shevchenko addressed the task of collecting evidence for pursuing justice and specifically the role of the Ukrainian archival service in supporting transitional justice. In preserving the truth of crimes, the focus has been on war crimes, crimes against humanity and massive internal displacement. Archives, she noted, don't just store information about the past but in preserving documentation on human rights violations, including forced displacement, they provide the evidentiary foundation for the right to truth and for accountability. Collection of evidence is carried out by an inter-agency working group with the strong participation of civil society. Thousands of interviews, surveys, and testimonies are included in the archives.

Hardin Lang began by emphasizing that forced displacement is an intentional strategy in war, not only an unintended consequence and that local actors, not international agencies, are on the front line of collecting the necessary data. In Colombia, consultations with IDPs were organized as part of the peace process itself. Housing, land and property issues are central challenges in the return process. Transitional justice mechanisms pave the way to reconciliation and support recovery efforts.

In the discussion, Tetiana Shevchenko replied to a question about the involvement of IDPs in Ukraine's archival efforts by saying that IDPs as direct witnesses have shared their experiences with displacement, that many civil society initiatives support IDP participation and that IDP-led organizations have contributed to the process. Laura Borrero signaled that Colombia had instituted one of the first transitional justice processes and that it was born from the peace agreement – without the peace agreement, they couldn't have had transitional justice – this put IDPs in the center of the agreement. Tetiana Schechenko noted, in response to a question about sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), said that many civil society organizations have been working on SGBV and evidence collected is used in criminal proceedings. The question of how this evidence can be preserved in archival collections while respecting victims' privacy is important. In Colombia, Laura Borrero noted that in public *audiencias* for peace, many of those accused of crimes speak directly to their victims. Hardin Lang commented that we have seen some accountability for individual perpetrators of violence and internal displacement at both the national and international levels. But the question remains of what can be done now – in the midst of ongoing conflict. Documentation of crimes needs to occur from the beginning of a conflict and the system must move from providing aid to accountability.

In closing the conference, Sarah Miller and Elizabeth Ferris noted that a recording and summary of the meeting will soon be posted on the sponsoring organizations' websites and thanked the panelists and participants in the meeting.

Strategic Outlook: Addressing the Structural Inequality

The diverse experiences shared by the panelists – from the socioeconomic data on deepening poverty to the transitional justice mechanisms in Colombia – point to a systemic challenge. To move forward, displacement legislation must evolve beyond emergency aid to formally integrate accountability and a culture of remembrance as vital links in transitional justice. Only by addressing this hidden structural inequality can we ensure that the rights of the internally displaced are as clearly defined and protected as those of recognized refugees.