

Record 50.8 million people internally displaced in 2019

By Jean Shaoul
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Some 50.8 million people worldwide were forced from their homes by conflicts and natural disasters in 2019, living as internally displaced people (IDPs). This is the highest number ever recorded, 10 million more than in 2018, and is in addition to 71 million refugees, also a record number.

Not having crossed any borders but living as de facto refugees in their own countries in informal settlements, emergency shelters and crowded camps, their plight is virtually ignored, attracting little global attention. These highly vulnerable people have limited or no access to healthcare, now making them highly susceptible to the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, the recession engulfing the entire world, which the corporate and financial elites everywhere are using to corral people back to work irrespective of the health risks, will be used as the pretext for reducing the already limited humanitarian aid for people they view as so much surplus labour.

The Norwegian Refugee Council's Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre's (IDMC) Global Report on Internal Displacement highlights the extent and consequences of local wars and conflicts throughout the world. It omits to state that most of these conflicts have been stoked by the imperialist powers, while calling on the same international agencies and governments responsible for creating these disasters to address the issue. It cites approvingly United Nations Secretary General António Guterres' call for a "decade of action" on global equality and sustainable development.

The report states that by the end of 2019 conflict and violence in 61 countries (or nearly a third of the 193 UN member states) had internally displaced 45.7 million people, many of whom had fled their homes more than once.

Some 34.5 million, three-quarters of the 45.7 million displaced by conflict, were concentrated in just 10

predominantly poor or middle-income countries: Syria, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Yemen, Afghanistan, Somalia, Nigeria, Sudan, Iraq and Ethiopia.

Of the new displacements, the majority were in the world's poorest countries in sub-Saharan Africa where conflicts in the Sahel, Somalia and South Sudan have caused hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes.

In 2019, sub-Saharan Africa was again the region most affected by displacement due to armed conflict, communal violence and jihadist attacks in countries where endemic poverty, government corruption, struggles over natural resources—often driven by international powers and their local proxies—and the effects of climate change exacerbate the risk of displacement. Some 19.2 million, or nearly 40 percent of the world's total, were living in internal exile.

DRC is by far the worst affected country with 1.7 million new IDPs, making a total of 5.5 million. Torn apart over 25 years by wars in which 200 armed groups are fighting each other for control of the country's vast mineral resources, it has seen the bloodiest war since World War II, with over 5 million dead, as well as its second largest Ebola outbreak and measles and cholera outbreaks that killed thousands of people. DRC saw heavy rains and flooding in 12 of its 26 provinces, displacing another 250,000 people. Around 15.9 million of its 87 million people were expected to need humanitarian aid in 2020.

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, saw 250,000 new displacements, making a total of 2.6 million. Home to vast oil and gas wealth, Nigeria is one of the most socially unequal countries on earth, with 10 individuals controlling a total net worth in excess of \$26 billion while over 50 percent of the population subsist on less than \$2.00 a day, according to the World Bank. More than 23

percent of Nigerians are unemployed.

It has faced years of conflicts and insurgencies, particularly in the northern part of the country against the Islamist group Boko Haram, and is overrun by criminal gangs engaging in kidnappings, extortion, and assassinations. Nearly half a million IDPs are living in camps without adequate shelter in the northeast.

The Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa, encompassing Burkino Faso, Mali and Niger saw a particularly sharp spike in violence and displacement, with nearly 1 million new IDPs, as unpopular governments, with the backing of France and Germany, fight off local militias.

The source of the escalating conflicts in the Sahel is the growing conflict between the major powers over control of resources, including gold and uranium. France, the former colonial power, and other European imperialist powers are seeking to defend their interests against the US, China, Russia and even India, all of which are trying to gain a foothold in Africa. France and Germany are also trying to prevent refugees from Africa from reaching the Mediterranean and Europe by sealing off the borders and setting up concentration camps.

Cameroon's crisis—it has nearly 1 million IDPs, as anglophone secessionists in the west have clashed with security forces—is one of the world's most neglected.

The Middle East and North Africa accounted for more than a quarter (12.5 million) of all IDPs in 2019, mostly in Syria (6.5 million), Yemen (3.6 million) and Iraq (1.6 million), which have been subject to wars and conflicts launched by the US and/or its regional clients and proxies. Whether displaced in their own countries or elsewhere in the region, the large number of refugees from these and other wars, including Libyan and Palestinian refugees, have been living for a protracted period in terrible conditions. With conflict and violence ongoing, many face the risk of secondary displacement.

In Syria, clashes between pro-regime forces and US-backed ISIS militias in the east around Deir el-Zur and Turkey-backed Islamists in the northwest in Idlib province triggered 1.8 million new displacements.

In Yemen, where Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, with US and UK backing, have been fighting the Houthis-led rebellion against the stooge government of now exiled Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, 400,000 became homeless in 2019, almost double the number in 2018. For many, it was not the first time, heightening their vulnerabilities. With 80 percent of the population in need of humanitarian assistance and 3.6 million living in internal displacement, Yemen is the world's worst

humanitarian crisis. More than half of IDPs live in rented accommodation, while 35 percent live in informal settlements, tents or out in the open.

In Libya, the war between General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), which is backed by the UAE, Egypt and Russia, and the UN-recognised Government National Accord, which is backed by Turkey, for control over the capital Tripoli has escalated. What was a relatively low intensity conflict has morphed into a high intensity war involving sophisticated weaponry, guided missiles and drones and led to 215,000 new IDPs, with 451,000 people living in settlements at the end of 2019.

The West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza recorded 1,500 new displacements in 2019, bringing the total number of IDPs in Palestine to nearly 250,000. This was the result of house demolitions, forced evictions, the confiscation of property and acts of violence carried out by Israeli settlers and the military. The number of Palestinian homes demolished in East Jerusalem in 2019 was the highest in 15 years, while Palestinians living in Area C in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Hebron are at high risk of eviction.

A significant feature of the IDMC's report was the presentation for the first time of the numbers displaced by natural disasters. It estimated 5.1 million people in 96 countries were displaced as a result of natural disasters not only in 2019 but in previous years, many of which go unreported in the world's press. Of the 5.1 million, 3.4 million were living in Afghanistan, India, Ethiopia, the Philippines, Sudan, South Sudan, China, Iran, DRC and Nigeria.

In 2019, tropical storms and monsoons displaced millions in south and east Asia, with India, China, the Philippines, Bangladesh and China each recording at least 4 million displacements. Many were preemptively evacuated by their own governments and of these, most but not all, were subsequently able to return to their homes.

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