

The Turbulent Decade: Confronting the Refugee Crises of the 1990s

Sadako Ogata. New York, W.W. Norton, 2005. \$27.95. 402 pp.

In *The Turbulent Decade*, Sadako Ogata reflects on her decade-long term as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. While the reflections offered are not as candid as may have been anticipated in the memoirs of such a prominent figure, the work nevertheless provides convincing support for Ogata's central argument: that 'humanitarian action may create space for political action but on its own can never substitute for it' (p. 25).

Ogata argues that many of the challenges confronted by UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) during the 1990s – from the militarisation of refugee camps to the intentional expulsion of refugees further to campaigns of ethnic cleansing – had political origins and therefore required more than simply humanitarian responses. She outlines how political and strategic actors were, however, unwilling to take action, leaving humanitarian agencies like UNHCR to confront challenges that were often beyond their capacity or mandate to resolve.

She effectively supports this argument by reflecting on four prominent refugee emergencies during the 1990s: the Kurdish refugee crisis, the cycles of displacement resulting from the Balkan wars, the mass exodus resulting from

the Rwandan genocide, and the challenges of millions of Afghan refugees.

Ogata's first challenge as high commissioner was to rally international support for the Kurdish refugee crisis, in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War. With the tremendous speed of the refugee movement, the denial of asylum in neighbouring countries, and the frequent tensions between the protection needs of refugees and broader strategic priorities in the region, Ogata notes that the dynamics of the Kurdish crisis foreshadowed many of the challenges faced by UNHCR during the decade.

She then outlines how similar dynamics existed throughout the Balkan wars, where ethnic cleansing and 'the displacement of people became the very objective of the war' (p. 168). While Ogata believes that UNHCR's response alleviated suffering and saved lives during the long conflict, she concludes that the complex political and strategic context of the inter-linked conflicts posed challenges to UNHCR that were beyond its capacity. As a result, Ogata argues that UNHCR was 'forced' to compromise on a number of its core principles.

Likewise, Ogata argues that the profound shortcomings of the international response to the refugee outflows from Rwanda in the mid 1990s 'revealed serious international shortcomings in dealing with fundamental political and security issues' (p. 178). Ogata rightly begins by emphasising that the cycle of violence that led to the 1994 genocide was a direct result of the failure to find a solution for the Rwandan refugees from the 1960s, whose descendants filled the ranks of the Rwanda Patriotic Front, which invaded Rwanda in October 1990. Then, in the aftermath of the genocide and the strategic withdrawal of a large portion of the population to camps in eastern Zaire, the international community failed to respond to the serious problem of the militarisation of the refugee camps and the refugee-assistance programmes, especially in North and South Kivu. Such inaction led to a regionalisation of the conflict, the effects of which are still being felt in the region today.

In contrast, Ogata draws on the case of the Afghan refugees to argue that when approached as part of a more comprehensive and collaborative response, 'a mission to protect refugees and solve their problems can contribute to peace and nation building' (p. 277). While Ogata pays insufficient attention to the neglect of the Afghan refugee situation by numerous international actors for most of the 1990s, and how this neglect exacerbated regional instability, her treatment of the security and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan after 11 September 2001 holds important lessons for security planners today.

By contrasting these four cases, Ogata's work makes an important contribution to our understanding of the shortcomings of the international response to regional conflict in the 1990s. She concludes that humanitarian action alone did

not lead to a resolution of refugee problems. Instead, humanitarian actors were left to cope with a wide range of challenges, which stretched their capacity and challenged their mandates. The result was not only increased vulnerability for refugees and tremendous pressures on humanitarian agencies, but a perpetuation of many underlying causes of conflict and a spread of insecurity within regions of refugee origin.

While *The Turbulent Decade* makes an important contribution, it is not without its shortcomings. Indeed, it is striking that the work adopts such a narrow focus, dealing with such a limited number of cases and not engaging with a number of issues of fundamental importance. Ogata justifies her approach by arguing that her focus on four cases reveals 'the complex interplay between political, military, and humanitarian actors in the ongoing refugee crises of the 1990s' (p. 25). While this is true, it is striking that the four cases considered were primarily cases where solutions were found for the majority of refugees by the end of Ogata's time as high commissioner, giving the impression of her leaving office with a clean slate. Instead, a significant number of the refugee situations that emerged during her tenure – especially in the Horn of Africa and West Africa – remain in existence today.

In fact, the average duration of a refugee situation almost doubled during Ogata's tenure, rising from an average of nine years in 1993 to an amazing 17 years by 2003. While Ogata rightly portrays the 1990s as a decade of refugee emergencies, it is important to note that that same decade gave rise to protracted refugee situations – one of the greatest challenges faced by the international refugee protection regime today. The emergence of these situations of prolonged exile, and their impact on national and regional security today, is another consequence of the changing nature of conflict since the end of the Cold War, and Ogata's work could have made an important contribution by engaging with the rise of this phenomenon.

Ogata's exclusive focus on refugee emergencies in regions of refugee origin – the Middle East, the Balkans, Central Africa and Southwest Asia – further overlooks the fact that equally significant developments were occurring in Western Europe and North America. In fact, the 1990s was a 'turbulent decade' for asylum not only in the global South, but in the global North as well, as Western states placed numerous restrictions on entry for asylum seekers, posing a fundamental challenge to the international refugee-protection regime. These changes had a significant impact on the relationship between Western asylum and donor states and the UNHCR, as the agency was constrained in its ability to criticise the same states upon whom its financial well-being was dependent. Given the increasing significance of this trend well into the twenty-first century,

Ogata's work could have made an important contribution by providing insight on this dynamic and its impact on the protection of refugees worldwide.

Indeed, a number of challenges to the refugee regime being debated today have their roots in the 1990s, including UNHCR's involvement in situations of internal displacement, the agency's position on refugee repatriation, the challenge of so-called 'temporary protection', and the expansion of operational aspects of UNHCR's mandate. Given that Ogata oversaw one of the most significant decades in UNHCR's short history, she was in a position to provide unique insight on many of these issues, and her decision not to confront these debates in her memoirs constitutes a missed opportunity.

These limitations do not, however, detract from the overall significance of the work. Ogata's central argument, that humanitarian action is no substitute for political action to address the causes of refugee movements and their impact on states and refugees alike, is as valid to refugee situations of today as to those of the 1990s. It is a lesson that must urgently be learned by policymakers and researchers if we are to ensure that the turbulence of the 1990s does not continue to shake future decades.

James Milner

Munk Centre for International Studies, University of Toronto