

## Freedom and migration

*Migration draws together the great issues, weaknesses and doubts of this new century. Developmental failures, simplistic notions about a "clash of the cultures", the resurgence of ethnic nationalism, the extent of democracy or authoritarianism in the sending and the receiving countries – they all jostle and merge within the globalized roamings of people and peoples.*

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Well before the attacks of 11 September 2001, immigration had come to dominate the political agenda. This was equally true in the North, where populist political parties made it one of their main campaign themes, and in the South, where the economic crisis and civil wars intensified xenophobic reactions to communities of foreign origin. Thus, in Argentina, Bolivian nationals suffered racist attacks by ultranationalist politicians who sought to blame them for unemployment and crime. And in Bolivia, Colombian migrants were subjected to denigration campaigns and suggestions of "collective guilt". In Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), meanwhile, migrants from Burkina Faso were stigmatized and threatened by a central authority obsessed with its own concept of "Ivorianness".

The attacks in New York and Washington further exacerbated the existing negative perceptions of these migratory movements. Migrants, whether clandestine or legal, had long been accused of increasing people's sense of insecurity. Now, migrants have suddenly become suspects.

In the United States, the arrest of more than a 1,000 nationals of Arab or Moslem countries after 11 September, and their imprisonment without the legal guarantees

provided by the American judicial system, bear witness to this "security first" approach.<sup>1</sup> The European Union's rhetoric, measures and plans have generally followed the same trend towards collective suspicion of migrants from the Arabo-Moslem world.

### Great questions

Faced with migration, every country starts to ask itself some fundamental questions about its own identity, its social consensus and its most characteristic values. "How can respect for universal values be combined with recognition of ethnic, religious and communitarian specificities?" wondered *Le Monde des Débats*. "This question worries our societies, which are more and more open not only to individuals but also to widely differing groups and above all, like it or not, to migrants."<sup>2</sup>

The presence of "different" communities, when they are numerically significant, inevitably raises the question of a nation's political identity. Whether it is based on French-style republicanism or on the community structures of the English-speaking world, its philosophical, cultural and political foundations are tested and some-

times called into question. Points of conflict abound, and they often touch upon values and principles that are held sacred by the majority or minority communities. They also concern basic rights, such as women's rights and freedom of expression, religion and association.

## Migration and repression

In this equation of freedom and migration, the aim of the present article is not to describe the abuses to which refugees and migrants are subject in the countries of arrival, but, first and foremost, to consider the situation in the sending countries – the reasons, other than free choice and the lure of Eldorado, that move individuals and groups to leave their native land.

Attacks on freedom lie at the core of migrations. History is littered with great population shifts caused by political factors, repression or pogroms. From the expulsion of the Moors and the Jews by the Spanish crown after the fall of Grenada in 1492 to the exodus of the Eastern Christians subjected to violence by Moslem authorities or populations at the end of the nineteenth century, from the exile of the Republicans after the Spanish civil war in 1939 to the forced population transfers under Stalin, from the flight of the leftists persecuted by the Latin American military dictatorships of the 1970s to the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of West African immigrants by Côte d'Ivoire in 1985, political violence is one of the main causes of mass departures. The war in ex-Yugoslavia during the 1990s added a horrendous new brutality to this formula by integrating forced migration into military strategy and introducing a policy of "ethnic cleansing".

The absence of freedom together with insecurity and vulnerability in the face of armed groups – state, paramilitary or religious – are primary reasons for exodus. Combined with war, as in the conflicts that are consuming the failed states<sup>3</sup> (Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, etc.) or in the Colombian troubles, political violence creates a whole series of

dramatic flights and human catastrophes. Refugee camps become pawns in the game. Armed groups battle for control of them, in order to seize humanitarian aid and recruit new fighters. This transformation of refugee camps into violent, arbitrary ghettos inevitably pushes people into further exodus. They move away from the combat zones – often towards the industrialized countries.<sup>4</sup>

## Democracy and development

The links between migrations or population movements and politics are sometimes hidden and more difficult to pinpoint. Amartya Sen, winner of the Nobel Prize in economics, has shown how an absence of freedom can also indirectly cause situations which, in turn, set off forced migrations. This cause-and-effect link applies particularly to famines. In democratic countries, where information circulates and the authorities are accountable to public opinion, famines have to be prevented. In dictatorships on the other hand, such as Ethiopia in 1984, censorship and a repressive state apparatus allow famines to develop, thus creating internal or external migratory movements.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, after being portrayed as a hindrance to economic "take-off" and development, democracy came to be seen by a growing number of writers and international institutions from the early 1990s onwards as a condition and lever of development. In particular, freedom of expression and of the press has been described as a decisive factor in creating the space for the discussion, transparency and responsibility that development requires. This theory was put forward in particular by the President of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, in a speech given in November 1999 to the World Press Freedom Committee in Reston, United States. "Freedom of the press is not a luxury," he declared. "It is not an extra. It is absolutely at the heart of equitable development, because if the poor are not liberated, if they do not have the right to express themselves, if the press does not

shed light on corruption and unfair practices, we cannot build the consensus necessary for change.”<sup>6</sup>

A lack of freedom can push into exile precisely those people who could have been the most decisive protagonists of economic development. The “brain drain” suffered by many countries in the South cannot be explained solely in terms of researchers’ wish for better economic conditions. Another important factor is the stifling nature of closed, violent or repressive societies. For example, over the past few years, Colombia has lost tens of thousands of professionals, researchers and intellectuals, driven to despair by the climate of violence there.

### Forced displacement

In authoritarian countries, the absence of freedom also enables the authorities to organize, or even force, population movements that fuel conflicts with the local populations and thus, in turn, lead to renewed exodus. Forced population shifts were a characteristic of the Stalinist system, whose heritage still weighs heavily on the countries that emerged from the implosion of the Soviet Union. Governments, to prevent pressure on resources and particularly on land or water in a given region, may also press populations to settle in other parts of the country. Usually, this is to the detriment of the native populations. One such drama took place when Amazonia was colonized, from the 1960s onwards. The aim had been to solve the problem of the landless peasants in the north-west of the country, but without going to the trouble of a real land reform. In fact, what Brazilian governments did was to contribute to the destruction of the Amazon forest and the massacre of the Indians.

In Indonesia, the central government in Jakarta facilitated migrations towards the less populous islands of the archipelago. This led almost immediately to insuperable tensions with local populations who had different ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds. Viet Nam pursued

the same policy of “colonization” and internal migration in its central highlands, triggering protests and exile among the mountain-dwellers.<sup>7</sup>

### Repression and environmental exodus

“Environmental exodus” is a dramatic illustration of this link between repression and migration, telescoping the political and economic dimensions of the phenomenon. The degradation of the environment in many regions of the world underlies population movements that swell the number of internal exiles or refugees. “Dams, urban sprawl and pollution have already driven 25 million people worldwide into exile,” noted *Le Courrier international* in 1996. “Even more than conflicts, this environmental degradation will soon be the top cause of emigration, particularly in the countries of the South.”<sup>8</sup>

In many countries, however, environmental degradation is possible only because of the violence used against those who reveal and denounce this destruction – such as journalists, indigenous communities and trade unionists. This is what happened in Chiapas, Mexico, during the 1980s, when landowners backed by the militias and the authorities took advantage of fuzzy property laws in order to push Indian populations out into marginal rural areas. It is also true of Amazonia, particularly in Brazil, and of Malaysia, where forest industry companies resorted to violence in order to silence the environmentalists and journalists who were denouncing their practices. Such environmental degradation and the reduction in exploitable resources are in themselves factors that provoke wars and therefore further migrations.<sup>9</sup>

### Criminalization

Migration has therefore been thrust into the very heart of a new global phenomenon, the criminalization of the economy and of politics. The expulsion of peas-

ants by forest enterprises, mining companies and drug traffickers is most often achieved through the use of death threats. In many regions of the world, the State has abdicated in favour of criminal gangs and moneygrubbers, or in some cases has simply gone into cahoots with them.

To their previous trafficking activities, mafias have now added the smuggling of human beings. The most brutal variant is sexual trafficking. Each year, hundreds of thousands of human beings, mainly women and children, are swallowed up by the transnational prostitution networks, in which the most basic human rights are systematically violated.<sup>10</sup> The market in under-qualified employment is also coordinated by mafia-style organizations with the complicity of state officials, at the points of departure and arrival, and the collaboration of unscrupulous employers who deprive these workers of their right to freedom of association and expression. This criminalization of the labour market, which in the sending countries thrives on the failure of the State, goes on to affect the receiving countries, where it creates areas of violence and exploitation. The guarantors of legality, such as labour inspectors, tax inspectors and journalists, if they are too insistent, soon become the targets of intimidation or attempted corruption. In these mafia-style economies, the press in particular is in the firing line. Over the past few years, scores of journalists have been killed by the hirelings of criminal organizations.

## Helping democracy and preventing conflicts

Given such complex and violent phenomena, the control and expulsion measures introduced by many Western countries are inherently flawed. The only effective policy would be one that attacks the root causes of forced migrations. Instead, double standards are the order of the day. The selfsame Western governments that intercept and expel migrants are also turning their backs on equitable development and cutting their aid to the poor coun-

tries. Statements of intent at UN and G8 (the world's richest countries and Russia) summits scarcely survive the realities of a global system that treats poverty as more or less predestined and inequality as virtually normal.

Assistance for democratic experiments is also hamstrung by pragmatic geopolitical considerations which protect the dictatorial regimes that many refugees are fleeing. Attempts to prevent and resolve conflicts get bogged down in these same contradictions generated by realpolitik and economic diplomacy. The fight against the criminalization of international commerce also suffers. This is because bans on arms sales, and export controls on the raw materials behind the "new civil wars", such as diamonds and coltan,<sup>11</sup> are only loosely applied, due to pressure from metropolitan or transnational business.

"God give you peace," said some polite monks to the fourteenth-century English commander Sir John Hawkwood. "God take away your alms," he retorted, "for as you live by charity, so do I by war." His words should give pause to the present-day debaters of migration and asylum policies.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch: *Presumption of guilt: Human rights abuses of post-September 11 detainees*, New York, August 2002.

<sup>2</sup> *Le Monde des Débats* (Paris): "Ethnies, religions, communautés, le grand défi des différences", April 2002, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Anne-Line Didier and Jean-Luc Marret: *Etats "échoués", mégapoles anarchiques*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> See François Jean and Jean-Christophe Rufin (eds.): *Economie des guerres civiles*, Paris, Hachette, 1996; and Mats Berdal and David M. Malone (eds.): *Greed and grievance, economic agendas in civil wars*, Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Amartya Sen: *Development as freedom*, New York, Anchor Books, 1999, pp. 160-188.

<sup>6</sup> Freedom Forum, 11 April 2000; or *A New Approach to Development: The Role of the Press*, A World Association of Newspapers/World Bank conference, Zurich, 13 June 1999. The quotation is an unofficial retranslation from the French.

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch: *Repression of Montagnards*, New York, April 2002.

<sup>8</sup> *Le Courrier international* (Paris): “L'exode écologique a commencé”, 28 Nov.- 4 Dec. 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas F. Homer-Dixon: “Environmental Scarcity, Mass Violence and the Limits to Ingenuity”, in *Current History*, November 1996, pp. 359-366.

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Watch: *Owed Justice: Thai women trafficked into debt bondage in Japan*, New York, Sep. 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Columbite-tantalite – coltan for short – is a dull metallic ore.

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