

Witchcraft and displacement

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There is a longstanding and well-documented relationship between human displacement and witchcraft allegations.

In the late 17th century, for example, the Salem Witch Trials in New England (which led to widespread executions and imprisonment) took place in an area that was seriously affected by violence and forced migration. According to one author:

“The port town of Salem in the county of Essex lay at the edge of the war zone. Into the county came hundreds of frightened refugees from villages to the north and west that had been raided by the French and Indians. These displaced people spread all over Salem township, including the farming community of Salem Village to the west.”¹

Some 300 years later, in October 2007, UNHCR issued a press release which demonstrated that the phenomenon of witchcraft allegations continues to be linked to population displacement. Titled ‘Witchcraft allegations plague southern Chad’s camps’, the press release stated:

“When 11 refugees fell ill and died within a single week earlier this year at the Dosseye refugee camp in southern Chad, witchcraft allegations swirled through the community and led to cases of assault and arson.” “In one incident,” it continued, “three siblings died within an hour and Adjara, a widowed mother of eight in the camp, was attacked by 15 others who accused her of cursing the children.”

Recent UNHCR evaluation missions to Angola and southern Sudan have demonstrated that witchcraft allegations can also be an important gender and protection issue in the context of refugee return. In Sudan, for example, the evaluation team encountered examples of allegations of witchcraft against returnees and accusations that they were bringing HIV/AIDS into the community. The

evaluation team that visited Angola met an NGO that had been obliged to establish a ‘safe house’ for the protection of older women who had been accused of witchcraft.

Prompted by such evidence, the Policy Development and Evaluation Service (PDES) has undertaken a very rapid assessment of the current state of knowledge about refugee protection and witchcraft allegations. PDES has concluded:

1. Witchcraft allegations occur regularly and globally in the refugee, IDP and returnee context.
2. Women, children and older persons are disproportionately affected by witchcraft allegations, although allegations against adult males are not unknown.
3. While witchcraft allegations are sometimes dealt with by formal judicial systems, they are more frequently associated with arbitrary forms of ‘justice’ and punishment.
4. Witchcraft allegations impinge upon the protection of displaced people in a number of ways:
 - Refugees, IDPs, returnees and asylum seekers who are accused of witchcraft often experience serious threats to their physical, material and psychological welfare.

- When host and local populations make allegations of witchcraft against refugees, IDPs and returnees who have arrived in their community, tensions are created between the two groups that obstruct the process of integration or reintegration. Witchcraft

allegations consequently undermine the primary UNHCR objective of creating ‘a favourable environment for protection’.

- It would appear that witchcraft allegations are increasingly being used as a basis for asylum claims in the industrialised states. There is also disturbing evidence that the number of child abuse cases involving witchcraft allegations and young asylum seekers is on the rise.
 - There is evidence to suggest that some refugees and asylum seekers are not accessing appropriate health-care services because they attribute their illness to witchcraft.
5. Our understanding of this issue is limited. While scattered references can be found to witchcraft allegations in UNHCR documents, for example, this phenomenon and the humanitarian community’s response to it have not been the subject of any concerted attention.

On the basis of these findings, UNHCR’s Policy Development and Evaluation Service PDES is planning to undertake a global documentation and literature review on this topic in an attempt to develop a better understanding of the magnitude and implications of this issue. Anyone who wishes to contribute to this initiative is welcome to contact crisp@unhcr.org.

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1. Peter Charles Hoffer ‘Salem Witch Trials’ www.mrellingson.com/Puritan%20PDFs/Salem%20Witch%20Trials%20Cotton%20Mathers.pdf