INTRODUCTION

The war in Afghanistan, and the resulting increase in the number of refugees and internally displaced persons, focuses our attention on homelessness at an international level. This policy paper represents an effort to examine homelessness created as a direct result of war, and to recommend ways to reduce conflict and prevent war.

WAR AND HOMELESSNESS: The International Picture

More than 30 wars are being fought in the world right now, mostly in Africa, central Asia and southwest Asia. A few, such as the war between the United States and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, are international conflicts. Most, however, are civil or revolutionary wars, occurring between governments and opposition groups within countries.

Conflicts over resources—land, minerals, energy—are the most basic and enduring causes of war. Clashing ideologies, including those influenced by political concepts or religion, and struggles to control other people can also lead to war.

War leads to homelessness by creating refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). At the beginning of 2001, the number of people of concern to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was 21.8 million, or 1 out of every 275 people worldwide. Of this figure, 12 million were refugees. In 1999, the 10 largest refugee populations came from Afghanistan, Burundi, Iraq, Sudan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Somalia, Angola, Sierra Leone, Eritrea and Vietnam. All these countries, except Vietnam, are currently at war.

The United Nations estimates the number of internally displaced persons at 20 million–25 million worldwide. IDPs have been forced to flee their homes but have not reached a neighboring country. Therefore, unlike refugees, they are generally neither protected by international law nor eligible to receive many types of aid. The UN does provide humanitarian assistance to IDPs. However, continuing conflicts prevent many of them from receiving humanitarian assistance. Among those of concern to the UNHCR as of the beginning of 2001, are people living in war-torn countries, including Eritrea, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Azerbaijan, Colombia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Yugoslavia, Angola and Liberia.

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Effects of War on Local Populations

Refugees and IDPs face incredible hardships: poor physical and mental health; lack of personal safety; extreme poverty and malnutrition; lack of access to healthcare, employment and education; sexual exploitation and abuse. Lack of resources and political will forces refugees and IDPs to live in predefined locations that lack adequate shelter, housing, sewerage and hygiene infrastructure. Many are

(continued on reverse)
The number of existing conflicts indicates that countries around the world, including the United States, have not yet developed the political will to truly foster and engage in nonviolent forms of conflict resolution, thereby avoiding increased homelessness. Billions of dollars have been allocated in the federal budget to build our defense systems and new weapons for war while, in comparison, funds directed toward the prevention of conflicts and war are minimal. The United States has developed and continues to build a military industrial complex that depends, in part, on the export of arms throughout the world.

To prevent war and the homelessness it causes, we need to ensure that a global economic system adheres to principles of justice, equality and the protection of human rights. Priorities should be reordered to reflect a greater emphasis on the following:

- Developing and implementing a nuclear arms reduction treaty that is equitable in its reduction of existing stockpiles and in its enforcement of regulations to serve as disincentives for the production of future nuclear arms.

At the end of 2000, approximately 4 million Afghans were living as refugees in neighboring countries.

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Since the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan, hundreds of thousands of Afghans have been forced to flee. Their eventual repatriation is complicated by the destruction of an already weakened infrastructure and by tribal conflict over the establishment of a new governing body.

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