

In 'closed file' limbo: displaced Sudanese in a Cairo slum

by Pascale Ghazaleh

Bus drivers idle their engines as they wait at the end of the highway leading to Cairo. Exhaust fumes swirling around them, fruit vendors preside indifferently over misshapen and rotting produce, shaded from the searing light by tattered umbrellas. A small Sudanese girl trudges past the vendors up the hill to Arba'a wa Nuss. The waste water trickling down the hill and the weight of her baby brother on her hip make the steep, rutted track harder to negotiate.

*Refugee families,
Arba'a wa Nuss,
Cairo*

Arba'a wa Nuss sits in limbo on Cairo's margins, an hour or more from the city's belly through grinding traffic. Its name - meaning four and a half in Arabic - refers to the distance in kilometres that separates it from the beginning of the Cairo-Suez road but most of its residents know it as Ezbat al-Haggana, after the camel-mounted guards who first settled in the area.

Sudanese uprooted by war or poverty have come to swell the settlement's population, directed here by relatives or compatriots who wait at Cairo's downtown train station for new arrivals from the south. These days, the refugees are keeping close watch on negotiations to end Sudan's 19-year civil war. Few have any hope that the talks will change anything.

Beyond city limits

Displaced Sudanese, especially black African Christians from the war-torn south of the country, live in many quarters of the Egyptian capital but

Arba'a wa Nuss is one of the few places where they have assembled in numbers large enough to make a visual difference. Most of the refugees here are poor. Most have little hope of leaving and still less to hope for if they stay.

The earliest inhabitants of Arba'a wa Nuss built houses on land owned by the military. Twenty years on, through *wad' yad* (roughly, squatters' rights), they have come to own these dwellings, and the government has granted the area de facto acknowledgment by including as many of its residents as it can count in the census and by extending a bus route to their doorsteps. Water and electricity supply, absent entirely until the mid-1990s, remains erratic. Yet marginality offers certain advantages to the desperate. Rents remain two or three times lower than the very cheapest rates elsewhere in Cairo, although affordable to the poorest only if four or more crowd into a couple of cramped rooms, or rotate the rent

according to the occasional work they find.

Counting heads

No one seems to know exactly how many people fleeing Sudan have ended up in Cairo. The mixed Egyptian and Sudanese population of Arba'a wa Nuss may be as high as a million. Claims by the Egyptian government that as many as five million displaced Sudanese currently live in the country are widely regarded as exaggerated. The Joint Relief Ministry (JRM), a coalition of churches that has been working with displaced Africans in Cairo since the early 1990s¹, registered 8,000 new arrivals from Sudan in 2000. Almost 6,000 Sudanese refugees are registered with the UNHCR office in Cairo, 68% of Egypt's recognised non-Palestinian refugee population.

However many there are, the Sudanese, especially those from the south, stand out on the city's streets,



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taller and darker-skinned than the Egyptians waiting with them for the bus. The older women wear bright African wraps, the men dark trousers and white shirts. Teenage boys wear baseball caps and low-slung, oversized jeans and the girls skin-tight trousers and clattering jewellery.

While ethnicity and clothing combine to increase their visibility, enforced idleness makes the displaced easy targets for their hosts' potential hostility. Because non-Egyptians must obtain work permits, all but impossible for anyone not affiliated with a foreign company, many Sudanese are unemployed. With too much time on their hands and not enough money to feed their families, they feel trapped. Those who do find employment face another host of problems. Women who clean houses, cook and care for the children of wealthy Egyptians tell of their salaries being withheld, month after month. If they complain, employers threaten to call the police. The men might do odd jobs in offices, or serve in upmarket restaurants and coffee shops. They are usually impassive but resentment shows through tight-stretched smiles when colleagues address them as 'Chocolate'.

Race matters

Several incidents, including a street battle that brought the riot police out in force, have fuelled the feeling, widespread among the refugees and many of those who work with them, that Egyptians are racist toward black Africans. In the school built in Arba'a wa Nuss upon the initiative of the Sacred Heart Church, the displaced gather to tell their stories. "Our children are lost here," says one woman. "Society rejects them because of their colour, their clothes; they are chased away from shops. They can only relax here, among those of their race." Mark Bennett, JRM programme coordinator, estimates that black Africans in Egyptian society must cope with two sets of problems: first, as blacks ("the darker your skin, the less you are accepted") and, second, as foreigners, with limited access to services compounded by a lack of cultural and linguistic familiarity. Racism has grown as Egyptian workers displaced by more skilled labour return from the Gulf and are forced to compete with better-educated, multi-lingual Sudanese.

Anita Fabos, former director of the Forced Migration and Refugee Studies

(FMRS) programme at the American University in Cairo, notes that the plight of Sudanese refugees is symptomatic of a general "failure to deal with the reality that Egypt is a multicultural society. Neither the Egyptian state nor the media, nor society in general, recognises the right of foreigners to basic services," Fabos declares. However limited the resources available to the displaced, there is a real basis for resentment among their Egyptian neighbours. As recent visitors to Arba'a wa Nuss waded through the sludge past the auto repair stalls that line one of the main paths into the settlement, an Egyptian mechanic jeered: "Coming to see us?" Another replied: "It's the foreigners again. They'll be wanting the Sudanese. They're not about to give you anything, that's for sure."

Compounding the refugees' alienation, and aggravating latent antagonism from the host community, is the fact that almost 30% of the community consists of young single people who are unable to complete their education or find work. Sudanese youth must cope with the difficulties facing young people generally in Egypt, where unemployment and drastically limited prospects brew resentment in pressure-cooker conditions and where the security forces are quick to impute subversion to groups of aimless juveniles. Wider political developments can also trigger crackdowns on those whose official identity – or lack thereof – makes them automatically suspect. Palestinian university students in Cairo, routinely subjected to house calls or roundups, are frequent victims. The media, too, play a part in scapegoating refugees as drug dealers, prostitutes, drunkards or rapists.

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UNHCR estimates that some 200 people a year are arrested for lack of a residency permit. While forced returns to country of origin remain extremely limited, unknown numbers wait in Egyptian jails for someone to realise they have disappeared. Others are on the run from the authorities, their whereabouts unknown. Appalling stories of the torture of domestic servants, murder and theft of body organs circulate among the displaced Sudanese, fostering fear, anomie and insecurity.

Recognising refugees

Sudanese government soldiers kidnapped Wilson in 1987. He was 15. After killing his father they took him to a training camp and gave him weapons. Somehow managing to escape, he made it to Khartoum, found work at the YMCA and from there found his way to Cairo. Literate in Arabic, he found a menial job in an office. He applied to UNHCR for refugee status but was refused. To recount this event, he uses the two-word English phrase all Sudanese refugees in Cairo know and learn to hate: 'closed file'. These words change the course of a life, signal that it has tipped over the edge into illegality and inform the recipient that hope has ended. In legal terms, they mark the border between asylum seeker and illegal alien, the possibility of resettlement and the threat of deportation, the end of waiting and the beginning of indeterminacy.

Although it has signed both the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees and the 1969 Organisation of African Unity Convention, Egypt does not have an official policy on refugees. It has allowed other bodies, primarily UNHCR, to take responsibility for determination of their legal status, and eventually for repatriation or resettlement. Recognition of refugee status is a precondition for seeking asylum but if UNHCR rejects a petition and a subsequent appeal, a process that can take up to two years, the asylum seeker's case is closed. To regularise their status, rejected refugees must then pay fines for the months they have stayed in the country in excess of the duration their visa specifies – if they had a visa in the first place. Ten days before it expires, they must apply for renewal. "But

most are scared," explains Vincent Cochetel of UNHCR. "Other community members warn newcomers against contact with the authorities, so people place themselves in a position of illegality. It's a Catch-22 situation."

Refugee status determination (RSD) is among the points on which those working with the displaced disagree most sharply. The 1969 Convention (which counts as refugees those displaced by civil war or wars of colonial liberation, and allows for group,

rather than individual, recognition) defines as *prima facie* refugees those directly fleeing a war zone. Barbara Harrell-Bond, acting director of the FMRS programme, argues that Egypt, as a signatory to the Convention, "could grant *prima facie* recognition and get it over with." In contrast to the impossibly lengthy, tedious process would-be refugees must go through in Egypt, she points out that Iran, with four million refugees, "does not do individual status determination." In Yemen, too, Somalis are recognised on *prima facie* grounds.

"Why don't they move on?"

With a total backlog of over 17,000 cases, UNHCR seems to be doing both far more than it can and much less than is necessary. Harrell-Bond believes the agency is spending "too much time on resettlement" and not enough on defending refugees' rights. She argues that the RSD system itself is flawed as procedures recommended by UNHCR HQ in Geneva are not followed. For example, "no one is given a reason for rejection in a form that permits them to clear up misunderstandings adequately or bring new evidence to support an appeal."

The system consists of a 'durable solution' interview designed to determine whether the applicant can integrate in Egypt. The resulting file is then referred to the US, Canadian or Australian immigration authorities, whereupon the asylum seeker's case is no longer UNHCR's responsibility. Harrell-Bond, who believes that UNHCR should not be spending its scarce resettlement resources except when people are at risk, argues that embassies should do that work. Most importantly, she says, "it should not be doing status determination. It cannot protect refugees - which is its job - and at the same time be their judge and jury."

Perhaps surprisingly, Cochetel agrees. "This office was not meant to be what it is. UNHCR has been working in Egypt on refugee status determination procedures since 1954. It is filling a vacuum, determining status for the government by default because the authorities are not ready to assume responsibility. It is not natural for UNHCR to get involved in this field."

Cochetel lays at least part of the blame for the low success rate in claiming refugee status at the door of

the displaced themselves. In a bid to convey maximum need, "they advise each other on the process, and add fiction, extra elements. Because their stories are not credible, they are rejected," he maintains. Harrell-Bond, too, reports incidents of invented testimonies. In addition, UNHCR's admittedly restrictive definition of a refugee simply does not apply to many asylum seekers who have spent months or even years in IDP camps in Khartoum or Omdurman before coming to Cairo. "Why don't they move on?" demands Cochetel rhetorically. "They prefer illegality in Arba'a wa Nuss to the slums of Khartoum. No one forces them to come here." Harrell-Bond has a ready response: "These people ... are still afraid of genuine persecution in the countries from which they fled."

Assisting refugees

The JRM, an ecumenical association, receives limited resources from 32 donors, among them UNHCR. If the refugees in Arba'a wa Nuss need help, they turn to an explicitly Christian organisation whose interests may sometimes have little to do with the refugees' welfare. According to Harrell-Bond, one church offered to help fund the Sacred Heart school but on condition that all the Muslim students were expelled. The headmaster refused. A volunteer with a legal aid project affiliated to the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights (EOHR)² recounts that Muslim refugees woke up one morning last winter to discover that blankets had been distributed to their Christian neighbours, while they had somehow been overlooked. The flip side, Fabos points out, is "that the state supports a Muslim Egyptian perspective through media coverage and various policies. This is obviously divisive."

Clientelism, agrees Cochetel, is characteristic of any religion and, while he is reluctant to "create religious dependence" through the supply of assistance, he cites practical considerations when explaining UNHCR's reliance on the church network. The churches were already active in the field. In the great Muslim versus Christian debate, it is easy to forget that there is also a threat to "the older African religions, for which survival is difficult in the religious environment here."

On the other hand, given that the vast majority of all refugees in Egypt are

Muslim, it may seem astonishing that civil society has done so little to respond to their needs. "Why are the mosques not doing anything?" Harrell-Bond wonders. The UN has met with Mohamed Sayed Tantawi, the sheikh of Al-Azhar, in an effort to change that. Some mosques have medical centres but provide health care on an individual basis and offer no outreach facilities. NGOs associated with the Islamist movement often have problems with the authorities and thus little inclination to expand their activities in any visible manner. Subject to the vagaries of the 'war on terrorism', they confine themselves to propounding Islamic charity for the numerous poor Egyptians. Secular human rights organisations also contend with draconian government restrictions and feel their primary mandate is to help Egyptians.

Conclusion

In the desolation of Arba'a wa Nuss, the displaced wait, trying to remember what pride was like. "We were not poor," says one of the women at the Sacred Heart school. "They should not think we had nothing. But we have lost all this: our land, our music, our songs."

The displaced often feel that their only hope is self-reliance. In 2000, a few of them formed a problem-solving committee and, with assistance from Egyptian and foreign psychiatrists, lawyers and social workers, began training volunteers, recruited principally among the 'closed files', asylum seekers rejected by UNHCR. "Once you know nobody will help you," says the organisation's coordinator in Arba'a wa Nuss, "you start learning to help yourself."

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1. For information on the work of the JRM, see www.geocities.com/jrmcairo/aboutUs.html
2. See www.eohr.org.eg.

See also Michael Kagan's report 'Assessment of Refugee Status Determination Procedure at UNHCR's Cairo Office 2001-2002' at www.aucegypt.edu/academic/fmrs/Reports/reports.html