

Daring to dream of an end to exile in sub-Saharan Africa

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Almost 98% of the refugees in Africa today could be considered as in protracted refugee situations. We need concerted efforts to draw as many as possible to a close.

People from eight nations are represented among the 2.3 million refugees in sub-Saharan Africa falling within UNHCR's definition of a protracted situation (that is, more than 25,000 refugees in exile for more than five years), namely: Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Eritrea, Liberia, Somalia and Sudan (Darfur and the South). While the focus on larger protracted refugee situations is warranted both by their numbers and the impact these populations have on their host communities, it is also important not to lose sight of

the many small groups of refugees, or individual refugees, who remain in protracted situations in both rural and urban settings. This broader definition adds people from another 13 countries: Chad, Republic of Congo, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Ethiopia, Mauritania, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Togo and Uganda.

Since the 1960s, when UNHCR began working in sub-Saharan Africa, the dynamics of displacement and trends in refugee movements have evolved considerably. Initially, refugee flight was often the result of a liberation struggle. Later, civil conflicts became

a major cause of flight. The numbers peaked in the mid-1990s when some seven million Africans were living in exile as refugees. Today half of the nationalities represented among the largest protracted refugee populations at that time no longer figure in the charts. Several more could soon drop off as well, as peace is consolidated and refugees find solutions.

Between 1993 and 2007 more than 9.2 million people across Africa were able to return to their country of origin. Decreases in total refugee populations are also a result of third country resettlement, with over 182,500 people resettled in the same period. Opportunities for local integration, on the other hand, which had been a solution for many refugees



Voluntary repatriation of Sierra Leonean refugees from Liberia, July 2004.

in the region in the 1980s, became negligible towards the end of the 20th century. Encouraging signs, however, indicate that settling permanently in their country of asylum is once again becoming an option for a considerable number of refugees.

Remaining refugees

Among smaller residual populations of refugees in protracted situations are groups and individuals, sometimes widely dispersed among several African countries, who took refuge outside their country of origin many years ago. Identifying appropriate solutions for them requires an understanding of their particular situations. Ghanaians who have been in Togo since the 1980s are already socially and economically integrated and other groups, such as Congolese in Gabon, are moving in this direction. For the Ethiopians who took refuge in Kenya in the early 1990s, resettlement has been the main option to date. On the other hand, Ethiopians who fled to Sudan may have the option of local integration, and a profiling exercise is currently underway to identify an appropriate solution for each individual. Repatriation also remains a possibility for others, such as the Namibians who have been in Botswana for over 10 years and the Mauritians in Senegal since 1989.

Eritrean refugees in eastern Sudan have spent the greatest time in exile – some of them more than 40 years. In view of the limited prospects for voluntary repatriation, the focus is on self-reliance as a precursor to local integration, which is no longer a taboo. In Ethiopia, where there are just over 13,000 Eritrean refugees, large-scale resettlement is underway.

Solutions for Rwandan refugees have seemed the most elusive since many of those remaining in exile continue to reject the possibility of their return. Many of them are socially and economically integrated in their countries of asylum to varying degrees but, like others, remain dependent upon their refugee status for right of residence. UNHCR continues to work closely with the Rwandan government, host country governments and refugees themselves in exploring all possibilities for solutions, encouraging return where possible

or, alternatively, a change from refugee to resident status to enable their full local integration.

Closing the ‘refugee chapters’

A comprehensive approach to achieving solutions for refugees remaining in protracted situations is desirable, including placing a greater focus on increasing receptivity to local integration. For Angolans, Liberians and Sierra Leoneans, UNHCR is working with governments in their countries of origin and asylum to bring the ‘refugee chapter’ in the history of these countries to proper closure.¹

The prospects for achieving solutions for all Angolans are encouraging. While the voluntary repatriation operation was formally concluded in 2007, UNHCR and the Government of Angola are developing a comprehensive plan which would provide for the voluntary return of some of the remaining Angolan refugees in Southern Africa, which may in turn open the way for local integration for those who do not wish to return. The will and intentions of the refugees are the key consideration.

While the peace processes in Burundi and South Sudan are still fragile, UNHCR is cautiously optimistic that the conditions for achieving solutions for all remaining Burundian and South Sudanese refugees are falling into place. To date, close to half a million Burundians have gone home, with the number of persons choosing to return having sharply increased since 2006. According to current projections, organised repatriation should be complete by the end of 2009. UNHCR has also actively pursued resettlement, including for a group of more than 8,500 Burundian refugees from the 1972 influx living in camps in Tanzania.²

For the South Sudanese, more than half of those who fled across borders have returned. UNHCR projects that of the roughly 125,000 South Sudanese refugees remaining in countries of asylum, almost half are likely to return in 2009. Governments in the countries where these Sudanese refugees have found asylum have not yet offered possibilities for local integration but discussions are under way.

Successful efforts to resolve the border tensions between Nigeria and Cameroon have also enabled the majority of Nigerians who sought refuge in Cameroon to return home. UNHCR is working with the remaining group, which over the years has decreased from 17,000 persons to fewer than 3,000, to identify the preferred solutions and bring this refugee chapter to a close.

Interminable conflicts

Yet prospects for return remain dim for some refugees whose countries are engulfed in intractable conflicts. For the Congolese (DRC), Central Africans, Sudanese from Darfur and Somalis, predicting the outcomes of current peace negotiations is difficult. To increase the likelihood that any agreements will be comprehensive, UNHCR is advocating for the inclusion of both refugees and IDPs in peace processes. UNHCR facilitated the participation of Congolese in the Goma Peace Conference and Darfuris in the Darfur-Darfur Dialogue and Consultations and is currently exploring similar possibilities for the refugee and IDP populations from the Central African Republic and Somalia.

The Congolese refugee population is a mixture of people who fled in the 1970s due to conflict in Katanga Province and others who have been uprooted since 1996 as a result of civil war. The earlier group (some 11,900) fled to Angola, where they have achieved a significant level of socio-economic integration and are expected to be able to naturalise as Angolan citizens or obtain permanent resident status as a step toward eventual naturalisation. The solution for most Congolese refugees who fled in the 1990s is to return home and some, despite the volatile situation, are indeed returning. Resettlement is also being pursued for some and for others local integration may be an option. For the Central Africans in Chad, UNHCR and its partners are focusing efforts on building self-reliance. On the other hand, resettlement has been significant for Somalis, with more than 75,000 resettled since 1996, although this number is small in relation to the total number of Somali refugees in Africa.

In the mid-1980s Ugandan refugees fled to DRC and, in much smaller numbers, to Kenya. Those in DRC are

considered to have achieved a certain level of socio-economic integration. UNHCR will be exploring local integration opportunities with the government, while also exploring possibilities for return both for those in DRC and those in Kenya.

The Chadians who became refugees in several different outflows between the early 1980s and 2008 are largely socially and economically integrated where they live in Benin, Cameroon, CAR, Gabon, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Sudan. But, like many other refugee groups, they would benefit from the opportunity to obtain an appropriate legal status that would facilitate their local integration on a sustainable basis.

Conclusion

Neither UNHCR nor the refugees can realise durable solutions alone. The efforts need to be combined

with those of states (both countries of asylum and countries of origin), multilateral African organisations and the international community at large. In 2006, Ministers at the African Union (AU) Ministerial Meeting in Ouagadougou set their goal very high, calling for a Special Summit “to tackle the root causes of the problem of forced displacement in order to eradicate this phenomenon” on the continent. The AU Special Summit on Refugees, Returnees and Displaced Persons due to take place in October 2009 offers an important opportunity to mobilise African states to build upon the recent positive initiatives taken in several countries and achieve lasting solutions for refugees.

The common factor for all refugees is that they have limited or no control over their lives. For many, their lives are on hold while they wait,

sometimes for decades, longing to reclaim their basic human rights and some ability to determine their own future. Perhaps the most poignant dimension of the problem is to see young refugees being born and growing up in enforced exile. A critical part of the AU’s undertaking will be to mobilise the political will to give a voice to those who have been forcibly displaced.

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1. See also the following article on West Africa by Alistair Boulton.
2. See also the article by Jessie Thompson on Burundians in Tanzania on pp35-36.