

Encampment at Abu Rakhm in Sudan: a personal account

by Tarig Misbah Yousif

This article explores camp policy as embodied in the rural settlement approach which has characterised the work of UNHCR and its implementing partners in their search for a durable solution to Eritrean/Ethiopian refugee issues in eastern Sudan.

Sudan's hospitality towards those fleeing for their lives has long been recognised and appreciated, at least publicly, by the international community. The first influx of refugees was in 1963 from Congo (now the Democratic Republic of Congo); Eritreans followed in 1967, Ugandans in 1972, Ethiopians in 1974 and Chadians in 1982. The last large refugee influx was of Ethiopian military refugees who sought sanctuary at El Lafa area in eastern Sudan following the defeat of the Dergue's forces at the hands of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front in Asmara in 1991. This article reflects mainly on the experience of the Ethiopian refugees who were transferred from the border reception centre of Demazine and re-encamped at Tenedba in central Sudan.

Since the 1960s, the Commissioner's Office for Refugees (COR) in Sudan has been responsible for making and implementing the Government's refugee policy. As most of the Eritrean/Ethiopian refugees were from rural areas with subsistence farming as their means of livelihood, a camp policy of organised rural land settlements was adopted, with agriculture proposed as a vehicle to self-sufficiency. Assistance would be provided for a short time until the refugees became self-supporting peasants. Since refugees can be a crucial asset for the development of an area, they have to be given the opportunity to pursue the skills they utilised prior to flight. The notion of establishing refugees in planned agricultural settlements appears to be supported by the argument that when refugee influx is massive, repatriation unlikely to occur and beneficiaries

and their hosts vulnerable, self-sufficiency projects are preferable to an interminable dependency in camps.

Before embarking on this joint refugee self-sufficiency venture, both UNHCR and COR seemed to share an identical vision. The former was eager to realise the wish of the donor community for an early phase-out by implementing one of its conventional solutions to refugee problems, while the latter was concerned to prevent refugees from becoming a drain on the country's meagre resources.

Abu Rakhm Refugee Settlement

Abu Rakhm Refugee Settlement, established in 1979, comprises 3 camps: Abu Rakhm, Tenedba and Wad Awad, with a total caseload of 8,000 refugees, most of whom came from Eritrea. Their basic survival needs were met upon arrival in Sudan. The second phase was to help refugees achieve self-sufficiency by assigning them plots of land for cultivation.

However, self-sufficiency - the ability of refugees to produce enough sorghum from their plots for their own needs coupled with the cessation of external assistance - was never achieved. Apart from some slight improvements in the living conditions of a tiny number of refugees in some of these settlements, no settlement could be termed a success, despite the millions of dollars spent. Inadequate international assistance and lack of clear government policy are the main reasons behind the failure. Given the smallness of the plots distributed to refugees (5-10 feddans¹ per family), soil depletion from



photograph: Jon Bennett

continual cultivation resulted in poor productivity and the refugees could not practice the conventional system of leaving some land fallow to improve soil fertility. In addition, most settlements were located in marginalised barren lands where rainfall was inadequate, unevenly distributed and absolutely undependable.

For self-sufficiency, the refugees needed adequate plots of land and adequate assistance during the pre self-sufficiency period. All too often aid falls short of refugees' needs, sometimes governed by political factors. Until the mid 1980s, Sudan was the third largest recipient of US aid because of the crucial role played by the Government during the Cold War. However, Western donors' attitudes changed following the military coup of 1989 which brought the current regime to power. Retrenching humanitarian assistance resulted in appalling conditions in refugee camps; refugees' basic survival needs went unmet, leading many refugees to opt for repatriation, not from an informed voluntary decision but from despair. Furthermore, the integration of refugees was never government policy; their presence was viewed

by the Government as temporary as it was assumed that they would return as soon as the causes which precipitated their flight were eliminated. What can be said with certainty is that, under such conditions of underfunded settlement infrastructures and dubious government policy, to ask refugees to become self-sufficient was to ask the impossible.

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Re-encampment as a pre-repatriation stage

It was not until the 1990s that voluntary repatriation became UNHCR's 'most desirable solution to the problems of refugees'. There were two major reasons behind this. The first was the growing reluctance of donors to fund protracted refugee assistance programmes, particularly in Africa. The second was the spread of complex emergencies which the world witnessed in the wake of the Cold War's demise - Somalia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda - all of which overshadowed UNHCR's ongoing open-ended programmes. However, voluntary repatriation is far from 'problem free', as the experience in Sudan showed.

In 1994, a group of about a thousand Ethiopian refugees were transferred from Demazine, a refugee reception centre bordering Ethiopia, to an existing settlement at Tenedba, part of the Abu Rakham Settlement in central Sudan. This was obviously a pragmatic decision by both UNHCR and the Sudanese Government. The former wanted to reduce its assistance programmes in Sudan, and the latter cited security reasons. Despite the inaccessibility of roads during the rainy season in that area, the transfer was carried out with remarkable success (credit goes to the dedicated staff of the two parties involved). Tenedba was chosen because it was both ethnically suitable and infrastructurally viable. At the time of the arrival of the first convoy, I was moved by the spontaneous reaction of the 'old settlers' of Tenedba refugee camp as I watched them carrying their traditional food, *angaira*, for their kinfolk on board the trucks. The incident confirmed the spirit

of solidarity which refugees possess, despite the shock and trauma of having to abandon their homeland and turn to others for help. By taking this initiative, the refugees emphasised the fact that good reception is extremely important for refugees. Having gone through the same harrowing experience themselves, the older refugees of Tenedba, though materially poor, were concerned to do everything possible to comfort and alleviate the suffering of the new arrivals.

Although initial requests by the camp administration

for urgent logistical support appeared to fall on deaf ears, eventually a UNHCR mission visited the camp and took prompt action to send cooking utensils and other essential relief items.

The majority of the transferred refugees had registered for repatriation prior to their transfer from Demazine and so were not prepared for a lengthy stay in Tenedba. Poor preparation by both UNHCR and COR was to blame for a lengthy delay in repatriation, which became intolerable for many refugees. Potential repatriates made their resentment known to the camp management but the decision to start repatriation was beyond the camp management's jurisdiction. Despite the tremendous efforts made by the staff of the settlement, they were hampered by the lack of adequate resources. UNHCR insisted on applying its 'modular approach' by implementing

the operation with the settlement's existing resources, no matter how meagre. The continuous reduction in programme budgets was clear evidence of UNHCR's intention to halt its programmes in Sudan by executing a fast and final phase-out. Not surprisingly, services rendered to refugees reached breaking point and the already fragile settlement infrastructure nearly collapsed, dashing refugees' hopes of leading an independent life and leaving them in uncertainty and despair.

Fed up with empty promises and procrastination in effecting the promised airlift, the transferred refugees eventually set fire to the grass and bamboo purchased for the construction of their *tukuls*. Had the camp administration not taken rapid action to diffuse the situation, the consequences could have been serious, with loss of life. Refugees resorted to rioting and violence in order to attract attention to their ordeal after they realised that it was not possible to get a definite answer regarding the date of their airlift. The incident did, however, send an unmistakable signal to aid agencies that refugees can and will stand up for their rights. Had the level of assistance in the camp been satisfactory, refugees would not have resorted to rioting at two o'clock in the morning. The incident was reported to the headquarters of the two offices who were urged to take immediate action to surmount the obstacles delaying the airlift. In addition, given the difficult living conditions in the camp and since the arrival of the transferred refugees coincided with weeding time, I used my discretion as Project Manager to offer to all those



A convoy of 1200 Ethiopian refugees return to Ethiopia.

photograph: Howard J. Davies

interested the opportunity to work as casual labourers in the agricultural scheme in the vicinity of the camp.

In order to easily locate refugees in the event that repatriation would start soon, owners of the agricultural schemes agreed to cooperate with the camp's administration by lodging a list containing the names of all registered potential repatriants working with them.

This was not the end of the saga. When trucks were sent to Tenedba to transport the repatriants to Kassala airport when the airlift finally materialised, strategies such as 'family splitting' and 'go and see' were at work. A number of refugee families were reported to have sent only one or two members with the repatri-

ants' convoy. Lack of border control made it easier for 'repatriants' to come back to Sudan without being stopped at any border point. Not surprisingly, some 'returnees' managed to collect the cash component of the UNHCR's repatriation package and later re-join their kinfolk who were left behind in Sudan. Refugees were clearly sceptical about the guarantees of their prospective reintegration when they returned home. The UNHCR reintegration package proved to be far from adequate in helping refugees to reintegrate. Given the thin literature on the subject, reintegration of returnees would be a fruitful area of research, provided that returnee areas were accessible to those wishing to conduct empirical studies.

Inadequate funding has always been an insurmountable obstacle on the road to viable settlement infrastructure.

based settlement projects from the perspective of a practitioner. It must be said that the establishment of refugees in camp-based settlements in eastern and central Sudan was necessitated by the massiveness and suddenness of refugee flows. However, there are lessons to be drawn from the experience:

• The seclusion of refugees on the assumption that their presence is a temporary phenomenon, and the adoption of an anti-integration strategy, can hinder rather than help refugees to become self-supporting. Had donor funding been directed to zonal development and refugees given the chance to release their energies, they might have contributed positively and given an impetus to the country's development process. Despite the generosity displayed by donors at the beginning of the refugee crisis, nebulous government policy probably discouraged them from pumping more resources into settlements which are perceived as transient structures. Most importantly, there was a miscalculation on the side of the Government which did not anticipate that a time would come when rapid donor response to humanitarian emergencies would turn to reluctance and, ultimately, to the termination of assistance.

Conclusions

Encampment as embodied in the settlement policy implemented by COR (with UNHCR and NGO funding) has achieved little success, if any. The striking fact which stands in testimony to its failure is the presence of more than half of the Ethiopian/Eritrean refugees hosted by Sudan outside of the assistance net and living spontaneously in major Sudanese towns. Lamentable conditions in camps have compelled many refugees to head

Lessons

This article has attempted to highlight some of the problems encountered during the course of the implementation of camp-

• Humanitarian values should be viewed as an end in themselves, not purely as a means to the attainment of political ends.

• Re-encampment of refugees who have spent considerable time in urban surroundings can be counter-productive. Proper preparation for repatriation is vital and should always prevail over budgetary constraints.

• Constructive cooperation between COR/UNHCR is sorely needed since the welfare of refugees is their ultimate goal. Since the military coup of 1989, relations between the two agencies have been negatively affected as a result of the politicisation of COR. Inept and inappropriate handling of refugee affairs under the 'politicised COR' has been the direct consequence of sacking most of COR's competent staff. The recriminations and mistrust that have dominated the relations between the two agencies over the last few years must be improved, to foster mutual confidence and concerted effort, since the hardening of attitudes has proven deleterious both to cooperation between them and to the lives of the refugees.

Tarig Misbah Yousif joined the Sudanese Commissioner's Office for Refugees in 1987. During his time there, he worked as Project Manager of Abu Rakhm settlement. In 1996 he attended the RSP's International Summer School. He is now living in Ireland and has just been awarded an MPhil in Peace Studies at Trinity College, Dublin.

1 One feddan equals 4,200 sq metres (one acre equals approx 4,067 sq metres).

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