

Shattered dreams of Sudanese refugees in Cairo

by Hala W Mahmoud

At least 28 Sudanese were killed in December 2005 as Egyptian riot police violently dispersed a sit-in near the Cairo offices of UNHCR. A year later, those responsible for human rights violations have not been held to account and some refugees who went missing remain unaccounted for.

The 30,000 Sudanese in Cairo registered with UNHCR are but a fraction of the vast Sudanese population living in the Egyptian capital.¹ In June 2004 UNHCR took the view that the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Government of Sudan and the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement² allowed southern Sudanese to return in safety. The agency therefore decided to grant all Sudanese asylum seekers temporary protection rather than subject them to individual refugee status determination (RSD), as had been the practice for the previous nine years.

The basic question of who is ultimately responsible for the welfare of Sudanese and other refugees in Egypt was, and is, unclear. Sudanese have long demanded an end to arbitrary detention and protested against Egyptian racism. Primary legal responsibility for such issues rests with the Egyptian government, not with UNHCR. The Egyptian government has no official mechanism through which to engage with the concerns of refugees. Therefore the protestors had no choice except to address all of their concerns to UNHCR.

Faced with unbearable living conditions and left without other options, in September 2005 Sudanese refugees started a peaceful sit-in to protest UNHCR's decision and indicate their desire for resettlement, not repatriation. UNHCR noted that most of the demonstrators' demands were beyond UNHCR's control. After initial tolerance, the Egyptian authorities violently dispersed the protest, killing an unspecified number and arresting around 650 Sudanese who were taken to a number of military camps and prisons. The protest and its aftermath were deeply traumatising as families were separated and children orphaned. UNHCR lobbied to prevent their deportation and the last of the protestors were released in February 2006.

A year on, little has changed. The tragedy attracted the interest of the media and human rights organisations but the refugees received little financial assistance or counselling. The Sudanese have returned to their harsh life in Cairo and its daily frustrations. Egypt has signed the 1951 UN Convention and the 1969 OAU Convention but continues to deny Sudanese refugees the rights to education, health care and protection which

these enshrine. UNHCR, for its part, has not investigated the whereabouts of those missing after the break-up of the sit-in. Queries regarding the status of refugee applications are rarely responded to. UNHCR needs to improve communications with the Sudanese in Cairo and be more transparent and sensitive; regular public meetings would clarify UNHCR's role and responsibilities and help to counteract the rumours which often sweep through the community.

Much could be done to make the refugees' prolonged stay in Egypt more bearable. Egypt and UNHCR should heed those refugees who call for establishment of organised refugee camps where services could be provided and the Sudanese protected from exploitation and racism. The international community could provide backing for those educated and enthusiastic Sudanese refugees who seek to initiate community-based programmes.

Hala W Mahmoud (hwm21@cam.ac.uk), a PhD student at the University of Cambridge, spent over two years researching the community of Sudanese refugees in Cairo.

For more background, see www.rsdwatch.org/index_files/Page4070.htm

1. Ghazaleh, P 'In closed file limbo: displaced Sudanese in a Cairo slum', FMR16, www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR16/fmr16.8.pdf

2. See FMR24, Sudan: prospects for peace, www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR24/FMR24full.pdf