pensioners, the unemployed and other categories of the disadvantaged. In 1996, the new South African government granted amnesty to all citizens of the 14 member states of the Southern African Development Community under which long-time residents in South Africa could apply

Mutual aid characterises the lives of refugees the world over

for permanent residence and, subsequently, citizenship. Many refugees took up the offer and acquired the necessary documentation – thus opening the way to accessing social security benefits. Others acquired citizenship through marriage to South Africans, bribing civil servants or paying South Africans to claim them as relatives.

Remittances from relatives working in urban areas or in rural employment elsewhere – while not always regular or even sufficient to constitute an adequate basis for survival – are an important source of livelihood. Many refugees have consciously refrained from going to live or work in urban areas where living costs are high. They have opted to live in rural areas because of the opportunities for livelihood diversification and the wider scope for securing support when in difficulties.

Mutual aid characterises the lives of refugees the world over and the Mozambicans in Tiko are no exception. Goods and services are regularly exchanged. Those lacking food and other essentials ask from neighbours, as do those lacking money. Women generally help each other with childminding.

“When I don’t have food, I go there [to a neighbour] and ask for a bucket of maize meal. I can also go there [to another neighbour] and ask, and cook for my children. We help each other.”

Local shopkeepers extend credit facilities to many families, provided that they are employed or have a regular income and have a good repayment track record. In the absence of formal credit facilities, many would have experienced greater hardship.

Conclusion

Although they left their country of origin against a background of great uncertainty, Mozambican refugees have managed to establish self-reliant and dignified lives in their new environment. In addition to pursuing familiar livelihood strategies they have taken advantage of available opportunities to craft new ones. Their experience reminds us that refugees are not always destined to be dependent on handouts. Left to their own devices, they are able to use their ingenuity to construct and maintain sustainable livelihoods.

Frederick Golooba-Mutebi (mutebi@soft.co.za) and Stephen M Tollman (tollman@sphe.wits.ac.za) work at the Agincourt Health and Population Unit, School of Public Health, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa: http://healthpop.agincourt.wits.ac.za/agincourt_hdss.htm

1. The village name is fictitious. The study is part of a project looking at livelihoods and well-being of Mozambican refugees and their hosts, supported by the Andrew Mellon Foundation in 2001-03.

The forgotten Palestinians:
how Palestinian refugees survive in Egypt

by Oroub El Abed

Some 50,000 Palestinian refugees live in Egypt without UN assistance or protection and burdened by many restrictive laws and regulations. Little is known about their plight and their unique status.

Palestinians fled to Egypt after the wars of 1948, 1956 and 1967. Gazans employed as civil servants when the Gaza Strip was under Egyptian administrative rule and Gazan students in Egypt when it was occupied by Israel in 1967 were also prevented from returning home. Neither group of displaced Palestinians has been protected or assisted either by UNHCR or by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) – the agency set up to assist Palestinian refugees which began operations in 1950. While UNRWA established relief and assistance projects in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, West Bank and Gaza, Egypt did not allow UNRWA to operate on its territories.

The rise to power of Gamal Abdel-Nasser in 1952 ushered in a golden age for Palestinians in Egypt. Palestinians were regarded as equal to Egyptian nationals and were able to access education and other state services and to work without restrictions. However, by the late 1970s the dispersed Palestinian communities in Egypt were increasingly affected by tensions between the Egyptian government and the Palestinian liberation organisation. The Camp David peace agreement and the assassination of Egypt’s culture minister by the Palestinian faction headed by Abu Nidal in 1978 proved a turning point. Laws and regulations were amended
to treat Palestinians as foreigners. Rights to free education, employment and residency were rescinded. The state media projected negative images of ‘ungrateful’ Palestinians and accused them of having brought about their expulsion by their greed and willingness to sell their land to Zionists. As a result, many Egyptians believe that Palestinians are rich, economically powerful and influential and deserve neither sympathy nor assistance.

Palestinian rights in Egypt since 1978

University education, free for Palestinians under Nasser, now has to be paid for in foreign currency. Even those Palestinians entitled to exemption from paying 90% of the fees charged to foreign students are often unable to raise the remainder. Some Palestinians report forging birth certificates to indicate they are Egyptian in order to get free education. Others have initially paid the minimum fees that Egyptians pay, promising to pay the remaining foreign fees after graduation. Often they are unable to do so and are thus denied official accreditation.

Due to their educational qualifications Egypt-based Palestinians were able to secure well-paid employment in the Gulf in the 1960s and 1970s. Palestinians were known as highly educated professionals and worked in medicine, commerce, engineering, teaching and management. Those who began professional careers prior to 1978 have been able to keep their posts. However, education restrictions mean they have not been joined by younger Palestinians. Many adolescent Palestinians have dropped out of school. Aware of the constraints on their livelihoods, many young men only aspire to learning a vocational skill or owning a shop. Young women have given up hope for an education and resign themselves to household duties and child-rearing. Public sympathy for Palestinians as a result of new hardships suffered since the outbreak of the current Al Aqsa intifada has recently led to the education authorities allowing Palestinian students to attend government schools without paying fees. This has assisted a few but has done little to make up for the lack of education over the years.

The private sector requires skills which, without education, Palestinians are unable to obtain. Private employers are required to obtain work permits for Palestinians and regulations restrict the number of ‘foreigners’ in any company to 10%. Palestinians are thus forced to work as truck or taxi drivers, unskilled or semi-skilled labourers, bicycle-repairers, street vendors of used clothing or itinerant ‘suitcase merchants’ carrying items from governorate to governorate.

A minority of Palestinians are more fortunate. Employees of the PLO and former Egyptian civil servants are assured a regular income and have been able to send their children to public schools and are exempted from paying university fees.

Palestinians are also affected by:

- the risk of health emergencies: while basic health services for Palestinians in Egypt are satisfactory, most fear inability to pay for unexpected and costly medical operations and prolonged medication.

- a 1976 law restricting foreigners from owning buildings and lands and a 1988 limiting ownership of agricultural land to Egyptians

- strict residency requirements: renewal of permits is conditional on paying a fee and proving a reason to remain in Egypt – even though none of them can go back to Palestine. Palestinians unable to provide evidence of educational enrollment, a work permit, marriage to an Egyptian, a business relationship with an Egyptian or a bank balance of $5,000 are at risk of jail or deportation.

- tight travel restrictions: if Palestinians spend more than six months out of Egypt their residency may be revoked. Those who need to reside abroad for one year are required to apply for a one-year return visa which is invalidated if the holder does not return to Egypt before its expiry. Many Egyptian-born Palestinians are stranded in Arab states, living illegally and unable to return to Egypt. In 2001-2002 a student who had studied in Russia spent 14 months shuffling between Moscow and Cairo airports before UNHCR managed to secure asylum in Sweden.

Who protects the rights of Palestinians in Egypt?

In theory, UNHCR has a mandate to protect Palestinians living outside the five UNRWA areas of operation. However, Arab politicians have hampered UNHCR’s ability to provide protection. Arab states have argued that as the UN is responsible for Palestinian expulsion – the General Assembly Resolution 181 in 1947 approved the Partition Plan for Palestine – the UN has therefore an ongoing responsibility to develop mechanisms for repatriation and compensation. Allowing Palestinians to be protected by UNHCR would prejudice their case by encouraging third-country resettlement.

Palestinians have been excluded from the protection of UNHCR, based on the fact that they receive assistance from UNRWA – regardless of the fact that only those who live within its five areas of operation are assisted. Only in September 2002 did UNHCR reinterpret Article 1D of the 1951 Refugee Convention in order to emphasise that Palestinian refugees are ipso facto refugees and are to be protected by UNHCR if the assistance or protection of the other UN body ceases. In light of this, it has included those Palestinians not living in the countries of UNRWA field operations within UNHCR’s protection mandate. In practice, however, UNHCR is still not doing much for Palestinians who do not come under the UNRWA mandate.

Conclusion

Egypt is a signatory to the 1965 Casablanca Protocol and has ratified its articles designed to give Palestinians rights to residency, work and travel while emphasising the importance of preserving Palestinian nationality and maintaining refugee status. In 1981 Egypt additionally signed the 1951 UN Convention. In practice, neither document has been implemented. Egypt’s shifting policies towards its Palestinians have led to a gradual erosion of their rights. Regulations have marginalised Palestinians and reduced them to the
Learning from empowerment of Sri Lankan refugees in India

by K C Saha

Some 65,000 Tamil refugees from conflict in Sri Lanka live in 133 camps in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. As peace talks generate hope for their repatriation, the work of a self-help group, the Organization for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation (OfERR), shows how refugees can equip themselves with skills to be used to rebuild their homeland.

Two thirds of the refugees are Hindu and the remainder Christian. Almost all are from the conflict-affected areas of Sri Lanka’s Northern and Eastern provinces. Prior to fleeing to India in the 1980s or 1990s most refugee families were agricultural labourers or fishermen. Some came to India in their own fishing boats. The Tamil refugee population is young and many have spent most of their lives in exile. In addition to those living in government camps, an estimated 40,000 live outside them. Some of the refugee settlements in Tamil Nadu have fewer than ten people while others are home to thousands.

Although India has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, it has given shelter to refugees from many countries. The Sri Lankans comprise India’s second largest refugee community. The dispersal of refugees around Tamil Nadu and their common language have eased their integration into local communities and some have married and established local links. Refugees receive an assistance package provided by the central and the Tamil Nadu governments which includes a monthly cash grant, ration and free water and electricity.

OfERR was set up by the refugees in 1984 and has headquarters in the Tamil Nadu capital Chennai and four regional offices. Its activities are funded by the European Union, the Jesuit Refugee Service, other Christian organisations and individual Sri Lankan expatriates, including students in the USA.

Education has been a major priority for OfERR. Whereas on arrival most refugees were illiterate, the population is now well educated with an increasing number of qualified professionals. OfERR covers the salary costs of 200 nursery teachers. Due to the support of the Tamil Nadu education authorities almost all refugee children attend school. There are currently 621 students from the refugee camps in universities in the state. In return for OfERR assistance with education expenses, the university students are obliged to provide tuition to other refugee students. A large number of refugee paramedics now serve fellow refugees in camps and also work in government primary health centres.

Other OfERR projects include:

- two agricultural research farms which train refugee youth while generating income from selling rice seeds to the state government and raising poultry
- a nutritional enhancement programme providing supplementary food prepared from local grains to pregnant women and lactating mothers – reducing expenditure on baby food
- an initiative to transfer fishing net manufacture skills from older refugees both to young refugees and to local fishermen
- youth labour cooperatives which have won contracts to help construct the Konkan railway on India’s western coast
- three tailoring training centres: the trained refugees meet the needs of camp inhabitants and sell to local markets
- a gem-cutting teaching centre where a hundred refugee youth