status of foreigners denied access to international bodies able to voice their needs. All the legal instruments of the UN and the Arab League have failed to protect the basic human rights of Palestinians, not only in Palestine but also in exile. If Egypt, and other Arab states, are to sincerely support the Palestinian refugee cause they must provide rights and access to services until such time as Palestinians are able to return.

Oroub El Abed is an independent researcher based in Amman, Jordan whose focus is on Palestinian refugee issues in host countries. This paper is based on a two-year project undertaken in 2001-2003 under the auspices of the Forced Migration Refugee Studies Programme (FMRS) of the American University in Cairo www.aucegypt.edu/academic/fmrs and funded by Canada’s International Development Research Centre (www.idrc.ca). It is adapted from a forthcoming book ‘Palestinians in Egypt: analysis of survival and livelihood strategies’. For further information, contact the author: oroub@yahoo.com

Learning from empowerment of Sri Lankan refugees in India

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 Tamil Nadu governments which includes a monthly cash grant, rice 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...
have learnt to cut and polish semi-precious stones; some have set up their own businesses, while others have found private employment
- female income-generation projects making coir ropes and brushes
- enabling vulnerable widows and older people to supplement their income by raising poultry
- raising environmental awareness by improving camp sanitation facilities, encouraging energy efficiency and promotion of biogas
- supporting 176 women self-help groups (each of between 15 and 18 members) who receive credit to enable food manufacture and vending microenterprises
- credit provision to young male refugees to establish grocery, bakery, fish and vegetable marketing and cycle repair business
- loans to enable trained masons, carpenters and painters to purchase tools; 2,000 refugees now work in the construction industry

Lessons learned
OFERR has provided an empowerment model for self-help refugee organisations elsewhere. They have demonstrated that a refugee-run organisation can:
- base programmes on accurate knowledge of refugee needs
- put resources to optimum use for the benefit of maximum number of refugees
- ensure that the needs of vulnerable community members are not ignored
- integrate health, nutrition, income-generation, microcredit and skills training programmes
- devise ingenious methods to mobilise resources from expatriates both in the countries of resettlement and of origin
- provide practical training and technical assistance to build sustainable livelihoods
- establish credibility with donors and attract new funding sources

create a pool of skilled refugees ready to provide long-term economic benefits and assist post-conflict reconstruction.

OFERR’s empowerment programmes have not only helped the refugees to be gainfully occupied but also overcome the psychological trauma resulting from prolonged residence in camps and years of uncertainty regarding prospects for return to Sri Lanka. The dependency syndrome often accompanying prolonged stay in camps has been avoided.

K C Saha is an Indian senior civil servant. He works independently on forced migration issues in South Asia. The views expressed in this paper are the author’s personal views and should not be construed as the views of the Government of India. Email: kc_saha@nic.in

The website of the Organization for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation (OFERR) is www.oferr.org

Livelihood opportunities for Sudanese refugees

S

ome of the most disadvantaged refugees in Egypt are former Sudanese students who remained in Egypt when the democratically-elected Sudanese government was overthrown in 1989. A small number of them managed to settle in the West but the majority remained in Egypt as refugees; legal restrictions, however, prevent them from working officially.

Many work illegally in jobs that do not match their qualifications. Some stay at home, dependent on their spouses. Women have assumed greater responsibility for their families often because the men are unwilling to do the lower status – and lower paid – jobs that are available. Some former students receive remittances from relatives and friends in the West, a flow of resources key to the survival strategies of many refugees in Egypt.

Skills for Southern Sudan is an NGO set up in 1995 by Windle Trust International to support educated Sudanese refugees in Britain and East Africa in developing relevant skills for the job marketplace and helping them find employment.

In 1997 Skills for Southern Sudan set up an office in Kenya to facilitate Sudanese professionals’ return to Africa, arranging job-seeking workshops and assisting with recruitment. In February 1999 they opened an office in Cairo to provide information and support to those Sudanese refugees willing to take up training and employment opportunities in East Africa and southern Sudan. The Cairo office is now closed.

Skills for Southern Sudan has run training courses (in Cairo, southern Sudan and Nairobi) in subjects such as report-writing, CV preparation, interview techniques, good governance, language skills and women’s empowerment. A number of Sudanese refugees from Cairo have returned to Southern Sudan; most have mainly found work with humanitarian organisations but some are working with the civil administration of the SPLA, which sorely lacks skilled personnel. When the peace accords are finally signed, returnees will be able to contribute to their country’s reconstruction and attainment of a durable peace.

Leben Nelson Moro works for the Office of African Studies at the American University in Cairo. He is currently studying at the Refugee Studies Centre in Oxford.

Email: leben.moro@aucegypt.edu

by Leben Nelson Moro