

Urban Somali refugees in Yemen

Tim Morris

Being an urban refugee in Yemen brings far fewer benefits than being in a camp – and scarcely more opportunities.

Yemen shares characteristics with many other countries hosting urban refugees: lack of durable solutions; challenges of quantifying populations; a host government evading Convention responsibilities; hostility from a once-welcoming host community; political interference in choice of implementing partners; and, most fundamentally, inadequate provision of protection, food, health care and education.

The great majority of urban-based refugees in Yemen are Somali, although there are also substantial numbers of Ethiopians, Eritreans and Iraqis. In 2008 over 50,000 Somalis arrived in Yemen – a 70% increase from 2007 – as increasing numbers flee conflict between the government of Ethiopia and Oromo insurgents.

The Yemeni public generally takes pride in the fact that Yemen welcomes Somali refugees while its richer Arabian neighbours turn them away. Yemenis believe this indicates their greater adherence to the deeply-rooted Islamic duty to offer shelter

to those fleeing persecution. Few are aware that Yemen – the only country in the Arabian Peninsula that is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol – is obliged by international law to accord everyone the right to seek asylum. However, Yemen has not enacted national refugee legislation, and refugee matters are dealt with on an ad hoc basis. In June 2009, after prolonged advocacy by UNHCR, the government established a Ministry of Refugee Affairs but there is considerable uncertainty about its role.

There are no durable solutions for Somalis. In 2008 only 40 Somalis voluntarily repatriated. Resettlement is not a viable option – in the first half of 2009 a mere 164 Somalis were resettled – and the Yemeni government has repeatedly stressed its opposition to local integration. Somalis with over 20 years' documented residence have failed in attempts to apply for Yemeni citizenship.

While UNHCR has data on Somalis who present themselves to reception centres it has no means of estimating the number of Somalis who subsequently leave Yemen or who reside outside the country's only refugee camp, Kharaz, situated in a bleak region west of Aden. The Yemeni government often asserts that there are 800,000 Somali refugees. UNHCR reported that at the end of June 2009 there were 154,009 refugees in Yemen: 13,143 in Kharaz and the remainder in urban areas. UNHCR staff, however, unofficially acknowledge their reliance on guesswork.

Discrepancy between Yemeni government and UNHCR statistics is complicated by the numbers of *muwaliidiin* – people of mixed Yemeni and Somali/Ethiopian descent. For centuries Yemeni traders have lived in the Horn of Africa while maintaining links with the homeland. Since the 1980s, considerable numbers of *muwaliidiin* have been returning to Yemen as a result of conflicts and disruption to trade. Many have settled in urban areas and been acknowledged as Yemenis, often despite lacking official

Somali refugees in Yemen.



identity papers. While the *muwalidiin* are often stigmatised by Yemenis, they nevertheless have a higher social status than Somalis and Ethiopians in a nation with deeply entrenched, inherently racist, concepts of social hierarchy. Many Somali refugees believe that the government of Yemen and UNHCR privilege the *muwalidiin*, claiming that most of those resettled have falsely presented themselves as refugees.

Refugee entitlements

There is considerable discrepancy between the rights which the government of Yemen asserts are enjoyed by Somali refugees and refugee testimonies. The government argues that no restrictions are placed on Somalis seeking employment, health care or education but refugees point to a range of restrictions and shortcomings.

Employment: In a nation with massive un- and under-employment, few male refugees can find regular work. In Sana'a they make money by washing cars or emptying latrines. Some older and more educated men manage to find employment as English language teachers, and a small number of Somalis run kiosks, internet cafes and restaurants. The overwhelming majority of Somali men, however, have to depend on whatever income can be earned by women. In a traditionally patriarchal society this often leads to psychological distress – and cases in which Somali men abandon wives and children in Sana'a and leave for Saudi Arabia are reportedly on the increase.

Somali women are frequently seen begging. Those with regular employment are mostly employed as domestic servants in Yemeni households but many are forced to leave children unattended – often tied to beds¹ – while they go to work.

Chronic inflation makes it increasingly difficult for refugees to buy sufficient food. Until Yemen's economic crisis worsened it was common for restaurants to provide Somalis with unconsumed food but nowadays Somalis are in competition with malnourished Yemenis for the leftovers.

Yemeni government protestations that Somalis may enter the job market on an equal basis with Yemeni citizens are strongly refuted. Increasingly, Yemen's deteriorating economy has led to even the most menial jobs being reserved for nationals. Somalis complain of a complete lack of labour rights and official indifference and inaction whenever they try to bring complaints against employers.

ID: Refugees are entitled to receive free government-issued identity cards but authorities routinely solicit bribes. Recently arrived refugees report being asked to pay the equivalent of \$15 to police and neighbourhood officials. Unable to pay, many do not seek ID cards – but Somalis without ID cards may be arrested, and it is increasingly difficult to rent accommodation without a valid ID. Recently issued cards are not recognised by the major money-transfer companies, forcing Somalis who receive funds to pay Yemeni intermediaries. UNHCR and the Yemeni government have started an EU-funded campaign to register Somalis but Somali refugees want the EU to recognise that lack of ability to pay bribes may prevent many from registering and obtaining an ID.

Health care: As Yemen's public health-care system collapses, it has become ever harder for Yemenis to be seen by health professionals. Government health-care institutions no longer provide free medication to Yemenis, and Somalis report being ignored when they report to government hospitals.

Education: Only an estimated quarter of Somali children in Sana'a are enrolled in school as many are unable to pay for uniforms, books, transport or food. Somali students increasingly face harassment and racially-based intimidation.

Freedom of movement: Even if Somali refugees hold a valid ID card they are prevented from moving between Yemeni cities by government orders to bus companies and taxi drivers not to transport them. There are frequent reports of Somalis being detained at checkpoints, asked to pay bribes, and being abused, arrested or dumped at the roadside without the means to return to their families.

Refugee perceptions

Key complaints made by urban refugees:

- Refugees allege that many staff members of UNHCR's six Yemeni implementing partners (IPs) in Sana'a demand bribes; they are particularly critical of the longest-established and largest IP, alleging that refugees are only treated with respect when UNHCR international staff are present, its clinic only provides analgesics, medical personnel do not facilitate transfers to government health institutions, and guards routinely abuse patients and carers. Refugees want more services from international IPs and improved monitoring of partners by UNHCR.
- Minimum nutrition needs are not met. Highly vulnerable households are eligible to apply through a Yemeni IP for a UNHCR monthly grant of \$25 and for food coupons but the application process is bureaucratic. Somali representatives report that no more than 80 families in Sana'a are regular recipients of assistance.
- Many refugees, particularly those in female-headed households, want to be relocated to Kharaz camp where they will get food, health care and education. UNHCR, however, actively discourages return there – presumably in order to keep capacity for future arrivals. This policy is much criticised; in the absence of reliable support, Somalis say, it is hardly surprising that many turn to prostitution and theft.
- UNHCR adheres to Yemeni policy prohibiting foreign organisations from employing refugees. The only refugees who receive income from UNHCR are translators employed on a casual basis. Refugees call on UNHCR to challenge Yemeni policy and to advocate for quotas for non-nationals in humanitarian organisations.
- Microcredit and vocational training programmes are underfunded. The average credit available from UNHCR – \$100-200 – is not enough to start a business and only women are eligible. Refugees

believe that vocational training providers have few skills.

- There is no coordination mechanism between the government, UNHCR, recognised IPs and those INGOs with an interest in refugee affairs.
- Refugees also call on UNHCR to contest corruption, intimidation of refugees by officials, and movement restrictions.

UNHCR has recently made great efforts to improve relations with urban refugees. Somalis are impressed by the willingness of recently appointed UN Volunteers to get to know the realities of the Somalis' lives. UNHCR has facilitated the election of committees to represent the Somali communities

in Sana'a and in Aden and to present their needs to the Yemeni authorities; this has given great hope to the refugees. A building has been rented in Sana'a by UNHCR to act as a community centre although it lacks any furniture or equipment, and committee members receive no stipends. They report that the community now has unrealistic expectations of them. No matter how committed they are to helping their fellow refugees, they lack the means to do so and are forced to prioritise their own immediate survival.

In Yemen, UNHCR lacks the funds and the political clout to fully exercise its mandated role to assist and protect urban refugees. In the worsening economic climate – and with the scale of internal displacement increasing significantly

as a result of conflict in northern Yemen – opportunities for Somali refugees in Yemen's cities are likely to deteriorate further.

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A version of this article is at <http://tinyurl.com/MorrisGuardianYemen>
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1. <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=27007>