

Urban refugees in Mauritania

by Channe Lindstrom

A largely desert country, the Islamic Republic of Mauritania forms a link between the Arab Maghreb and western sub-Saharan Africa.

As such, it covers a cultural transitional area with the population divided between Arab-Berbers to the north and black Africans to the south. Mauritania is one of the least developed nations in the world. Legal and social infrastructure remains rudimentary. Political power and economic wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few. While Mauritania only recently has come to be regarded as a stable country for its own nationals, it has now become host to a relatively significant number of refugees from a variety of sub-Saharan countries.

The majority of urban refugees in Nouakchott, the Mauritanian capital, are from Sierra Leone. They began to arrive in 1997 at a time when UNHCR was about to close its office following the conclusion of its voluntary repatriation scheme for Malian refugees. Since then, the refugee population has been steadily increasing with 50-100 new arrivals each year. The majority are between 18 and 59 years of age (20% are under 18 years of age) while 43% of the total population are female.

UNHCR status determination

Despite the fact that Mauritania has acceded to the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its associated 1969 New York Protocol as well as the 1969 Organisation for African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, Mauritania has yet to adopt a national law regarding the status of refugees, nor has it established a national eligibility procedure for the granting of asylum. In view of the absence of institutional structures to protect and uphold the rights of refugees, UNHCR in Nouakchott examines all requests for asylum.

The only official paper issued by UNHCR to validate an individual's refugee status is a renewable 'attestation' valid for between three and six

months. The attestation is only a document of protection; it does not necessarily grant refugees the right to resettlement or financial assistance. Moreover, this paper is not always respected by the law-enforcement authorities.

Assistance to refugees

When an individual's application for asylum is pending, no material or financial assistance is granted to the refugee. Many refugees turn to the mosques and churches as well as the Mauritanian Red Crescent who provide blankets, food and some financial assistance to anyone deemed in desperate need. Many refugees concede that begging is a common practice.

"We have no means of providing for ourselves; we are just receivers. I have surrendered myself to the UNHCR."
(Refugee in Nouakchott)

A partnership between UNHCR and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) – the only implementing partner of UNHCR in Mauritania – was initiated in April 1999. LWF administers and implements the programme of Emergency Assistance to Individual Urban Refugees in Nouakchott but has insufficient resources to meet the high demand for services. UNHCR has reduced its funding and the resources at LWF's disposal have consequently suffered.

Refugees are assisted by LWF through the distribution of food, clothing and blankets; payment of medical bills and costs of shelter and education; a refugee school; and micro-credit schemes. Equal amounts of assistance are given to each family – a relatively new policy instigated by the UNHCR Protection Officer to prevent conflicts within the refugee community and avoid allegations of favouritism.

Access to employment

Although Mauritania is obliged under Article 17 of the 1951 Geneva Convention to grant recognised

refugees the right to work, not one refugee interviewed had been granted a work permit nor heard of any others who had obtained such a permit. Most refugees do not believe, however, that a work permit is necessary for them to carry out labour in those informal sectors of the economy where they have found work; due to weak administrative infrastructure and a lack of enforcement resources, the government has adopted a laissez-faire approach.

The majority of urban refugees in Nouakchott support themselves by casual labour in the largest market in Nouakchott while others work as barbers, hairdressers, carpenters, plumbers, electricians, construction workers and fishmongers. The majority, however, are self-employed in tailoring. LWF micro-credit schemes have been set up in order to create and sustain incentives for entrepreneurial activities.

Access to education and healthcare

Unlike the right to work, access to the rights of education and healthcare do not require permits. As a signatory to the 1951 Convention, Mauritania is required to accord refugees the same treatment as nationals with respect to elementary education and the same treatment as 'aliens' with respect to secondary and further education. Refugees must also be accorded the same level of healthcare treatment as nationals. However, as Mauritania provides its citizens with neither free elementary education nor healthcare, access to both depends almost entirely on whether one can afford the costs. (The only health care facility provided free of charge is child vaccinations.) The difficulties encountered in attaining employment generally mean that refugees find it difficult to afford these services. LWF has no medical facilities but in a medical emergency a refugee is taken to hospital by the refugee representative responsible for medical assistance – and the treatment is paid for. Reimbursement of minor medical expenses is usually delayed for up to a month, a practice which places sick and vulnerable individuals under considerable strain.

UNHCR is reportedly negotiating with the Mauritanian authorities to recognise the primary school qualifications of refugee children. Uprooted and generally English-speaking, these children need a curriculum that is adapted to their needs and allows them to learn Arabic and French in order to integrate into the Mauritanian educational system. Two volunteer teachers give free courses at four primary school levels for 75 children. The Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives in Mauritania provides equipment and school supplies. Even so, refugees reported that there was a severe shortage not only of teachers but also of books and other educational materials.

Prevalence of discrimination, detention and deportation

Regardless of their nationality, most refugees interviewed assert that racism and cultural intolerance towards foreigners are prevalent among the Mauritians. UNHCR's 'attestations' are issued to regularise residence and provide protection for the refugee population. However, it was widely reported that these are not respected by the law-enforcement authorities who have had no training in refugee issues. The threat of detention is real, despite the possession of a UNHCR attestation. Refugees are

often arrested in the hope of extracting a bribe. Although the entire population is arbitrarily harassed by police officers asking for bribes, refugees are a particularly vulnerable and targeted group. If one is not able to pay bribes, refugees report having been detained at the local police station for up to one week before being released. The Mauritanian Association for Human Rights reports substantial abuses in detention committed by police forces against refugees. Several cases of deportations have been reported.

Administrative weakness in the form of a lack of understanding at the municipal level (e.g. policemen not recognising a refugee card) and national level (e.g. deportation of refugees, thereby violating the principle of *non-refoulement*) leads to unjust treatment of refugees. Ironically, however, it is the country's administrative weakness and underdeveloped economy that simultaneously prevent the commitment of greater injustice because these characteristics reduce the government's capability to effectively conduct mass detentions and deportations.

Conclusion

The Mauritanian government has failed to translate its international

obligations towards the protection of refugees' rights into national policy. Although it nominally accepts the granting of refugee status determined by UNHCR, it does not issue any formal recognition. UNHCR Mauritania continues to offer local integration as its primary – if not only – 'durable solution'. This should not be considered as 'durable' until, at a minimum, national laws are put in place to ensure the protection of refugees. Mauritania's inability to fulfil its international obligations is due to a combination of factors. Being an underdeveloped country, it finds itself short of the resources which ensure respect for refugee rights; Mauritania's weak and un-harmonised administrative structures hinder the development of a transparent and coordinated refugee policy.

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This is a summary of a report commissioned by the Forced Migration and Refugee Studies Programme, American University, Cairo. The full report, which details the situation of other refugee groups in Mauritania as well, is available at www.aucegypt.edu/academic/fmrs (under reports).

Refugees from Mail, Bassikounou camp, Mauritania

