

KANERE: a refugee-run free press in Kenya

Editorial Staff of the Kakuma News Reflector



A refugee-led news service in Kakuma camp has had to address various challenges – including physical threats – in its attempt to provide a voice for refugees and to tackle issues such as insecurity and corruption in the camp.

Kakuma refugee camp is ‘home’ for refugees who come from many different countries in Africa and whose daily lives are directed and constrained by many rules and policies, both from the host country, Kenya, and UNHCR. Most of the camp’s inhabitants, however, know little about those rules and policies. Despite having been in existence for 21 years, Kakuma has not been served by any news sources for many years, and much of the information provided by humanitarian organisations tends to focus on the positive results of humanitarian work rather than on the deeper, ongoing problems beyond practical assistance.

To address this need for information, we – a group of refugees – decided in late 2008 to establish a reliable source of news for Kakuma refugees, humanitarian NGOs operating in the camps, people living in the area, and the local and regional government. Among our goals were:

- to represent refugee voices in the camp and provide an avenue through which refugees at Kakuma can interact with and speak directly to the outside world
- to fill the gaps in the information provided by NGOs and the camp’s governing bodies
- to expose abuses of power, violations of human rights and exploitation connected with the distribution of food aid, and the negative impact of certain UNHCR policies in Kakuma.

Before becoming a refugee, the current editor-in-chief had studied journalism in Ethiopia. A year after arriving in Kakuma in 2005, he started a journalism club in Unity Primary School. Later, the club expanded to include teachers at the school, who had begun meeting to discuss news from the camps. One of the most critical

issues discussed was the problem of insecurity. As soon as the sun set, refugees were suffering robbery, assault, sexual and gender-based violence, looting and murder. The entire refugee community was terrorised and, to make matters worse, there was no vehicle for telling the outside world about what was going on in the camps. The editor-in-chief approached a human rights researcher and put together a small group to explore solutions, and the Kakuma News Reflector – KANERE – was officially launched in October 2008.

A positive impact

To date, the editorial team has produced eleven publications online, plus print copies of the first four editions which were circulated in the greater Kakuma camps and nearby Kakuma town. KANERE has made a significant impact on life in Kakuma:

Security: Following KANERE’s reporting on security incidents, more police have been deployed to patrol the camp day and night, and several police posts have been established inside the camp.

Information sharing: There is greater awareness of camp issues with refugee leaders working in collaboration with KANERE. In addition, getting information out to the wider world helps the international community to understand refugee life in Kakuma and to advocate for refugee rights.

Access to UNHCR: KANERE reported on inadequate addressing of complaints, requests and questions; now, with the establishment of field posts in all sections of the camp, refugees are able to speak directly with UNHCR officials.



Camp lighting: In response to reports of rape and shootings, some solar lamps have been installed to make some areas more secure.

Human rights: Since KANERE started reporting violations of human rights, corruption and refugee mistreatment in aid distribution, the situation has improved somewhat.

KANERE has faced various challenges. One continuing challenge is that of securing funding for the project – to pay staff, to buy equipment and to cover any other expenses. KANERE currently operates with only one donated laptop and one video camera, and inconsistency of funding means that production of the newsletter can easily be delayed for months.

A significant additional challenge has been opposition to KANERE. After KANERE's inaugural issue, which appeared online on 22 December 2008, UNHCR officials raised objections, including that the KANERE team had started the newsblog without consulting them and that the reports posted online could jeopardise job security for staff employed by UNHCR. Soon after that, other NGOs operating in Kakuma camp and local government officials expressed their opposition in inter-agency meetings. The hostility peaked in early 2009 when the refugee reporters received serious threats to

their personal security, largely from fellow refugees concerned about KANERE's outspoken criticism of the operations of humanitarian organisations in the camp – which they claimed might jeopardise resettlement opportunities. Two KANERE journalists were physically attacked, the chief editor's home was destroyed, and KANERE equipment and documents were damaged. Through the internet, however, KANERE linked up with human rights groups, lawyers, refugee legal experts and academics locally and internationally, who were able to help mediate the situation in consultation with UNHCR and other camp governing authorities. The security of the journalists, while by no means stable, has improved significantly since then.

The staff of KANERE hope to be able to continue operating a refugee-run free press for Kakuma camp and for the surrounding locality which is poorly served by existing media outlets. As part of their goal to break down divisions between refugees in camp and locals in town, KANERE also involves non-refugee reporters.

Despite the challenges that KANERE has faced, it strongly encourages refugees in other camps to start up their own free presses to provide a mechanism for refugees to give feedback on the policies which affect them, a mechanism which is often sorely lacking. It is not clear, for example, by what other means refugees can hold humanitarian organisations accountable for their actions and how they can reliably report local abuses of power to authorities who can actually address them. Whether based in camps or urban centres, refugees should find ways to express their unfiltered voices, even if what they have to say is critical of humanitarian modes of business.

The Editorial Staff of KANERE can be contacted at kakuma.news@gmail.com KANERE welcomes donations – whether material or financial – and advice to help ensure continuity of publication. www.kanere.org