

# In Limbo: Dependency, Insecurity, and Identity amongst Somali Refugees in Dadaab Camps

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## **Abstract**

*The Somali civil war of 1991 left thousands of refugees scattered in neighbouring countries. This article examines the situation of the 130,000 Somalis in their second decade in Dadaab camps in Kenya, with a particular focus on the role and responsibilities of the refugee regime and the host state. It is argued that these camps are characterized by deprivations of both material and physical security. Research found that refugees' dependency on inadequate aid is due to lack of alternative livelihoods rather than "dependency syndrome." However, participants expressed diminished "self-esteem" resulting from their prolonged encampment. Finally, the paper presents a critique of the failure to explore solutions for protracted refugee situations on the part of the international refugee regime.*

## **Résumé**

*La guerre civile de 1991 en Somali a laissé des milliers de réfugiés éparpillés dans les pays avoisinants. Cet article examine le sort des 130,000 somaliens qui sont à leur deuxième décennie dans les camps de Dadaab au Kenya, avec une emphase particulière sur le rôle et les responsabilités de la convention sur les réfugiés et du pays hôte. L'article soutient que ces camps sont caractérisés par un manque de sécurité tant au niveau physique que matériel. Des études ont démontré que la dépendance des réfugiés sur de l'assistance – quoique cette assistance est elle-même insuffisante – découle d'une absence de voies alternatives pour gagner sa vie plutôt d'un syndrome de dépendance. Toutefois, les participants ont exprimé un*

*sens diminué d'estime de soi, résultant de leur séjour prolongé dans le camp. Pour terminer. L'article examine de façon critique le fait que la convention internationale sur les réfugiés ait failli dans son devoir de rechercher des solutions alternatives pour des gens se retrouvant comme réfugiés pour un laps de temps prolongé.*

**P**rotracted political limbo still prevails in Somalia as it enters its fourteenth year of "statelessness." Despite the precarious situation of Somali refugees scattered across many parts of the world, both the country and the plight of its refugees remain off the radar of world media. The atrocities committed in the process of tumbling Siad Barre's regime in 1991, and the clan-based power struggles that followed, led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Somalis. The refugees initially fled to the neighbouring countries of Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Kenya, subsequently moving on to countries near and far. Those who were fortunate enough to escape the trials and tribulations inherent in exile in countries such as Kenya, where existing resources are barely able to meet the basic needs of the native population and where most refugees still remain in closed camps, moved on to more prosperous countries where they obtained refugee status. Most refugees were not so fortunate, however.<sup>1</sup>

The focus of this paper is on the approximately 130,000 Somali refugees who remain in limbo in camps in the North Eastern Province of Kenya (NEP).<sup>2</sup> Dadaab, a name given to three camps (Hagadera, Ifo, and Dhagahley), is located about 100 kilometres from the Somali-Kenya border. These camps were created in mid-1992 after it became almost impossible for the international humanitarian regime to run the camps in Liboi, a border region too close to south-

ern Somalia where violence was still occurring on a daily basis. Security concerns for international staff, refugees, and humanitarian supplies all led to the creation of new camps further inside Kenyan territory. The region where Dadaab camps are located is semi-arid and was sparsely populated by nomadic Somali-Kenyans before the arrival of refugees fleeing the war. Hostilities between Kenya and Somalia, which claimed the Somali-inhabited Northern Frontier District (NFD) as a missing Somali territory and supported regional independence movements, persisted since independence in the early 1960s. Due to this tension, Kenya kept NFD, now known as North Eastern Province of Kenya (NEP), and its population under a permanent state of emergency from independence until 1992.<sup>3</sup>

The scale of the refugees fleeing across the Kenyan border in the early 1990s overwhelmed both the small local nomadic population and the available scarce natural resources of the area. The presence of international organizations nevertheless brought this previously marginalized region some attention with the provision of services such as boreholes, hospitals, and schools. By March 2003, about 160,000 of the more than 400,000 Somali refugees who fled to Kenya at the height of the war remained in Kenya. Of these, 130,000 were in the three Dadaab camps, with a smaller numbers in the Kakuma camps in Northwestern Kenya, and the remainder living in urban centers such as Nairobi. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) administers the camps, with CARE responsible for social services, WFP (World Food Program) for food, and MSF (Médecins Sans Frontières) for health care.<sup>4</sup>

While cognizant of the role the failed state of Somalia and warlords still engaged in power struggles played in the plight of Somali refugees, the central theme of the paper is the role and responsibilities of those charged with caring for refugees after they are in refugee camps in neighbouring countries. The paper argues that encampment and protracted refugee situations leave thousands of men, women, and children living in limbo, resulting in wasted human capacity and deprivations of human dignity. Research in Dadaab found that refugees are dismayed by their dependency on inadequate aid, and express diminished self-worth due to their inability to better their situation or to escape from the conditions of camp life. The failure of the host state and the international community to bring about any effective intervention to free refugees from this limbo state is also examined. Here the emphasis is on the neglect of the Kenyan government, as a signatory state to many human rights and refugee covenants, to enforce the refugees' legal rights under international law. Any positive and proactive commitment on the part of this government, the paper argues, would have gone a long way to alleviate the refugees'

predicament. Finally, I argue that the international refugee regime's mantra of durable solutions – reintegration, resettlement and repatriation – as the only viable options often translates to no solution and leads to a protracted state as demonstrated by the situation in which refugees find themselves. Refusal to explore other options of addressing the refugee crisis, other than care and maintenance, to end the limbo status of these refugees causes devastating consequences for displaced populations.

### ***Encampment: Dependency, Deprivations, and Refugee "Persona"***

Humanitarian organizations upon their arrival in disaster zones rarely have the luxury to assess whether camps are the best option to address human catastrophes.<sup>5</sup> Once camps are created, however, the initially hoped temporality often turns out to have been wishful thinking, as demonstrated by the many cases of protracted refugee situations in the last two decades.<sup>6</sup> Examples of refugees in limbo for over a decade include "Tigrayans and Eritreans in Sudan, Afghans in Pakistan and Iran, Salvadorians in Honduras, Cambodians and Laotians in Thailand, Mozambicans in Malawi, Angolans in Zaire, and Vietnamese boat people in different countries in Southeast Asia."<sup>7</sup> We should add Rwandan refugees in Tanzania and Somalis in Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti, and Yemen. On paper, UNHCR claims that "the establishment of refugee camps must be only a last resort. A solution that maintains and fosters the self-reliance of the refugees is always preferable."<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, camps become the first choice to "manage" a refugee crisis. Certainly difficulties abound for the humanitarian community in managing and assisting people dispersed over a vast land in emergency situations; yet, as will be demonstrated by this paper, camps as the only solution for the administration of humanitarian assistance neglect the short-term and long-term detrimental effects on refugees.

Camps often established in peripheral regions lead to segregation and marginalization of refugees.<sup>9</sup> The international humanitarian organizations administering these camps function under different norms of culture, languages, and politics than the refugees they aid. Refugees in the crisis phase welcome the assistance strangers bestow on them and remain acquiescent to camp regimentation. However, once the emergency period passes, with camp entering a care and maintenance phase, refugees experience few changes in the routines of scheduled ration distributions, head counts, and visits of international dignitaries. Resentment and conflict towards the aid apparatus follows.<sup>10</sup> Aggravating these inadequacies further is the prohibition of freedom of movement to which refugees in closed camps are subjected, a constraint that greatly hampers

refugees' ability to seek alternative livelihood strategies outside camps. Coupling this last restriction with the difficulties international humanitarian organizations experience in raising sufficient funds to continue to administer the camps with adequate provisions beyond the emergency phase renders camps domains of material scarcity.

Arguments against this type of encampment include that camps engender passivity, *breaking down all initiatives* and *self-worthiness* of refugees. Hand-to-mouth arrangements of awaiting others to provide all one's needs eventually translate to complete dependency on donations.<sup>11</sup> However, while acknowledging the need for these rations for refugees whose other options are constrained both by the environment of camp locations, and also by national laws prohibiting or limiting employment prospects, some researchers contest this "dependency syndrome."<sup>12</sup> Instead, Kibreab, using Somali-Ethiopian refugees in Somalia in the 1970s and 1980s as an example, argues:

[t]he majority of refugees in the camps were willing to expend their labour on economic activities, often for very small return, and also, in some cases, to take the risk of relinquishing their ration cards for the uncertain alternative of self-sufficiency. Among the able bodied refugees, there was no evidence at all that the refugees' willingness to take initiatives and to work hard either to earn an income or to augment their diet was negatively affected by prolonged dependency on handouts.<sup>13</sup>

Clark also refutes the concept of a dependency syndrome. Instead, he asserts that "the apparent dependency of refugees derives from their removal from their social, political and economic coping systems."<sup>14</sup> While dependency is acknowledged here, the reasons why refugees may become dependent are contested: instead of "laziness" or "welfare mentality," this argument partly blames the structural constraints to which refugees are subjected in camps, equated with Goffmanesque "total institutions."<sup>15</sup> Despite the different rationales for refugee dependency, a consensus exists within the literature of the sufferings of refugees in "closed camps" living in limbo and dependent on dwindling rations for years. Due to the disruption of refugees' social and economic networks, long-term encampment further negatively impacts on the future reintegration of refugees into their home countries.<sup>16</sup>

Research with Afghani refugees in Pakistan found that more than the social dislocation of being outside of their home country, "what is disruptive and potentially most threatening to Pakhtun refugees is not social dislocation so much as the contradictions posed by the framing experience of becoming \_ in multiple senses of the word \_ refugees."<sup>17</sup> This last finding emphasizes the disempowerment

refugees experience when they no longer toil on their land and survive on their sweat but wait around for food distribution, perceived as non-reciprocal charity bestowed on them. Acceptance of these donations is perceived as being contradictory to the Pakhtun culture. Also research with Vietnamese refugees in Southeast Asian camps demonstrates that more than the enclosure and fences surrounding the camps, what is most damaging about closed camps is the uncertainty of their prospects of leaving the camps, and the camp administration's expectation for refugees to self-represent themselves as "helpless supplicants under suspicion."<sup>18</sup>

Data collected from Somali refugees in Dadaab confirms the deprivations refugees experience in protracted refugee situations. Interviewees detail the precariousness of their day-to-day lives, which is unfortunately also substantiated by camp administration reports. For example, WFP often raises alarm bells about the impending starvation of refugees in Dadaab or in Kenya. The food WFP is able to secure for these refugees always falls short of the daily calorific requirement, with reduction of both the quantity and quality of rations. Refugees expressed to this author their frustration with this situation. Foodstuffs distributed are actually often scorned. Many argue that the quality of the grains distributed is "not fit for humans." Moreover, most research participants dwelled on the lack of variety in their rations, and also the cultural inappropriateness of maize as the main staple provided. "The food distributed per person has now been reduced to three kilograms of maize per person per fortnight" is a statement that was reiterated by all refugees. Flour, a staple most Somalis utilize to prepare *anjero* (flat bread), is rarely found in their bimonthly rations. By the end of my first trip to Dadaab, August 2001, refugees had not received flour for almost a whole year. The refugees contrast this with the rations they received at the beginning of their arrival in the camps, which were not only double what they were in 2001, but also included a variety of grains. During those days, refugees were able to sell some of the rations to buy other food items such as meat, milk, and vegetables that are not provided by the camp administration.

Refugee diet, which should in theory include pulses and vegetables, rarely contains these, and often results in high rates of malnutrition amongst women and children. During my first trip to Dadaab in summer 2001, MSF reported a dramatic increase of 172 per cent in the malnutrition rate of Somali refugee children within a period of six months due to a 35 per cent decrease in the general food distribution in the camps.<sup>19</sup> Only a small number of refugees receiving remittances from the diaspora and those involved in petty trade/business are able to supplement these meager rations.

Affording “meat and milk” (*cad iyo caano*), two words that together signify subsistence in the Somali language and originally comprising nomads’ main foodstuffs, is a luxury very few refugees can afford. An interesting item illustrating the precariousness of refugee life is the price of food items in Dadaab. A woman who sells some of her grain to buy milk for a baby would sell her maize for 5 Kenyan shillings per kilogram. However, one glass of milk costs 10 Kenyan shillings.<sup>20</sup> For a mother to provide this one glass for a small child, she would have to sell two kilos of the maize she received that morning, accounting for two-thirds of the main ration the child receives for two weeks.

Despite the deprivations discussed above, the dependency identified in Dadaab resembles more that discussed by Clark, namely loss of “social, political and economic coping systems,”<sup>21</sup> rather than any “welfare mentality” or laziness. Refugees’ discussions highlight their lack of alternatives to rations distributed. Refugees repeatedly dwell on how employment and/or gaining one’s livelihood is desirable but impossible in the camp settings. Lack of material resources and employment prospects obliges most to rely solely on the bimonthly rations. For most refugees who are not involved in trade and who don’t receive remittances, dependency on aid remains the only option. However, in spite of camp constraints, I found that refugees desire and hope to be freed from the “beggarly” positions they occupy as dependents on insufficient aid. One interviewee reported that she cleaned the premises of one of the NGOs for free for weeks, until some NGO staff took notice and a small remuneration was offered to her. This permitted her to supplement the meager distributed rations for her and her four children. This woman, among others, demonstrated a tenacity to better her situation in an environment of scarce resources. All around the camps, one sees women selling small pockets of sugar or spices to make just enough to buy a glass of milk for the smallest children. Thus, as much as camp appearances portray people always waiting for something, the desire to provide for one’s family was expressed by almost all refugees. And this challenges the claim that refugees become dependents on aid because of unwillingness to provide or work for their sustenance.

### ***Self-Perception: Refugee Identity***

Another theme often coupled with dependency syndrome is loss of self-worthiness that may result from protracted refugee situations. This author’s research in Dadaab significantly supports this argument. Refugees’ self-representation as “refugees” was often very negative. Most refer to themselves as “*qoxooti*,”<sup>22</sup> often portrayed as a dreaded “identity,” and often only associated with others.

A refugee is a fenced person. (Hawa M. Ali)<sup>23</sup>

The word refugee, in my opinion, in our heads, it means a weak individual; that is how we see ourselves. We ourselves don’t like it when we are called “refugees”; we are not happy with it. But what can you do? It is a weak person, a person whose country was destroyed; it means a poor person, who has nothing, who is begging food that is handed down. That is what it means to me. (Sa’ida M. Farah)

A person who is sitting somewhere as if he/she was handicapped! There are no men who are employed in this block, who go to work in the morning and who gain a living. They are sitting around the house. They are unemployed. Nowhere to find jobs! (Aliya S. Abdi)

Refugee is poverty and hunger. A loser standing around, that is a refugee. I think of poverty, praying to Allah: “Allah, take us out of this misery,” this suffering and hardship, carrying water on your bare back, searching for wood in the bushes, lack of milk for your children, unemployment, that is it. (Hodan F. Abdirahman)

A refugee is someone suffering. A refugee is someone who is in need. A refugee is someone who has nothing. That is how I interpret the word refugee. If we had any way of freeing ourselves, we would not be in this refugee camp tonight. (Halima K. Bile)

“Refugee” is not a pleasant word. When someone is told, “you are a refugee,” it is a word that hurts. A “refugee” is a person who abandoned his habitat, who lives in a territory that is not his, and who lives miserably and desperately, constantly worrying. Hence, “refugee” is a word that bothers us. And when someone is called a refugee, it hurts us. I mean you are seen as someone who is less than others, who is worst. So, as refugees, when we are told, “you are a refugee,” we see it as if we are despised, weaker and less than other people. It depresses us every time the word is used. I see it as weak, someone who is not capable of anything. That is how I see the word refugee. (Kaha A. Bihi)

Refugees frequently refer to the constraints on their freedom of movement in closed camps. People use metaphors drawn from nomadic animal herding: “fenced like livestock.” “Living in a prison where the sky is open” is another way refugees illustrate their condition. Fencing symbols suggest hindrances to refugees’ capacity to escape the dearth of material conditions and the deprivations in the camps. Many refer to their wish or hope one day to be freed from the conditions of “refugeehood.” To this end, both

men and women often recited prayers. A refugee persona, however, as much as it is despised, as illustrated by the images of “refugee” above, is also assumed when recounting the harshness of camp life. As Harrell-Bond and others have argued, refugees assume this “victimized” persona after a certain time in camps.<sup>24</sup> In fact the conditions existing in Dadaab render it very easy for refugees to internalize this persona. Deprivation of both material and physical security characterizes Dadaab camps, and one discerns in refugees’ narratives a denial of being the definitions they associate with the identity “refugee.” These definitions embody refugees’ ambiguity towards this identity: what they perceive as an undesirable identity, “*qoxooti*,” and that they are “*qoxooti*” in Dadaab camps.

### ***Insecurity: Fenced for the Enemy?***

Instead of hospitality, refugees in limbo often experience exploitation, extreme insecurity, and constant harassment, not only from local populations, but also from national authorities and policies fueling unfavourable sentiments towards the newcomers.<sup>25</sup> This hostility may partially stem from the deprivation persisting in refugee-hosting areas. Local populations in these regions often end up more marginalized than the refugees, who receive international humanitarian aid which at least permits them to meet subsistence needs. When excluded from this aid, host populations tend to resent refugees and view the newcomers as “enemies” or competitors. Scarce resources, such as firewood and water, become contested when the sudden population increase leads to high consumption of limited resources.<sup>26</sup> However, I argue that conflict with refugees in this situation should not be interpreted as hostility towards refugees *per se*; rather, conflict in areas where water and pasture scarcity prevails is often the norm. For example, in the North Eastern province of Kenya where the Dadaab camps are located, local Somali Kenyan populations historically and presently experience clan conflicts due to pasture and water paucity. To expect “hospitality” beyond the short-term for refugees, even if amongst co-ethnics, when the local populations persistently experience violent confrontations, is unrealistic. Rather, in an environment of scarcity, a “survival-of-the-fittest” mentality translates to refugees often being victimized in the relationship with host populations.

The persistence of insecurity in Dadaab camps illustrates this often-tense relation between locals and refugees. Highlighting the scale of this concern, UNHCR reported that, at the height of gender-based violence, there were 200 documented rapes in Dadaab in 1993. In the subsequent four years, the number of officially recorded rapes averaged between 70 and 105. But rapes again increased to 164 in 1998, fell to 71 in 1999, rose again to 108 in 2000, 72 in

2001.<sup>27</sup> Given the stigma attached to rape within the Somali culture, reported rapes fall far short of the actual number of cases.<sup>28</sup> Most of the rapes in Dadaab occur in the outskirts of the camps. Depletion of firewood in this semi-arid region obliges women to travel further and further in search of fuel for cooking. UNHCR documented over 100 rapes from February to August 2002.<sup>29</sup> Most of the perpetrators are allegedly Somali nomads from the area, *deegaanka*,<sup>30</sup> often referred to as “*shiftas*.”<sup>31</sup>

Another example of insecurity reported by refugees is bandits raiding the camps. These incursions coincide with material donations such as plastic bags distributed to cover refugees’ makeshift houses, and/or bimonthly ration distributions. The bandits often rob refugees of any valuables they may have, targeting those suspected of owning material goods and those receiving remittances, and even robbing poorer refugees of their rations. It was reported that the *shiftas* use the women to transport the rations, subsequently raping and at times killing them in the outskirts of the camps.

One-woman interviewee referred to a rape she witnessed:

I saw it with my own eyes. She was caught and raped at the door, her pants<sup>32</sup> pulled off, a girl of 15 years old, a gang, vagabonds, losers and *shiftas*, there you are, you are watching it, you scream, but you cannot free her from them, you are standing at your door. The conflict we fled, yesterday when NGOs (*hay'adihii*), assisted us, when we got settled, assisted us well, we thank them for it, we thank Allah for it, when we settled, our children started schools, when we would have done something for ourselves, an enemy was born (*cadow baa dhulkii oo dhan ka dhaqaaqay*). The other conflict might even have been better; at least we could get out, we could move around even if a bullet hits you. And now we miss that. In that one, we could move around, during the conflict, we could move; now we cannot move around. You just sit around (*waaba saas u yuurur*). (Ebla A. Hersi)

Additionally, the Kenyan police stationed in the camps to protect the refugees reportedly commit violence against and rapes of refugees. Banditry, coupled with fear and distrust of those responsible for their protection, renders the situation of refugees, especially women refugees, doubly oppressive. Amelioration of the security situation in Dadaab is minimal, as is clear from the statistics above. The scope of this crisis is clearly illustrated by Verdirame, who in his assessment of the human rights abuses in Kenyan camps accuses UNHCR of “administering the camps in ways which often appear to be blatant disregard of international human rights standards.”<sup>33</sup>

A comparison of the incidents of rape in Dadaab, where a population of 130,000 resides, to those reported in 2002 for Mogadishu, the most dangerous and violent city in Somalia for the past decade with a population of over one million, illustrates the magnitude of insecurity prevailing in Dadaab. A Somali human rights group active in Mogadishu, the Dr. Ismael Jumale Human Rights Centre (DIJHRC), documented 32 rape cases in Mogadishu for 2002.<sup>34</sup> Again this number is probably a gross underestimation of the actual number of rapes committed by militias in Mogadishu; it nevertheless underscores the seriousness of insecurity women in Dadaab camps experience. The high incidence of violence in Dadaab is also a clear indication of the failure of the host state to protect refugees on its territory.

### ***Role of the Host State in a Refugee Crisis***

The host state plays a crucial role in the reception and type of settlement offered to refugees: either integration with the host population or in limbo in peripheral regions. Geopolitics often is key to these decisions. For example, Western nations encouraged refugees from the eastern bloc during the Cold War whereas, following the end of the East-West divide, reception of refugees, *i.e.*, those from the Balkan wars, was tepid at best. Furthermore, regional conflicts can encourage or discourage refugee flows from neighbouring countries, either to discredit the other side, or to avoid a spillover of political turmoil in neighbouring countries. The latter is especially the case when the nations in the host state include peoples of the same ethnic group(s) as the refugees. For instance, neighbouring countries with historical border disputes such as Somalia and Ethiopia each encouraged refugees from the other side in the 1970s and 80s, whereas Kenya, with the collapse of Somalia in 1991, was hostile to the refugee influx. In the last case, the Kenyan government's encampment policies are closely tied to its apprehension of refugees acting as a destabilizing force. Containment of refugees in closed camps facilitates the monitoring of undesirable activities within that space.

State policies towards a refugee crisis are also partially dictated by the pressures states experience from the Western powers, which control the funds for "aid" and "loans." Kenya, for example, already facing reduction of aid due to its human rights record, used the Somali refugee crisis to negotiate for a continuation of international aid. "On the one hand, the presence of large numbers of Somali refugees in Kenya was held as evidence of Kenya's improved human rights record. On the other, Kenyan authorities threatened to return these refugees forcibly if a renewal of aid was not forthcoming."<sup>35</sup> Governments in addition influence how the greater host population perceives refugees. Scapagoat-

ing refugees as responsible for all the social and economic ills, often in reality preceding the refugee arrivals, often fuels resentment of an already disfranchised populace within the host population who might perceive neighbouring "enemy" citizens on their territory as foreign and undesirable.<sup>36</sup> The situation of Somali refugees in Kenyan camps is therefore intrinsically tied to the colonially inherited border disputes between post-independence Somalia and Kenya, and the marginal position Somali-Kenyans occupy within the Kenyan state.

Finding solutions for protracted refugee situations, such as refugees in Dadaab camps, remains a challenge for the international community. However, as discussed in the next section, narrow definitions of how and what the best course to address refugee crisis are results in the persistence of limbo state for millions of refugees.

### ***Durable Solutions: Prospects of Integration, Resettlement, and Repatriation for Dadaab Refugees***

Almost all refugees in Dadaab are familiar with the three preferred solutions for refugee crisis as stipulated by the international refugee regime: integration into the host society, resettlement in a third country, or repatriation to the country of origin. Of the 130 refugees who participated in consultations with Adelman and Abdi during a 2003 CARE Canada consultancy field trip in Dadaab, almost all reiterated the need to implement one of these options to terminate their encampment.<sup>37</sup> However, these solutions have so far translated to guaranteed permanence of a limbo state for Somali refugees in Kenyan camps.

As our discussion of the Kenyan government's treatment of Somali refugees illustrates, integration into the host country for Somali refugees has not been tried as a viable option, because if tried, it would have met very vocal opposition from landless locals. This is especially so given the scarcity of arable land and the conflict about its ownership in Kenya. Economic and political challenges confronting Kenyans eliminate any provision of land and acceptance of integration for these refugees on Kenyan territory. Furthermore, Kenya's reluctance to pass a refugee bill that has been under discussion for years now, despite hosting very large numbers of Somali and Sudanese refugees starting in the 1980s, testifies to its ambivalence towards refugees. UNHCR assumes responsibility for all refugees in Kenya, who still lack any legal recognition within the Kenyan political system, despite its ratification of the refugee conventions of both the UN and the Organization of African Unity (OAU).

If integration is not a viable alternative, both resettlement and repatriation have also remained elusive so far for

Somali refugees in Dadaab camps. The percentage of resettled refugees worldwide amounts to a dismal number. Of the over twenty million persons dispersed around the world in 2002, 55,500 or just about 0.3 percent of these refugees were resettled in a third country.<sup>38</sup> The numbers of Somali refugees resettled by traditional refugee-receiving countries such as Canada, the United States, and Australia have further diminished since the September 11 terrorist attacks in the U.S. For example, the 2002 UNHCR Annual Statistical Report shows that the number of resettled Somali refugees for that year was 640: 295 went to the U.S., 159 to New Zealand, 116 to Canada, and smaller numbers to the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden.<sup>39</sup> The current “terrorist” rhetoric dominating immigration policies of most Western nations, and the incidents of bombings in Kenya in which Somalis were implicated, account for this decrease. These dismal numbers highlight the limited opportunities for resettlement that exist for refugees in general, and for Somali Muslim refugees since the September 11, 2001, attacks.<sup>40</sup> This also underscores the problematic nature of this option as a solution to end the limbo state of large numbers of refugees.

Repatriation has also remained impossible for most refugees in Dadaab. Here, however, lies a dilemma. Refugees and UNHCR differ on the feasibility of this option as a solution to the limbo state of refugees. A small percentage of the thousands in Dadaab who signed up for voluntary repatriation in 2001 with UNHCR have so far returned, mainly to the Puntland region of Somalia. Unlike Somali refugees in Ethiopian camps, the majority of whom are already repatriated to Somaliland, UNHCR reports 220 refugees repatriated from Dadaab camps in 2002 and about 500 for 2003.<sup>41</sup> UNHCR claims funding constraints hinder its ability to repatriate the Somali refugees in Dadaab. Adelman and Abdi’s consultations with refugee groups in Dadaab overwhelmingly supported voluntary repatriation provided they get some financial assistance to restart life.<sup>42</sup> Despite the fact that many refugees in Dadaab come from minority clans and/or rural backgrounds in the southern regions of Somalia, most expressed a willingness to repatriate to other regions, mainly to the northeast and northwest of Somalia, if provided with some financial assistance to do so. Many insisted that they are very aware of the material and physical insecurities existing in many parts of Somalia. However, they also argued that worse material and physical insecurities persist in Dadaab camps. Refugees cited the Somali proverb “*laba kala daran mid dooro*” (choosing the best of two bad situations). Regardless of the risks involved in life in Somalia, refugees argue they would at least have freedom of movement and freedom to seek employment opportunities. But with diminishing funding for all other

aspects of administering the camps, UNHCR claims that it is unable to fulfill the desires of thousands of refugees.

Adelman *et al.* proposed an alternative to the costly yet inadequate care and maintenance provided to refugees in Dadaab for the last twelve years. This proposal argues that repatriation for most Somali refugees should seriously be considered:

We recommend that a meeting be held of donors so that they pledge to give the same monies they now give for camp operations over the next five years, but an appropriate committee of international agencies be given authority to use those guarantees to obtain present funding for repatriation in flexible ways to find the various durable solutions for the different groups of refugees and different choices refugees make. The refugees will return, but with conditions, conditions that deal with their material security and security of education for their children.<sup>43</sup>

This proposal emphasized giving refugees real choices. Here it is important to highlight that resettlement is not a viable choice for most refugees, as illustrated by the statistics above. This will, however, be encouraged for small groups of refugees, such as some minority groups who feel they cannot return to Somalia, vulnerable women and their children, etc. As Kumin argued in her address at the 2003 G78 Annual Policy Conference, options such as the one proposed here actually fit well with the current High Commissioner’s proposed “Convention Plus.” Consistent with Adelman and Abdi’s insistence on avoiding the narrowly defined mantra of “durable solutions,” “Convention Plus” is about “develop[ing] new tools for today’s problems.” These tools include:

[C]omprehensive plans of action to ensure more effective and predictable responses to mass influx or to protracted refugee situations; development assistance targeted to achieve more equitable burden-sharing and to promote self-reliance of refugees and returnees; multilateral commitments for resettlement of refugees; and the delineation of roles and responsibilities of countries of origin, transit and destination. The underlying premise is that specific commitments will lend themselves better to binding agreements than broad policy exhortations.<sup>44</sup>

Durable solutions as they stand now are no more than exhortations, often amounting to no commitment from the international community. Exploring other options, and freeing refugees from “imaginary” solutions for their plight, should be at the top of the agenda of refugee-assisting organizations. Also these options should include international concerted effort to contribute to peace-building

initiatives in the refugee-producing regions, which will go far in expediting the end of refugee limbo state.

### Conclusion

The above analysis attempted to highlight the constraints refugees in limbo face in their protracted camp life. It was argued that dependency on aid in Dadaab remains the main option open to most refugees, not because of lack of initiative to provide for one's family, but rather due to lack of alternative livelihoods for the majority. In addition, research clearly indicates that the refugees' self-worth was affected by their refugee status. "Refugee" identity is painted as dreaded and undesirable. Moreover, violence, especially gender violence, remains epidemic in Dadaab, and insecurity remains a top concern for all refugees. With Dadaab in its second decade of existence, and world attention currently on the war on "terrorism" and the aftermath of the war in Iraq, securing funding for refugees in protracted situations in peripheral regions is becoming extremely hard for international organizations.

Given the grim picture painted by these findings, it is paramount that states signatory to UN covenants on human rights endorse national legislation for the rights of refugees in agreement with international laws. This would certainly go a long way towards reducing the desperate protracted situations of refugees in many parts of the world. Even if governments are ultimately responsible for settlement policies, and not international organizations which have "no army to or access to coercive power to act on behalf of refugees,"<sup>45</sup> international organizations can and should do more to use their presence in host countries. Regrettably, once the emergency phase passes, inertia of the international humanitarian bodies administering the camps and the international community's will to find solutions sets in leaving refugees in a desperate state of limbo. Yet literature provides us with enough case studies, with lessons to be implemented for future crisis, to avoid repeating the same old scenarios: creation of camps as temporary solutions to crisis; camps turning to semi-permanent settlements where inadequate livelihoods and insecurities persist. The long-term consequences of closed camps where people are segregated from the general host population, where freedom of movement is highly curtailed, where a state resembling a "total institution" prevails, where state of limbo in all areas of daily life persists, are underestimated. It is time for the international community and national and international organizations working with refugees to explore other alternatives to address protracted refugee situations.

### Notes

1. This paper draws from two periods of field research in Dadaab in 2001 and 2003: the first included twenty in-depth interviews with women refugees, focus groups with refugee community workers of both sexes, and consultations with NGO staff; the second, conducted with Dr. Howard Adelman, involved extensive community consultations with both refugee groups (youth, women, men, elderly, and religious leaders), and NGO personnel working with refugee serving agencies both in Dadaab and in Nairobi.
2. About 97 per cent of refugees in Dadaab are Somali. However, there are some claims that up to 20 per cent of these are actually Kenyan Somalis who settled within the Somali refugees. The rest comprise a small number of Ethiopians and Sudanese.
3. Abdisalam M. Issa-Salwe, *The Collapse of the Somali State: The Impact of the Colonial Legacy* (London: Haan Publishing, 1996).
4. MSF pulled out of Dadaab in 2003 and GTZ (German Technical Cooperation) is currently running the health services of these camps.
5. Camps in this paper refer to UN-supervised regimented centres, where refugees are mainly dependent on international aid, and where little prospects for self-sufficiency exist.
6. See Jeff Crisp, "No Solution in Sight: The Problem of Protracted Refugee Situations in Africa" (Working Paper No. 75, New Issues in Refugee Research, Evaluation and Policy Unit, UNHCR, 2003).
7. Wim Van Damme, "Do Refugees Belong to Camps? Experiences from Goma and Guinea," *Lancet* (1995): 362.
8. UNHCR 1982:57, cited in Sydney Waldron and Naima A. Hasci, "Somali Refugees in the Horn of Africa: State of the Art Literature Review," *Studies on Emergencies and Disaster Relief* No. 3 (Sweden: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1995), 19.
9. See Crisp; Johnathan Bascom, "The New Nomads: An Overview of Involuntary Migration in Africa," in *The Migration Experience in Africa*, ed. J. and T. A. Aina (Sweden: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1995), 197–219.
10. For detailed discussion of the schisms between refugees and those who manage camps, see Linda Hitchcox, *Vietnamese Refugees in Southeast Asian Camps* (London: Macmillan, 1990); Jennifer Hyndman, *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
11. B.E. Harrell-Bond, "Pitch the Tents," *New Republic* (1994): 15–19; in Van Damme, "Do Refugees Belong to Camps?" 1995:361; Waldron and Hasci, 19.
12. Gaim Kibreab, "The Myth of Dependency among Camp Refugees in Somalia 1979–1989," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 6 (1993): 321–49.
13. *Ibid.*, 346–47.
14. L. Clark, "The Refugee Dependence Syndrome: Physician Heal Thyself" Washington, D.C.: Refugee Policy Group, 1985), 1–3, cited in Waldron and Hasci, 19.
15. Waldron and Hasci, 19–20; Hitchcox, 148–76.



16. L. Clark and B. Stein, "Older Refugee Settlements in Africa: A Final Report" (Washington, D.C.: Refugee Policy Group, 1985), cited in Barbara Harrell-Bond, "Camps: Literature Review," *Forced Migration Review* (August 1998): 22–23.
17. David Busby Edwards, "Marginality and Migration: Cultural Dimension of the Afghan Refugee Problem," in "Refugee Issues and Directions," special issue, *International Migration Review* 20, no. 2 (1986): 325.
18. Hitchcox, 113.
19. IRIN, "Alarming Increase in Refugee Malnutrition," NAIROBI, 27 June (2001), online: IRIN Homepage <<http://www.irinnews.org>> (date accessed: 13 January 2002).
20. These prices were those of summer 2001.
21. Clark 1985.
22. This word literally means "refugee." Prior to the 1991 Somali crisis, 'qoxooti' was a word intrinsically associated with Somali-Ethiopian refugees who fled to Somalia in the 1970s and 1980s. In common Somali parlance, it carries multiple negative connotations. Refugees in Dadaab often referred to this past, regretfully claiming that they never thought they would find themselves in such a position, and in retrospect sympathizing with Somali Ethiopians who sought refuge in Somalia.
23. All refugee names in this paper are pseudonyms.
24. B.E. Harrell-Bond, *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
25. Gaim Kibreab, "Eritrean and Ethiopian Refugees in Khar-toum: What the Eye Refuses to See," *African Studies Review* 39, no. 3 (1996): 131–78.
26. Beth Elise Whitaker, "Refugees in Western Tanzania: The Distribution of Burdens and Benefits among Local Hosts," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 15, no. 4 (2002): 342; Jeff Crisp, "A State of Insecurity: The Political Economy of Violence in Kenya's Refugee Camps," *African Affairs* 99 (2000): 601–32.
27. UNHCR, "Security Analysis Paper" (Sub-Office, Dadaab 2003a).
28. See Africa Watch and Women's Rights Project, "Seeking Refuge, Finding Terror: The Widespread Rape of Somali Women Refugees in North Eastern Kenya," *Africa Watch (Human Rights Watch)* 4, no. 14 (1993); Human Rights Watch 1997, "International Failures to Protect Refugees: Protection of the Rights of Refugee Women," online: HRW Homepage <<http://www.hrw.org/reports/1997/gen3/general.htm>> (date accessed: 7 January 2002).
29. "Somalia: 2002 Country Report on Human Rights Practices," (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 31 March 2003), 6.
30. This word means "locals." Refugees in Dadaab often use it to refer to the Somali local population inhabiting the Dadaab region.
31. This is a term originating from the Kenyan government's conflict with the NFD independence movements in the 1960s. It is now widely used by Somali refugees and humanitarian organizations to refer to lawless bandits who allegedly terrorize refugees and local populations.
32. A recent phenomenon with Somali women is the addition of pants, often worn under long dresses, to women's attire. This is a phenomenon that commenced with the civil war, as rapes against women increased. Also with flight and the chaos of daily life in war zones, the pants increased both modesty and the number of layers an attacker needs to remove in an attack, with the hope that help might arrive before the attacker rapes the woman.
33. Guglielmo Verdirame, "Human Rights and Refugees: The Case of Kenya," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 12, no. 1 (1999):75.
34. "Somalia: 2002 Country Report on Human Rights Practices," 5.
35. Opondo 1994, cited in Waldron and Hasci, 13.
36. Kibreab, 1996, 131–78; Waldron and Hasci, 13.
37. Howard Adelman and Awa M. Abdi, "How Long Is Too Long: Durable Solutions for Dadaab Refugees," (Report for CARE Canada, 2003), 97.
38. UNHCR, "Refugees by Numbers," 2003b, online: UNHCR Homepage <<http://www.unhcr.org/>> (date accessed: 24 October 2003).
39. UNHCR, "UNHCR 2002 Annual Report: Somalia, 2003c," 23 July, online: <<http://www.unhcr.org/>> (date accessed: 17 January 2004). This report does not state whether these are resettlements under family reunification or on humanitarian grounds. Also it is not clear where these refugees resided prior to resettlement.
40. It is important to highlight that resettlement of about 10,000 Somali-Bantu refugees to the United States has started. These have already been moved from Dadaab camps to Kakuma in the Northwestern region of Kenya. However, the events of September 11, 2001, still negatively impact on this group given the stringent security measures enacted in the U.S. for all migration proceedings which will prolong the time it will take to resettle 10,000 people.
41. UNHCR 2003c.
42. Adelman and Abdi, 106–16.
43. *Ibid.*, 15.
44. Judith Kumin, "The Misery of Refugees," UNHCR Canada Representative Address to the G78, Ottawa, April 29, 2003; online: <<http://www.hri.ca/partners/G78/English/Global/refugees.shtml>> (date accessed: 1 February 2004).
45. B.E. Harrell-Bond, 1986, 162.

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