Kakuma Refugee Camp:
A humanitarian crisis in progress

The notorious Kakuma Refugee Camp is located in Northern Kenya, an arid, drought-affected region populated by the nomadic Turkana people. The camp, made up of Kakuma 1, 2 and 3 covers 25 square kilometers and houses approximately 90,000 refugees. Established 15 years ago the Kakuma camp in Kenya is one of the oldest and largest refugee camps in the world. The population of the camp is made up of nine nationalities and dozens of ethnic groups, although the majority are refugees from fighting in the Sudan and Somalia. (Kakuma: A Troubled Refugee Camp in Kenya, Report Refugees International 10/08/2003)

Conditions in Kakuma are extremely difficult. The average temperature is 40 degrees Celsius. Dust storms are common and there is a shortage of food, water and firewood. There has been severe land degradation because of over-grazing and meeting firewood needs. Originally converted from an old World War 2 military camp Kakuma is a sprawl of mud huts and plastic shelters. The presence of so many refugees has strained local resources and caused significant resentment amongst the poverty stricken Turkana. (Pittaway and Bartolomei 2002)

The Turkana people and many of the refugees have assault rifles. There have been frequent outbreaks of ethnic fighting between the refugees and the Turkana, and amongst the refugees. Security concerns are so high that the UN has forbidden UNHCR and other NGO workers and their families to live in the camp. Aid workers must leave Kakuma by 5pm each day. Only the Catholic Order of the Salesians of Don Bosco who run vocational workshops have ignored this directive and live in the camp with the refugees.

Ethnic violence is endemic, but so too is violence directed against women. Kakuma is unusual in that men outnumber the women in the camp in all age groups. Refugee women in Kakuma face a variety of threats including abduction, rape and sexual mutilation. The Jesuit Refugee Services runs a safe haven for women in need of immediate and temporary protection, however, this is limited to only 6 beds. The UNHCR has created a protection area next to the police station for those most at risk of violence.

Unfortunately, many of those under protection cannot leave for fear for their safety, and their children do not go to school. As Eileen Pittaway and Linda Bartolomei have noted ‘They are confined in rotting canvas tents in an area approximately the size of a football field behind 6 foot high barbed wire fencing. Some 120 families live in this area. Most are women and children including women who have been raped or abducted or sexually harassed.’ (Pittaway and Bartolomei 2002)

Firewood shortages in Kakuma pose a significant security risk for refugee women who depend on firewood for cooking. There are reports that refugee women forced to travel long distances to gather firewood have been harassed, raped and sexually mutilated. The UNHCR began providing firewood to refugees several years ago to reduce the risk of violence. However, this meets only 25-40 percent of the firewood needed. Women who cannot afford to buy firewood to meet the shortfall are still placed at risk.

The Government of Kenya prohibits the free movement of refugees. Refugees must stay in Kakuma or one of the other camps, and it is illegal for them to work. Only a small percentage of refugees have access to any income. Most refugees who do have income are employed by NGOs and are often paid less than $10 per month. Some refugees have started small businesses in the camp but vocational training programs are limited. Most refugees are dependent on food assistance from UNHCR. (Pittaway and Bartolomei 2002)
Repatriation of Sudanese refugees under threat

Following the uneasy peace in the Sudan there have been attempts to repatriate refugees from Kakuma. Recently 131 refugees were returned to South Sudan by UNHCR. It could take up to five years to get more than half a million South Sudanese refugees back to their homes. (Fakhouri, 2005)

South Sudan is an area larger than France and Germany combined, but has only 14 kilometres of paved roads. As a result repatriation by bus and truck is dependant on the weather. UNHCR plan to continue repatriation up to the start of the rainy season in May this year, resuming again after the end of the seasonal rains. In addition to the first group of returnees, another 1,600 refugees in Kakuma have signed up for return to South Sudan. (McKinsey and Caux 2005)

Even this limited repatriation of the Sudanese is under threat. On March 21 the UNHCR announced that the repatriation of refugees to the Central and Western Equatorial regions of south Sudan has been suspended following fighting in Yambio near the compound of a non-governmental organization and a fatal attack on UNHCR staff in Yei. The UNHCR has announced a review of the security situation for returnees. (Schlein, 2006)

WFP cuts food aid to Kakuma refugees by 20 per cent

While the repatriation of refugees from Kakuma to south Sudan remains precarious, there is now the threat of malnutrition in the camp. An estimated 3.5 million Kenyans are affected by severe drought in the northeastern part of the country. The World Food Program says a lack of funds is forcing it to cut food rations to some 230,000 Somali and Sudanese refugees living in Kakuma and Dadaab camp. WFP says, to restore the food aid, it urgently needs $5 million by the end of July 2006 and an additional $14 million by the end of the year. The Agency says the cuts will allow the World Food Program to stretch the limited supply of stocks it has on hand over the next few months.

WFP spokeswoman Christiane Berthiaume says the malnutrition rates are bound to increase because of the food cutoff. She says she fears violence will break out in the camps and people will resort to extreme measures to get food. “Women resorting to prostitution in order to find some food,” she said. “You will see an increase of that, but also, most probably an increase in insecurity because the refugee camps have no other means to answer their needs, at least on the food side. It comes from us. If we cannot give them the food, they will try to find it locally. They will get out of the camps. They will go somewhere to try to find the food and there is none. In this part of Kenya, there is a severe drought. There is no food.” (Schlein, 2006)

According to Berthiaume the isolated and harsh environment around the camps means there is little the refugees can do to do to provide for themselves. She says the refugees suffer from chronic poverty and malnutrition. Berthiaume predicts that refugees will sometimes sell some of their food rations to obtain essential items like soap, firewood and other basic goods adding the spiraling malnutrition rate. (Schlein 2006)

The position of the refugees trapped in Kakuma becomes more desperate by the day. The repatriation of the Sudanese refugees that make up a large proportion of the camp is threatened by ongoing violence. Shortfalls in donor aid have resulted in drastic cuts to food aid at a time when the Northern Kenya is suffering from prolonged drought. The United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees, Ms Wendy Chamberlin, described the decision of the WFP to cut rations to the camp as “heartbreaking as there has never been such need for humanitarian aid to these camps like now.” (Wendy Chamberlin, Press Conference Nairobi March 16 2006 UNHCR). These cuts to aid can only increase the security risks to refugees in the camp, particularly woman. Fifteen years after its establishment Kakuma remains a dangerous and desperate place for thousands of the world’s most vulnerable people.

I first became aware of the conditions at Kakuma refugee camp through the work I have done on behalf of the Horn of Africa Relief and Development Agency (HARDA) and the Edmund Rice Centre. My former colleague Sr. Carmel Hanson and I have drafted submissions to the UNHCR to have a group of camp residents from the Ogaden area of Ethiopia reclassified as refugees eligible for resettlement. These Ogaden refugees have been living in camps for over 24 years and they are now forced to endure the conditions in Kakuma. Their only hope for a better life is to be reclassified as refugees eligible for resettlement. As at the date of this article the submissions remain unanswered by representatives of the UNHCR in Kenya.

Full references on the website. Thanks to researcher James Marshall for this edition.