

Farrah Hussein, Kenya

Protracted suffering: the plight of Somali refugees in Djibouti

Farrah Hussein's presentation was about Somali refugees and asylum seekers in Djibouti, some of whom had been there for 10-18 years.

The civil war in the north of Somalia in 1987-88 resulted in an influx of 20-30,000 refugees into Djibouti, and in 2005 the numbers of refugees in Djibouti may be as high as 78,000.

These refugees undertake irregular secondary movements largely because of the living conditions in the camps. The research undertaken had several aims:

- to identify the legal framework and thus
- to study the gap between policy and practice
- to provide an overview of the living conditions
- to suggest possible solutions

The research involved:

- 120 in-depth interviews in Djibouti and three camps outside the city
- an attempt at gender representation
- focus groups
- an attempt to account for all clans and to represent of minority clans

Djibouti policies do accept references to "civil strife" as a reason to flee, and the national refugee law is similar to the 1951 Refugee Convention (including refugee rights to education, employment, accreditation and mobility). However, these provisions are not met on the ground.

Most refugees live in the three camps and seek employment (illegally) in the city. Documentation is normally given to the head of household (usually male), which means that women and children are undocumented.

The contradiction between policy and practice stems from the fact that Djibouti is not capable of providing privileges/rights to refugees – it is very small, very poor, has a high rate of unemployment and is bordered by 3 conflict-prone countries, which lead to a need for international humanitarian assistance.

However, there is also an unwillingness by the government to administer effectively:

- gross mismanagement, corruption of refugee assistance
- very weak/inept asylum institution – governance
- favouritism/discrimination (according to clan) – Djibouti is mostly populated by ethnic Somalians
- there has been no recount of refugees since 1997 - there are no records or statistics for births, marriages, deaths since then

This has meant that many can't access help, leading to food insecurity.

Up until 1999, UNHCR did most of the camp administration as the influx of refugees lessened, the system began to fail. Families don't receive the necessary assistance, and the vulnerable populations (the elderly, children) are suffering from malnutrition – although no records are available from the UNHCR-funded clinic. Government mismanagement is exacerbated by donor fatigue, and only basic (substandard) assistance is provided. On top of all of this, in March 2005 the WFP reduced food assistance by 50% - despite the fact that as no recount has been done, they have no idea how many people are in a family; in June 2005, there were further cuts of 30%. This food insecurity has led to the pursuance of risky/illegal methods of leaving, to Egypt or Yemen and thus to Europe or the US.

There is also a lack of adequate access to education, despite the high value placed on education by parents. Families are subsidizing the high-school education of sons by selling food (which increases food insecurity), and girls are being pulled from school to work in the city as maids. This pays for more food and subsidises their brothers' education overseas. This indicates the lack of value placed on education for girls, who are not considered as important or valuable as their brothers. The WFP is giving girls oil to sell so they do not have to leave school to work, but the attitude is already ingrained.

What are the solutions? These are limited – there are no resettlement programmes (although resettlement was supposed to re-open in 2005) and repatriation/reintegration are the only options. The Djibouti government is not keen on reintegration, although clan identity has allowed some to seek “de facto” citizenship – these people continue to live in the camp but their children have access to education. In terms of repatriation, this is only possible for those from North Somalia or Somaliland – and since the refugees are pastoralists, they have lost their livelihoods and become used to the camps, and do not want to repatriate.

High levels of poverty, with a small remittance connection with those abroad, lead to apathy, particularly in the elderly and those with strong ties to Somalia and a ‘post-Buufis’ mentality – these refugees do not *want* to resettle. However, there is still a desire for their children to go.

(Report written by Nina Allen, GCIM)