

Refugee Crisis in Africa: Implications for Development

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Abstract: The United Nations High Commission for Refugees asserts that refugees are the ultimate symptom of social disintegration. They constitute the last, most obvious link in a chain of causes and effects that define the extent of a country's social and political breakdown. As the crises affected the whole of Africa with huge amount of money and resources wasted, efforts are required to ensure a permanent end to them. This study is a survey of the existing literature, government as well as international institutions' documents, for facts on the subject. The analysis is descriptive. The study provides more elucidating and complimentary information about the efforts of the United Nations on the situation in Africa and recommends collaborative efforts with the United Nations in containing the scourge of refugee in Africa.

Key words: Refugees, crisis, civil war, development, Africa's efforts, United Nations' efforts, United Nations High Commission for Refugees

INTRODUCTION

The problem of refugees in Africa has reached unmanageable proportions. This study examines the scourge of refugees and the attendant problems on the socio-political and economic wellbeing of Africa. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that at the end of 1999, there were some 11.7 million refugees world wide. Of these, 30% were in Africa and 41% in Asia. There were also a further 1.2 million asylum seekers mostly in Europe and North America-those who claimed refugee status but whose claims were not yet recognised (UNHCR, 2000a).

Though the refugee problem is not limited to the African continent alone, it is a world wide problem. It is common in Asia as well as Southern America. For example, during the Guatemalan civil war, an estimated 150,000 people fled the country to seek refuge in neighbouring countries (mainly Mexico and one million became internally displaced (De Rivero, 2001).

This alarming refugee population is rapidly increasing at a time when the continent is faced with serious problems of economic recovery and transformation. The reduction in aid from foreign donor countries and other aid institutions compounded the situation. This was further worsened by the excruciating debt crisis and debt servicing burden, deteriorating terms of trade, coupled with the collapse of commodity prices in the international market as well as unfavourable climate conditions. The need therefore arises to unearth the causes of this malignant problem hindering the development of Africa.

The phenomena of civil wars and refugee crises are 2 major challenges facing the continent of Africa. Whenever, there is political or social disturbance such as ethnic/religious strife, civil war or natural disaster (draught or famine) in any one African state the spillover effect is usually devastating on the economic and social balance of neighbouring states. Till date neither the continent nor the international community as a whole has come up with enduring solutions to arrest the refugee situation in Africa. However, Africa has come to the full realization that the major causes of the refugee problem are situated internally. This implies that the total eradication of these causes should be the primary responsibility of African nations.

It is against the above background that the contributing factors to the problems of refugees in Africa have been examined. In this regards, attention is focused on civil wars as the major contributing factor to the scourge of refugee crisis in Africa. The study also highlights some of the actions already taken by African countries to curb this menace in the continent. Furthermore, the study examines the effort of the international community in solving the refugee problem in Africa. In this study special focus is made on the United Nations through its agency, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and the limitations or the constraints of the agency in combating the problem.

Who is a refugee?: There is no generally acceptable definition of the concept refugee. The basis for the legal

protection of refugees was established during the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees. The convention determined the rights of refugees to work, to education, to social welfare, to religious freedom and to legal processes (Guy, 2001). Before 1951, refugee was defined only within the context of a particular legal instrument. However, the definition of that time has received the wildest international acceptance, with some degree of flexibility in interpretation. This has served as the basis for the United Nation's action and it is embodied in:

- The statute that created the office of the UNHCR in 1950.
- In the convention relating to the Status of Refugees which was adopted in 1951 and entered into force in 1954 (Keller, 1975).

Refugees are individuals whose race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinions make them targets of persecution in their homelands and who migrate from their country of origin unable to return to it (Kegley and Wittkopt (2004) and Black (2002)). An important point to note is that, refugee as defined above does not include:

- Persons displaced within their own country or forced to leave it because of economic hardship or natural disaster.
- All those who have committed serious crimes, such as war crimes and crimes against humanity.

This definition represents the view of the North. In contrast, in many Southern countries a wider definition is often employed (Black, 2002). In Africa 'victims of war or external aggression' are included and accordingly much greater numbers proportionally are held to fall within the purview of refugee policy.

BACKGROUND TO THE REFUGEE PROBLEM: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Refugee is obviously not a new issue or phenomenon in global politics. Some scholars have traced the beginning of the problem to Adam and Eve as the first refugees on earth. It has been observed that throughout human history, the main causes of refugee crisis include, wars, invasions, religious and political persecutions, while people sought refuge in churches, mosques and other holy places (Waever *et al.*, 1993).

Hugo Grotius, himself a refugee, in the 17th century declared that permanent residence ought not to be denied

to foreigners who, expelled from their home and seeking a refuge, provided that they submit themselves to the established government and observe any regulations which are necessary to avoid strife's (op.cit).

The 20th century witnessed an unprecedented upsurge of refugees around the world. This sudden rise in refugees in the world led some observers to describe the century as century of homeless man. For many reasons the refugee problem acquired a magnitude it never had before. Roberts (1998) identifies some of the reasons for the increase of refugees in the 20th century. To him, the boundaries between sovereign states became increasingly watertight, transportation improved, as population growth increased the size of the exodus and restricted the absorptive capacities of countries of asylum. The rise of totalitarianism and the ideological divisions stimulated refugee movements. He also identified the unstable and ever changing nature of modern societies as a factor for the increase.

CAUSES OF AFRICA'S REFUGEE CRISIS

Civil wars as a cause of refugee crisis: A war is a situation of an open armed conflict between nations or states, or between parties in the same state carried on by force of arms for various purposes. It is a conflict of arms between hostile parties of a nation. A war is described as a civil war when it is carried on within the boundaries of a state. So, a war involves the use of force of arms or violence by striving parties. Wars are also aimed at accomplishing an identifiable goal, which often time may be political or economic.

A survey of the African continent reveals that the continent is plagued with one form of civil war or the other. No sub-region of the continent is devoid of civil strife. In the African region for instance, the following countries have experienced or are still under the conditions of war; Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Angola, Somalia, Zaire now the Democratic Republic of Congo, Algeria, Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda.

Generally, the causes of civil wars in Africa can be attributed to ethnic, religious and political factors. The spate of wars across the continent has been the major factor contributing to increased refugee crisis in Africa. This is why, Abdulahi (1994) asserts that, scarcely any state in Africa is currently spared from the effects of refugee exodus or internal displacement. In his view, the causes of Africa's refugee crisis are largely due to fundamental internal contradictions (i.e., civil wars) within the African state.

In Mozambique many citizen fled the country and seek refuge in neighbouring Malawi as a result of war. On

the outbreak of the Liberian war, over 9,000 Liberians were settled in Ijebu-Oru in Ogun State, Nigeria. The picture is grimmer in the great lakes region-Rwanda and Burundi. According to the UNHCR chronology in, 1977 following the revenge killing that attended the death of Ndadaye, the first elected president of Burundi, 700,000 Hutus streamed into Rwanda, Tanzania and Zaire to escape army reappraisals. In April 1994, following the attendant revenge killing that followed the death of the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi, nearly a quarter of a million Rwandans cross to Tanzania in 24 h. This flight of Hutu refugees appears to be the largest and fastest movement of refugees in modern history. In July 1994, more than a million Rwandans flooded the Eastern Zaire. Similarly, in the Horn of Africa, in early 1987, the number of Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia jumped from over 100,000 to about 375,000 (ibid). In Somalia, on the outbreak of the civil war, 400,000 Somalis found refuge in both Ethiopia and Djibouti (UNHCR, 2000a).

CONSEQUENCES OF REFUGEES PROBLEMS ON AFRICAN COUNTRIES

In many poor countries, it may not be easy to look after large numbers of people making demands on jobs, living space, social services and other scarce resources. Existing inhabitants of a host country may feel that the new arrivals are competing with them for these things. It is therefore a measure of generosity for Africans that despite their economic circumstances, they have proved to be their brother's keepers by playing host to refugees from other African countries. These include the countries in Southern Africa, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Swaziland Sheltered Mozambican refugees during the civil war in that country.

However, there are few cases in which refugees are denied refuge by other countries thereby posing a serious humanitarian crisis. In 1984, political refugees in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda suffered this fate when the host countries jointly declared the region a refugee-free-zone. Again, Tanzania also shut its door against Rwandan refugees. So, also has Zaire's border being closed against Burundian refugees (ibid).

The hardship the refugees face in the country of their asylum and refuge make the situation tenser. A times they go without food, many die in the refugee camps for lack of adequate care.

Other problems attendant to refugees crisis for the host country apart from overstretching existing infrastructure include that of social malaise such as armed robbery which may become more rampant and the spread of communicable diseases especially AIDS and HIV.

THE BEGINNING OF INTERNATIONAL ACTION

It was not until the upheaval caused by World War 1 that the very size of the refugee problem attracted International action. Between 1918 and 1922 almost 1.5 million refugees from Russia streamed into various parts in Europe and East Asian countries. At the time most European countries were undergoing political and economic reconstruction and as such lacked the needed capacity to address the issue adequately. This informed the League of Nations in 1912 to appoint the Norwegian diplomat as High Commissioner on its behalf to deal with the problems of Russian refugees in Europe. It was observed that at the instance of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, not less than 120,000 Americans fled from persecution. Furthermore, in 1923 the League also became involved in the massive population transfer between Greece and Turkey. Approximately 1.3 million Greeks and over 400,000 Turks from the Balkans were affected. By 1941 some 431,000 Jewish and 35,000 non-Jewish refugees fled NAZI persecution. It was further observed that in each of these situations, the League of Nations authorized some protective measures such as issuance of identity cards called Nansen passport, definition of refugee status and a little material aid.

AFRICA'S EFFORTS TOWARDS SOLVING THE CRISIS

African Governments and people have put in considerable effort in providing both material and financial assistance for refugees in Africa, in the form of social services; education, health, transportation, water, training, as well as infrastructure development. One of the more practical solutions in dealing with the influx of refugees in Africa, according to Abdullahi, hinges on the principle of voluntary repatriation (ibid). Countries of origin and countries of asylum have embraced this principle. The militating factor against effective implementation is the requirement of massive financial resources involved in it.

Evidently, Africa has tried at the national, sub-regional and regional levels to find durable and lasting solutions to the refugee problem on the continent. At the national levels, African Governments have continued to demonstrate willingness to work towards greater and genuine democratization of governance and decision-making processes. This is done within the context of the peculiarities of peoples' beliefs and values, socio-economic and political environment. Similarly, national governments have continued to demonstrate greater sensitivity to ethnic issues which otherwise were the major source of internal conflict and civil strife.

At the sub-region levels, Abdullahi noted that consultations are taking place to establish confidence-building measures between and among asylum countries and countries of origin with a view to creating enabling environment conducive to conflict management and conflict resolution. At the continent level, concerted efforts are been made by African Heads of State and Governments to enter into dialogue on the question of the root causes of refugees, within the framework of the relevant resolution adopted by the summits in regards to refugee problems. They have resolved to translate into action their collective and individual commitment to the defence and promotion of human and people's rights and to the peaceful settlement of internal and inter-state conflicts and to continue to respect the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states in accordance with the provisions of the Charter of the OAU and that of UN (Abdullahi, 1994).

However, it must be noted that, the efforts of African countries are constrained by several factors, which include, finance, declining political will on the part of some of the traditional donors, the economic conditions of many countries and the continual disregard on the part of warring factions to embrace peaceful settlement.

THE UNITED NATIONS EFFORTS ON REFUGEES CRISIS IN AFRICA (THE UNHCR)

The United Nation (UN) has been involved in refugee problems in Africa since the 20th century through its agency the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNCHR). The UNHCR was founded by the UN General Assembly in 1950, with statutory responsibility for providing international protection for refugees and seeking permanent solutions to their problems (Hammer-stad, 2000). The UNHCR came into being as a result of the unprecedented uprising due largely to the Second World War that demanded immediate emergency measures. Keller (1975) observed that several million persons had been displaced from their homes. These were people from various countries in Europe, Australia and Asia. This trend coupled with the Korean War and Israel/Arab wars created the influx of refugees across continents and sub-regions. Due largely to the massive increase in the number of refugee, in 1942 the United Nations became involved directly in providing direct temporary relief to more refugees. By 1950 the UN found it necessary to create the UNHCR through which the organization's services were made to refugees globally.

THE UNHCR SCOPE OF ACTION

At the time of establishment, its main responsibility was to provide international protection for refugees and seek permanent solutions to refugee problem in Europe. Hammer-stad (2000) clearly identified the role of the agency in Europe and the developing nations during this period. The main activity of the agency in the developed world was ensuring that states hosting refugees from communist countries adhered to their international legal obligations according to the 1951 Refugee Convention. In the developing world, the agency's main activity was the running of refugee camps across the borders from states submerged in protracted wars such as those in Afghanistan and Angola.

However, in the 1970s and 1980s the activities of the agency gradually widened. Today the agency has been described as the UN's humanitarian arm' (Helton, 1994). And the primary focus has shifted from providing international protection for refugees, particularly in the form of promoting asylum, towards large-scale humanitarian operations, in the midst of conflict, for war affected populations, internally displaced persons and refugees alike (Guy, 1999).

Similarly, it was observed that, though the statute of the agency remains unchanged, the UN General Assembly authorized the agency to assist in or coordinate programmes for; Southern Sudanese returnees and displaced persons; humanitarian assistance to Cyprus; uprooted and displaced Vietnamese, Cambodians and Lao-both inside and outside their countries of origin, notably in Thailand and humanitarian assistance to Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau and Angola (op. cit). It is important to note that this operational transformation has accomplished significant conceptual change and a re-assessment of the agency's understanding of the nature of refugee problems and its own role in dealing with such problems.

In Africa, the agency has been involved in addressing refugee issues since the 1970s. For instance, it was involved in providing humanitarian and resettlement programmes for returnees: Over 120,000 from Guinea-Bissau; over 2,000,000 Mozambican refugees were assisted and provided humanitarian services to over one million Angolan refugees both inside and outside these countries. It also played a crucial role in Rwandan refugee crisis in Zaire/Congo in 1996-1997 (Helton, 1994).

LIMITATIONS OF THE UNHCR

Financial Limitation: Considering the scope of the activities of the agency such humanitarian services

obviously cannot be financed with a small administrative budget. Loescher (2001) opines that the absence of an autonomous resource base for UNHCR and the limited mandates and competencies of the organization continue to limit response to future refugee crises just as they have done for the past 50 years. UNHCR is often at the mercy of its donors. The UNHCR obviously cannot be financed with a small administrative budget the UN allocates to it. Four major sources of assistance have made the operational activities possible for the agency. These are the voluntary contributions from governments and private individuals and organizations, the generosity of countries of first asylum, cooperation with the inter-governmental committee in Europe and lastly, the role of voluntary organizations and agencies. While for almost 4 decades the UNHCR had the resources to meet the needs of refugees at the end of 1989, the office needed for the first time, authority to carry out a major year end deficit of US \$38 million. The budget reduction has an enduring solution to the refugee's crisis in general and Africa in particular.

Change in focus from protection to emergency assistance: One other important constraint facing the UNHCR results from the shift in focus from legal protection to emergency assistance that has occurred within the agency in recent years. The core values of UNHCR in early years were the protection of refugees which gave it special meaning, identity and coherence. Since the mid 1980s operational activities have gained precedence over protection which has declined.

Lack of developed facilities: Another factor that has limited the operations of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is the lack of developed facilities especially among poor African countries. This usually cause the agency to beside providing foods, health care, schools, has to provide such facilities as warehouses, construction of tents, water-supply etc.

Accidents involving the UNHCR officials: In war situations, UNHCR staff members have found themselves working in more dangerous places. Fifteen UNHCR staff members were killed in deliberate and calculated armed attacks during the 1990s and in 1999 specifically, the agency registered over fifty serious security incidents involving its staff (UNHCR, 2000). These cases have also contributed to the limit of its operations and involvement in refugee issues.

Lack of respect of international conventions: Many countries do not respect the convention protecting the

rights of refugees by warring factions especially in Africa. Besides the basic 1965 Convention and the 1967 Protocol, there are a number of the Conventions and Agreements. These include, the 1954 Convention on the recovery abroad of maintenance, ratified in 1957; the 1957 Agreement relating to Refugee Seamen (1961), with a 1973 Protocol (1975) the 1969 Convention of the OAU governing the specific aspects of Refugees in Africa (1974) and a host of others. The agency has been involved in promoting the adherence to these conventions. But in most war situations, these conventions have been flawed on several occasions in Africa.

SUGGESTIONS

- While the African governments commit themselves to the eradication of the refugee problem in the continent, it may be suggested that, partnership should be forged between them and the international community. It is a necessary step to the eradication of the problem in Africa.
- There is also the need for African countries to democratize and ensure good governance. This will provide the internally needed mechanism for conflict resolution and management.
- Members should continue to create, promote and strengthen cooperation among them in order to avert new flows of refugees.
- The United Nations 'High Commissioner for Refugees should be provided the required financial and material resources to enable it effectively carry out its mandate.

CONCLUSION

The above analysis presents the issue of refugee as a global phenomenon. Nevertheless it is more endemic in the African continent. It became the concern of all Africans and indeed the whole world in the 1970s. Between the 1970s through the 1990s, Africa shared about 35% of world refugees. The unceasing intra and inter states wars mostly as a result of state failure contributes to the largest cases of refugees in the continent. The international community through the UN and its agency, the UNHCR has been deeply involved in the protection, resettlement and provision of humanitarian services to African refugees, for over 2 decades now. However, the sudden reduction of the agency's budget has hampered and to a great extent limited its programmes in eradicating refugee's problem in Africa in particular and the world in general. It is hoped that the UN General Assembly will

revisit this particular issue. Meanwhile, African nations require urgent crisis management and conflict resolutions strategies to put an end to the ever-increasing refugee population. National, sub-regional and regional cooperation among countries is paramount in this regard since the root causes of the crisis are internally located, African countries must assume the equal responsibility of eradicating the menace.

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