"Forgotten," "Hidden": Predicaments of the Urban Refugee

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Abstract

Urban refugees are widely viewed as anomalous—people who stand outside a refugee regime which, in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, is based upon rural encampment. This article considers why states and humanitarian agencies view urban refugees in this way. It examines the history of the refugee as an urban person and the recent change in perspective which has enforced a rural norm. It considers the extreme pressures placed upon displaced people in the city and the consequences for communities which contest their marginal status.

Résumé

Les réfugiés urbains sont généralement considérés comme une anomalie – des gens qui ne tombent pas sous le domaine d'application d'un régime de réfugié qui, en Afrique, en Asie et en Amérique latine, est fondé sur des camps ruraux. Cet article traite des raisons pour lesquelles les états et les organismes humanitaires conçoivent les réfugiés urbains de cette façon. Il examine l'histoire du réfugié comme citadin, ainsi que le changement de perspective intervenu récemment qui a imposé une norme rurale. Il tient compte des pressions extrêmes exercées sur les personnes déplacées dans les villes et les conséquences pour les communautés qui contestent leur marginalité.

Urban refugees, observed Rogge and Akol, are "forgotten people." Writing in the late 1980s, they noted that large communities of displaced people in the cities of Africa were unrecognized by the authorities and lived at the margins of local society.1 Over ten years later, after repeated mass displacements across the continent, the situation was unchanged: Human Rights Watch commented on the many urban refugees "hidden" to governments and international agencies.2 This apparent conundrum—the presence/absence of urban refugee communities—is in fact a global phenomenon. More and more refugees are city dwellers whose existence is denied by governments and agencies. This article considers the policy of denial and its implications for refugees.

The urban refugee presents a special case of the problem presented to state authorities by migrants in general. In a recent assessment of global migration policy Cohen comments that "nothing is as disturbing to national societies as the movement of people."3 Although of enormous importance to many receiving societies, especially in the economic context, migration represents a challenge to the modern state. The presence (or anticipated presence) of migrants may disturb ideas about citizenship, national integrity, and local rights and responsibilities. In the case of forced migrants – people engaged in movements that are usually unplanned and unexpected – the authorities may perceive a threat to their control over territorial borders and to their authority in defining "internal" cultural boundaries. Mass movements of refugees are seldom welcome, unless they fulfill a specific economic or ideological function, and states may go to great lengths to exclude incomers and/or to isolate them from the wider society.

Urban refugee communities present a further difficulty. Power is invariably concentrated in cities and it is in the urban context that the state exercises authority in the most assertive and exemplary fashion. At times of economic instability or political crisis the presence of non-national communities can become especially problematic as they are targeted by nativist or nationalist currents and/or by the state itself. One outcome—and a further paradox associated with the urban refugee—is that people who are usually "invisible" can quickly become the focus of high-profile campaigns of exclusion.

Urbanism and the Refugee

Over the past thirty years the urban refugee has been viewed as anomalous and sometimes as illegitimate and unacceptable to state authorities and international agencies. This is especially striking in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where in some countries urban communities now contain a large majority of the displaced population. The reluctance or even refusal of governments and officials to recognize them is inconsistent with historic practice, for traditionally people recognized as refugees have been of urban origin and have found sanctuary in urban environments.

In ancient traditions of sanctuary and of asylum, such as those recorded in Jewish and Indian religious texts, certain cities were identified as places of refuge.[4] In ancient Greece the institution of *asylon* embraced an understanding between city states that their citizens would be accommodated unharmed in places protected by local deities. A similar approach afforded the *exsul* (exile) of ancient Rome protection guaranteed by gods associated with specific *sanctuaria,* usually located in major cities.[5] In Arabia key trading centres were also sanctuaries where fugitives could expect protection. In Islamic tradition—born in the cities of Hijaz in the seventh century CE—displacement, flight, and sanctuary became integral to principles of the faith and were recognized in the notions of *hijra* ("emigration"/flight) and *muhajir* ("emigrant"/"exile"/"refugee"), and celebrated in the practice of *hajj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca, Najaf, Karbala, and many lesser urban centres.[6]

In medieval Europe sanctuary was based upon the idea of inviolability of religious sites, of which the most important were the great abbeys, monasteries, and city cathedrals. When these traditions changed in the early modern era, giving way to notions about asylum granted by the nation-state, the first groups accommodated as refugees were people of urban origin who found sanctuary in the cities of the receiving society. The Huguenots of France were urbanites—mainly entrepreneurs, merchants, traders, and artisans—who moved primarily to the cities of Switzerland, Holland, England and Ireland. In the case of the much-celebrated emigration to England, the great majority of Huguenots moved to London: a small number settled in other towns; very few settled in rural areas.[7]

Over the next two hundred years all manner of people were displaced by upheavals in Europe: of those who benefited from asylum rights most originated in the urban elite. Marrus notes that during the nineteenth century the great majority of those recognized as political exiles or as *émigrés*—the terms most closely correlated with today's definitions of the refugee—were bourgeois.[8] They were people of "the relatively well-to-do or, at least of the once well-to-do."[9] Most had played a leading role in nationalist movements such as those in Italy, Hungary, Austria, and Poland, or were radical activists from France and Germany—people (almost invariably men) involved in modernizing, essentially urban projects who sought sanctuary in cities in which they could maintain communication with other exiles and with movements in their countries of origin. So many activists settled in London that in the mid-Victorian era the city became known as "Little Germany."[10] Some European cities also accommodated leading figures from the embryonic anti-colonial movements of the Middle East and Asia. All were urban radicals, for rural activists (such as the guerrilla fighters who opposed French forces in North Africa) seldom left the remote areas which were their military bases.[11]

There were exceptions to the "rule" of urbanism. In the late eighteenth century Loyalist groups in Britain's American colonies who opposed independence and the establishment of a United States of America were rewarded with grants of land in Canada: in effect they became rural refugees. A hundred years later refugees from the Franco-Prussian war were directed by the French government to Algeria, where some were placed on land seized from the indigenous inhabitants. Even they were a minority of the *colon* population, however, for most *pieds-noirs*—including refugees from Europe—were implanted in the cities of Maghreb.[12]

The pattern began to change in the late nineteenth century, when large numbers of people living in territories under Tsarist rule sought sanctuary in North America and western Europe. Most were Jews from Poland, Belorussia, Ukraine, and the Baltic states who fled increasingly intensive anti-Semitism, and many were of rural origin—poor and ill-educated people who proved much less attractive to receiving states than the *émigrés* of an earlier era.[13] In an important development the British government closed its borders against them, using the Aliens Act—the first legislation of the modern era to deny entry to people seeking asylum. For the next fifty years most mass displacements in Europe and neighbouring regions were of a similar social composition: during the First World War some six million people were affected in Russia alone, most of whom were peasants from provinces occupied by German forces.[14] Few were regarded as suitable candidates for asylum and very few became refugees, even on the loose, informal basis operated by most state authorities. It was the fate of people of rural origin that as more were displaced they had fewer opportunities to find places of sanctuary, for by the 1930s most states of Europe and North America had closed their borders to intending immigrants.[15]

Elite class

When the first international legal regime on asylum came into existence after the Second World War it was based upon

the preference of certain states for refugees of a specific social status. Those who wrote the Geneva Convention and shaped refugee policy in the 1950s and 1960s were strongly influenced by the ideological battles of the Cold War and the desire to encourage movement from East to West of "escapees" from Communist rule. Tuitt comments that refugees of this period were largely "of an elite class able to perform a relatively sophisticated ambassadorial role on behalf of the host state."[16] They were mainly adult males of professional standing—technocrats, scientists, and military men judged suitable for resettlement in states of North America and western Europe. The Convention confirmed a long-standing historic pattern: refugees were conceived as members of the urban elite; others, including the mass of people of rural origin, seldom appeared as candidates for asylum.

There was a further difficulty: the Refugee Convention of 1951 defined the refugee as a person located in Europe—displaced people elsewhere were simply ineligible for refugee status. This had implications for all those involved in mass displacements then under way in the "Third" world. Break-up of the European colonial empires was associated with huge population movements: in the late 1940s some fourteen million people crossed the borders of the new states of India and Pakistan, and almost a million were displaced in and from Palestine. The vast majority were peasants—as people living in overwhelmingly agrarian societies it was inevitable that they would make up the bulk of those affected. None were recognized as refugees who might be included under the terms of international agreements then under negotiation. In the case of India the International Refugee Organisation (the immediate precursor of the UNHCR) refused to intervene, and in Palestine those affected were treated as a unique local problem.[17] People of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, overwhelmingly of rural origin, did not qualify for refugee status. They were not discriminated against *as* peasants, agricultural labourers, etc., but because they were not Europeans and specifically not "escapees."

For the next twenty years dominant states viewed refugees in the context of their preoccupation with the Cold War. The model candidate for asylum was a person persecuted in a state of the Eastern Bloc whose journey to the West could be presented as a flight from totalitarianism to freedom. In the case of the US, people displaced from states not dominated by Communist or radical regimes were rejected out of hand: there was simply no policy under which they could be recognized.[18] With rare exceptions, refugees continued to come from among those who could perform an "ambassadorial" function.[19] During the 1960s, however, this approach was modified in the light of a new and serious difficulty—the problem of mass displacement

in Africa. Here large numbers of people had been affected by conflicts involving the colonial powers in Congo, Kenya, Rhodesia, Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau, and by new conflicts which affected independent states such as Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Tanzania, and Sudan. The US in particular was worried by these developments: according to a US Senate Judiciary Committee those affected were likely to be "prey to agitators and potential reservoirs of political and quasi-military opposition to existing regimes."[20] Successive American administrations had been sceptical about the Geneva Convention and the activities of the UNHCR. In 1967, however, the US agreed that the Refugee Convention should have worldwide applicability and that the UNHCR should become a body with a global mandate. Loescher makes a terse assessment of the conjuncture:

> The Cold War moved from Europe to Africa and Asia where refugees and refugee assistance were now viewed as part of the East-West struggle for hegemony in the developing world. The UNHCR's programs were [now] viewed by the United States and other Western states as providing stability in a region rife with conflict and potential for Communist expansion.[21]

The UNHCR had already developed a novel category—the *de facto* refugee—to embrace people who did not have a case for asylum under the strict definition imposed by the Refugee Convention, and had extended its "good offices" to many groups affected by war and civil conflict. During the 1950s the organization had been active primarily in Europe—but by 1969 it was spending over 60 per cent of its funds in Africa.[22] Its new beneficiaries contrasted sharply with refugees in Europe, where "escapees" and "defectors" were still moving West and where most underwent settlement, eventually becoming citizens of the receiving states. Most displaced Africans were poor and lacked formal education and many were of rural origin. For states of North America and western Europe (some engaged directly in conflicts in Africa) the priority was to contain them *within* the region of displacement and to isolate them from sources of political contamination represented by Communists and other radical currents.

"Repackaging"
It was under these circumstances that a new regime was developed for displaced people. Harrell-Bond describes the change as a "repackaging" of refugees.[23] They were no longer "victims of communism and 'votes for democracy' " but problem-people who, like victims of poverty and general developmental crisis, should be marshalled and closely managed by special agencies.[24] They were to be administered

according to principles of "modernisation" which, since the 1940s, had been applied to economic and social problems across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The work of the UNHCR therefore became part of a wider effort "to assist developing countries with their modernization and development."[25]

Dominant theories of development assumed that people of the Third World could progress only by following models pioneered in the West. Rostow, Lerner, and others maintained that meaningful change would be the outcome of imitation—not merely the application of economic principles but an embrace of Western techniques and values.[26] This required only encouragement and the correct forms of management, for as Lerner memorably observed in the case of one "undeveloped" region, "What the West is… the Middle East seeks to become."[27] On this view the mass of people worldwide would soon be goal-oriented, acquisitive, and physically mobile. They would accept radical change, especially change in agrarian practice including relocation of entire communities. This was the rationale for mass movements of population in rural areas undertaken to facilitate extensive cultivation and for infrastructural projects including dams, canals, irrigation schemes, and urban extensions. In states which rejected the Western model in favour of Soviet or Chinese principles, "command" agendas produced similar outcomes, moving large numbers of people to facilitate projects such as the High Dam in Egypt, the Volta River scheme in Ghana, and the *ujaama* village program in Tanzania (those affected by these initiatives were later to be viewed as "development-induced" migrants, sometimes as "development-induced" *refugees*.)

People displaced by war and civil conflict were treated similarly—as objects of the process of modernization. The UNHCR was advised by strategists who also worked for the World Bank and who favoured programs similar to the latter's "integrated rural development" schemes. The UNHCR developed a specific practice in relation to refugees, transporting them to camps in the countryside where they were provided with food and shelter, allocated land, seeds, and tools, and directed to achieve "self-sufficiency." In Africa over one hundred rural encampments were established as part of a program of "zonal settlement" based on this approach and in effect upon *a new model of the refugee*—that of a person contained in a rural location, closely managed and focused upon specific developmental objectives. This was soon the refugee around which states and agencies defined key areas of global refugee strategy.

Towards the Cities

Over the past fifty years governments in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have located most refugee settlements in rural areas. This has sometimes complemented the desire of refugees to be close to places of origin but in many cases it has proved problematic for the displaced. Kibreab shows that, in the case of Sudan, rural settlement became a "standard response" to the arrival of refugees, notwithstanding the latters' origins, experiences, skills, cultural practices, and aspirations.[28] During the late 1960s and early 1970s all refugees from Eritrea and Ethiopia who arrived in Sudan, including those of urban origin, were directed to settlements in the countryside. Although urbanites lacked appropriate knowledge and skills, they were directed into schemes in which cultivation was the only option. The refugees were under compulsion: "the authorities required [them] to adapt to the new situation by abandoning their previous urban lifestyle," observes Kibreab.[29] Urbanism had become incompatible with refugee status.

Loescher comments that even when enthusiasm for rural settlement was at its height most refugees in Africa settled "spontaneously," away from official projects.[30] Many evaded settlement programs and moved directly to towns and cities where their presence troubled both colonial officials and governments of the newly independent states. The latter were not only committed to policies of modernization (and obliged to honour these in order to obtain external funding) but also concerned to maintain their authority during the tense and sometimes troubled periods which followed independence. Isolation of refugees in remote rural locations therefore satisfied several strategic aims. It soon proved ineffectual, however: as Kibreab shows in the case of Sudan, refugees of urban origin were reluctant to move to rural settlements or even to pass through reception centres; instead many undertook long journeys in order to reach cities in which they could use their education, skills, and professional expertise.[31]

During the 1980s the global total of refugees increased rapidly as economic instability and the outbreak of numerous "new wars" prompted repeated mass displacement in vulnerable regions. It is likely that the rate of urbanization of refugees increased at an even faster pace.[32] In Africa most "zonal settlement" schemes failed to achieve developmental aims and some residents, including people of rural origin, drifted away. Meanwhile in zones of intense crises the scale of displacement overwhelmed aid agencies and refugees moved through a series of states in the search for security, their journeys facilitated by new technologies of communication and by transport networks focused on the cities. In addition, as more international NGOs established offices in regional centres they attracted more refugees who hoped for employment, welfare support, and access to settlement schemes abroad. Urban communities grew apace: Mexico City drew refugees from conflicts in Central and South

America; New Delhi became a temporary home for refugees from across South Asia; Nairobi, Kampala, and Cairo attracted the displaced of Central Africa and the Horn of Africa; Conakry drew refugees from West Africa; Istanbul accommodated refugees from the Middle East and central Asia. There were numerous other such centres.[33]

Unenumerated, Unmanaged

States, agencies, and researchers often have little information about urban refugees. Hansen notes that encamped refugees are usually carefully monitored: "Their identity and location are known. They live in locations that are supervised and managed by the national government or by international organizations."[34] Urban refugees, however, are usually dispersed, unenumerated, and unmanaged. In the jargon of international NGOs they are "spontaneous" or "self-settled" refugees—people who have not entered the encampment regime or have abandoned it.

A minority of refugees in urban locations do have formal status. For almost sixty years Palestinians have lived in camps in the cities of Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, and in the 1970s and 1980s large numbers of Vietnamese refugees were accommodated officially in camps in Hong Kong. In addition millions of Afghans are still located in settlements in and around Peshawar in Pakistan for which international agencies take responsibility. But these are a small minority of the mass of urban refugees: as aliens living outside approved locations the majority lack rights, including rights of residence and rights to employment, housing, education, and welfare. Many live at the margins of urban society—some, in effect, beyond the margin.

One of the rare independent studies of urban communities, Cooper's *Needs Assessment of the Ethiopian and Eritrean Refugee Populations in Cairo*, published in 1993, gave early warning of developments under way worldwide.[35] It established that the city accommodated several large communities, drawing refugees across vast distances by means of what Cooper called a "magnet effect" associated with the presence of local and international NGOs, the prospect of employment, and the hope of admission to resettlement programs in the West.[36] Cairo had become a regional hub for refugees of many origins, part of a network of increasingly complex migrations which operated independent of states and agencies. The report had important implications: it was likely that in many other regional centres similar communities were in formation and that together they were exercising an important influence on global refugee movements.[37]

A few years later the UNHCR published its own research on urban refugees. The agency conducted regional workshops in Harare and Kuala Lumpur and in 1997 produced a detailed report, *UNHCR's Policy and Practice Regarding Urban Refugees*.[38] This is probably one of the most controversial documents ever produced by the agency and, as we shall see, its conclusions were later modified by the organization's own officials. It is worth considering in some detail.

The report began by noting that urban refugees could be difficult to identify among the "massive populations of illegal migrants" found in a number of regions.[39] The correlation of urban refugees with illegality was an indicative starting point, for the report was suffused with pejorative references to people whom UNHCR officials viewed as anomalous and in effect as inauthentic. The agency had no definition of the urban refugee, the report continued, noting that "the most commonly articulated definition of an urban refugee [among UNHCR officials] is that of an individual of urban origin… anyone who is not a farmer or a peasant."[40] By using occupational status rather than location as a criterion, this approach excluded at a stroke the large numbers of people of rural origin now part of urban populations. The UNHCR could account for 56,000 urban refugees on its case-lists, the report noted, and on this basis suggested a possible global total of 200,000.[41] At a time when refugee numbers worldwide were approaching thirty million (including refugees and people "of concern" to the UNHCR), of which a substantial proportion were already to be found in cities, the calculation was a gross underestimate. It reflected a widespread belief among agency officials that "real" refugees were people of rural origin properly encamped in rural locations, and that those who had chosen not to enter the camp regime, or who had escaped it, were of little account.

The report was sceptical about urban refugees in general—even the modest numbers who fell within the definitions used by UNHCR officials. It noted that some lacked genuine claims for asylum while others were dysfunctional personalities. It observed:

> Urban refugees and asylum seekers tend to include a wide variety of people, some, but by no means all, of whom have genuine asylum claims. They include opportunistic and dynamic individuals as well as those who failed to survive as part of the normal migration (or refugee) flow—the maladjusted [*sic*], the social outcasts etc—a factor which can make status determination difficult. Furthermore, since such movement is often stimulated, at least partially, by a desire to improve their economic potential, urban refugees and asylum seekers tend to share a culture of expectation, which, if not satisfied, often leads to frustration and violence.[42]

Urban refugees engaged in all manner of uncontrolled activities which were not part of "normal" migratory move-

ments, the report suggested. People who joined urban refugee communities were "irregular movers" against whom "preventive measures" should be taken; meanwhile there should be "curative measures [*sic*] to deal with individuals who have already moved irregularly."[43] Urban refugees were said to make unreasonable demands on the UNHCR's budget and upon the energies of its officials. Many agency staff had concluded that they should not be provided with assistance—that the UNHCR should not "reward" people who moved from rural settlements to the city "in order to seek better conditions and prospects."[44] "A privileged few" left rural encampments for the city, lobbying for improved assistance or access to settlement programs and becoming "aggressive and violent" if their expectations were not met.[45] Among the most vehement protesters were the "irregular movers." those whose applications for asylum had been rejected, and "the psychologically disturbed."[46]

Some urban refugees had been "politically manipulated," the report observed: their journeys to the city implied illegitimate activities including the establishment of "networks"; their movements were sinister—"far from being random and spontaneous, such movements are organised" and raised questions about motives and outcomes.[47] The report proposed that no "irregular movers" should ever be registered as refugees; that all should be excluded from resettlement schemes and should be denied assistance including help with education; and that people found outside their regions of origin should be recorded on new databases with the aim of containing further movement.[48]

Denial

The report reflected an increasingly hostile stance taken by Western governments towards refugees in general and long-distance migrants in particular. From the mid-1980s Western politicians and media became increasingly concerned about those who sought sanctuary in Europe, North America, and Australasia. The collapse of Communism meant that refugees no longer appeared as uncomplicated victims of culpable action by totalitarian states; rather they were poor and often desperate people who (publicly at least) had little to offer host societies. A pattern of conduct evident one hundred years earlier was repeated as desired states of asylum closed their borders to those in pressing need. Refugees were now depicted as calculating, aggressive, and undeserving—as opportunists who sought to exploit the credulity of Western publics. Like the politicians of Europe and North America, UNHCR officials were prepared to accept the presence of closely managed refugee communities in remote locations; when refugees appeared elsewhere, however, they became objects of suspicion and the focus of punitive action: in particular, when they entered urban networks which facilitated movement to the North they were to be treated as dangerous and threatening.

The 1997 report represented a policy of denial and of rejection. It ignored the earlier analyses of Chambers, Rogge and Akol, Cooper, and Kibreab.[49] It minimized the scale and extent of urban refugee communities and, using mainly anecdotal evidence, went on to misrepresent them. In 2002 Human Rights Watch published the findings of its own research on refugees in Nairobi and Kampala, reaching very different conclusions. It noted that "tens of thousands" of displaced people from Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, and elsewhere lived in "dire and dangerous" conditions.[50] They existed at the margins of city life—not only poor, hungry, and often ill but also subject to beatings, sexual violence, harassment, extortion, and arbitrary arrest and detention at the hands of criminals, persecutors from their countries of origin, and local officials, police and armed forces. Their communities were invisible to the local authorities and to certain agencies, observed Human Rights Watch: they lived "hidden in plain view."[51]

This account was soon confirmed by Horst's detailed study of Somalis in Nairobi. She noted the presence of a large and growing community confronted by problems of illegality which were exploited by officials and by the Kenyan police.[52] Meanwhile studies of Burundians in Dar El Salaam and of a range of refugee groups in Johannesburg had identified a similar picture in other cities of Africa.[53]

Human Rights Watch questioned the "blanket assumption" made by the UNHCR that "most refugees should not be moving to or living in urban areas."[54] Some officials within UNHCR had similar criticisms, prompting new research by the agency's Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit (EPAU) in Cairo, Nairobi, New Delhi, and Bangkok. The Unit argued for a different approach: in the case of New Delhi its researchers found that most refugees lived without formal recognition. Like those in African cities they were technically illegal, leaving them open to arrest and deportation. They were poor and faced discrimination and harassment: many were compelled to work illicitly, and under intense pressure some had left India by clandestine means.[55] A UNHCR workshop emphasized the need for a new policy on urban refugees based on a sympathetic understanding of their problems and a commitment to the principle that "refugees in urban areas are of concern."[56]

Refugee Resistance

In 2001 the UNHCR revised its count of urban refugees to 13 per cent of the global refugee population—some 1.9 million people but still a fraction of those living in urban environments.[57] In 2006, as part of a global survey, it issued

a new statement on urban refugees. More displaced people were moving to cities, it observed, with the aim of escaping "restrictive encampment schemes instituted by host countries." They faced problems with local officials and "exploitation, police abuse, arbitrary arrest and deportation."[58] For the first time, the UNHCR identified a general tendency to treat urban refugees "with considerable suspicion" and implicitly criticized the assumption that all must be "irregular movers." Almost ten years after its first report the agency was still unable to offer a revised policy, however—an index of the continuing reluctance of states, transnational bodies, and local NGOs to accept that urban refugees in the global South are people who have good reason to seek sanctuary and who should be treated appropriately.

The UNHCR report of 1997 had identified urban refugees as people likely to have unreasonable aspirations and expectations. Violating "normal" patterns of migration by evading or escaping rural encampments, they demonstrated dysfunctional behaviour which could be manifested in aggressive or even violent conduct. This assessment was based in part on experiences of UNHCR officials who had witnessed protests at the agency's offices worldwide—events which have recently grown in scale and become much more numerous. Urban refugees often organize to demand faster processing of applications for refugee status or resettlement, for improved welfare benefits, for the right to work, or against harassment and abuse by police and officials—issues over which most poor and vulnerable people might be expected to mobilize. For the UNHCR this has been evidence of personal instability and of the inherent threat posed by all "irregular" movers. The presence in cities of mobile, self-directed refugees continues to violate the idea that displaced people must be helpless and dependent—an idea inherited from modernization theory and which, decades after it has been discredited as a principle of development strategy, continues to inform those who shape migration policy.

Urban refugees in general are becoming more organized and more outspoken. This is in part a reaction to increased pressure from local authorities, in particular the determination of some states to enforce rural encampment or even deportation. Burundian refugees have long lived in camps in western Tanzania and increasing numbers have made their way to the capital, Dar El Salaam, living illegally as what Sommers calls "undercover urbanites."[59] Those discovered by the authorities face arrest and, since 2003, return to the Burundi-Tanzania border without documents—and with all the attendant dangers.[60] In Thailand, where many Burmese refugees have lived in Bangkok and other cities, officials have recently forced thousands of people to move to areas in which they are restricted to rural camps. In 2005

the government announced that those who resisted encampment would lose UNHCR protection: they would also be barred from resettlement and could face arrest or even deportation to Burma. Similar measures have been threatened against Burmese refugees in Bangladesh.[61]

Official hostility towards urban refugees can take the form of extreme violence, especially when migrant communities organize publicly to defend their interests. In recent years there have been numerous public protests in cities including New Delhi, Bangkok, Nairobi, Kampala, Moscow, Beijing, and Cairo, often directed towards the local authorities and/or the UNHCR and other agencies. Some have been attacked by the police and the army, with mass arrests and heavy casualties. In 2002 hundreds of Burmese refugees surrounded the UNHCR office in New Delhi, demanding faster processing of applications for refugee status and reviews of cases which had been rejected. Banners read "SOS" and "Victims of UNHCR—silent killer."[62] The following year there were further demonstrations, calling for adequate subsistence allowances, help with basic health care, and a guarantee against *refoulement*. After attacks by police, refugee organizations said that hundreds had been arrested and twenty seriously injured.[63] In May 2005 a combined force of 12,000 regular police and special riot police invaded a camp for displaced persons in Khartoum, Sudan, killing fourteen people after protests in which residents had resisted "relocation."[64] In December 2005 thousands of Egyptian riot police surrounded a protest by Sudanese refugees outside UNHCR offices in Cairo. Demonstrators were attacked with a show of violence that astonished witnesses and resulted in many deaths, including several among children. Government spokesman put the number of fatalities at twenty-seven; according to Egyptian human rights organizations the real figure was over one hundred.[65] Refugee community organizations alleged that the UNHCR was complicit in the planning and execution of the assault.[66]

The Cairo events had been in the making for many years. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s refugees arrived from across Africa and the Middle East: in 2005 Moorehead observed that they made their way to the Egyptian capital across vast distances "by a hundred different paths."[67] Some were granted formal recognition by the UNHCR but many were refused asylum or chose not to enter a refugee status determination (RSD) process they regarded as arbitrary and unjust.[68] Forced to live precariously in an intimidating urban environment, they made repeated individual and collective protests to the UNHCR, including allegations that the agency recognized only those applicants prepared to make payments to officials and that the UNHCR operated RSD on a "quota" system determined by the Egyptian

government. Welfare groups, including those run by independent religious charities, observed that as refugee communities expanded, their relations with the local state became increasingly tense.[69]

In the early 1990s Cooper proposed an "open dialogue" between refugees, NGOs, and government officials. The key aim, he maintained, must be to ensure that refugees gained a measure of control in their lives, which were becoming increasingly stressful and insecure.[70] More than ten years later there was still no meaningful form of communication: to this extent the confrontation of December 2005 was predictable, even if the scale and intensity of violence on the part of the state could not have been anticipated. The Cairo events were an expression of official intolerance towards desperate people who dared to challenge their lowly status: when they mobilized as social/political actors the state took punitive measures, determined that they should be neither seen nor heard.[71]

Global trends suggest that more such tragedies are likely to occur. More displaced people are moving to the cities, where more of the population lives at the very margin of survival. For governments eager to demonstrate their authority refugees present an attractive target: vulnerable and often "voiceless," they are a convenient focus for exemplary action against "illegals" and "criminals"—the same deviants who populate official discourses of the refugee in Europe and North America. For centuries the city was a place of sanctuary: for people of the global South it is increasingly a place of danger.

Notes

1. John R. Rogge and Joshua O. Akol, "Repatriation: Its Role in Solving Africa's Refugee Dilemma," *International Migration Review* 23 (1989): 184.
2. Human Rights Watch, *Hidden in Plain View* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2002), <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/kenyugan> (accessed 11 March 2007).
3. Robin Cohen, *Migration and Its Enemies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).
4, In the Jewish texts see, for example, Psalms 16, 27, 36, 51, 52; and Isaiah 8.
5. Robert Gorman, "Poets, Playwrights, and the Politics of Exile and Asylum in Ancient Greece and Rome," *International Journal of Refugee Law* 6, no. 3 (1994): 402.
6. Islamic tradition combines notions of emigration/exile with ideas of sanctuary, so that *mahjar* (a place of emigration, retreat, refuge, or sanctuary) is associated with the *muhajir* (an emigrant or émigré) as both a member of the community of the Prophet who travelled from Mecca to Medina, and the contemporary emigrant/refugee. See Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Weisbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1971), 1019. On current Islamic state practice *vis-à-vis* refu-

gees see the policy of the Islamic Conference Organisation, <http://www.oic-oci.org/english/conventions/refugees-conf.htm> (accessed 11 March 2007).
7. Bernard Cottret, *The Huguenots in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
8. Michael R. Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 20.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Rosemary Ashton, *Little Germany: Exile and Asylum in Victorian England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
11. The new generation of anti-colonial activists included Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, the founder of pan-Islam, who during the 1880s lived with groups of supporters in both London and Paris.
12. See Edward Behr, *The Algerian Problem* (London: Penguin, 1961).
13. The attraction of the *émigrés* to host states during the nineteenth century, argues Porter, lay in their utility in ideological struggles with rival powers. In the case of Britain their presence was taken as confirmation of the value of local traditions of liberty and free expression. See Bernard Porter, *The Refugee Question in Mid-Victorian Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) and Bernard Porter, "The British Government and Political Refugees, 1880–1914," in *From the Other Shore*, ed. J. Slatter (London: Frank Cass, 1984). For an assessment of refugees' status in Europe during the nineteenth century see Philip Marfleet, *Refugees in a Global Era* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006).
14. Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War 1* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 3.
15. There were certain exceptions, such as the "population exchanges" between Greece and Turkey organized in the early 1920s.
16. Patricia Tuitt, *False Images: Law's Construction of the Refugee* (London: Pluto, 1996), 16. The US National Security Council was precise about its preferences in relation to refugees, believing that damage to Eastern Bloc states and advantage to the West would be maximized when "emigration pertained to professionals." See Tommie Sjoberg,, *The Powers and the Persecuted: The Refugee Problem and the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (IGCR) 1938–1947* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1991), 10.
17. The United Nations Relief for Palestinian Refugees, later renamed the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), was created to administer camps and work programs. It viewed Palestinian refugees as distinct from all others and operated under a unique UN mandate.
18. Between 1956 and 1968 a total of 233,436 refugees were accepted for asylum in the US: all but 925 were from countries with Communist or radical nationalist governments. See Gil Loescher, *The UNHCR and World Politics: A Perilous Path* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 55.
19. The US sometimes admitted more diverse groups, usually under special decree, such as the Hungarian refugees accepted

after the 1956 uprising, and certain Cuban immigrants accommodated after the fall of the Batista regime in 1959.

20. Quoted in Loescher, 139.
21. *Ibid.*, 105.
22. UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 37.
23. Barbara Harrell-Bond, "The Experience of Refugees as Recipients of Aid," in *Refugees: Perspectives on the Experience of Forced Migration*, ed. Alastair Ager (London: Continuum, 1999), 147.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Loescher, 105.
26. Walter W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1961); Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1958).
27. Lerner, 47.
28. Gaim Kibreab, "Eritrean and Ethiopian Urban Refugees in Khartoum: What the Eye Refuses to See," *African Studies Review* 30, no. 3 (1996): 147.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Loescher, 122.
31. See Kibreab.
32. Kibreab notes that the proportion of urban refugees in Africa may have increased from 4 per cent to over 30 per cent between the late 1970s and the late 1980s: Kibreab, 132.
33. See Marfleet, chap. 10.
34. Marc Sommers, Foreword, in *Fear in Bongoland: Burundi Refugees in Tanzania* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2001).
35. Derek Cooper, *A Needs Assessment of the Ethiopian and Eritrean Refugee Populations in Cairo* (Cairo: Ford Foundation, 1993).
36. *Ibid.*, 2.
37. See also Derek Cooper, "Urban Refugees: Ethiopians and Eritreans in Cairo," *Cairo Papers in Social Science*, 15, Monograph 2 (1992).
38. UNHCR, *UNHCR's Policy and Practice Regarding Urban Refugees, A Discussion Paper* (Geneva: UNHCR, 1997).
39. *Ibid.*, 2.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*, 16.
42. *Ibid.*, 3.
43. *Ibid.*, 10.
44. Others—an implied minority of staff—disagreed, said the report. *Ibid.*, 6.
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*, 2.
48. *Ibid.*, 11.
49. See R. Chambers, "Rural Refugees in Africa: What the Eye Does Not See," *Disasters*, 3, no. 4 (1979); Rogge and Akol; Cooper, "Urban Refugees: Ethiopians and Eritreans in Cairo"; Cooper, *A Needs Assessment of the Ethiopian and Eritrean Refugee Populations in Cairo*; and Kibreab. Authors of the 1997 report were either in ignorance of earlier research or chose to ignore it. Some UNHCR officers were well informed as to the

circumstances of urban refugee communities: Kibreab notes that in 1987 he discussed problems of refugees in Khartoum in person with agency officials (Kibreab, 145).
50. Human Rights Watch, Statement, http:// www.hrw.org/press/2002/11/kenya1121.htm (accessed 11 March 2007).
51. Human Rights Watch, *Hidden in Plain View*, 1.
52. Cindy Horst, *Transnational Nomads: How Somalis Cope with Refugee Life in the Dadaab Camps of Kenya* (PhD thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2003).
53. Sommers; Loren B. Landau, ed., *Forced Migrants in the New Johannesburg: Towards a Local Government Response* (Johannesburg: Forced Migration Studies Programme, University of the Witwatersrand, 2004).
54. Human Rights Watch, *Hidden in Plain View,* 2.
55. Naoko Obi and Jeff Crisp, "Evaluation of UNHCR's Policy on Refugees in Urban Areas: A Case Study Review of New Delhi" (Geneva: UNHCR Evaluation and Policy Unit, 2000), 4.
56. Naoko Obi and Jeff Crisp , "UNHCR Policy on Refugees in Urban Areas: Report of a UNHCR/NGO Workshop" (Geneva: UNHCR Evaluation and Policy Unit, 2002), 1.
57. UNHCR Statistical Yearbook 2001.
58. UNHCR, *The State of the World Refugees*, <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/publ/opendoc.htm?tbl=PUBL&id=4444d3c32f> (accessed 11 March 2007).
59. Sommers, 30.
60. Refugees International, Report, <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/article/detail/951/?PHPSESSID=5ce00f9 2779c166 324e1d> (accessed 11 March 2007).
61. Anti-Slavery International, Statement, <www.antislavery.org/archive/submission2005-CHRburma2.htm> (accessed 11 March 2007).
62. *Asia Human Rights News*, 24 October 2002.
63. Asian Centre for Human Rights, Report, http://www.achrweb.org/countries/india/mizoram/CR0403.htm (accessed 11 March 2007).
64. Sudan Tribune, Report, <http://www.sudantribune.com/article.php3?id_article=9744> (accessed 11 March 2007).
65. *Report of Ahram Weekly*, Report, 5 January 2006.
66. Personal discussions with participants in the protest, Cairo, March 2006.
67. Caroline Moorehead, *Human Cargo: A Journey among Refugees* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2005), 7.
68. See Cooper, "Urban Refugees: Ethiopians and Eritreans in Cairo," and Marfleet, chap. 10. In numerous personal discussions with refugees in Cairo conducted between 1989 and 2006 it was made clear that entire communities viewed the UNHCR, which has sole responsibility in Egypt for status determination, with extreme scepticism. See also Michael Kagan, *Assessment of Refugee Status Determination Procedure at UNHCR's Cairo Office, 2001–2002*, <http://www.aucegypt.edu/academic/fmrs/ documents/RSDReport.pdf> (accessed 11 March 2007).
69. Interviews with officials at the Anglican Cathedral, Zamalek; Sacred Heart Church, Sakakini; St. Andrew's United Church

of Cairo; and Africa and Middle East Refugee Assistance (Amera), 2002 to 2005.

70. Cooper, *A Needs Assessment of the Ethiopian and Eritrean Refugee Populations in Cairo*, 83.

71. For an analysis of the events by researchers at the Forced Migration and Refugee Studies Program, American University in Cairo, see http://www.aucegypt.edu/academic/fmrs/documents/FMRSReportonRefugeeProtest_000. pdf (accessed 11 March 2007).

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