

# CAIRO: A TRANSIT CITY FOR MIGRANTS AND AFRICAN REFUGEES\*

by  
Ayman Zohry, PhD.†

## 1. INTRODUCTION

From Biblical times, Egypt has been a haven for people fleeing persecution and natural disasters. Egypt has continued to fulfill this role into the present. People fled to Egypt after the Armenian massacres in Turkey in the 1920s and from both World Wars. Numerous African nationalist politicians or their families – notably those of Kwame Nkrumah and Patrice Lumumba – found sanctuary in Egypt during the 1960s.

Today, Egypt's capital, Cairo accommodates one of the five largest refugee populations living in urban areas' in the world (Ismail 2002). This assessment is based on the number of asylum seekers received by UNHCR. It is impossible to give precise numbers of refugees in Egypt and 'guesstimates' vary from 500,000 to 3 million. Although all refugees in Egypt face similar hardships and most rank among the poorest of the poor, each community in Cairo has its different cultural and religious background that makes it unique.

In Egypt, UNHCR determines refugee status, not the Egyptian government. Thousands of refugees denied recognition by UNHCR also continue to live in Egypt (Kagan 2002; 2003).<sup>1</sup> Wars and massive human rights violations in Africa and the Middle East have been the main source of refugees. Of the nationalities of African refugees known in Egypt, Sudanese form the largest group, followed by people from Somalia, Ethiopia, and

---

\* This presentation is a modified version of an article by the author appeared in REMI; "*The place of Egypt in the regional migration system as a receiving country*". Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales. 19(3):129-149.

† email: [azohry@aucegypt.edu](mailto:azohry@aucegypt.edu) and/or [ayman@zohry.com](mailto:ayman@zohry.com), web: <http://www.zohry.com>

Eritrea. Other nationalities come in smaller numbers, but groups of significant size come from Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Burundi.

This paper surveys African refugees and their communities in Cairo. The study is migrant-focused, though some elements of Egyptian government policy are also included. These sections are primarily concerned with the policies of the Egyptian government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which decides refugee status in Egypt. To take a migrant-focused approach to immigrants – mainly refugees - who come from at least 20 different African countries, would require political and economic analyses of their countries of origin, and this is beyond the scope of this study. This study relies mainly on secondary data come from reports of international organizations and independent research and studies. It should be borne in mind that migration data are generally incomplete, based more on estimates than hard facts, so that even simple trends are often hard to confirm.

## 2. EGYPTIAN POLICIES CONCERNING REFUGEES

Article 53 of the Egyptian Constitution guarantees asylum for political refugees. Article 53 states that ‘Egypt is obliged to grant the right of political asylum to any foreigner who has been persecuted for his defense of the interests of people, or of human rights, peace or justice.’ The Office of the President is in charge of granting asylum to political refugees.

<b>Article 53</b>
The right to political asylum shall be granted by the State to every foreigner persecuted for defending the people’s interests, human rights, peace or justice. The extradition of political refugees shall be prohibited.
<b>Egyptian Constitution</b>

Article 151 of the Constitution states that international treaties ratified by Egypt have force of law and in all cases supersede domestic law. In 1951, Egypt was, with Turkey, the only non-western member of the drafting committee of the United Nations Convention on Refugees. UNHCR established its office in the country in 1954.

In 1980, Egypt ratified the Organization of African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems and the 1951 United Nations Convention. In 1981 it ratified the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. In 1984, it ratified the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which also provides for the right to seek and obtain asylum. The 1992 Declaration on the Protection of Refugees and Displaced Persons in the Arab World also urged Arab States to adopt a broad concept of 'refugee' and 'displaced person' as well as a minimum standard for their treatment, guided by the provisions of the United Nations instruments relating to human rights and refugees as well as relevant regional instruments, and to also guard against *refoulement* (Grindell 2003).

At the time of ratifying the 1951 Convention, Egypt entered reservations to the following articles, making them inapplicable in Egypt: Articles 12 (1), articles 20 and 22 (1), and articles 23 and 24. These cover personal status, unequal treatment of refugees compared to nationals if there is a rationing system in Egypt; and access to public relief, but the two articles having the greatest impact on refugee populations living in Egypt are Article 22 on free primary education and Article 24 on employment. For these reasons alone refugees in Egypt have no chance for 'integration', one of UNHCR's three 'durable solutions'.

Egypt is a signatory of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which stipulates that children have the right to free access to education and support for psychological recovery after war. Nevertheless primary and secondary education for most refugees is not allowed in Egyptian public schools. Refugees who want a university education must pay foreigners' fees in foreign currency. A Presidential decree signed in 2001 declared that Sudanese children of recognised refugees should be allowed to attend public schools.

With the restriction on the right to work, refugees are forced to rely on the informal sector and are thus easily exploited. However, a policy issue open to exploration is Article 17(1), (2) and (3) of the 1951 Convention, to which Egypt did not enter

reservations. Article (17)<sup>1</sup> states, ‘the Contracting States shall accord to refugees lawfully staying in their territory the most favorable treatment accorded to nationals of a foreign country in the same circumstances, as regards the right to engage in wage-earning employment.

### **3. AFRICAN REFUGEE COMMUNITIES IN EGYPT**

#### **3.1 Sudanese refugees**

‘Sudanese in Egypt have for long enjoyed a status close to nationals on account of a number of bilateral agreements, especially the Nile Valley Agreement of 1976 which, among other things, allowed for free movement of goods and people across the common border’ (Sperl 2001: 20). During the civil war from 1955 to 1972, the first wave of Sudanese asylum seekers came to Egypt. The second wave of Sudanese began arriving as a result of the current civil war that began in 1983. Most of the recent asylum seekers in Egypt are from Southern Sudan, South Kordofan, and South Blue Nile regions of Sudan. A significant number of Sudanese from the Muslim north have also sought refuge from persecution since 1983. Besides civil war and fear of persecution, some Sudanese have come to Egypt because of famine and the impossibility of sustaining life in the displaced camps around Khartoum (Cooper 1993: 2).

Until 1995, it was not necessary for Sudanese refugees to seek asylum; they were usually referred to as ‘displaced people’. However, the 1995 assassination attempt on President Mubarak in Ethiopia, allegedly by members of Egypt’s Islamic fundamentalists supported by the Sudanese government, changed Egypt’s open-door policy toward their southern neighbor. Since then, every Sudanese must have a visa to enter Egypt and, if a refugee, must proceed through the refugee status determination process at UNHCR. In 2001 there were only 2,960 recognized refugees from Sudan. Their recognition rate in 2000 was only 30% and does not come near to reflecting the true number of Sudanese who have fled their country because of war and persecution.

Due to the low rate of recognition of Sudanese refugees by the UNHCR, the number of Sudanese individuals who approach UNHCR in Cairo is decreasing. Some 208 Sudanese registered with the UNHCR Cairo Office in July 2005, a significant drop from 462 in January 2005. This decrease does not necessarily indicate a decreasing trend of new-arrivals from Sudan. The decrease is more likely due to the suspension of refugee status determination by UNHCR in Cairo owing to the lack of resettlement opportunities in third countries. In spite of the relative stability in the Southern Sudan after the peace agreement between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement and Khartoum, the number of voluntary repatriation remains low, with less than 20 persons on average per month. Among these, the percentage of those returning to the south is increasing (UNHCR, 2005a).

As with most refugee populations, the Sudanese see education for their children as the only way out of poverty, but they have been barred from the free Egyptian public school system. Christian churches and refugee-run NGOs are the only source of education for refugees in Cairo. Only one of these primary school programs teaches the Egyptian curriculum. There are not nearly enough facilities and resources to educate the tens of thousands of refugee children living in Egypt and there are no secondary schools.

In December 2000 the minister of education announced a plan to address the lack of public primary education for Sudanese children and in 2001 a ministerial decree was issued (Peterson 2001). The decree is problematic in two ways. Families are required 'to present extensive documentation, including a birth certificate, last schooling level certificate, identity document with legal residence permit, and letter from the Embassy of Sudan' (Peterson 2001).<sup>2</sup> A second obstacle is the resistance of the Sudanese refugees to the idea of local integration, preferring English-language teaching no matter how few opportunities are available, as preparation for their hoped-for resettlement to English-speaking countries in the West. Their resistance to Arabic teaching is also related to their deep-seated aspirations for an independent Southern Sudan where, as one Sudanese man put it, 'Arabic is not going to be the main language' (Peterson 2001).

### ***The Four Freedoms***

In January 2004, the Egyptian and Sudanese governments signed an agreement guaranteeing the freedom of movement, residence, work, and property ownership between the two countries. The so-called "four freedoms agreement" was signed during a summit between President Hosni Mubarak and his Sudanese counterpart Omar Hassan El-Beshir in Cairo in January 2004. According to the agreement, Sudanese nationals would be entitled to own property in Egypt, as well as rightfully work and reside in Egypt. Egyptian nationals would also enjoy the same rights in Sudan.

### **3.2 Somali refugees**

Prior to the Somali civil war that began in 1991, Somalis residing in Cairo consisted of three main groups: (1) diplomats and their families, (2) university students on scholarships, and (3) female-headed families who came to Egypt for the education of their children while their husbands worked in the Gulf (Al-Sharmani 2003). According to UNHCR, in 2003 there were 1,832 recognized Somali refugees, 952 rejected applicants, and 1,544 asylum seekers. The Somali community members claim that there are at least 5,000 in Cairo.

Somalis who came to Egypt before the war or shortly thereafter differ from those who came to Egypt in the late 1990s. The first Somalis to settle in Cairo came mainly from urban areas, were highly educated, had held professional or administrative jobs, and fled Somalia via Kenya or the Gulf. The more recent Somali refugees have both urban and rural origins, are more likely to be unskilled and young. Many are illiterate, and a number of them fled first to the Gulf before coming to Cairo.

Somalis are concentrated in two districts of Cairo, Ard El-Liwa and Nasr City. Because the Somali community in Cairo is 'an integral part of well-connected communities of the transnational Somali Diaspora that have very strong economic and social ties,' many Somalis receive remittances from relatives in western countries and Saudi Arabia, in addition to their income from the informal sector in Cairo (Al-Sharmani 2003).

Somalis suffer from the restrictions on attendance of public schools and very few, if any, benefit from the church-based educational programs on offer in Cairo. Self-help schools organized by the Somali Refugee Committee of Egypt (SRCOE), and other small NGO initiatives, provide an alternative for a few children.

### **3.3 Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees**

From 1977-1979, Ethiopian refugees came to Egypt in order to escape the Mengistu regime's 'Red Terror' (Cooper 1992). Another influx of refugees came in 1991-1992 when the Mengistu regime fell; some were members of the military. Border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea (1998-2000), the suppression of civil liberties in both countries, and the turndown in the economy are all reasons why Eritreans and Ethiopians have continued to flee to Egypt. Eritrean refugees living in Sudan began coming to Egypt after UNHCR and the Eritrean government invoked the cessation clause (Article 1C(5)) of the 1951 Convention in 2000 because they feared forced return.

The majority of Ethiopians and Eritreans in Cairo during the early 1990s were educated and skilled single young men from urban areas, from both Muslim and Christian backgrounds (Cooper 1992). More than half came to Cairo directly by plane while others came by foot or train after having spent some time in other African countries and the Gulf countries. Financial support mainly stemmed from relatives in the West and local churches in Egypt.

More recent data on the make-up of the Ethiopian and Eritrean refugee population in Egypt are not available. However, if trends from the early 1990s hold true, the profile of refugees from Ethiopia and Eritrea will have greatly changed. Before 1990, men coming from these two countries made up the majority but by 1992 more women than men were fleeing to Cairo. Nevertheless, the actual Eritrean and Ethiopian community is around 5,000.

#### 4. UNHCR POLICIES IN EGYPT CONCERNING REFUGEES

Despite constitutional provisions concerning refugees, the maintenance of Egypt's reservations to the Convention, the lack of national laws on refugees, and the unwritten non-integration policy of the Egyptian government have all contributed to the hardships of refugees in Egypt. The government has allowed UNHCR to assume the responsibility for refugee status determination. But when UNHCR functions as the decision-maker (or judge) in the decision process, it can not effectively fulfill its primary mandate of refugee protection. Moreover, there is no judicial review of the status determination procedures and no independent appeal process to which rejected refugees have recourse (Kagan 2002, 2003).

Since 1997 there have been 63,243 registered asylum seekers, but only 18,537 have been recognized (of which 12,251 have been resettled). Between 1997 and 2003 over 32,000 claims have been rejected and their files closed by UNHCR. This latter group, who fear to return home, earn a meager living in the informal economy, and live under the constant threat of detention and deportation (Grindell 2003). The acceptance rate for asylum seekers has varied widely, ranging from 24% in 1997, to 38% in 1998 and 1999, back down to 31% in 2000, up to 42% in 2001, down again to 27% in 2002.

Before November 2002, asylum seekers eighteen and older who sought refugee status from UNHCR were given a minute slip of paper that only showed the date of the interview and passport number. It was not stamped by UNHCR and offered no other information. The holder of such a paper is supposed to be regarded as 'under the protection of UNHCR,' but police and security do not recognize it. Since most asylum seekers must wait for more than a year for a decision on their case, they continue to be at serious risk of detention or deportation. Since November 2002, new asylum seekers are issued yellow cards. This new card, valid for six months and renewable three times, provides refugees with residency from the Ministry of Interior through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Those who are recognized as refugees by UNHCR are issued a blue card that allows them to reside in Egypt. *Most recently, the stamp 'work prohibited' has been*



*removed from the residence permit, a significant positive step by the Government of Egypt.*

Because of Egypt's reservations to the 1951 Convention do not permit refugees to enjoy their basic rights; Egypt is viewed by most refugees as a *transit country*. There are significant resettlement programs to such countries as Australia, Canada, Finland, and the United States. From 1997 to May 2003, UNHCR have resettled 12,051 refugees to western countries. This does not include refugees who have managed to get 'sponsorship' to Australia and Canada through special programs. It also does not include refugees who have left Egypt for Libya in order to attempt to reach Italy using traffickers. Somalis are known to take this route, but other groups may also do so. Other refugees use traffickers to reach Israel.<sup>3</sup>

According to the latest statistics by the UNHCR, at 1 January 2005, there were 20,300 refugees in Egypt recognized by UNHCR under its mandate. Sudanese constituted 73 percent of the refugee population, followed by Somalis at 18 percent. The remainder included refugees from 27 other countries mainly from Africa (UNHCR, 2005b).

## **5. THE ECONOMIC SITUATION OF AFRICAN REFUGEES IN EGYPT**

Egypt's unemployment is estimated at around 20 percent (Sperl 2001). African refugees frequently experience racism on the streets and the media have been known to make xenophobic statements about refugees, who are seen as *competing* with Egyptians for work. However, 'the thousands of refugees living in Cairo are irrelevant to the explanation of the pressing economic and social problems found in Cairo' (SUDIA 2003). They are 'irrelevant' because they are consumers from the moment of their arrival, they receive remittances from abroad, they work in jobs not filled by Egyptians, and they receive very little assistance from UNHCR or the NGOs, which, in any case, represents income to Egypt in foreign currency. They, unlike many poor Egyptians, depend on the private sector for housing where rents are high. Refugees must pay school fees (when

they can afford them). This expenditure directly benefits the local economy. And, unlike poor Egyptians, refugees have lost the social networks upon which they, like everyone everywhere, depend upon for support.

Assistance by NGOs is concentrated in Cairo and ‘discourage[s] the dispersal of refugees throughout the country’ (Ismail 2002). Alexandria is the only other city in Egypt in which refugees receive (limited) assistance from UNHCR and churches. These services, which benefit at most a few hundred people, include education, health, food, and vocational training to help refugees obtain employment (as domestic workers, for example).

UNHCR gives monthly stipends to a limited number of refugees through its implementing partner CARITAS. However, while the number of refugees in need has been increasing each year, funds have been decreasing. From 1997-2002, this money has declined from \$2,928,129 to \$1,677,088. If every recognized refugee (the only ones eligible for assistance) was given these funds on a per capita basis, they would have received only \$186.34 in 2002. That amount would not even pay the average household’s rent for three months. UNHCR attempts to ‘target’ the most ‘vulnerable’ (the aged, the infirm, minor children). In doing so it has arbitrarily cut off assistance to certain categories who may also be ‘vulnerable’, such as single men, *all* Sierra Leoneans, and *all* Liberians. One can confidently say that refugees in Egypt belong to the poorest of the urban poor.

## **8. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Forced migration has been the plight of an estimated six million people in the Middle East (Roudi, 2001). The national, regional, and global policy environment in which these movements and the conditions that cause them are enacted is another important area of study. Forced migration has been subject to some study but the articulation of this system with the conditions and structures in Egypt has not been addressed. Cairo hosts one of the largest urban refugee communities in the world. A program of research that goes beyond

the simple documentation of refugee policy and the position of Egypt and other host governments in the region is suggested. Research is to look at the intersection of policies that affect the conditions of refugees. The research may explore how refugees interact with the policy environment in this region and identify means of developing policies that enhance refugees' survival strategies and contributions to the host society and address the concerns of host nationals. A comparison between marginalized groups of nationals and refugees should be carried out.

Missing in the studies related to refugees in Egypt is their connections with international diaspora; most of the studies on refugees in Egypt are concerned with refugees' living conditions and coping strategies, few is known about remittances they receive from their families in the West and their migration trajectories.

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Prof. Barbara Harrell-Bond, Distinguished Adjunct Professor and Mr. Randy Chrisler, Forced Migration and Refugee Studies Program, The American University in Cairo for information on refugees and their comments on early version of this presentation.

## **Bibliography:**

- Afifi, W. (2003) Research Report on Education for Refugees in Cairo. Unpublished Document, FMRS Library, American University in Cairo.
- Al-Sharmani, M. (2003) Livelihood and identity constructions of Somali refugees in Cairo. FMRS Working Paper 2. American University in Cairo.  
<http://www.aucegypt.edu/academic/fmrs/Reports/final.pdf>
- Brinks, J.S. and Sinclair, C.A. (1980) *International Migration and Development in the Arab Region*. ILO, Geneva.
- Cleland, W. (1936) *The Population Problem in Egypt: A Study of Population Trends and Conditions in Modern Egypt*. Science Press Printing Company. Lancaster, Pennsylvania.
- Cooper, D. (1992) 'Urban Refugees: Ethiopians and Eritreans in Cairo', *Cairo Papers in Social Science: volume 15*, Monograph 2.
- Cooper, D. (1993) 'A Needs Assessment of the Ethiopian and Eritrean Refugee Population' RSC Documentation Centre, Oxford University.
- Corsellis, J. (1993) 'Yugoslav refugees in camps in Egypt and Austria 1944-47', *North Dakota Quarterly*, 61(1) Winter: 40-54
- Dingemans, E. (2002) 'Educational Needs and Priorities for South Sudanese Refugees in Cairo.' Unpublished Report: FMRS, The American University in Cairo. Cairo, Egypt. Also Available at:  
<http://www.aucegypt.edu/academic/fmrs/Research/Estherreport.pdf>
- Grindell, R. (2003) 'Refugees' Experiences of Detention in Egypt.' Unpublished Paper: FMRS, American University in Cairo.
- Ismail, I. (2002) 'Co-ordinating 'Humanitarian Aid' for Refugees in Egypt.' June. Unpublished Report: FMRS, The American University in Cairo. Cairo, Egypt. Available at: <http://www.aucegypt.edu/academic/fmrs/Reports/iman.pdf>
- Kagan, M. (2002) 'Assessment of Refugee Status Determination Procedure at UNHCR's Cairo Office 2001-2002'. Working Paper No. 1 FMRS, The American University in Cairo. Cairo, Egypt. Also Available at:  
<http://www.aucegypt.edu/academic/fmrs/Reports/final.pdf>
- Kagan, M. (2003) 'Is the Truth in the Eye of the Beholder?: Credibility Assessment in Refugee Status Determination.' *Georgetown Immigration Law Journal*, Volume 17(3) forthcoming.

- No Author (2002) 'Withdrawal of Egyptian Reservations to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees' Prepared by Lawyers from the EOHR Refugee Legal Aid Project. Available at the American University in Cairo. Cairo, Egypt.
- Peterson, N. (2001) 'School's out,' *Cairo Times*. Volume 25 (5), 30 August – 5 September.
- Roudi, N. (2001) 'Population Trends and Challenges in the Middle East and North Africa', *Population Reference Bureau (PRB)*.
- Sell, R. (1988) 'Egyptian International Labor Migration: Towards regional integration.' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Vol 22 (3): 87-108.
- Sperl, S. (2001) 'Evaluation of UNHCR's Policy on Refugees in Urban Areas: A Case Study Review of Cairo.' (EPAU 2001/07).
- SUDIA (2003) 'Developing pathways into work for Sudanese Refugees: Labour Markets.' Cairo
- UNHCR (2005a) *Sudan Operations: Sudan/Chad Situation Update 27, 27 August*, UNHCR, Khartoum.
- UNHCR (2005b) *Country Operations Plan, Executive Committee Summary Country: Arab Republic of Egypt*, UNHCR, Cairo.
- Zohry, A. (2003) 'The place of Egypt in the regional migration system as a receiving country'. *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales*. 19(3):129-149.

---

**End Notes:**

- <sup>1</sup> Ironically, these same refugees would have been recognised on *prima facie* grounds had they been in Kenya or Uganda.
- <sup>2</sup> The Egyptian government has waived the letter from the Sudanese embassy but must have all other documentation before a child can attend school.
- <sup>3</sup> More is known about this route because recently a group of Liberians who suffered serious security and economic problems in Egypt were trafficked to Israel. They are charged \$3,500, a sum that they are expected to pay after reaching Israel and getting work. They are warned that collectors will be there to ensure that they do pay. Many are apprehended by the Egyptian security, others by Israeli security and we learn about their cases when there is information about their detention either here in Egypt or from a human rights lawyer in Israel. At least one Rwandan refugee has also followed this route.