Refugees: Stuck in limbo in Ethiopia, Africa's biggest refugee camp

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While European countries bemoan the refugee influx, developing countries like Ethiopia have hosted hundreds of thousands of refugees for years. But without a future, the refugees' sense of relief gives way to despair.

Seated inside the small emergency support office, James holds a sheet of paper containing passport-sized photos of his South Sudanese family. Next to him is his solemn-looking wife. "I hadn't seen my family for over a year," James recounted. "I thought they had all been killed." James made it to Ethiopia, while his family managed to escape to Kenya, where they were eventually reunited.

James has brought them to Ethiopia and is now trying to get them processed. He and his family have found help at the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) in the heart of Addis Ababa, near Sidist Kilo.

Asked how he feels about reuniting with his wife and family, his eyes widen below his forehead marked with tribal scarring, while he slowly exhales, gathering his thoughts.

"I can't find the words to describe the relief," he says.

The JRS has been running the refugee center in Addis Ababa for 20 years. Frequented by refugees from countries such as South Sudan, DR Congo, Uganda, Somalia, Eritrea, Burundi and even Yemen, the JRS compound resembles a microcosm of Africa's – and the Middle East's – woes.

The Catholic refugee organization estimates that its center will assist 1,700 people in 2015.

"This is a welcoming center, where we provide three main services in the form of education, community and emergency support," says Hanna Petros, the center's director. "There are all types of refugees here: those who've suffered political and religious persecution, and economic migrants."

Developing countries host 86 percent of the world's refugees, according to a 2013 Global Trends report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Many of these host countries are already struggling to respond to the needs of their own populations, which makes them reluctant to allow refugees to study, work or move freely within their territories.

Ethiopia has taken in about 680,000 refugees, the largest number of any African country.

No work, little hope

Thirty-five-year-old Guilain is from Guinea in West Africa and has lived in Ethiopia for 11 years. He has formed a seven-member music band of fellow Guineans, who practice in the JRC's small music room. Two years ago, his wife and daughter managed to make it into the US, where he hopes to join them.

"I miss them. But I must keep my heart intact, so I can't think about it too much," he says. "The music gives me hope. I am happy when I come here; you see people enjoying themselves. It helps you forget."

In a corner of the compound is a small café run by Wude. With one of her four grandchildren strapped to her back, she is busy preparing numerous dishes for lunchtime. Outside, 29-year-old Ababa, one of Wude's eight children, is making traditional Ethiopian coffee.

"I still want to go to America for the sake of my children," Wude says. She is Ethiopian, but she was married to a refugee from Democratic Republic of Congo, who died awaiting resettlement after 40 years in Ethiopia.

Through the marriage, Wude and her children are still classed as refugees and therefore cannot be employed in Ethiopia under the current rules for refugees.

This conundrum is just one of many within the labyrinthine bureaucracy that refugees must attempt to navigate.

Hence, any mention of Ethiopia's Administration for Refugee and Returnees Affairs (ARRA) or the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) can provoke some harsh words.

"All they care about is their budgets; they don't care about refugees," says a 33-year-old Congolese man at the JRC. He had fled to Ethiopia five years ago to escape the fighting and the persecution of his minority Banyamulenge tribe by the government.

"It's a form of psychological killing living here, because we aren't allowed to work," he adds. "We have no hope."

Mass exodus from Eritrea

There is an added twist to Ethiopia's little-appreciated refugee situation: Despite relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea remaining glacial beyond their catastrophic 1998-2000 war, thousands of refugees are Eritreans. They are fleeing a country that a 2015 United Nations report describes as being ruled by fear.

Housing thousands of Eritreans, the May Aini, Adi Harush and Hitsats refugee camps are some of the largest refugee camps in the country.

Some Eritreans make it to Addis Ababa. "At least I'm free to practice my faith here," says 30-year-old Samrawit, a Pentecostal Christian. "But when you can't even earn a living, such freedom really counts for nothing." Samrawit teaches English classes for refugees at the JRC.

One night seven years ago, Samrawit walked across the border from Eritrea into Ethiopia.

She supports herself and her 6-year-old daughter by teaching. Samrawit hasn't seen her husband for years. Thanks to the center's classes, she can put her education to some use. She has a bachelor's in English Literature and a master's in journalism and Web design.

Mihret, another young Eritrean woman, made the same night-time border crossing. Guided by her uncle, she kept hearing frightening sounds, she recounts, which were likely Eritrean military border patrols, who reportedly operate on a shoot-to-kill policy. A qualified doctor, Mihret despaired of Eritrea's enforced military service controlling her life. After two years in Addis Ababa, she finally made it to a northern European country by obtaining a visa.

Others aren't so fortunate. Every February sees another exodus of Eritreans from Addis Ababa heading to Sudan in the hope of continuing northwestward and eventually reaching Europe. According to popular wisdom here, March is the right month to start the journey from Sudan's capital, Khartoum, to Libya. The Sahara desert is not too hot, and the waters of the Mediterranean Sea will be calmer by April than during the winter.

All or nothing

Thirty-one-year-old Shewit left Eritrea in 2011. "For the young, there's no chance to do your own thing. You can't do anything for your family. Everything pushes you to leave," he explains. "No one can stand for justice there," Shewit says. "Before you start, they will capture you. Such efforts are good for nothing." Shewit spent a year in an Ethiopia-based refugee camp before relocating to Addis Ababa.

Eritrea's authoritarian government employs a vast spying and detention network. Shewit, while clearly not sympathetic to those involved, appreciates the realities: "It's a matter of survival: to feed their families. The situation forces them to spy."

Both Shewit and 29-year-old Binyam sitting next to him have Eritrean friends who attempted the Mediterranean crossing from Libya. Fortunately, no one they know died. But Eritreans accounted for the majority of the 3,000 people who have drowned in the Mediterranean this year, humanitarian agencies estimate.

A 20-year-old niece of Shewit's died in Libya while waiting to make the crossing. He doesn't know the cause, he says. And Binyam says he has relatives who were kidnapped during their northward overland travels and released after ransoms were paid.

Do either of them ever consider making the perilous trek and sea voyage out of Africa?

"Of course it has come to my mind," Shewit says. "I've been here four years. What is my future going to be if I stay here?"