

In Limbo: Dependency, Insecurity, and Identity amongst Somali Refugees in Dadaab Camps¹

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I. Introduction

Somalia is still in a protracted political limbo as it enters its fifteenth year of “statelessness.”² Despite the precarious situation of Somali refugees scattered across many parts of the world, both the country and the plight of its refugees remain off the radar of the world media. The atrocities committed in the process of the overthrow of Siyaad Barre’s regime in 1991, and the clanistic power struggles that followed, led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Somalis. The refugees initially fled to the neighboring countries of Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Kenya, subsequently moving on to countries near and far. Those who were fortunate enough to escape the trials and tribulations inherent in exile in countries such as Kenya, where existing resources are barely able to meet the basic needs of the native population and where most refugees still remain in closed camps, moved on to more prosperous countries where they obtained refugee status. Most were not so fortunate, however.³

The focus of this essay is the approximately 130,000 Somali refugees who remain in limbo in camps in the North Eastern Province of Kenya (NEP).⁴ Dadaab, a name given to three camps (Hagadera, Ifo, and Dhagahley), is located about 100 kilometers from the Somali-Kenya border. These camps were created in mid-1992, after it became almost impossible for the international humanitarian regime to run the camps in Liboi, a border region too close to southern Somalia, where violence still occurred on a daily basis. Security concerns for interna-

tional staff, refugees, and humanitarian supplies all led to the creation of new camps further inside Kenyan territory. The region where the Dadaab camps are located is semi-arid and was sparsely populated by nomadic Somali-Kenyans before the arrival of refugees fleeing the war. There have been hostilities between Kenya and Somalia ever since independence in the early 1960s, the latter claiming the Somali-inhabited Northern Frontier District (NFD) as a missing Somali territory and supporting regional independence movements. Due to this tension, Kenya kept the NFD, now known as the Northeastern Province of Kenya, and its population under a permanent state of emergency from independence until 1992.⁵

The scale of refugee flight across the Kenyan border in the early 1990s overwhelmed both the small local nomadic population and the scarce natural resources of the area. The presence of international organizations nevertheless brought this previously marginalized region some attention with the provision of services such as boreholes, hospitals, and schools. By March 2003, about 160,000 of the more than 400,000 Somali refugees who fled to Kenya at the height of the war remained there. Of these, 130,000 were in the three Dadaab camps, with smaller numbers in the Kakuma camps in Northwestern Kenya, and the remainder living in urban centers like Nairobi. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) administers the camps, with CARE responsible for social services, the World Food Program (WFP) for food, and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) for health care.⁶

This study examines the roles and responsibilities of those charged with caring for refugees in camps in Somalia's neighboring countries. The argument here is that encampment and protracted refugee situations leave thousands of men, women, and children living in limbo, resulting in wasted human capacity and acute diminution of human dignity. Research in Dadaab found that refugees are dismayed by their dependency on inadequate aid and express the loss of a sense of self-worth due to their inability to better their situation or to escape from the dire conditions of camp life. The failure of the host state and the international community to bring about any effective intervention to free refugees from such a condition is also examined. Here, the emphasis is on the neglect of the Kenyan Government, as a signatory state to many human rights and refugee covenants, to enforce the refugees' legal rights under international law. Any positive and proactive commitment on the part of this Government, I suggest, would have gone a

long way to alleviate the refugees' predicament. Finally, I submit that the international refugee regime's mantra of durable solutions—reintegration, resettlement, and repatriation—as the only viable options often translates to no solution and only leads to a protracted condition, as demonstrated by the situation in which refugees find themselves. Refusal to explore other options for addressing the refugee crisis (other than basic maintenance) has devastating consequences for displaced populations.

II. Encampment: Dependency, Deprivations, and Refugee “Persona”

Humanitarian organizations, upon their arrival in disaster zones, rarely have the luxury to assess whether camps are the best option to address human catastrophes.⁷ Once camps are created, however, the transit that was initially hoped for often turns out to have been wishful thinking, as shown by the many cases of protracted refugee situations in the last two decades.⁸ Examples of refugees in limbo for over a decade include “Tigrayans and Eritreans in Sudan, Afghans in Pakistan and Iran, Salvadorians in Honduras, Cambodians and Laotians in Thailand, Mozambicans in Malawi, Angolans in Zaire, and Vietnamese boat people in different countries in Southeast Asia.”⁹ One should add Rwandans in Tanzania and Somalis in Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti, and Yemen. On paper, the UNHCR claims that, “the establishment of refugee camps must be only a last resort. A solution that maintains and fosters the self-reliance of the refugees is always preferable.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, camps become the first choice to “manage” a refugee crisis. Certainly difficulties abound for the humanitarian community in managing and assisting people dispersed over a vast area in emergency situations; yet, as I will demonstrate, falling back on camps as the only solution for the administration of humanitarian assistance means turning a blind eye on the short-term and long-term detrimental effects on refugees.

Camps are often established in peripheral regions, which leads to segregation and marginalization of refugees.¹¹ The international humanitarian organizations administering these camps have different cultural norms, linguistic backgrounds, and political concerns than the people under their care. To be sure, refugees in the crisis phase welcome the assistance strangers bestow upon them and remain acquiescent to camp regimentation. However, once the emergency period passes, with camps entering a maintenance phase, refugees experi-

ence few changes in the routines of scheduled ration distributions, head counts, and visits of international dignitaries. Resentment and conflict with the aid apparatus follows.¹² Aggravating these inadequacies further is the prohibition of freedom of movement to which refugees in closed camps are subjected, a constraint that greatly hampers the ability to seek alternative livelihood strategies outside the camps. Coupled with the difficulties international humanitarian organizations experience in raising sufficient funds to administer the camps with adequate provisions beyond the emergency phase, this renders the camps domains of high material scarcity.

Arguments against this type of encampment include that camps engender passivity, *breaking down all initiative* and sense of *self-worth* of refugees. The hand-to-mouth arrangement of waiting for others to provide for one's needs eventually translates to complete dependency on donations.¹³ However, while acknowledging the importance of these rations for refugees whose other options are constrained both by the environment of camp locations and national laws prohibiting or limiting employment prospects, some researchers contest this "dependency syndrome."¹⁴ Instead, Kibreab, using Somali-Ethiopian refugees in Somalia in the 1970s and 1980s as an example, writes:

[t]he majority of refugees in the camps were willing to expend their labour on economic activities, often for very small return, and also, in some cases, to take the risk of relinquishing their ration cards for the uncertain alternative of self-sufficiency. Among the able bodied refugees, there was no evidence at all that the refugees' willingness to take initiatives and to work hard either to earn an income or to augment their diet was negatively affected by prolonged dependency on handouts.¹⁵

Clark also refutes the concept of a dependency syndrome. Instead, he asserts that, "the apparent dependency of refugees derives from their removal from their social, political and economic coping systems."¹⁶ While dependency is acknowledged, the reasons refugees may become dependent are contested: instead of "laziness" or "welfare mentality," this argument partly points to the structural constraints inherent in camp life, equated with Goffmanesque "total institutions."¹⁷ Despite the different rationales for dependency, a consensus exists within the scholarly literature about the suffering of refugees in "closed camps," who live in limbo and rely on dwindling rations for years on end. Due to the disruption of refugees' social and economic networks, long-term

encampment further negatively impacts the future reintegration of refugees into their home countries.¹⁸

Research among Afghans in Pakistan found that more than the social dislocation of being outside of their home country, “what is disruptive and potentially most threatening to Pashtun refugees is not social dislocation so much as the contradictions posed by the framing experience of becoming—in multiple senses of the word—refugees.”¹⁹ This last finding emphasizes the disempowerment that refugees experience when they no longer toil on their land or survive by their sweat but wait around for food distribution, perceived as nonreciprocal charity bestowed upon them. Acceptance of these donations is perceived as being contradictory to the Pashtun culture. Also, research among Vietnamese refugees in Southeast Asian camps demonstrates that even more than the enclosure and fences surrounding the camps, what is most damaging about closed camps is the uncertainty of the refugees’ prospects for leaving the camps and the camp administration’s expectation for refugees to represent themselves as “helpless supplicants under suspicion.”²⁰

Data collected from Somalis in Dadaab confirms the deprivations refugees experience in protracted situations. Interviewees detailed the precariousness of their day-to-day existence, which is, unfortunately, substantiated by camp administration reports. For example, WFP often raises alarm bells about the impending starvation of refugees in Dadaab or in Kenya. The food WFP is able to secure always falls short of the daily caloric requirement, with both the quantity and quality of rations falling short. Refugees expressed to this author their frustration with the situation. Foodstuffs distributed are actually often scorned. Many argued that the quality of the grains distributed is “not fit for humans.” Moreover, most research participants dwelled on the lack of variety in their rations and the cultural inappropriateness of maize as the main staple provided. “The food distributed per person has now been reduced to three kilograms of maize per person per fortnight” is a statement that was reiterated by all. Flour, a staple most Somalis utilize to prepare *laxoox* (flat bread), is rarely found in their bimonthly rations. By the end of my first visit to Dadaab, in August 2001, refugees had not received flour for almost a whole year. They contrasted this with the rations they received at the beginning of their arrival in the camps, which were not only double what they were in 2001, but also included a variety of grains. During those days, refugees were able to sell some

of the rations to buy other food items, such as meat, milk, and vegetables, which are not provided by the camp administration.

A refugee diet, which should in theory include pulses and vegetables, in reality rarely contains these, and often results in high rates of malnutrition among women and children. In that first exploration in Dadaab in summer 2001, MSF reported a dramatic increase in the malnutrition rate of Somali refugee children—172 percent within a period of six months—due to a 35 percent decrease in the general food distribution in the camps.²¹ Only those few who receive remittances from the diaspora and those involved in petty trade/business are able to supplement the meager rations. “Meat and milk” (*cad iyo caano*), two words that together signify subsistence in the Somali language and originally comprised nomads’ main sources of nutrition, is a luxury very few refugees can afford. An interesting example illustrating the precariousness of life is the price of food items in Dadaab. A woman who sells some of her grain to buy milk for a baby would sell her maize for five Kenyan shillings per kilogram. However, one glass of milk costs ten Kenyan shillings.²² For a mother to provide this one glass for a small child, she would have to sell two kilos of the maize she received that morning, accounting for two-thirds of the main ration the child receives for two weeks.

Despite these difficulties, the dependency identified in Dadaab more closely resembles that discussed by Clarke, namely, loss of “social, political and economic coping systems,”²³ rather than a “welfare mentality” or laziness. Refugees’ own perspectives highlight their lack of alternatives to distributed rations. As a matter of fact, they dwell on how employment and/or gaining one’s livelihood are desirable but impossible in the camp setting. Lack of material resources and employment prospects oblige most to rely solely on the bimonthly rations. For most refugees who are not involved in trade and who do not receive remittances, then, dependency on aid remains the only option. However, in spite of camp constraints, I found that refugees still desire and hope to be freed from the “beggarly” positions they occupy as dependents on insufficient aid. One interviewee reported that she cleaned the premises of one of the NGOs for free for weeks, until some NGO staff took notice and a small remuneration was offered to her. This permitted her to supplement the meager distributed rations for herself and her four children. This woman demonstrated a tenacity to better her situation in an environment of scarce resources. All around the camps, one sees women selling small packets of sugar or spices to

make just enough to buy a glass of milk for the smallest children. Thus, as much as representations of camps always show people waiting for something, almost all expressed the urgent desire to provide for one's family. This, in a nutshell, challenges the claim that refugees become dependent on aid because of an unwillingness to work for their sustenance.

III. Self-Perception: Refugee Identity

Another theme often coupled with the dependency syndrome is the loss of self-worth that may result from protracted refugee situations. My investigations in Dadaab strongly support this point. For many, the implications of being and being called "refugees" were often very negative. With a sense of grief, most refer to themselves as "*qaxooti*,"²⁴ a dreaded identity often associated with a degraded sense of self. Here are a few personal statements to that effect:

- "A refugee is a fenced person." (Hawa M. Ali)²⁵
- "The word 'refugee'...in our heads means a weak individual; that is how we see ourselves. We ourselves don't like it when we are called refugees... . But what can you do? It means a weak person, a person whose country was destroyed; it means a poor person, who has nothing, who is begging food that is handed down." (Sa'ida M. Farah)
- "A person who is sitting somewhere as if he/she was handicapped! There are no men who are employed in this block, who go to work in the morning and who gain a living. They are sitting around the house. They are unemployed. Nowhere to find jobs!" (Aliya S. Abdi)
- "Refugee is poverty and hunger. A loser standing around, that is a refugee. I think of poverty, praying to Allah: 'Allah, take us out of this misery,' this suffering and hardship, carrying water on your bare back, searching for wood in the bushes, lack of milk for your children, unemployment, that is it." (Hodan F. Abdirahman)
- "A refugee is someone suffering. A refugee is someone who is in need. A refugee is someone who has nothing. That is how I interpret the word 'refugee.' If we had any way of freeing ourselves, we would not be in this refugee camp tonight." (Halima K. Bile)
- "Refugee is not a pleasant word. When someone is told, 'you are a refugee,' it is a word that hurts. A refugee is a person who aban-

doned his habitat, who lives in a territory that is not his, and who lives miserably and desperately, constantly worrying... I mean you are seen as someone who is less than others, who is worst. So, as refugees, when we are told, 'you are a refugee,' we see it as if we are despised, weaker and less than other people. It depresses us every time the word is used. I see it as weak, someone who is not capable of anything. That is how I see the word 'refugee.'" (Kaha A. Bihi)

Refugees frequently refer to the constraints on their freedom of movement in closed camps. People use metaphors drawn from nomadic animal herding, such as "fenced like livestock." "Living in a prison where only the sky is open" is another way they express their condition. Fencing metaphors symbolize the barriers to the outside world, thus the barriers to escape the material deprivations intrinsic in camp life. Many refer to their hope to be freed from the conditions of "refugeehood." To this end, both men and women often recite prayers. However, camp inhabitants, however much they despise the refugee *persona* (as illustrated by the images above), also assume this *persona* when recounting the harshness of camp life. As Harrell-Bond and others have argued, refugees assume a "victimized" *persona* after spending a certain time in camps.²⁶ In fact, the conditions existing in Dadaab render it easy to internalize this *persona*. Life in the Dadaab camps means being deprived of both material and physical security, and one discerns in refugees' narratives a dilemma: on the one hand they are, objectively, refugees or "*qaxooti*;" on the other, they resent what the word connotes.

IV. Insecurity: Fenced in for the Enemy?

Instead of hospitality, refugees in limbo often experience exploitation, extreme insecurity, and constant harassment, not only from local populations, but also from national authorities, whose policies fuel unfavorable sentiments toward the newcomers.²⁷ Such a situation may partially stem from the hard conditions persisting in refugee-hosting areas. Local populations in these regions often end up more marginalized than the refugees, who receive international humanitarian aid, which at least permits them to meet subsistence needs. When excluded from this aid, host populations tend to resent refugees and view the newcomers as "enemies" or competitors. Scarce resources, such as firewood and water, become contested when the sudden population

increase leads to high consumption of these limited resources.²⁸ However, I argue that conflict with refugees in this situation should not be interpreted as hostility toward refugees *per se*. Rather, conflict in areas where water and pasture are scarce is often the norm. For example, in the Northeastern province of Kenya, where the Dadaab camps are located, local Somali-Kenyan populations historically and presently experience conflict due to a paucity of pasture and water. In such a context, for refugees to expect “hospitality” beyond the short-term is unrealistic, even if among a population of the same ethnic background. In an environment of scarcity, a “survival-of-the-fittest” mentality envelops all, with refugees often becoming victimized.

The pervasive insecurity in the Dadaab camps therefore illustrates the often-tense relationship between locals and refugees. Highlighting the scale of this concern, UNHCR reported that, at the height of gender-based violence, there were 200 documented rapes in Dadaab in the year 1993. In the subsequent four years, the number of officially recorded rapes averaged between 70 and 105. But rapes again increased to 164 in 1998, fell to 71 in 1999, rose again to 108 in 2000, and dropped to 72 in 2001.²⁹ Given the stigma attached to rape within the Somali culture, reported acts fall far short of the actual number of cases.³⁰ Most of the rapes in Dadaab occur in the outskirts of the camps, as the depletion of firewood in this semi-arid region obliges women to walk further and further in search of sources of energy for cooking. UNHCR documented over 100 rapes from February to August 2002.³¹ Most of the perpetrators are allegedly Somali nomads from the area, *deegaanka*,³² often referred to as “*shiftas*.”³³

Another example of insecurity is the raiding of the camps by bandits. These incursions coincide with bimonthly ration distributions or when material donations such as plastic bags are distributed to cover refugees’ makeshift houses. The bandits often come to grab any valuables they might find, targeting particularly those suspected of owning material goods or receiving remittances and fresh rations. It was reported that, on certain occasions, *shiftas* use the women to transport the looted rations and, when the task is done, rape and at times kill them on the outskirts of the camps.

One-woman interviewee referred to a rape she witnessed:

I saw it with my own eyes. She was caught and raped at the door, her pants³⁴ pulled off, a girl of 15 years old, a gang, vagabonds, losers and *shiftas*, there you are, you are watching it, you scream, but you cannot

free her from them, you are standing at your door. The conflict we fled, yesterday when NGOs (*hay'adihii*), assisted us, when we got settled, assisted us well, we thank them for it, we thank Allah for it... . we settled and our children started schools, when we would have done something for ourselves, an enemy was born (*cadow baa dhulkii oo dhan ka dhaqaaqay*). The other conflict might even have been better; at least we could get out, we could move around even if a bullet hits you. And now we miss that... . You just sit around (*waaba saas u yuurur*). (Ebla A. Hersi)

Additionally, the Kenyan police stationed in the camps to protect the vulnerable also reportedly commit violence against refugees. Consequently, banditry, coupled with fear and distrust of those responsible for their protection, renders the situation of refugees—especially women—doubly precarious. The security situation in Dadaab has improved only minimally, as is clear from the statistics above. The scope of this crisis is illustrated by Verdirame. In his assessment of the human rights abuses in Kenyan camps, he accuses the UNHCR of “administering the camps in ways which often appear to be blatant disregard of international human rights standards.”³⁵

A comparison of the incidents of rape in Dadaab, with a population of 130,000, to those reported in 2002 for Mogadishu, the most dangerous and violent city in Somalia for the past decade, with a population of over one million, illustrates the magnitude of insecurity prevailing in Dadaab. A Somali human rights group active in Mogadishu, the Dr. Ismael Jumale Human Rights Centre (DIJHRC), documented 32 rape cases in Mogadishu for 2002.³⁶ Though this number is probably a gross underestimation of the actual number of rapes committed by militias in Mogadishu, it nevertheless underscores the seriousness of insecurity faced by women in Dadaab camps. Furthermore, the high incidence of violence in Dadaab is also a clear indication of the failure of the host state to protect refugees in its territory.

V. Host State and Refugee Crisis

A host state plays a crucial role in the reception of refugees and the type of settlement offered to them: either integration with the host population or existing in limbo in peripheral regions. Geopolitics is often key to these decisions. For example, Western nations encouraged refugees from the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War, whereas, following the end of the East-West divide, the reception of refugees from the Balkan wars was tepid at best. Moreover, regional conflicts can encour-

age or discourage refugee flows from neighboring countries; that is, the masses on the move become a tool to discredit the other side or to avoid a spillover of political turmoil in neighboring countries. The latter is especially the case when people in the host state include some of the same ethnic group(s) as the refugees. For instance, neighboring countries with historical border disputes, such as Somalia and Ethiopia, each encouraged refugees from the other side in the 1970s and 80s, whereas Kenya, with the collapse of Somalia in 1991, was hostile to the influx. In the latter case, the Kenyan Government's encampment policies are closely tied to the fear that the new arrivals could endanger political order in the country. Containment of refugees in closed camps, then, facilitates the monitoring of undesirable activities.

A host state's policies toward a refugee crisis are also partially dictated by the pressures it experiences from the Western powers, which control the purses of "aid" and "loans." Kenya, for instance, already facing reduction of aid due to its human rights record, used the Somali refugee crisis to negotiate for a continuation of international aid: "On the one hand, the presence of large numbers of Somali refugees in Kenya was held as evidence of Kenya's improved human rights record. On the other, Kenyan authorities threatened to return these refugees forcibly if a renewal of aid was not forthcoming."³⁷ Host governments, in addition, influence the perceptions of the wider host population. The scapegoating of refugees as responsible for all the social and economic ills (which often predate the arrival of refugees) compounds the resentment toward an already disfranchised populace construed as foreign and undesirable.³⁸ The situation of Somali refugees in Kenyan camps is, therefore, intrinsically tied to the colonially inherited border disputes between post-independence Somalia and Kenya, and to the marginal position Somali-Kenyans occupy within the Kenyan state.

Finding solutions to protracted refugee situations, such as those in the Dadaab camps, remains a challenge for the international community. However, narrow definitions of the best course of action to address the crisis often result in the perpetuation of an untenable condition for millions.

VI. Durable Solutions:

Prospects of Integration, Resettlement, and Repatriation

Most refugees in Dadaab are familiar with the three preferred solutions to refugee crises as stipulated by the international refugee regime: inte-

gration into the host society, resettlement in a third country, or repatriation to the country of origin. Of the 130 refugees who participated in conversations with Adelman and Abdi during a 2003 CARE Canada consultancy field trip in Dadaab, the majority reiterated the need to implement one of these options to terminate their encampment.³⁹ However, none of these potential solutions have yet been implemented. On the contrary, the camp life has assumed a degree of permanence.

As the comments about the Kenyan Government's treatment of Somali refugees illustrate, integration into the host country has not been tried as a viable option. This is because of the assumption that the policy would immediately be met by very vocal opposition from landless locals. Serious economic and political challenges confronting Kenyans eliminate any possibility for the provision of land to refugees or the acceptance of integrating them. Furthermore, Kenya's reluctance to pass a refugee bill that has been under discussion for years now, despite the fact that it has been hosting very large numbers of Somali and Sudanese refugees from the 1980s onward, testifies to its ambivalence. Consequently, refugees in Kenya still lack any legal recognition within the Kenyan political system, despite Kenya's ratification of the refugee conventions of both the U.N. and the Organization of African Unity (OAU). All responsibility then falls on the UNHCR.

If integration is not a viable alternative, both resettlement and repatriation have also remained elusive for Somali refugees in Dadaab camps. The percentage of resettled persons worldwide amounts to a dismally small number. Of the more than twenty million persons dispersed around the world in 2002, 55,500 (or just about 0.3 percent) were resettled in a third country.⁴⁰ The numbers of Somali refugees resettled by traditional refugee-receiving countries, such as Canada, the United States, and Australia, have further diminished since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in the United States. For example, the 2002 UNHCR *Annual Statistical Report* shows that the number of resettled Somalis for that year was 640: 295 went to the U.S., 159 to New Zealand, 116 to Canada, and smaller numbers to the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden.⁴¹ The current rhetoric on "terrorism" that dominates the immigration policies of most Western nations, and the bombing incidents in Kenya in which Somalis were implicated, account for this decrease. These dismal numbers highlight the limited opportunities for resettlement that exist for refugees in general, and particularly for Somali Muslims, since the September 11, 2001, attacks.⁴² This also

underscores the problematic nature of this option as a solution to end the state of limbo in which large numbers of refugees find themselves.

Repatriation has also remained impossible for most in Dadaab. Herein, however, lies a dilemma. Refugees and UNHCR differ on the feasibility of this option. Only a small percentage of the thousands in Dadaab who in 2001 signed up with the UNHCR for voluntary repatriation have so far returned, mainly to the Northeastern region of Somalia. This is in stark contrast to Somali refugees in camps in Ethiopia, the majority having already repatriated to the Northwest. The UNHCR reports that 220 refugees were repatriated from the Dadaab camps in 2002 and about 500 in 2003.⁴³ The UNHCR also claims that funding constraints hinder its ability to repatriate the Somali refugees in Dadaab. Adelman and Abdi's consultations with refugee groups in Dadaab revealed an overwhelming preference for voluntary repatriation, provided there is some financial assistance to restart life.⁴⁴ Despite the fact that many refugees in Dadaab come from minority kin groups and/or rural backgrounds in the southern regions of Somalia, most expressed a willingness to repatriate to other regions, mainly in the northeast and northwest of Somalia, if provided with some financial assistance to do so. Many insisted that they are very aware of the material and physical insecurities existing in many parts of Somalia. However, they also argued that worse material and physical circumstances persist in the Dadaab camps. They cited the Somali proverb, "*laba kala daran mid dooro*" (choose the least of two evils). Regardless of the risks involved in life in Somalia, refugees argue that they would at least have freedom of movement and the possibility to seek employment. But with diminishing funding for all other aspects of administering the camps, UNHCR claims that it is unable to fulfill the desires of thousands of refugees.

Adelman et al. proposed an alternative to the costly yet inadequate care and maintenance that have been provided to those in Dadaab for the last twelve years. This proposal stresses that repatriation for most Somali refugees should seriously be considered:

We recommend that a meeting be held of donors so that they pledge to give the same monies they now give for camp operations over the next five years, but an appropriate committee of international agencies be given authority to use those guarantees to obtain present funding for repatriation in flexible ways to find the various durable solutions for the different groups of refugees and different choices refugees make. The

refugees will return, but with conditions, conditions that deal with their material security and security of education for their children.⁴⁵

This proposal emphasized giving refugees real choices. Here, it is important to highlight that resettlement is not a viable choice for most refugees. This will, however, be encouraged for small groups of refugees, such as some minority groups who feel they cannot return to Somalia, vulnerable women and their children, and so on. As Kumin argued in her address at the 2003 Group of 78 (G78) Annual Policy Conference in Ottawa, options like the one proposed here actually fit well with the current High Commissioner's proposed "Convention Plus." Consistent with Adelman and Abdi's insistence on avoiding the narrowly defined mantra of "durable solutions," Convention Plus is about "develop[ing] new tools for today's problems." These tools include:

[C]omprehensive plans of action to ensure more effective and predictable responses to mass influx or to protracted refugee situations; development assistance targeted to achieve more equitable burden-sharing and to promote self-reliance of refugees and returnees; multilateral commitments for resettlement of refugees; and the delineation of roles and responsibilities of countries of origin, transit and destination. The underlying premise is that specific commitments will lend themselves better to binding agreements than broad policy exhortations.⁴⁶

Durable solutions as they stand now are no more than exhortations, often amounting to no commitment from the international community. Exploring other options and freeing refugees from "imaginary" solutions for their plight should be at the top of the agenda of refugee-assisting organizations. Also, these options should include an international concerted effort to contribute to peace-building initiatives in the refugee-producing regions, which will go far in expediting the end of the miserable condition of uncertainty.

VII. Conclusion

This analysis has attempted to highlight the constraints refugees in limbo face in their protracted camp life. It was argued that dependency on aid in Dadaab remains the main option open to most refugees, not because of lack of initiative to provide for one's family, but rather due to the absence of alternative means of livelihood for the majority. In addi-

tion, research clearly indicates that the refugees' sense of self-worth was affected by their status. "Refugee" identity is painted as undesirable and even dreaded. Moreover, violence, especially gender violence, remains epidemic in Dadaab, and insecurity remains a top concern for all. With Dadaab in its second decade of existence and world attention currently focused on the war on "terrorism" and the war in Iraq, securing funding for refugees in protracted situations in peripheral regions is becoming extremely hard for international organizations.

Given the grim picture painted by these findings, it is paramount that states that are signatories to the U.N. covenants on human rights endorse national legislation for the rights of refugees in agreement with international laws. This would certainly go a long way toward reducing the desperately protracted situations of refugees in many parts of the world. Even if governments are ultimately responsible for settlement policies (and not international organizations, which have "no army or access to coercive power to act on behalf of refugees"⁴⁷), international organizations can and should do more to maximize their presence in host countries. Regrettably, once the emergency phase passes, inertia of the international humanitarian bodies administering the camps and the international community's will to find solutions sets in. Yet the scholarly literature provides us with enough case studies and lessons to avoid repeating the same old scenarios when responding to future crises: *the creation of camps as temporary solutions*. On the contrary, camps turned into semi-permanent settlements create despair and insecurity. In other words, the long-term consequences of closed camps—where people are segregated from the general host population, where freedom of movement is dramatically curtailed, where a state resembling a "total institution" prevails, and where refugees are in limbo in all aspects of daily life—create a host of new and disabling problems. The choice seems to be stark: either condemn human beings who have already been dealt a cruel hand to a life bereft of adequate sustenance and dignity or act promptly and competently to explore other alternatives that effectively address protracted refugee situations. Relevant national governments, international organizations, and the larger global community are in a position to make that choice.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this article was published as "In Limbo: Dependency, Insecurity and Identity in Dadaab Camps," *Refuge: Canadian Periodical on Refugee Issues* 22, no. 2 (September 2004). Permission has been granted to publish the article in *Bildhaan*.
2. Ahmed I. Samatar, "Somalia: Statelessness as Homelessness," in *The African State: Reconsiderations*, ed. Abdi Ismail Samatar and Ahmed I. Samatar (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2002), pp. 217–251; and Lidwien Kapteijns, "The Disintegration of Somalia: A Historiographical Essay," *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*, Vol. 1 (2001): 11–52.
3. This paper draws from two periods of field research in Dadaab in 2001 and 2003: the first included twenty in-depth interviews with women refugees, focus groups with refugee community workers of both sexes, and consultations with NGO staff; the second, conducted with Dr. Howard Adelman, involved extensive community consultations with both refugee groups (youth, women, men, elderly, and religious leaders) and NGO personnel working with refugee-serving agencies both in Dadaab and in Nairobi.
4. About 97 percent of refugees in Dadaab are Somali. However, there are some claims that up to 20 percent of these are actually Kenyan Somalis who settled among the Somali refugees. The rest comprise a small number of Ethiopians and Sudanese.
5. Abdisalam M. Issa-Salwe, *The Collapse of the Somali State: The Impact of the Colonial Legacy* (London: Haan Publishing, 1996).
6. MSF pulled out of Dadaab in 2003, and GTZ (German Technical Cooperation) is currently running the health services of these camps.
7. The term "Camps" in this paper refers to U.N.-supervised, strictly regimented centers, where refugees are mainly dependent on international aid and where few prospects for self-sufficiency exist.
8. See Jeff Crisp, "No Solution in Sight: The Problem of Protracted Refugee Situations in Africa," Working Paper No. 75, *New Issues in Refugee Research*. Evaluation and Policy Unit (UNHCR, 2003).
9. Wim Van Damme, "Do Refugees Belong to Camps? Experiences from Goma and Guinea," *Lancet* 346 (1995): 362.
10. UNHCR 1982: 57, cited in Sydney Waldron and Naima A. Hasci, "Somali Refugees in the Horn of Africa: State of the Art Literature Review," *Studies on Emergencies and Disaster Relief*, No. 3 (Sweden: Nordiska Afrikanstitutet, 1995), p. 19.
11. See Crisp as well as Johnathan Bascom, "The New Nomads: An Overview of Involuntary Migration in Africa," in *The Migration Experience in Africa*, ed. J. and T. A. Aina (Sweden: Nordiska Afrikanstitutet, 1995), pp. 197–219.
12. For detailed discussion of the schisms between refugees and those who manage camps, see Linda Hitchcox, *Vietnamese Refugees in Southeast Asian Camps* (London: Macmillan, 1990) and Jennifer Hyndman, *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
13. Harrell-Bond 1994 in Van Damme, p. 361; Waldron and Hasci, p. 19.
14. Gaim Kibreab, "The Myth of Dependency among Camp Refugees in Somalia 1979–1989," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 6 (1993): 321–349.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 346–47.

16. Clark 1985, pp. 1–3, cited in Waldron and Hasci, p. 19.
17. Waldron and Hasci, pp. 19–20; Hitchcox, pp. 148–176.
18. Clark and Stein 1985, cited in Barbara Harrell Bond, “Camps: Literature Review,” *Forced Migration Review* (2 August 1998): 22.
19. David Busby Edwards, “Marginality and Migration: Cultural Dimension of the Afghan Refugee Problem,” in “Refugee Issues and Directions,” Special Issue, *International Migration Review* 20, no. 2 (1986): 325.
20. Hitchcox, p. 113.
21. IRIN, “Alarming Increase in Refugee Malnutrition” (Nairobi, 27 June 2001), online at IRIN Homepage <http://www.irinnews.org> (date accessed: 13 January 2002).
22. These prices were those of summer 2001.
23. Clark 1985, pp. 1–3, in Waldron and Hasci, p. 19
24. This word literally means “refugee.” Prior to the 1991 Somali crisis, *qaxooti* was a word intrinsically associated with Somali-Ethiopian refugees who fled to Somalia in the 1970s and 1980s. In common Somali parlance, it carries multiple negative connotations. Refugees in Dadaab often referred to this past, regretfully claiming that they never thought they would find themselves in such a position, and in retrospect sympathizing with Somali Ethiopians who sought refuge in Somalia.
25. All refugee names in this paper are pseudonyms.
26. Harrell Bond 1986.
27. Gaim Kibreab, “Eritrean and Ethiopian Refugees in Khartoum: What the Eye Refuses to See,” *African Studies Review* 39, no. 3 (1996): 131–178.
28. Beth Elise Whitaker, “Refugees in Western Tanzania: The Distribution of Burdens and Benefits among Local Hosts,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 15, no. 4 (2002): 342 and Jeff Crisp, “A State of Insecurity: The Political Economy of Violence in Kenya’s Refugee Camps,” *African Affairs* 99 (2000): 601–632.
29. UNHCR, “Security Analysis Paper” (Sub-Office, Dadaab, 2003a).
30. See Africa Watch and Women’s Rights Project, “Seeking Refuge, Finding Terror: The Widespread Rape of Somali Women Refugees in North Eastern Kenya,” 4, no. 14 (1993) and Human Rights Watch 1997, “International Failures to Protect Refugees: Protection of the Rights of Refugee Women,” online at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1997/gen3/general.htm> (date accessed: 7 January 2002).
31. “Somalia: 2002 Country Report on Human Rights Practices,” U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (31 March 2003), p. 6.
32. This word means “locals.” Refugees in Dadaab often use it to refer to the Somali local population inhabiting the Dadaab region.
33. This is a pejorative term, meaning lawless bandit, originating from the time of the Kenyan Government’s conflict with the NFD independence movements in the 1960s. It is now widely used by Somali refugees and humanitarian organizations to refer to those who allegedly terrorize refugees and local populations.
34. A recent phenomenon is the addition of pants, often worn under long dresses, to women’s attire. This is a phenomenon that commenced with the civil war, as rapes against women increased. Also, with flight and the chaos of daily life in war zones,

the pants increased both modesty and the number of layers an attacker would need to remove (with the hope that help might arrive before the attacker raped the woman).

35. Guglielmo Verdirame, "Human Rights and Refugees: The Case of Kenya," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 12, no. 1 (1999): 75.

36. "Somalia: 2002 Country Report on Human Rights Practices," p. 5.

37. Opondo 1994, cited in Waldron and Hasci, p. 13.

38. Kibreab 1996, pp. 131–178; Waldron and Hasci, p. 13.

39. Howard Adelman and Awa M. Abdi, "How Long is Too Long: Durable Solutions for Dadaab Refugees," Report for CARE Canada (2003), p. 97.

40. UNHCR, "Refugees by Numbers," 2003b, online at UNHCR Homepage <http://www.unhcr.org/> (date accessed: 24 October 2003).

41. UNHCR, "UNHCR 2002 Annual Report: Somalia, 2003c," 23 July, online at <http://www.unhcr.org/> (date accessed: 17 January 2004). This report does not state whether these are resettlements on family reunification or on humanitarian grounds. Also, it is not clear where these refugees resided prior to resettlement.

42. Resettlement of about 10,000 Somali-Bantu refugees to the United States is already underway. Many have already been moved from the Dadaab camps to Kakuma in the Northwestern region of Kenya, while some have already reached the U.S. However, the events of September 11, 2001, still negatively impact this group, given the stringent security measures enacted in the U.S. for all migration proceedings, which will prolong the time it will take to resettle such a large number of people.

43. UNHCR 2003c.

44. Adelman and Abdi, pp. 106–116.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

46. Judith Kumin, "The Misery of Refugees," UNHCR Canada Representative Address to the Group of 78, Ottawa (29 April 2003); online at <http://www.hri.ca/partners/G78/English/Global/refugees.shtml> (date accessed: 1 February 2004).

47. Harrell-Bond 1986, p. 162.