

Lenten Refugee Moment, Week 3: Somalia

March 19, 2017

I have struggled with this presentation this week. The intent of the series is to share information about the global refugee situation and lift up individual stories so we can recognize our common humanity and make it easier to share the compassion of Christ with our neighbors—in the broadest definition of that word. But I have struggled with use of the word *refugee* as yet one more label that can prevent us from seeing people as an us and not a them. I invite you to share this struggle with me, to continue seeking the face of God in theirs.

Today we focus on Somalia, the easternmost African nation in a region known as the Horn of Africa. It was colonized and actually broken apart by European powers in the 19th century and only emerged as an independent nation in 1960. It has had a difficult history ever since.^{1,2,3} It is the third-largest source country for refugees.⁴ Today I am going to focus on one refugee camp in particular.

In Kenya, about 60 miles west of the border with Somalia, on a red, flat desert plain, is Dadaab, the largest refugee camp in the world. It was set up by the UN 26 years ago, in 1991, as a temporary refuge for some 90,000 people fleeing a brutal civil war in Somalia that culminated in the fall of the capital, Mogadishu, and the overthrow of the central government. Today, according to UN records, it hosts more than 270,000 people living in houses made from mud, sticks, scavenged tin, and plastic tarps in an area covering 30 square miles. At times the population has swelled as high as half a million. Four percent of the residents have fled there from other conflicts in the larger Eastern African Region, but most are Somalis. Technically, it is Kenya's third-largest city.^{5,6,7,8}

Dadaab's first inhabitants thought they would be staying only a few weeks, but the power struggle between rival clan militias after the overthrow of Somali President Mohamed Siad Barre in 1991 ushered in decades of infighting and lawlessness that made it unsafe to return. The ongoing conflicts, along with recurrent flooding, drought, and famine, have left most residents with no other option than to stay.⁹

"No one wants to admit the temporary camp has become permanent," says Ben Rawlence, a Human Rights Watch researcher and writer who spent 8 years there—"not the Kenyan government, which must host it, not the United Nations, which must pay for it, and not the refugees who must live there. But life does not stand still, and people have made the best of their difficult situation," establishing schools and mosques and soccer pitches, "selling some of their UN food rations to raise a little capital and investing in businesses to provide things that other people want or need: clothes, vegetables, ice, mobile phones."¹⁰ The World Bank estimates that Dadaab adds \$14 million to the annual Kenyan gross domestic product.¹¹

Shamsa Hassan Jimaale has lived in the camp since the civil war broke out in 91, when different clan factions were fighting for control of land and resources in

southern Somalia, and kidnapping children to fight for them. Some of her family members were murdered then and her children taken from her. “They came at us, into our home,” she said “They shot my husband. They took my kids, all three of them. I slept for about a month, not being able to comprehend all of it. It hit me hard. I even, at times, thought I was dead.”¹²

Shamsa was pregnant with her son Abdikahir when she arrived at Dadaab. Now a young adult, he now helps her run the family butcher shop there. Abdikahir has never been outside the camp. Refugees are not allowed to leave except with special permission such as for medical care.¹³

Guled came to the camp as a teenager 20 years later, in 2010, to escape al-Shabaab, a violent ultra-extremist group linked with al Qaeda. Guled had grown up in Mogadishu, just a few blocks from where two US military Blackhawk helicopters had been shot down in an attempt to capture a Somali warlord in 1993. His parents were both dead by the time he was an adolescent, and he and his sister lived in a house with other war orphans, surviving on what little money his sister made selling biscuits and cakes, and he went to school. One day members of al Shabaab came to his classroom armed with machine guns, and kidnapped him and five other boys, summarily ending their education and forcing them into armed service fighting the Somalia government in order to establish a fundamentalist Islamic state based on a rigid interpretation of Sharia law—they were among two thousand children kidnapped that year in Somalia. He was able to escape while on patrol one day and bought passage on top of a sugar truck en route to the Kenyan refugee camp—the only place he could think of that al Shabaab would not find him.¹⁴

By then “the place Guled had come seeking sanctuary was, according to Oxfam, a public health emergency, and had been for several years. It was a groaning, filthy, disease-riddled slum heaving with traumatized people without enough to eat. Crime was sky high and rape was routine. On the day Guled arrived, the camps held nearly 295,000 people. Twelve months later, at the end of 2011, there would be half a million.”¹⁵

2011 was the year the Horn of Africa suffered one of the worst droughts on record. In June of that year tens of thousands of Somali residents flooded camps in Ethiopia and Kenya at a rate of more than 3,000 a day. Dadaab received a third of them. A quarter of a million people died during that famine—most under the age of six.^{16,17}

Somalia’s current government has made modest gains in stability, but al Shabaab remains a major threat. Despite a decade-long effort to eradicate the militant group, alShabaab retains significant control over some rural areas, and recently attacked high-profile targets in Mogadishu as well as the Westgate Shopping Center and Garissa University in Kenya. For the past year the Kenyan government has been trying to close Dadaab and repatriate its residents, claiming the camp is a recruiting ground for terrorists. Though the Kenyan high court ruled last month that closing the camp and forcing refugees to return to persecution is unconstitutional, the

Kenyan government plans to appeal the decision, and many residents are fearful they will be forced to return to a war that is far from over.^{18,19}

Meanwhile, another drought is upon the region. The International Rescue Committee predicts imminent famine. On March 11 it issued a press release saying it was a “catastrophe that has already arrived,” with over 3 million people facing starvation in Somalia, a number expected to triple by August. Neighboring Kenya is also a concern, with Somali displacement expected across the borders. Relief agencies working in the area say a massive increase in humanitarian assistance is urgently needed, knowing at the same time that they are unlikely to get it. They have already seen ration cuts two years in a row, as resources have been shifted to aid the Syrian crisis.^{20,21}

Many refugees in Dadaab have made peace with their situation. Shamsa Hassan Jimaale, who runs the butcher shop, says “wherever God takes us is where I will spend the rest of my days. I’m ready because there is nothing I can do about it.”²² Some have voluntarily returned to Somalia, primarily to the cities. Others hope for resettlement in other countries.

“For all his life, 25-year-old Mohammed Abdi Abdulahi has been part of Dadaab’s boxed-in population. So has his wife. Now they have a daughter..., Sumaiya—one of 6,000 grandchildren of the first arrivals that came to Dadaab in the early 1990s...and all they want is a chance for their little girl to see the world outside. ‘We can’t let her grow up thinking this is all that life has to offer,’ Abdulahi says. ‘We want her to have a country she can call home.’²³

“The only way for the family to leave the camp [aside from going to Somalia, where they have never been] is to qualify for asylum in an ongoing UN resettlement program” and be moved to another country. “They have seen friends and family get settled all across Europe and the United States. But Abdulahi says that was before things got complicated”²⁴—with more recent refugee crises, rising Islamophobia in Europe and the US, and President Trump’s proposed travel ban on several Muslim-majority countries, which has put in limbo resettlement plans for some 3,000 Somali refugees scheduled to travel to the US this year after waiting 7 to 10 years for their applications to be approved and organized, most of them from Dadaab.²⁵

Abdulahi’s asylum request has not yet been approved. “I am a father, husband, a refugee and Muslim from a country many do not understand,” he says. “Events around the world make it hard to get asylum,” he says. “So I stay put and continue to re-apply for the asylum.” “I just want my family and I to get out.”²⁶

May we carry these stories in our hearts. As we have been doing throughout this series, let’s close out this time by singing “Now It Is Evening,” #2187 in *The Faith We Sing*.

¹ Enough: The Project to End Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity, “Somalia: Roots of the Crisis,” http://www.enoughproject.org/conflict_areas/somalia/roots-crisis

² Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, “Moments in U.S. Diplomatic History: Somalia — From Great Hope to Failed State,” <http://adst.org/2015/06/somalia-from-great-hope-to-failed-state/>

³ BBC News, “Somalia Country Profile,” February 10, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14094503>

⁴ UNHCR, “Figures at a Glance,” <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>

⁵ Christopher Zumski Finke, “Life in the World’s Largest Refugee Camp,” *Yes! Magazine*, February 11, 2016, <http://www.yesmagazine.org/peace-justice/life-in-the-worlds-largest-refugee-camp-20160211>

⁶ Fair Observer, “The World’s Largest Refugee Camp May Be Closing” (video), March 10, 2017, <https://www.fairobserver.com/region/africa/dadaab-kenya-refugees-somalia-conflict-terrorist-africa-news-65589/>

⁷ Ben Rawlence, *City of Thorns: Nine Lives in the World’s Largest Refugee Camp*, Picador, New York, 2016.

⁸ UNHCR Dadaab, “Camp Population Statistics by Country of Origin, Sex and Age Group,” January 31, 2017, http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/REG_H04CampPopulationbyCoOSexAgeGroup%28Final%29January2017.pdf

⁹ Fair Observer, “The World’s Largest Refugee Camp May Be Closing” (video), March 10, 2017, <https://www.fairobserver.com/region/africa/dadaab-kenya-refugees-somalia-conflict-terrorist-africa-news-65589/>

¹⁰ Ben Rawlence, “The Chaotic Economy of a Kenyan Refugee Camp,” *The Irish Times*, February 13, 2016, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/africa/the-chaotic-economy-of-a-kenyan-refugee-camp-1.2532686>

¹¹ Tony Onyulo, “Kenya Closing World’s Largest Refugee Camp over Somali Terror Fears,” *The Washington Times*, June 19, 2016, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/jun/19/kenya-closing-dadaab-worlds-largest-refugee-camp-o/>

¹² Fair Observer, “The World’s Largest Refugee Camp May Be Closing” (video), March 10, 2017, <https://www.fairobserver.com/region/africa/dadaab-kenya-refugees-somalia-conflict-terrorist-africa-news-65589/>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ben Rawlence, *City of Thorns*, pages 12–13, 20–21, 27–28.

¹⁵ Ben Rawlence, *City of Thorns*, page 36.

¹⁶ Unicef, “The Situation of Women and Children in Somalia,”
<https://www.unicef.org/somalia/children.html>

¹⁷ Bryony Jones, “What Has Caused the East Africa Crisis?” CNN, July 22, 2011,
<http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/07/20/somalia.famine.explainer/>

¹⁸ Stanford University, “Mapping Military Organizations: Al Shabaab,”
<http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/61>

¹⁹ “Kenya Court Quashes Government Order to Close Dadaab,” *Al Jazeera*, February 9, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/02/kenya-court-quashes-government-order-close-dadaab-170209101027645.html>

²⁰ International Rescue Committee, Press release, March 11, 2017,
<https://www.rescue.org/press-release/catastrophe-has-already-arrived-irc-steps-response-famine-threat-across-africa-region>

²¹ Christopher Zumski Finke, “Life in the World’s Largest Refugee Camp,” *Yes! Magazine*, February 11, 2016, <http://www.yesmagazine.org/peace-justice/life-in-the-worlds-largest-refugee-camp-20160211>

²² Fair Observer, “The World’s Largest Refugee Camp May Be Closing” (video), March 10, 2017, <https://www.fairobserver.com/region/africa/dadaab-kenya-refugees-somalia-conflict-terrorist-africa-news-65589/>

²³ Daniel Wesangula, “Dadaab: The City You Cannot Leave,” *The Guardian*, February 1, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/feb/01/dadaab-somalia-home-cannot-leave-refugees>

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Jason Burke, “Refugees in Kenya Hit by US Travel Ban after Years of Waiting for Asylum,” *The Guardian*, January 30, 2017,
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/30/refugees-in-kenya-may-face-return-to-somalia-after-us-travel-ban>

²⁶ Daniel Wesangula, “Dadaab: The City You Cannot Leave,” *The Guardian*, February 1, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/feb/01/dadaab-somalia-home-cannot-leave-refugees>