

REFUGEES

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Dreams, Fears *and* Euphoria

**THE
LONG
ROAD
HOME**



UNHCR
United Nations
High Commissioner
for Refugees

Where can I go?

When 23-year-old Mohan Raj Sumathi decided to return to her Sri Lankan homeland from exile in India, she almost paid for the decision with her life.

The flimsy and illegal fishing boat that she, her husband, three-year-old daughter and other refugees were sailing in, capsized during a stormy crossing and tossed everyone into the sea.

None could swim, but they all eventually struggled ashore where Mohan said, “We lost



**Namibian
returnees
1989.**

everything except our lives, but many people kissed the land when we reached it. It feels good, very good to be back.”

In the Horn of Africa, Mzilah Kidane Maasho and her husband waited for several decades before they, old and nearly blind, returned to Eritrea. “We thank God to have kept us this long to see this,” they said at the time. “We have finally made it home.”

Despite the perception in some, mainly industrialized countries, that untold and threatening hordes of refugees are headed their way, the vast majority of the estimated 50 million plus persons UNHCR has helped in more than five decades, in fact have restarted their lives in their ancestral homelands.

There are some—people who cannot go back for various reasons—who need assistance to begin again, either in countries where they first sought asylum

or by permanently resettling in ‘third’ countries. This year’s World Refugee Day will commemorate all of these various hopes and endeavors for the future under the theme ‘A Place to Call Home.’

To be sure, even if refugees want to go home and conditions have changed sufficiently to allow them to try to return, the situation can be extremely difficult, as the various reports in this current special edition underline.

In Sudan, for instance, hundreds of thousands of civilians hope to go back to the south of the country shortly, while in the west large numbers of other Sudanese nationals have fled to neighboring Chad as conflict continues in that region.

Infrastructures need to be rebuilt. Many so-called refugees were actually born in exile. In other words, they have never seen the ‘home’ they are returning to and life there may be even more difficult than in the cloistered confines of a camp. There are other deep social, economic, political and religious obstacles to overcome.

Despite these problems, there are encouraging signs that increasing numbers of uprooted people, including many in longtime crises such as Sudan, Angola and Afghanistan, are continuing to vote with their feet. One telling statistic is that at the beginning of the new millennium, the refugee agency was helping 500,000 people to restart their lives at home. By 2002, that figure had soared to around 2.5 million and the trend continued last year.

Supporting the refugees’ personal wishes to return, development and humanitarian agencies such as UNHCR have also made strides in recent years to establish more relevant and progressive programs to assist not only returnees, but also the communities to which they are going back.

New funds and new programs will be needed to consolidate these gains but one thing is clear—with only the minimum of encouragement, the determination and resilience refugees have honed in exile will allow them to successfully re-establish their ‘home’ and restart their lives.

THE ROAD HOME

DREAMS AND FEARS

“I am going back to the land God gave us”



Mozambique
1994.

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Returning to their towns and villages is the ultimate goal for most refugees, but it is both a euphoric and frightening experience.

Getting there

Refugees return home by plane, truck, on foot, by donkey or by bus—in small groups or in massive human waves. From left to right: Bangladesh 1972; Mali 1997; Rwanda 1996; Ethiopia 1998; Afghanistan 2002.



CICR/F.STEINEMANN



UNHCR/C.SHIRLEY/CS/MLI•1997

In humanitarian folklore it is known as the ‘Miracle of Mozambique’ and Maria Recartade was an honorary member. For 30 years Mozambique, a long sliver of mountains and scrub on Africa’s eastern flank, had torn itself apart—first in a colonial struggle against the Portuguese and then in a savage civil war.

Tens of thousands of civilians were killed, including Maria’s husband, brother and several relatives. Around six million people abandoned their homes, including the young peasant girl.

“I took to the bush with my four children and hid there many nights,” she recalled, fearful of both government troops and guerrillas, until she fled to neighboring Zimbabwe. “If I had stayed, I would have been killed,” she said.

Instead, she became a longtime refugee and like tens of millions of people violently uprooted from their homes both before and since those events, the thought of one day ‘going home’ sustained her through years of hardship and a cycle of psychological despair.

“There were weeks and months when I could only think of my dead husband and my home,” she said. “My memories were the only thing I had left,” but though the

thought of home kept her going, there were several unexpected twists in Maria’s tale before she could realize her dream.

She remarried and after a peace agreement was signed in 1992, the ‘big moment’ came to return. There was immediate euphoria... followed instantly by doubt and apprehension.

“I was happier than I had ever been when I first heard the news the war was over,” Maria said. “And then I was afraid. I was safe in the refugee camp. My children had food. Why should I risk everything again? Perhaps the fighting would restart and my new family would be killed again.”

“But Mozambique was my home. I must go back.”

Overcoming that initial fear, another surprise awaited her when she got back. “A refugee bus dropped us off,” she said. “Officials gave us food, some sheeting and tools. But there was nothing else. Nothing. There were no houses, no schools, no wells, no crops. Maybe no future here.”

She persevered and, by local standards, prospered, building a neat *pilhota* (hut) of mud brick and branches with a cleanly swept courtyard of baked mud and a small plot to grow vegetables and raise goats and chickens.

During a 30-month period in the early 1990s, 1.7 million

“I WAS HAPPIER THAN I HAD EVER BEEN WHEN I FIRST HEARD THE NEWS THE WAR WAS OVER. AND THEN I



UNHCR/R.CHALASANI/CS/TZA•1996



UNHCR/N.BEHRING/DP/AFG•2002



UNHCR/L.TAYLOR/CS/ETH•1998

refugees like Maria caught trains, planes, cars and buses or simply walked back to their homes. Another four million civilians who had been hiding near their villages emerged from the surrounding bush in one of the most successful repatriations in modern history.

THE 'ONLY' SOLUTION

How best to help refugees restart their lives has enjoyed a chequered history.

In the middle of the last century, as international structures were first put into place to help uprooted peoples, the emphasis either on 'going home' or resettling people in new locations fluctuated, depending on the particular crisis and the political profile of the refugees.

During the chaos and aftermath of World War II, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) helped an estimated seven million people to repatriate.

A successor organization, the International Refugee Organization (IRO), was created in 1946, but took a different direction and resettled more than one million people in host countries around the world.

In the early decades of UNHCR's existence, western governments continued to open their doors to Hungarian and East European refugees during the Cold War, and to Indochinese civilians in the wake of conflict in Southeast Asia.

But as the global political climate changed and the number of people cared for by UNHCR swelled from around one million when the agency began work in 1951, to more than 27 million in the mid-1990s, the welcome mat was largely withdrawn. What is now officially called 'voluntary repatriation' became the only practical solution for the majority of them.

And in the last two or three years there were encouraging signs that many more civilians, especially those who had been displaced longest in so-called protracted crises, were headed back to their ancestral farms and towns.

At the start of the new millennium, the agency helped an estimated 500,000 people to return. In 2002, that figure soared to nearly 2.5 million, principally because of the huge numbers of Afghans going back. Last year, though the pace slackened somewhat, unofficial tallies indicated the rate of official returns was still strong. Additionally,

WAS AFRAID. I WAS SAFE IN A REFUGEE CAMP. WHY SHOULD I RISK EVERYTHING AGAIN?"

The reality

Life can often be harsh as refugees find their homes destroyed or have to rebuild totally from scratch.

Left to right: Sri Lanka 2002; Afghanistan 2003; Kosovo 1999; Eritrea 2001; Kabul 2003.



UNHCR/R.CHALASANI/DP/LKA*2002



UNHCR/R.CHALASANI/31057

at least two million people in such countries as Angola probably went back unannounced and without any official help.

COMPLEX PROBLEMS

In theory at least, since refugees, humanitarian agencies such as UNHCR and major governments all agree on the overall solution, the process of 'going home' should be relatively straightforward. Instead, it is always a complex equation embracing extreme emotion and practical considerations—euphoria, fear, dreams, nightmares, nostalgia, hostility—which must be addressed.

Why abandon the relative safety of a refugee camp, no matter how desperate the conditions, for a leap into the unknown? Will there be any homes, schools or clinics to return home to? What about land and crops? Will there be jobs and education? What about physical dangers such as land mines? Can people who have been away, sometimes for years, socially reintegrate with the civilian population which stayed at home during the war?

Both sides have often changed... their families grown larger, some people even changing their religion. Can

civilians, especially the young, who have tasted city or urban life during exile, even within the confines of a crowded refugee camp, return to isolated and often primitive hamlets and farms?

Refugees sometimes face the perplexing prospect of deciding whether to go back to a country where there is peace in one region, but fighting in another. That has happened in Afghanistan, the Congo basin and is currently the situation in the Sudan where hundreds of thousands of refugees may return to the south of the country this year, while similar numbers have been displaced by ongoing fighting in the west, some of them fleeing to neighboring Chad.

If individual refugees face such dilemmas, agencies, including UNHCR, must factor into their planning from the very moment an emergency begins the prospect of how and when refugees will eventually go home.

There are obvious and immediate logistical considerations: how long are the incoming refugees expected to stay and how much shelter, food and medicine will they need?

But there are more subtle concerns, too, which will eventually influence the 'going home' process. If civilians

THE GREAT MAJORITY OF PEOPLE DRIVEN FROM THEIR VILLAGES BY WAR AND PERSECUTION WANT TO GO



UNHCR/S.BONNESS/CS/ERI-2001

stay for an extended period, when should schools be established? What curriculum should be followed—that of the host country or the region from which they have come? In the case of refugees from Mozambique, should children have been taught in the lingua franca of that country—Portuguese—or in English as spoken in surrounding host states? What language eventually will be more useful?

What kind of skills should be taught in the camps which would be appropriate if and when refugees return home? How involved should humanitarian agencies become in addressing obvious social and cultural inequities in a refugee community?

The empowerment of women has been a major theme in refugee work for many years, but what impact will that have when families do return to their traditional villages and resume their former lifestyles? Should girls continue to go to school? (There is already a backlash against this in some parts of Afghanistan). Who actually will make the decisions in the household and who will go to work?

How can the infamous 'gap' between emergency aid—food, shelter and medicine doled out in refugee camps—and longer-term development aid—the rebuilding of clinics

and other infrastructure in returnee villages—which has plagued refugee situations for decades, be eliminated?

And however many refugees do return to their 'old homes', how best to help others who, for various reasons cannot return, find 'new homes' in other countries?

CONFUSING

If the pull of 'home' remains strong among adult refugees, the situation is more confused among younger people who may have been exposed for the first time to radically different social environments during their most impressionable years including music, fashion, alcohol, electricity and running water.

Many of these youngsters were born in exile and have never seen their 'home' or even their native country. Though exact numbers are difficult to assess, perhaps as many as 50–60 percent of today's refugees fall into this category.

Liyakath Aikhan Mohammed Aslam was very young when his family fled during Sri Lanka's quarter century of conflict in which an estimated 65,000 people were killed and some one million uprooted. Following a 2002 cease-

HOME. AND VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION IS THE ONLY PRACTICAL SOLUTION FOR THE MAJORITY OF THEM.

Rebuilding

Refugees are resourceful in rebuilding their homes, their countries and in recognizing the importance of education.

From left to right: Bosnia 1998; Cambodia 1980; Angola; Afghanistan 2003; Sierra Leone 2003.



UNHCR/PJAMBOR/10208



UNHCR/C.SHIRLEY/CS/BIH-1998

fire between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels, more than 300,000 civilians went home and the youngster, now 21-years-old, was in no doubt about his future either.

“I was seven when I fled,” he recalled. “I can’t even remember anything about my own village. But I will be so proud when I return there. I simply cannot wait.”

A half world away, 24-year-old James Badradin did go back recently to Sudan’s Nuba mountains, but his homecoming was one of cultural confusion (see page 16). After spending his refugee years in the streets of Kenya’s bustling capital, Nairobi, he found little to attract him in his home village where there were no jobs, no electricity, he was unable to date girls as he had done in Kenya and even his cool jeans and hip-hop cassette tapes were glaringly out of place.

Young people who had taken refuge in the besieged Bosnian capital of Sarajevo during the 1990s wars in the Balkans, or ventured further afield to Europe and North America, often worried in interviews about returning to the narrow confines of rural life in homes without electricity or running water and little social activity.

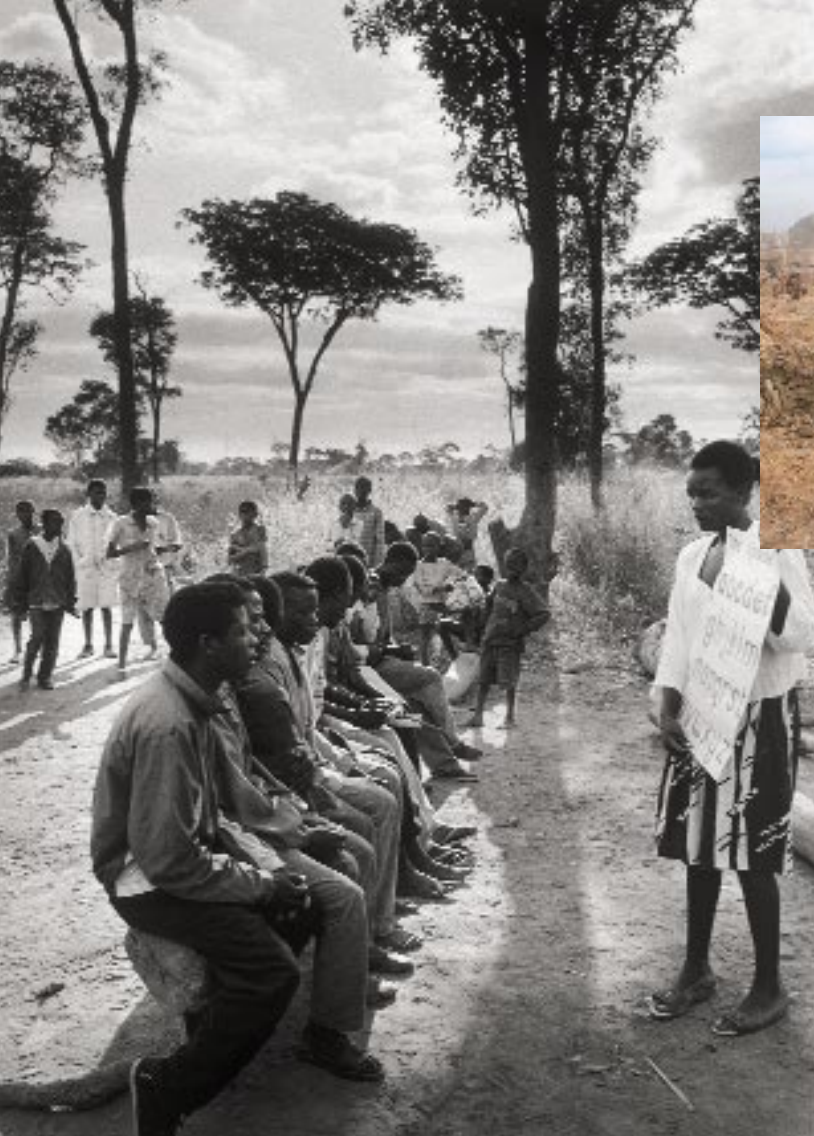
Even older returnees find that they and people who

stayed behind have changed irrevocably. Thirty-five-year-old Anthon Omar fled his village in 1989 to escape Sudan’s civil war, but during his forced exile in the capital, Khartoum, he converted to Islam. When he returned home with a young family, they not only had to try to ‘ruralize’ themselves to farming, but also to heal the deep schism with Omar’s Christian father. The animosity between the mainly Muslim north and Christian-Animist south has been the driving force of much of the country’s troubles. Here it was again, in miniature, with a single family at war with itself.

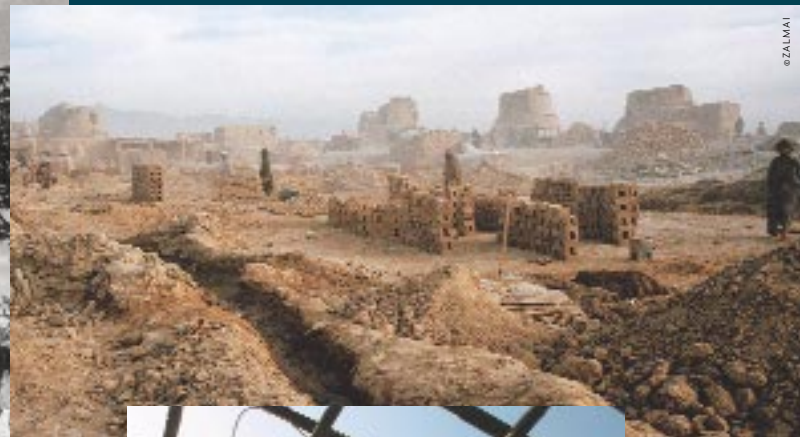
BITTERSWEET DEPARTURE

Refugees head for home in a variety of ways—spontaneously, in small groups, on foot or conversely, in carefully organized repatriations and sometimes in their tens of thousands per day. In 2002, more than two million Afghans returned within months of the installation of an interim government. In the same period, as many as 1.5 million persons internally displaced in Angola and 100,000 refugees did not wait for any official help, but just simply went back.

GOING HOME IS A COMPLEX OPERATION DURING WHICH A RANGE OF EXTREME EMOTIONS AND PRACTICAL



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UNHCR/N.BEHRING/DP/SLE•2003

Surprisingly perhaps, there is not only concern among refugees about their uncertain future as expressed by Maria Recartade on her return to Mozambique, but also genuine tears in leaving a camp, a familiar environment and the many friends people had made, especially if they have been in exile for many years.

“Mzilah Kidane Maasho hugged and kissed her neighbors as grandchildren wailed around her and tears ran down her cheeks,” *REFUGEES* magazine recently reported in describing the departure of Eritrean refugees from Sudan. “Her husband, Kidane Maasho also sobbed uncontrollably as he defiantly insisted ‘I have waited for this day for 20 years and I am not afraid of returning home. It is sad that I am leaving my friends behind, but I am going back to the land that God gave us.’”

This family, like so many others, was fortified not only by the powerful and all encompassing dream of their ancestral hut, but also by thoughts of the small and individual pleasures they most missed in exile and looked forward to upon their return.

“Before I came to the Sudan (a strictly Islamic country where alcohol is forbidden), I used to drink beer and for

the past 20 years I have not had a single one,” Maasho reminisced. He and his wife enjoyed a warm and gentle return, being greeted by extended family who had flown to Eritrea themselves from a new home in the United States and over a particularly satisfying iced drink, Kidane Maasho chortled: “I’ve finally had that beer—it is cold and delicious.”

Not every homecoming is as pleasant as the Maashos. When Osman Hysenlekaj returned to Kosovo from his brief exile in neighboring Albania, he found his home destroyed and his 40 sheep and 10 cows long since killed off. Worse was to follow at the farmhouse at the foot of the appropriately named Mountain of the Damned. Searching the property, Osman found the body of his 83-year-old father who had refused to flee a Serb advance, stuffed into a nearby well.

Osman cleaned out a barn to shelter his wife and children and erected a UNHCR-supplied tent under a nearby tree to make the blistering summer heat a little more bearable. “All I know is that I have to get on with my life,” he said at the time, displaying a stoicism which has been the bedrock allowing millions of hapless civilians to sur-

CONSIDERATIONS—EUPHORIA, FEAR, DREAMS, NIGHTMARES, NOSTALGIA, HOSTILITY—MUST BE ADDRESSED.

vive 'the refugee experience.'

Twenty-three-year-old Mohan Raj Sumathi also decided to go home with her daughter and husband to Sri Lanka from India, but their return was almost cut brutally short when the tiny fishing vessel they were traveling in capsized at night, tossing 20 passengers into the pitch black water. No one was able to swim, but two fellow passengers grabbed her three-year-old daughter, Rana, and held her above the waves while the others were able to stay afloat in the shallows. They eventually righted the craft and reached land.

"We lost everything except our lives, but many people kissed the land when we reached it," she said. "It feels good, very good to be back. I have no regrets."

LEARNING PROCESS

'Going Home' operations have also been a steep learning curve for humanitarian agencies. With most of their attention focused on the 'front end' of emergencies—the flight of refugees and legal and logistical help for them in camps—repatriations in the past often received only fleeting attention and resources.

One field officer remembers helping Namibians return to their homes in 1990. "We would pile refugees into a land cruiser and head out into the bush. One time, we arrived outside a little hut of thorns and sticks after nightfall to reunite some returnees with their family. The family came out of the hut, woken by the headlights and engine noise and everything dazzled them. They stood there be-

mused," he said. "They didn't even know we were coming. It was a surprise to everyone. We just dropped the refugees off and left them there. I wonder what happened next."

Operations have improved considerably since then. Refugees returning under UNHCR auspices generally receive not only assistance with transport, but also basic items ranging from blankets to seed, several months supply of food and shelter materials to rebuild at least part of their homes.

Although little research has been conducted, it is also quite clear that the refugees themselves are canny operators in deciding when and how to go back. Often a family will send one or two members—generally elderly people who most want to return—to reconnoiter the situation. They might re-establish themselves and begin rebuilding or report back on the difficulties.

In the Balkans some of these returnees became known as 'day trippers' because of their shuttle visits. The rest of the family, meanwhile, would continue to receive interna-

tional assistance and shelter.

The U.N. refugee agency also recognized years ago the importance of including local communities as well as returnees in all economic, social and cultural projects. So-called QIPs, quick impact projects such as rehabilitating roads and clinics were launched to benefit entire villages, though according to some critics there has not been enough sustained follow through to determine the long-term viability of many of these programs.

High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers has re-emphasized the importance of trying to bridge the gap between emergency aid in the initial phases of any refugee crisis and longer-term development assistance once refugees go home.

And for those who cannot return under any circumstances, the agency continues to encourage countries hosting refugee communities to integrate them into their own populations, and for other governments further afield to offer more uprooted persons the chance to permanently resettle there and begin new lives.

Jeff Crisp, head of UNHCR's Evaluation Unit, said there must be both more research and more flexibility in trying to shape refugee return.

In teaching civilians basic skills, for instance, "Are the predictable projects such as sewing for women and carpentry for men" necessarily the correct programs? And just because a man was a farmer and lived in a small village before he became a refugee, should he continue in the same job in the same place when conditions may have altered dramatically on the ground?

STRONG TIES

Despite all of the difficulties, the pull of home for most refugees is stronger than any obstacle. Nearly one million ethnic Albanians fled Kosovo in 1999. They were often forced out at gunpoint. They saw family members butchered by Serb forces, their homes destroyed and their identification papers deliberately torn up.

Yet within three months, in a dramatic reversal of fortune and under the protection of NATO forces, most of those who had fled returned home to their shattered province. Perhaps never before had so many people left and then returned in such a short time.

Abdul Hameed Badurdeen was given two hours to leave, without any possessions, from his home in Jaffna, in Sri Lanka. "We were told we might be back in two days," he remembered. "Thirteen years later, and we are still not home."

But he added, "However long it takes, we will go back eventually."

And in Eritrea, the old couple Mzilal Kidane Maasho and her husband said, "We thank God to have kept us this long to see this way. We are old and weak, but we have finally made it home." ■

UNHCR/M.KOBAYASHI/CS/IND-1999



Timor 1999:
The joy of return.

CIVILIANS SOMETIMES FACE THE PERPLEXING PROSPECT OF DECIDING WHETHER TO GO BACK TO A COUNTRY WHERE THERE IS PEACE IN ONE REGION BUT FIGHTING IN ANOTHER.

THE FAILI KURDS

Expulsion. A forced march. And the loss of nationality

BY MARIE-HELEN VERNEY

It's the same God. We all love the same God, so why should our motherland turn its back on us?" Jasem Mohamed Sallhek shakes his head and falls silent, lost in his memories and in contemplation of the nearby Zagros mountains, whose snowcapped peaks provide a majestic backdrop but also a formidable barrier between Jasem's current home in the Azna refugee camp in Iran and the homeland, Iraq, which disowned him a quarter century ago.

Jasem is a Faili Kurd whose forefathers once wielded formidable economic power in the Fertile Crescent, but who in the 1970s and 1980s fell victim to the tyranny of Saddam Hussein's regime.

Millions of civilians of all persuasions—Marsh Arabs, Kurds, Shia and Sunni Muslims—abandoned the country during that period or were forced to flee, but the fate of some 300,000 newly exiled Faili Kurds was particularly tragic. They lost not only their homes but also their homeland—officially stripped of their nationality and doomed like an estimated nine million other people around the world to be plunged into a twilight world of legal limbo as stateless persons.

Jasem and the Faili Kurds had enjoyed an ambiguous position in Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The majority of the country's nearly four million Kurds are Sunni Muslims and live in northern Iraq. The Faili are Shia Muslims from the so-called Faili triangle in central Iraq which embraces Baghdad, and were the butt of discrimination and distrust for decades.

The 1924 Iraqi Nationality Law divided the population into three categories based on religion and ethnicity—effectively creating three classes of citizenship. The Shiite Kurds were systematically classified in the lowest cate-

gory and repeatedly targeted by government officials who claimed that as followers of the Shia faith, they were in fact originally from Iran where the majority of the population is Shiite.

Despite this harassment, life in Iraq was good for Jasem and he had no doubts, either, about his origins. The owner of a textile factory, he had close dealings with other Failis who controlled Baghdad's legendary bazaar and as a result much of the country's economic wealth.

He was born in the capital, as were his father, grandfather and great-grandfather. In exile, he continues to brandish Iraqi documents. "Look," he says, pointing to a picture of a much younger man, "This is me. It says I was born in Baghdad." Carefully, he takes out a very old, crumpled piece of yellow paper with the photograph of an old man with a long white beard: his father's Iraqi identity card.

PROBLEMS AHEAD

But Iraq's ruling Baath party did not agree with Jasem's claims. In 1978, the Ministry of Trade and Commerce informed him that in order to keep his factory, he needed to provide evidence of, and register, his Iraqi nationality. His entire livelihood was suddenly at stake.

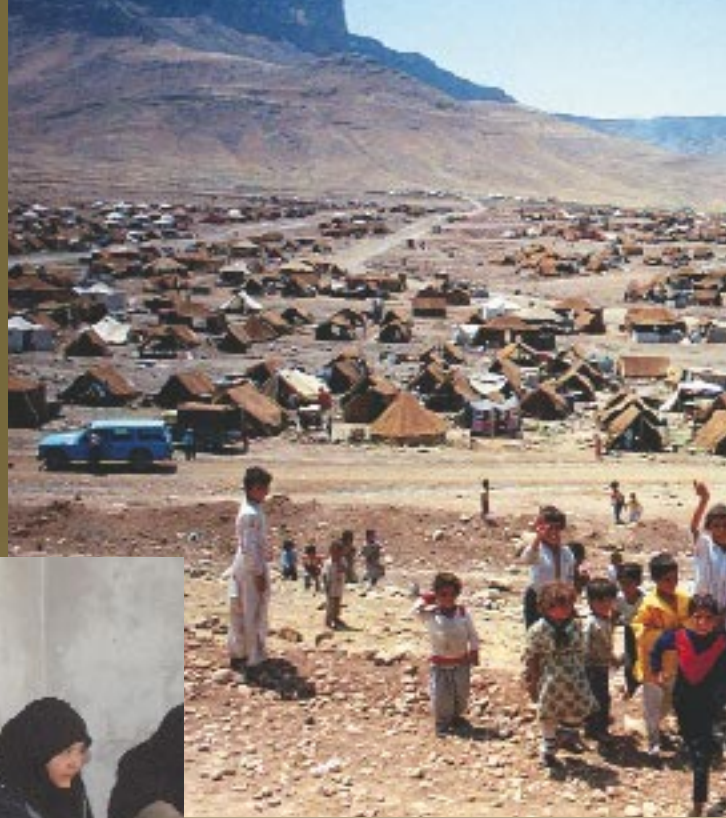
"The directive said that I should bring evidence that my grandfather, my father and myself were all born in Iraq," he remembers. "So I took the documents with me, and on all three it was: place of birth, Baghdad, Baghdad, Baghdad. But when I arrived at the ministry, they looked at my card and said: 'It says here you are Faili Kurd—are you a Faili Kurd?' I answered, yes, we are Faili, and the man said: 'Then you are not Iraqi'" and refused to register him.

In 1979, the story took another twist when Jasem's brother was ordered to do his military service in the Iraqi army. "They asked my brother to provide evidence that he

It couldn't get any worse, but now there is some hope for tens of thousands of a little known Iraqi group.

Life in exile

Refugee camp and school; old but very valuable identity papers; newlyweds Asam and Zeinab enjoy a happy moment.



UNHCR/M.VERNEY/DP/IRN•2004

UNHCR/B.BOYER/CS/IRN•1991

was Iraqi, and my brother explained that he was indeed Iraqi, but also Faili,” Jasem said. “The military authorities said, ‘For you, it doesn’t matter. You are Iraqi, and so you can serve in the army.’”

Meanwhile, Jasem was turned down again as the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran increased Saddam’s fears that his own Shia population, especially the two million Failis, might be fomenting trouble against his Sunni-dominated government.

At 1 a.m. on April 4, 1980, the security services knocked on Jasem’s door.

In subsequent questioning at security headquarters he was asked, “Where are you from?”

“I am from Baghdad.”

“How can you say you are from Baghdad? It says here on your card that you are Faili Kurd.”

“It says I am Faili, but it also says I was born in Baghdad. I am an Iraqi.”

“How can you be an Iraqi? You are not an Iraqi. You are from Iran.”

His wife, children, brothers and sisters were rounded up and all were pushed aboard trucks and driven through the night into an uncertain future. “The truck stopped. They shouted at us to get off and then told us to walk,” Jasem now recalls. “We were in front of high mountains

and I guessed it was the Iranian border. I asked ‘How can I cross the mountains with my small children?’”

If they did not walk, they would be shot, the soldiers said, adding, “Go and see (Iranian religious leader) Khomeini. You are a Shia, so go and live with the Iranians.”

On the other side of the border, bemused Iranian soldiers met them and after a few days of living in tents, they were transported by truck to Lorestan Province and the Azna refugee camp. Twenty-four years later, Azna is still their home.

They have been treated well, but when asked to describe his twenty-four years in exile, all Jasem can say is that he wants to go back. It’s as if he had spent the last quarter of a century living for nothing else than to see his homeland again.

DREAMIN’

At the beginning of 2003, there were more than 200,000 Iraqi refugees in Iran, 1,300 living in Azna, of whom 65 percent are Faili Kurds. Many of them are under 20 years of age, were born in the camp and have known no other home.

For them, Iraq has taken on the status of a mythical land. On the walls of a school for both boys and girls, there are drawings of Baghdad and its bazaar, a place the children

THEY LOST NOT ONLY THEIR HOMES BUT ALSO THEIR HOMELAND—OFFICIALLY STRIPPED OF THEIR NATIONALITY



UNHCR/M.VERNEY/DP/IRN+2004



UNHCR/M.VERNEY/DP/IRN+2004

have never seen but have heard so much about, it is more familiar than the nearby city of Azna.

But the children are not the only ones stuck between memories of the past and dreams for the future. Jasem's son, Asam, has spent 24 of his 30 years in the camp. He was six when he was taken on the forced march across the mountains into Iran and remembers life in Baghdad very clearly.

"We lived in a big house with a large garden," he said. "I remember that my father had a red bicycle and sometimes he would put me on the back and take me to the factory with him, to show me all the clothes."

Asam, like his father and many of the other Faili Kurds here, has no doubts that he wants to go back. "It is my country," he says. "I am an Iraqi. Is it my fault if my ancestors several centuries ago came from Iran?"

TRICKY PROBLEM

Most of the world's refugees share Asam's sentiments about 'going home' and for UNHCR, voluntary repatriation is the 'preferred' solution. But this seemingly simple idea is often fraught with difficulties ranging from the need to rebuild schools and clinics in destroyed villages, the threat of land mines and the difficult problems of reintegrating with people who had 'stayed behind.'

Overcoming the problem of statelessness is particularly tricky. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights underlines that "Everyone has the right to a nationality" but there may be as many as nine million stateless persons worldwide.

The U.N. refugee agency recently approached as many as 192 countries to try for the first time to build a comprehensive picture on the problem which will help it and governments to tackle the problem.

For the Faili Kurds in Iran, the initial signs are hopeful. Late last year at a meeting in the Jordanian capital of Amman, UNHCR outlined the need to establish a dialogue with the new Iraqi authorities to address the issue of statelessness and give urgent consideration to those like the Faili Kurds who had lost their nationality. The Iraqis indicated that the Faili would indeed be allowed to return.

Back in Azna, 20-year-old Zeinab who was born in the camp, tells a visitor: "The story is the same for all the Faili Kurds. You just need to change the names and it is the same story; the expulsion, the forced march, the loss of nationality."

Last year, Zeinab married Asam and moved two houses further down the last row of small houses in Azna. She is now five months pregnant. Her dream is that her child will be born not as a refugee, but at home, in Baghdad, and that he will never have to hear that he is not an Iraqi. ■

AND PLUNGED INTO A TWILIGHT WORLD OF LEGAL LIMBO AS STATELESS PERSONS.

SUDAN

“We walked from nowhere to nowhere

Sudan is both Africa's largest country and the scene of the continent's longest civil conflict. In nearly a half century of fighting between the mainly Muslim north and Animist and Christian south an estimated two million persons were killed. At least four million civilians were displaced inside Sudan itself and another half a million people sought shelter in neighboring states as refugees. Incongruously, perhaps, Sudan also played host at the same time to hundreds of thousands of foreigners fleeing in the opposite direction, from wars in their own countries. In 2004 a major contradiction hung over this land of seemingly unending desert and savannah grasslands. In the west, hundreds of thousands of civilians fled their villages during renewed fighting, many of them spilling into neighboring Chad. But in other parts of the country, the conflict was winding down and UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies geared up in anticipation of a massive return of refugees to their homes in peaceful areas. As the following reports highlight, people in the same country can face radically different futures and even when they go home the sheer joy of return is sometimes tempered by unforeseen difficulties.

*For some Sudanese refugees,
the nightmare may finally be ending.
For others, it has just begun.*



HOME

and then walked some more”





The agony

Decades of war and drought brought untold misery to the country; exiles learn skills and wait anxiously to return home.



UNHCR/P.KESSLER/CS/KEN•1995



UNHCR/B.PRESS/CS/KEN•1999

A WRINKLED FATHER CRIED AS HE CLUTCHED HIS SON IN HIS THIN ARMS. THEY HAD NOT SEEN ONE ANOTHER IN YEARS

BY EMILY WAX

His journey took him from Nairobi's throbbing urban streets to Sudan's shrubby plains. He carried only what he needed: his faded memory of his mother's face, a few pairs of jeans and two hip-hop cassette tapes.

His voyage was strenuous, he said, with little water and less food. He jostled for rides, squeezed onto the backs of lopsided, vibrating trucks and rattled through the countryside. When there were no cars and no roads, he tromped through tall stalks of weeds where land mines lay hidden like deadly insects waiting to strike.

At the end of a four-day journey and a 14-year absence, James Badradin, 24, returned home last month to the Nuba mountains in central Sudan.

At first, he was startled at the beauty before him, the golden grasslands of Nuba's many hills. But the novelty soon wore off. He couldn't find his mother. There were no jobs. He did not know how to farm the steep, rocky land. He was tired of the mosquitoes, the flies, the pounding sun and the lack of electricity.

He was of marrying age, but he couldn't flirt with women. Not without asking the girl's father to set up a supervised tea on market day, he lamented, his eyes rolling, his head shaking.

In the Nuba mountains alone, an estimated 150,000 people have already made the journey back from surrounding countries and the future of Sudan itself can be seen in the triumphs and challenges of those coming home like Badradin.

Some are finding the return as disorienting as the exodus. The battles of the war—for control of commerce, religion and culture—are reflected in the stories of those who are trying to return to a life they don't seem to recognize.

"It's nothing like Nairobi," Badradin said recently as he watched the market scene: barefoot women collecting water from a muddy stream, a camel strutting past a goat, a goat lounging in the lap of a drunk village elder.

A few days after he returned, he said, he sat down in the soft grass, placed his head in his hands and began to weep. He was home. But it was unrecognizable.

TWO CULTURES

Behind Sudan's war is the story of two cultures trying to share one country. They reflect Sudan's unique place between black sub-Saharan Africa and Arab North Africa.

Southern Sudan's flat, bushy terrain is populated with some of the darkest-skinned tribes on the continent: the tall, willowy Dinkas and Nuers. In the northern desert, the government in Khartoum has been dominated by Arab elites, most of them light-skinned, who have backed a poli-

HE COULDN'T FIND HIS MOTHER. THERE WERE NO JOBS. HE DID NOT KNOW HOW TO FARM THE STEEP,



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UNHCR/L.TAYLOR/CS/KEN•1995

cy that treats southerners like second-class citizens.

Although fighting has gone on for all but a decade since Sudan's independence in 1956, the current civil war began in 1983, when a group of southerners formed the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) to fight the northern government and its imposition of Islamic law.

About two million people are estimated to have died, many of starvation and disease, during the past 20 years. The government bombed civilian areas in the central and southern regions. Soldiers on both sides were accused of raping and looting.

The SPLA controlled large areas of the south (during the fighting), the government held some major towns and cities. Caught in the crossfire were the people of the Nuba mountains, a buffer between north and south.

STANDING OUT

"You want me to marry who?" James Badradin protested. He had been home for 10 days and had already been introduced to four girls. But his hipster jeans and his music, items that would appeal to women in Nairobi, caused no ripple here. And there was another problem: none of the girls could read or write.

"No," he said, recounting his argument with his father. "I just can't marry someone who doesn't know words."

"Don't you want a woman who will carry water?" his father asked him.

His son just shrugged. "So there's still no running water," he said with a sigh. "I forgot."

Badradin is tall, lean and muscular. He speaks perfect English, and when he stands at the market in Kauda, about 400 miles south of Khartoum, people with shorn heads and dressed in old, torn clothing stare at him.

"I guess they have never seen MTV," he said with a laugh.

What first brought him into contact with the outside world was something he doesn't like to talk about: war. At the age of 10 he was taken to fight with the SPLA.

"My mother cried," he recalled. "We were too close. Now I am here, and she is in Khartoum. Imagine me going up there. Me, a former SPLA guy. And besides, she won't recognize me."

Badradin didn't much care for being in the army. "I like words and talking," he said. "I'd be a lawyer if I could. I don't like hiding in bushes with weapons."

Still, he said, he had been an obedient soldier and after several years he was sent to Uganda to study where a Frenchman he met in Kampala offered to sponsor his schooling.

"They tell you to go to the bush and fight. You cannot refuse. Someone else tells you they can pay your school fees, and man, you cannot refuse," he said, shrugging and smiling.

He did so well that he earned a scholarship to the University of Nairobi. He finished his course work in liberal arts and worked odd jobs at hip-hop discos. When he heard a cease-fire had been declared in Nuba, he came home.

But now he doesn't know what to make of it. He said he was disgusted when he saw his family sleeping with animals—goats, dogs, chickens, inside the house. Several aid groups considered hiring him as a translator. "I would be with the outsiders," he said, looking down. "Isn't that something?"

NO LAND TO FARM

At the nearby mosque in Kauda, Saed Doaa, 39, lament-

ROCKY LAND. HE WAS TIRED OF THE MOSQUITOES, THE FLIES, THE POUNDING SUN.



The latest victims

Sudanese refugees in Chad.



UNHCR/H.CAUX/DP/TCD•2004



UNHCR/H.CAUX/DP/TCD•2004



UNHCR/H.CAUX/DP/TCD•2004

ed that fellow Muslims had taken his farm and his home.

“Why bother returning?” he said he complained to his imam. “These people are not Muslims. They have taken everything.” When he arrived back in Nuba, he discovered that his fruit farm, nestled among the fertile hills, had been seized by the government.

He, along with other Sudanese fled to Ethiopia 15 years ago, walking the entire way. “We walked from nowhere to nowhere and then walked some more,” he said. He lived as a refugee in Ethiopia, sometimes begging in the streets, sometimes cleaning floors.

But now he has no land to farm. “Where do I go? How do I feed them?” he said, pointing to a line of his children waiting in a straw hut nearby. He has nine. In Nuba, losing your land is like being fired from your job.

But the problem has become a familiar one. Sixty percent of the fertile land in Nuba has been taken over by the government for mechanized state-run farms.

Nuba is the breadbasket of Sudan and governor Abulaziz Adam Alhilu said land reallocation was the single biggest issue in the region: “Without backing and determination to solve these problems, war could explode again.”

Doaa built a mud hut on a friend’s land and lives there with his wife and children. “I used to cultivate my trees,” he said. “Now, I am nothing.”

FATHER AND SON

On an afternoon thick with heat, a wrinkled father, Obala Omar, cried as he clutched his son, Anthon Omar, in his thin arms. They had not seen one another in years. A ram was slaughtered for an evening feast.

The son praised the father for surviving the war, the bombing of hospitals and schools and the slave raids. The father marveled at how fat his son had grown working as a tailor in Khartoum.

But tensions surfaced as soon as the father brought out the homemade sorghum brew called *marissa*. With a smile, he swigged a long gulp from a round brown bowl. His son

refused: he was a Muslim now, one of many southerners who converted during a government campaign. His father was still Christian.

“Why did you leave?” his father sobbed for the second time that day. “Who are you now?”

Anthon Omar, 35, tried to explain why, as a young man in 1989, he had left to find a better life away from the war. Bombs were falling. Northern soldiers were coming. An ethnic cleansing campaign was underway, he said.

His father, a farmer who used to work in the fields naked, could have left, too. But “he didn’t want to,” his son said. “My father and his generation were without clothes. Now I am a tailor. The world changes.”

In Khartoum, the son lived in one of the many refugee camps, where officials came around and pressured people to convert to Islam. He didn’t mind much. “It’s not a bad religion,” he said. “A lot of things make sense.”

“Sharia law, though,” his father pointed out. “We don’t like it.”

“It’s not all bad,” his son said, laughing.

Once in Khartoum Anthon Omar planned to go back to Nuba, but the years passed quickly. Eight years ago, his father went to Khartoum and begged him to come home. His son refused, but eventually he gathered his family and made the week-long journey home by truck.

His younger wife, Harfa Abdrham, is trying to learn farm work. Anthon Omar is also adjusting. His sewing machine is set up under a shelter of dried sorghum. Goats wander nearby.

On a recent day, his father was drinking homemade beer and asked his son to join him: “You married a Christian and a Muslim wife. We can all be friends.”

His son waved his hand and took a sip of the warm brew. “Just a little,” he said.

Then they both laughed, slapped hands and hugged. ■

EMILY WAX is a reporter for the Washington Post newspaper where this article first appeared.

A FEW DAYS AFTER HE RETURNED, HE SAT DOWN IN THE SOFT GRASS AND BEGAN



UNHCR/H.CAUX/DP/TCD-2004

“OVER THERE I AM AT HOME, HERE I AM A FOREIGNER JUST SLEEPING UNDER A TREE”

BY KITTY MCKINSEY

Under a scorching sun, a harsh wind whips fine dust in an unremitting blast across the fringes of the Sahara Desert. Two goats nibble on scraggly scrub bushes, ignoring a camel skeleton bleaching in the sand, its desiccated hide stretched taut across glistening white bones. A russet-colored horse tethered to a tree, its back still bearing the imprint of a saddle, is the only clue that there might be any human beings in this unforgiving, desolate landscape.

This arid vista stretches in all directions for hundreds of kilometers, across eastern Chad and neighboring Sudan. But through the eyes of a new refugee, there's an enormous difference between the landscape here, and that of her home village of Habila, Sudan, just nine kilometers away, on the other side of an unmarked border.

“I was born over there, I wasn't born here,” says 14-year-old Fatime Adam, fingering the edges of a faded flowered scarf. “Over there I am at home, here I am a foreigner, just sleeping under a tree. It's not at all the same thing. Even the trees look different to me. The land is different.”

One of more than 110,000 refugees who fled intensifying fighting in western Sudan's Darfur region, Fatime now sleeps on bare ground, huddling together with her three sisters, three brothers and their parents for warmth, as temperatures plunge from a daytime high of 35 degrees Celsius to a bitterly cold 5 degrees at night.

This place is not even a speck on a map. Not a soul was living here until the Darfur refugees began arriving in mid-January. But in Chad, where, as one local puts it,

every mountain, every dune, every wadi has a name, Kourbileke is the name given to a scattered collection of thorn bushes and spindly, dusty trees seven kilometres from the Sudan border that hosts Chad's newest refugees.

TREE HOME

Fatime's new 'home' is literally a tree, branches of thorns barricaded in a circle around it to provide some modest protection from the biting winds. Clothes and cooking pots hang from the branches. Piled in the middle of the makeshift shelter are everything a few families could salvage as they fled—two metal bed frames, a heap of carpets, a wooden side table, valuable jerrycans for carrying water. The possessions of ten refugee families wouldn't furnish a small room in an average home in Europe or North America.

Like any 14-year-old girl anywhere, Fatime says wistfully that what she misses most are her shoes and clothes. Right now the only garment she owns is the one she's wearing.

But her complaints are mild. “The water is a little far,” she says in a major understatement, explaining that she must trek 12 hours round trip every other day to bring back water in jerrycans on the back of the family's two donkeys. The scarcity of water means refugees haven't washed in 12 days, and they're going hungry as well.

“The food we brought with us lasted two days, and then was finished. We don't have anything to eat now,” says a young mother, Samira Hassan Saleh, who adds that her four children have come down with colds and fever from sleeping outdoors. She ticks off a list of the basics

TO WEEP. HE WAS HOME. BUT IT WAS UNRECOGNIZABLE.



Inside Chad

Harsh conditions in one of the world's most inhospitable spots.



UNHCR/H.CAUX/DP/TCD•2004

UNHCR/H.CAUX/DP/TCD•2004

UNHCR/H.CAUX/DP/TCD•2004

she's dreaming of now: "clothes against the cold, sugar, soap, bedding, blankets, mats, jerrycans."

AN INVISIBLE EMERGENCY

UNHCR calls the refugee crisis in eastern Chad an 'invisible emergency.' One of the most remote areas in the world, the 600-kilometer stretch of borderland where the refugees are camped out is a bone-jarring three-day drive from the capital, N'Djamena. In a centuries-old tableau, turbaned men carrying spears gallop across the desert on horseback. For every car on the road—really just a sandy track—there are dozens of camels beside it.

Ironically, the Darfur conflict intensified just as the 21-year-long war in another part of Sudan, between government forces and southern rebels, appears to be coming to an end (*see earlier story*).

And unlike the refugee crises in Rwanda in 1994, or Kosovo in 1999, the Darfur refugees are not gathered in huge, telegenic groups that attract the world's media. It's a dilemma recognized by the refugees themselves. "The world has not heard of us because there haven't been any journalists in Darfur, or here in Chad," says Mohamed Hissin Ali, a 33-year-old former school teacher from Habila, Sudan.

The refugees are so dispersed, and their tree shelters blend so well with the landscape, that aid workers might easily pass within metres of them and not spot them. It's made registering them and organizing them for moves to formal camps difficult.

In many ways Chad, itself one of the world's poorest countries, is an unlikely host. More than twice the size of France, it has a population of less than nine million people, who earn a paltry \$200 a year on average. A year ago Chad gave sanctuary to citizens from the Central African Re-

public who fled a coup there; in March last year the Darfur refugees started arriving in the east.

LITTLE HELP

It's been a strain on the Chadian government, which in February issued an appeal for "substantial contributions" of aid "to ease the human suffering of Sudanese refugees." UNHCR also had its own difficulties. An appeal for \$10.3 million issued in September 2003, failed to raise a penny in five months.

Despite these constraints, a UNHCR emergency team arrived in eastern Chad in early January. "In just one month we began registering the refugees, we have distributed food and blankets, we have identified three sites (for camps further away from the border) and we have begun to move the refugees to camps," says Yvan Sturm, senior emergency officer at the UNHCR office in Abeche, in eastern Chad.

No one is more surprised by the Sudanese refugee crisis in Chad than the refugees themselves. "I could never imagine I could be a refugee," says Salim Ahmed, 47, a father of five, a former secondary school teacher, and now secretary of the refugees' committee in the town of Tine which straddles the border between the two countries. "I used to see refugees on TV and I felt sorry for them. Now I became like them."

When international aid was lacking, local hospitality filled the gap. Most of the refugees are Zaghawa people, an ethnic group that straddles the Chad-Sudan border. "Chad has accepted us because we were frontier people. We are neighbors, we are brothers," said school teacher Hissin Ali.

"When the refugees first started arriving the population organized to collect food for them, and some businessmen in the market gave them blankets," confirms Barout

"I USED TO SEE REFUGEES ON TV AND FELT SORRY



UNHCR/H.CAUX/DP/TCD*2004

Margui Sawa, a local government official in charge of refugees in Tine. “But the refugees kept arriving so the local population is overwhelmed. They can’t keep up with providing food for all the refugees.” Salim Ahmed says the locals “gave us everything they had” and now “are in the same situation as the refugees.”

The bustling Chad side of Tine is now home to an estimated 35,000 refugees. After Sudanese planes dropped apparently errant bombs on the Red Hill refugee area earlier this year killing three people and wounding a dozen others, UNHCR stepped up emergency relocations to send the refugees further inland.

SEEKING SAFETY

The refugees themselves are eager to move away from the dangerous border. There had been daily and nightly bombing raids which continued until late January, when the Sudanese government said it had taken control of the Sudanese side of Tine, by this time reduced to a ghost town of mud brick buildings.

An elderly woman from Habila, who says her bones ache from sleeping on the cold ground at Kourbileke, is eager to move to a UNHCR camp. “We are afraid the militia will come back and get us here. We don’t have anything to defend ourselves with,” says Khadidje Adam.

Refugees describe the fighting in Darfur as attacks by Arab militias—whom they say are backed by the Sudanese government—against black Sudanese Africans. The government says it is fighting rebels, who took up arms in March 2003, to protest alleged economic neglect of the region by the Khartoum government. UNHCR has no presence in Darfur, so is unable independently to verify what the situation is there.

From the refugees’ stories, there is a pattern to the attacks—an aerial bombardment by Antonov planes, followed by armed men who storm into the village on tanks and horses, burning homes and stealing livestock.

Abdelkerim Abakar Anou, 37, the village chief from Habila, Sudan, says all 1,750 residents of his village fled this type of attack. The goal of the attackers, he said, “was to burn down the houses, to steal everything, so the population has nothing left and they leave the village. Their goal is to chase the people away and then the Arabs can occupy the villages.”

Many of the refugees are mystified by the war that has suddenly engulfed them, baffled by the Antonov planes that circle the skies and, the refugees say, target innocent civilians. “We are farmers with our herds,” says Brahim Daoud Djimet, 36, nursing shrapnel wounds while lying inside a tent full of war casualties treated by doctors and nurses from the Médecins Sans Frontières agency in Tine, Chad. “If there are rebels they are not in the villages, they are in the bush. If they want the rebels, I don’t know why the government is bombing the villages.”

One elderly woman, just arrived in the night from Sudan, freely admits that her four sons were rebels. Though “I am more than sorry to desert my house,” Ambakan Khatir Said says she had no choice but to flee once two of her sons were killed and one was taken prisoner, her house was burned and she lost all her possessions.

Standing in the windswept wadi between the two halves of Tine, beside her bundles of possessions lying on sand strewn with the droppings of camels, donkeys and goats, Said is thrilled to be just meters on the right side of the border, inside Chad. “I came for a safe place,” she says simply. “Now I am in peace and I don’t think about anything else.” ■

FOR THEM. NOW I BECAME LIKE THEM.”

THE ROAD

ONE GOOD DAY

“At last I have two legs again and maybe a future”





PHOTOS BY ZALMAÏ



Ending years of exile and heading home at last.

Exile and home: the odyssey of an Afghan family

BY RAY WILKINSON

The day that Ali Mohammed's life changed forever began unexceptionally. It was one of those crisp, clear mountain mornings which make life so sweet in Afghanistan's highlands. Ali carefully cycled through the twisting lanes of mud brick buildings, avoiding the putrid open sewers running down the center of each road, past mounds of rotting garbage, groups of laborers, small bakeries, fruit stands and repair shops just opening for business.

As a small street trader, he was en route to downtown Kabul to purchase anything he could find as a bargain—toys, cans of food, household appliances—and then resell them on the streets of his working class but still vibrant neighborhood for a tiny profit.

Life was tough in the early 1990s, but on a day like this, Ali remembers that it was also 'good.'

Shortly afterwards, he awoke in a Red Cross clinic fighting for his life.

Years of political assassinations, civil war and an invasion by Soviet troops in 1979 had devastated the country. In the years following the arrival of the Russians, millions of Afghans fled to neighboring countries. The fighting ebbed and flowed across the rugged landscape, parts of the capital were reduced to rubble and the front lines lapped ever nearer. Civilians such as Ali Mohammed who had decided to stay put tried to take war in their stride as best they could.

A shell—who knows from which side—landed a few yards from the then teenager. He was knocked unconscious, flung across the street, his body a pincushion of shrapnel shards. Passers by carried him to a nearby Red



En route

Climbing aboard and heading for Kabul; lessons in the dangers of land mines; and an iris scan at the border.



Cross clinic where doctors told him his right leg had to be amputated immediately.

"Insisted not to cut," he said recently. "The doctors told me they had no choice and they amputated just above the ankle." Two months later, as gangrene spread, they had to amputate again, this time above the knee. Other pieces of metal had slashed open his left leg and his stomach—wounds which still disfigure him today. "I left the clinic crippled, but lucky to be alive," he said.

In the following decade, Ali Mohammed fled as a refugee to Pakistan, returned home to Kabul only to run afoul of the country's latest rulers, the Taliban, who beat and imprisoned him several times. He escaped again to Pakistan, married a woman whose own husband had been killed in the fighting, began a family, struggled to survive and then pondered whether to return home when the American-led invasion of Afghanistan brought promise of a new but still uncertain future.

His story in broad outline is not dissimilar to millions of other Afghans during a quarter century of turmoil—personal tragedy, flight, years in exile and a grim determina-

tion simply to 'hang on' and hope for a better future.

REFUGEES magazine followed the Ali Mohammed family which, after months of agonizing decided to return home last year. This story and the following photo essay chronicle their life and uphill struggle to get by day by day.

THE TALIBAN ARE COMING

The reputation of the Taliban as ruthless, often murderous enforcers against perceived opponents and other ethnic groups, preceded them. "The Taliban are coming. The Taliban are coming" became a familiar refrain in the alleyways of the Qala-e-Shada area of Kabul where the crippled teenager lived. Jobs and money were also becoming difficult for the Shia Moslem youngster, a member of the Hazara ethnic group. "We feared them very much," Ali Mohammed said. "We heard so many rumors that they were just killing everyone."

Together with his mother and three brothers, the young boy fled to Pakistan before the Taliban captured Kabul. At the height of the exodus a few years earlier, a total of 6.2 million Afghans had abandoned their homeland,

HE WAS KNOCKED UNCONSCIOUS BY THE SHELL, FLUNG ACROSS THE STREET,



the majority settling in Pakistan or Iran. The number of refugees fluctuated wildly in the next few years as the war spluttered and erupted again—many deciding to go home and then having to flee again months or years later.

Ali Mohammed's family settled in the Pakistani city of Peshawar as so-called urban refugees. Others ended up in hundreds of camps which proliferated across the region.

Eventually, together with 40 other Afghans, he became an apprentice at a local carpet weaving factory. Life remained so difficult, however, that he decided to run the risk of the Taliban and return to Kabul after only a few months. It was a mistake which nearly cost him his life for a second time.

As both a young man and a cripple, he was a natural target for the suspicious authorities. There were no jobs in the capital. His old district had been virtually abandoned and within days, he was picked up. "How did you lose your leg?" "Who were you fighting with?" "You are a traitor" Taliban interrogators scolded him. During his first arrest, as one official sat on his stump, another mercilessly beat the sole of his good leg with an iron bar. His already disfig-

ured leg still retains the swelling from the beatings and his ankle from an iron manacle. "You will either confess or be killed," he was told, but after three days and the equivalent of a 60 dollar bribe, he was released.

Twice more he was picked up and shaken down for money. "I told them I had nothing," he said. "In fact, I was so poor, I was eating their food while they were asking me for money."

When he was released a third time, he rushed to a relative's house, borrowed some money and took a bus to the border. "I was not expecting them to release me. I thought they would either kill me or send me to the central jail. There were so many people being killed at this time," he said, adding "When I did get out, I didn't even waste time collecting the only other pair of shoes I owned," he remembers. "I fled Kabul as quickly as I could." He was a penniless refugee once more, but still alive.

FEW PROSPECTS

As a cripple, with little education, no job and no future, the young man, now 24 years old, had few marriage

HIS BODY A PINCUSHION OF SHRAPNEL SHARDS.

Arrival

The first glimpse of Kabul; meeting the family again; and beginning work.



prospects. Back in Kabul, 28-year-old Majan faced an equally bleak future. A stray Soviet shell had destroyed her home and killed her then husband while she was pregnant with a daughter, Sabara. For the next few years she lived with her father-in-law and new baby “a life of silence and no future,” she says.

When Ali Mohammed’s mother came calling, a proposed arranged marriage between the two unlucky young people appeared an obvious way out for both of them. “When his mother proposed the arrangement, I saw this as a golden opportunity for me,” Majan now says.

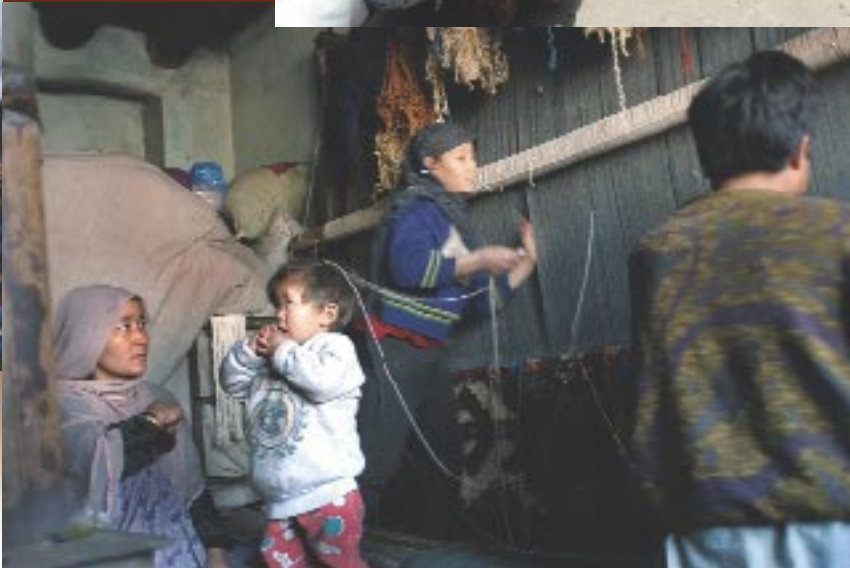
At first, it was not mentioned to the would-be bride that the prospective groom had only one leg. “A relative eventually told me,” she said, “but what choice did I have?” Her husband sat close by as she recalled these earlier concerns.

“I accepted. But on the way to Pakistan, I wondered ‘Who is this man? Will he be able to support me and my child? What will life be in a strange country with a man with one leg?’ But I also remembered again that I was in the middle of nowhere land. There was nothing else to do.”

Exile is a harsh existence for refugees, especially if it

stretches indefinitely into the future. Sometimes, however, there are modest consolations. This family lived in a tiny four square meter room in Peshawar, but it had a small kitchen and... electricity. “I remember especially the electricity,” Majan said. She had never had it at home in Afghanistan. “We had television and listened to all kinds of music (banned under the Taliban). Life was very difficult but we were not afraid. It was peaceful.”

THEIR NEW HOME IS A TINY SPACE BARELY FOUR SQUARE METERS. THERE IS NO RUNNING WATER,



Mother, father and young daughter worked from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m. each day weaving carpets, eking out a meager livelihood. Three years ago another daughter, Rahima, was born.

The terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, the subsequent U.S.-led attack in Afghanistan, the fall of the Taliban and the installation of a new interim administration in Kabul dramatically changed the situation.

More than two million Afghans flooded back to their homes in 2002, but others like the Ali Mohammed family were more cautious.

"I started thinking about going home as soon as the Taliban fell," he said. "My brothers went home last year. But we had established a foothold in Pakistan. We could at least survive there. We were earning and we were spending. But could I find work in Kabul? Could we survive there?"

NO CHOICE

In the end, the choice was made for him. "Everyone around us was going home," Ali Mohammed said. "My brothers. Our neighbors. Even the carpet merchant we had

been selling to left. In the end we really had no choice."

They began the paperwork and processing with UNHCR. One interesting highlight occurred when Majan underwent an ultra-modern iris scanning procedure introduced by the refugee agency. The process involved taking a close-up picture of a refugee's iris, digitally coding its texture and storing the data for future matching. It was introduced to allow officials to detect some refugees who try to cheat the system by 'recycling' themselves and applying for 'going home' aid several times over.

"I was rather worried," said Majan who, even in the more liberal world of Pakistan and back home in the 'new' Afghanistan, always wears her top-to-toe burka outside her home as a sign of modesty. "What was going to happen to my eyes when I looked into that machine?" she wondered. But it was all over in a few seconds. "Nothing has happened to my eyesight."

The family received a relocation package of 100 kilograms of wheat flour, two plastic sheets, female hygienic items, one kilo of soap and 65 dollars.

Most of that money, 55 dollars, went to hire a truck

NO TOILET, NO KITCHEN, NO HEATING. SCRAP PLASTIC BAGS COVER THE EMPTY WINDOW FRAME.

Coping
 With only one leg, even riding a bicycle can take weeks of painstaking practice.



along with five other families, for the one-day trip between Peshawar and Kabul.

It took the family less than two hours to pack all of their worldly goods—a couple of quilts, pillows and one battered suitcase full of clothes. Clinging precariously high above the fully laden vehicle, the returning refugees swayed their way through the high mountain passes and across scorched valleys towards home.

En route they had to pay a modest bribe of around five dollars to a Pakistani official and remained consumed with doubt. “What had happened to our houses? What had happened to our families? What awaited us there?” Ali Mohammed wondered.

Homecoming was less than ecstatic. It had been impossible to alert relatives of their arrival and on May 2 they spent their first night back in Afghanistan in a UNHCR

AT FIRST IT WAS NOT MENTIONED TO THE BRIDE THAT HER PROSPECTIVE HUSBAND HAD ONLY ONE LEG. “BUT



reception center on the outskirts of the city.

The next morning, they drove to his brother's modest room in the city.

Kabul was unrecognizable. Under the Taliban it sank into a dreary and tightly regulated urban backwater where outdoor life had shriveled, streets were deserted, vehicles were few and the religious police held terrifying sway.

Within months, as the return picked up momentum, it

WHAT CHOICE DID I HAVE? IT WAS A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY.”

A new right leg

After months of waiting for funds, buying a special pair of shoes and fitting a new artificial leg.



was transformed into an overwhelming cacophony of noise—music, television, shrill voices—streets clogged with traffic including armored personnel carriers and jeeps of an international protection force, fleets of humanitarian vehicles and hundreds of thousands of returning refugees who seemed to occupy every nook and cranny of the burgeoning town, including still-collapsed ruins of houses and factories.

Which was not good news for a second wave of refugees like Ali Mohammed and his family who returned last year. He spent weeks struggling through the streets on his crutches looking for work. A cleaning job at a school? No. A laborer? No work. Anything in the bakeries? Nothing. A night watchman? Everything full.

“Maybe it was a mistake coming back here,” he said to himself repeatedly. Some refugees facing the same appar-ent brick wall returned to Pakistan.

Ali Mohammed persisted but it took several months to find something... weaving carpets again as the family had done in Pakistan.

They moved out of his brother’s home and took the room he had once lived in on the outskirts of Kabul, a tiny space barely four square meters, built around a central courtyard where several other returning families live.

DIFFICULT LIFE

There is no running water, no toilet, no kitchen, no heating. And of course no electricity, unlike in Pakistan. Scrap plastic bags cover the empty window frame. A loom loaned from a local businessman lines one wall.

Mother and daughter work the loom by hand. The husband, still troubled by massive stomach pains because of his wounds and unable to lift anything heavy, does odd jobs.

It will take them two months to complete a carpet for which they receive the equivalent of 100 dollars. Since their return they have begun work on their second carpet.

Eleven-year-old Sabara, a very slim and pretty youngster, is enjoying Kabul simply because “I don’t have to work quite so many long hours here.”

THE PAIN IS EXCRUCIATING AND MANY TIMES ALI MOHAMMED DECIDES TO QUIT AND THROW THE LEG AWAY.



But she is unlucky in other respects. Many young girls, deprived of education at home under the Taliban, were allowed to attend school in Pakistan and Iran and upon their return home under a new government.

But school for Sabara is still out of the question. “Until I can find a full-time job,” her father says, “we cannot afford to send her to school. We need her here to make money for the family.”

The future is full of other uncertainties. They cannot afford the 15 dollars per month rent. Majan, of course, misses the electricity and its side benefits such as television.

And then there is probably the biggest problem of all—Ali Mohammed’s shattered leg. Despite modest help from visitors, for many weeks he could not even afford to buy a pair of special shoes or take time off to begin fittings for a promised artificial leg. “My life is like this circle,” he laments practicing riding a bicycle round and around on a piece of waste land with his one good leg. “Life turns and turns but it goes nowhere.”

“Often in the morning I leave the house to search for work but I don’t know where to go,” he adds.

Eventually, there is enough money. A shopping trip through the bazaars of Kabul to find the right pair of shoes. A fitting for the artificial leg and then practice, practice, practice. His teacher has lost his own leg.

The pain is excruciating and many times Ali Mohammed decides to quit and throw the leg away. “No. No. You must continue,” his teacher cajoles him. “It will work.”

It does. “At last I have two legs again and maybe a future,” the returnee says. “And from now on I will have more chance to find work.”

Hopefully. Ali Mohammed has seen too much and suffered too much to be a spontaneously happy man. He rarely smiles or even talks much.

But though the future remains uncertain, optimism occasionally breaks through and he recites a proverb: “Each time we have one good day here, we are having a good life.” In other words, he’s taking it one day at a time. ■

“NO. NO. YOU MUST CONTINUE,” HIS TEACHER CAJOLES HIM. “IT WILL WORK.”