

**Short Term Heaven, Long Term Limbo:
A visit to a UNHCR refugee camp in Rwanda**

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No less than 20 million of people, escaping incommensurable risks of social violence—wars, civil wars, persecution, ethnic cleansing and the like—, are currently living as refugees beyond the borders of their own countries, and a still larger number are living as uprooted, displaced persons within the boundaries of their country. Their protection is the core mission of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), an agency that developed and managed –and continues to do so–, sometimes with the collaboration of NGOs, hundreds of refugee camps throughout the Balkans, the Middle East, Africa, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, East Timor, Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and Colombia.

The logistics entailed in providing shelter, services and security for this population when an emergency of this kind arises is enormous. And those humanitarian harbors are reasonably conceived and designed as short-term, emergency refuges, as temporary stations for desperate people awaiting return to their homeland when the conflagration is over, or resettlement in a third country when return is not viable. However, while the expectation has been that the triggering violence and socially disrupting crisis could be short lived, and that once resolved, the refugees would be able to return to their own countries, violent conflicts can be, and currently are, protracted, lasting for years. Consider the decade of steady violence and civic turmoil in central Africa's Great Lakes region or in Colombia, or the five-year long crises in Chad or Afghanistan. In these

and other circumstances millions of people escaped their countries, saved their own lives and those of their children, and obtained harbor in refugee camps organized for a short-term stay, where they ended up remaining for years, without any other place to go. Thus, refugee camps conceived and designed as short-term solutions, in many cases become de facto long-term provisional cities, though they were never designed for that purpose.

A few years ago I spent several weeks in Rwanda as part of a research project on coexistence jointly sponsored by UNHCR, Harvard University, and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.¹ In that land-locked, impoverished country we visited several cooperatives of extraordinary women who had been able to pull themselves from the horrors of the 1999 genocide—their families hacked to death in a race-hate frenzy—and, with courage, persistence and creativity, managed to create thriving agricultural collective enterprises and new communities within three years. We interviewed some of those women and spent time recording their feat, and, alas, we also met with others who were still struggling to emerge from the social chaos of the prior years. We interacted with officials responsible for the development of the *Gachacha* native process of reconciliation and, last but not the least, shared many meals and rich conversation with the extraordinary Cindy Burns-- who directed the UNHCR Rwanda office and currently directs the even more complex UNHCR Uganda program-- as well as with other dedicated people working in local NGO programs.

And we visited a UNHCR refugee camp in northwest Rwanda, a camp populated by some 17,000 Congolese refugees—mainly *Banyamulenge* and *Banyamasisi* tribesmen, of remote *Tutsi* ethnicity—who had been steadily escaping the violence of the eastern provinces of the

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) since the beginning of the civil war in 1997, with new waves emerging in 1999 with the exacerbation of violence in that regional hotbed².

Approaching it from the road, the camp emerged as an extraterrestrial design, an out-of-this-world experience: following the contour of barren meadows and covered by a light canopy of visible dust were interminable rows of blue tarp tents that designed a seemingly endless labyrinth, stretching to the horizon. UNHCR employees originally from Gabon, Sierra Leona, and Rwanda itself cordially welcomed us into their facility and explained how they managed the flow of people in and out. To be precise, camp entry is reasonably tight, reducing the possibility of infiltration by *Interahamwe* militia (cf. footnote 2), but the exit is loose. People could leave the camp at will, but to go where? Back to Congo and its chaos? Into Rwanda, an arid country with a 0.4% of irrigated cropland, a GDP per capita half of that of Bolivia? Or perhaps neighboring Lesotho, where 60% of the population lives below the poverty line and 42% of children under five years old are malnourished? After living in the camp for years, most refugees seemed settled into considering the camp as a temporary-but-indefinite setting, where at least they receive food, shelter, health care, and live in a low-risk environment. Their future seemed not to include their own lives, but only those of their children: The camp's school system, impressive for its extension and robustness, features a broad program of elementary and secondary education in dozens of solid buildings—contrasting with the provisional nature of the refugees' tarp tents—and even the promise of university scholarships for excelling students.

We toured the camp, starting at its common open market, with a meager display of turnips, potatoes, cigarettes, and soap, and, behind it,

the endless rows of tents, interspersed by common toilet facilities and water facets. Children played soccer and ran around with great brouhaha in the broad spaces between some rows. Women looked at us with dead-pan expressions from their tents, while men, a minority in the camp, just walked around in small groups. We also visited the camp health facilities, several wooden huts both for out and inpatients, managed by four nurses and medics, three nursing assistants, and one part-time medical doctor shared with other camps.³ The health facilities served the camp's general population, but its seasoned personnel paid special attention to newcomers—detecting and treating malaria, infections, and child malnourishment and dehydration. Their medically sound protocols were highly pragmatic, with hand-painted signs detailing treatments in *Kenyarwandese*—“During the first two days, if the symptoms are X, then do this; during the following two days, do that...”

We drank cold drinks—dry, very hot weather is the rule—while chatting with the staff in a mixture of English and French, genuinely praised them for their extraordinary work, and returned along the bumpy road back to Kigali. The dust behind our vehicle soon erased the eerie vision of a labyrinth in the middle of nowhere and of people suspended in time, prisoners of their fate while blessed to be alive, hoping for a better life for their children, waiting not knowing very well for what, dreaming of returning home while the world they knew disintegrated, while the world we know continues to offer them little acts of kindness and enormous acts of indifference.

As we were leaving, flooded with admiration for the way UNHCR carried on its daunting mission, I was musing on how much the course of regional wars has changed over time, and the potential impact of those changes on the agency's mission. It may be the case that the UNHCR, like

with so many other institutions, will be confronted with the task of evolving new ways of providing its services, balancing the reality of both short and long-term stays with the need not to relieve the pressure on the international community to provide security in the regions from where these people come.

How could one design, I asked myself, camps that served both the short-term needs and the pragmatic reality of long-term stay? In an attempt at answering that question, I envisioned some first steps:

- Redesign camps not in rows of tents but in clusters of perhaps ten dwellings, opening inward towards a common space, recreating a small village. Offer those dwellings to families that know each other from before, or those with whom they share a language or even an ordeal, so as to facilitate the steady social networking central to fostering resilience and well being. In fact, urban planners/ architects should be brought on board so as to re-design refugee camps that would maximize their potential for communal living-friendliness
 - Develop educational programs also for adult refugees aimed at general education, health-related issues, and even a basic orientation to sociopolitical issues so as to provide them with a broader context for their own plight
 - Entice refugees, from the beginning, to participate in collective activities, from music making to artisan skill-building, including the development of some steady production of their own native arts and crafts, connected in turn with a fair-price crafts venture that would sell their products abroad. That would add meaning, connections, and a sense of shared endeavor; provide them with a project for day-to-day; and enhance their skills in a remunerated future-oriented activity, crucial both when they happen to return or to resettle, and if they end up in one

of those protracted waiting, interminable even in the heaven of the refugee camp.

In sum, I was musing, refugee camps may need to be somewhat rethought (without requiring in this effort a major shift in the agency's current overall goals and process nor in its tight budget) , so as to allow the integration of long with short term needs while remaining faithful to UNHCR current mandate.

By the dawn of 2006, the picture on refugees has not improved. 200,000 refugees from Darfur have been pouring into Chad, over 2 million Afghani refugees are still living in refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan, other 2 million refugees from different parts of the world are seeking harbor in Germany, Tanzania and the United States, while new or renewed conflagrations keep on uprooting new streams of defenseless and resourceless civilian populations away from their homeland.⁴ And, for those living in the camp we visited, the violence in East Congo continues unabated, and the flow of new refugees far exceeding the flow of people in process of repatriation. In sum, they are still living in limbo.

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¹ This team, led by Antonia Chayes and Martha Minow, included Eileen F. Babbitt, Cynthia Burns, Sara Cobb –currently the Director of the Institute of Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University--, Brian Ganson, Laura McGrew, Mark Sommers,

and myself. A description of the project can be found in Chayes A and Minow M, Eds. (2003): Imagine Coexistence: Restoring Humanity after Violent Ethnic Conflict. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

² This figure amounts to only 5% of the 330,000 Congolese refugees from the DRC who are spread throughout neighboring countries, and a minuscule figure, considering the 1.8 million persons internally displaced within the Congo itself, and the estimated 3.8 million Congolese who have died from easily preventable diseases and malnourishment resulting from the disruption of health service, agriculture and infrastructure and from refugee displacement as a result of that conflict.

The complexity of the political situation in eastern Congo that led to that diaspora is mind-boggling: in an attempt at controlling (and looting) this resources-rich region, the territory is roamed by confronting military forces from the central government of DRC, Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, Sudan and Angola. To this list should be added disaffiliated bands of marauders –mainly armed groups from other countries in the region that became “independent agents” when their central governments ceased paying their soldiers—and the *Interahamwe*, a force composed by large contingents of the Rwandese Hutu militias responsible for the 1994 Rwandese genocide who subsequently escaped to the neighboring Congo and were in turn rearmed by the DRC to contain the Rwandan [Tutsi-based] army's border threat, becoming a player of their own in that scene. In turn, the regional jigsaw puzzle of refugees displaced from one country to another is equally complex: in addition to the Congolese who fled into Rwanda and other neighboring countries, tens of thousands of people escaped from Rwanda in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide and remain in exile in neighboring countries, and the same happens with more than 800,000 refugees from Burundi who fear returning to that strife-torn nation, with countless Sudanese refugees escaping to other countries, and so on.

³ This health provider/inhabitant ratio, appalling by US standards, fits the national profile of Rwanda, with 0.018 physicians per 1000 inhabitants, translated into a national total of 160 physicians for their 8 million inhabitants, with an average life expectancy of 40 years.

⁴ ⁴ Sites consulted for accuracy of data in this article include <http://www.globalsecurity.org/>, <http://www.unhcr.ch>, <http://www.unicef.org>, <http://www.aacn.nche.edu>, <http://www.usaid.gov/>, <http://www.internal-displacement.org>, <http://www.cdc.gov> (specifically IERHB); and <http://en.wikipedia.org/>