

# **Refugees in The Gambia; When You Leave Everything Behind**

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## **Introduction**

This was my second time participating in The Gambia field studies program. I was more comfortable dealing with controversial topics, and my studies had become more focused since my last visit. As a political science major, I have studied various conflicts throughout my college career. Since The Gambia has seen little political conflict since the seventies, it has become a host country for refugees fleeing conflicts in neighboring countries. I wanted to talk to some of the refugees in The Gambia about their lives as refugees, to hear their stories, and learn about conflicts through people who have survived them and still await a peacetime homecoming.

The Gambia is host to 15,800 refugees, mostly Senegalese and Sierra Leoneans. Most of them are settled in urban areas. The registered refugee numbers in the camps in 2001 were 700 Sierra Leonean and 600 Senegalese. The aid received from the government and NGOs includes health aid, education, agriculture, and income-generating trade programs within the camps (information from UNHCR 2001 report).

## **UN Complex**

The UN Complex is in Cape Point about ten minutes by bike from the Friendship Hotel, past the Bakau produce market and the batik stands, along Atlantic Avenue, which runs parallel to the docks and wharfs where my brother was conducting his research. The big blue gates of the complex opened easily for me. The guards and attendants asked a few questions and I was allowed inside. A Gambian probably would have had to go through a lot more to get inside the UN Complex. I was visiting the Complex because I knew that the the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) would be an important part of my research.

The UNHCR closed their Gambian office a few years ago and has contracted the Anglican Mission to manage the refugee population in The Gambia. I wrote a request for audience with the UN resident representative to The Gambia, John Cacogne. I wanted to learn about why the UNHCR withdrew from The Gambia, what their role had been, what role they still played, and what Mr. Cacogne did as resident representative. However, I did not actually get an interview until the last few days of our trip. In the meantime, on a free morning, I would ride to the UN Complex, sign in, and read in the library for a few hours. I looked over the annual UNHCR reports, compilations of legislation relating to refugees, and manuals and guides for people working with refugees (see bibliography).

I took a special interest in two things. First of all, I wanted to learn about the entrepreneurial endeavors of refugees. Secondly, I wanted to learn more about

their reservations and motivations with regard to testifying at tribunals. The Milosevic trial was being discussed all summer, and it was becoming evident the testimony of refugees in a budding international court system could provide a powerful body of evidence.

### **What is a Refugee?**

As the nature of war changes, so does the definition of a refugee. UNHCR's founding mandate defines refugees as "persons who are outside their country and cannot return owing to a well-founded fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group" (UNHCR 2002 Statistics). As history dashes forward, there has been a profound shift from inter-state wars to internal conflict. The 1969 Organization of African Unity Refugee Convention and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration in Latin America expanded the definition of refugees to include those fleeing such civil wars. The 144 signatures on the 1951 Geneva Convention and/or the 1967 Protocol acknowledge the position of refugees based on this definition. Twelve million people fit the UNHCR definition of a refugee.

### **How Refugees Challenge the Host Country**

There are great costs in risks and resources taken on by a host country that accepts a refugee population. An influx of refugees means thousands and thousands of people without jobs, without families or friends or social support of any kind, who need to be fed, doctored, clothed, and sheltered. The refugees take a toll on the environment, cutting wood for fires that cook food and provide warmth, requiring a waste disposal system that is usually unattainable. They camp – by the thousands, sharing everything, which is mostly nothing, from food, to tools, to disease. Residents of the host country might see a mass of people living off of their country, contributing little in return, representing a sort of vacuum for charity, government attention, and other resources. The huge influx of an eager labor force drives wages down and prices up. One solution to this problem is to spread the refugees out more evenly, in smaller groups that are less likely to have a harsh impact on a specific region.

There is also an entire network of political and economic risk that becomes involved in accepting a refugee population. Refugee camps can be targets for attacks, the host country itself can become the enemy of a neighboring state by harboring "dissidents." Some refugee camps need police or military protection because it is not uncommon that a large, poorly planned camp, or even just an especially poor one rouses the animosity of citizens of the host country. Camps can also be attacked by their persecutors from the home country, crossing borders or attempting to involve the host country in the conflict, which creates another element of risk in accepting a refugee population.

### **Interview with John Cacogney**

The day before our departure, I interviewed Mr. Cacogney for about an hour. The United Nations Resident Representative is from Kenya and had become involved in the UN through his studies in environmental policy. He has published several papers on the environmental impact of refugee camps. Cacogney told me about

his studies and his work. Because refugee camps are essentially temporary residencies, there is very little infrastructure. This means little if any access to running water, sewage and waste disposal. Most refugee camps are built on infertile land, making it very difficult for refugees to grow their own food, let alone cash crops. The camps thus have a leeching effect on the local environment, depleting the soil, producing waste, using the cheapest resources up very quickly, and unable to offer much in return to the local economy.

Mr. Cacogne briefly discussed programs that are designed to counteract the negative impacts of refugee camps. There are restrictive laws on what refugees can take from the surrounding environments (for example, firewood) and there are initiatives for cleanups and waste management. However, the most effective programs tend to be entrepreneurial. Some camps try to train some of the refugees to earn money and become self-sufficient. Artisans might emerge where there is a tourist market. Profits can also be generated in the service industry. UNHCR and other organizations might send seeds and gardening tools to camps where people want to farm their own food. They can grow enough to feed their families and then sell any surplus to bring in money for clothing, medical care, education, and shelter.

The problem with these programs is that there is rarely a market for the goods that refugees are able to produce. Walking down the streets of the Bakau area, it is more than evident that there are more than enough taxi drivers, vendors, artisans, and produce stands. Small-scale, private business is writhing with competition in The Gambia, leaving little opportunity for foreigners with no capital to make a profit.

Mr. Cacogne informed me that on December 31, 2001, the UNHCR left The Gambia as part of a downsizing program. The organization is dependent on funding, and could not maintain its full size without an increase in funds that never came. Mr. Cacogne said the closing was unfortunate, but mentioned that he was working on a liaison office in Dakar that would provide legal and financial assistance to the Anglican Mission, which was busily filling the shoes of the UNHCR Gambia office. The Anglican Mission had already been active with refugees in The Gambia, working alongside the UNHCR for many years. The Anglican Mission office receives funding and some management from the UNHCR office in Dakar, Senegal and from various other UN budgets.

When I asked Mr. Cacogne about the way refugees were provided for and kept track of, he discussed registration and screening processes that the refugees go through. Most refugees register because there is a strong incentive to do so. It allows them to apply for resettlement, to move freely in the host country, and to gain access to a network of resources established by the UNHCR and now under the custodianship of the Anglican Mission Development Management. The UN has developed screening mechanisms that help determine who should have refugee status. (It is not uncommon for people seeking welfare to apply for refugee status.) The people who are hired or volunteer to work with the refugees are also screened. They deliver food, medicine, security, and other essentials to refugees. Unfortunately, I have heard many stories about guards and distributors who withhold these resources, sometimes only distributing them in return for sexual favors or bribes. Mr. Cacogne said that these problems were dealt with

through police and military force and stressed that such corruption is not easily warded off. The interview closed with an onslaught of phone calls, and I was on my way.

### **The Anglican Mission**

The Anglican Mission has a branch called Anglican Mission Development Management, which manages various development projects. Their refugee programs fall under this management. Rex King is the director of the refugee program hosted by the Anglican Mission. I interviewed Rex King to learn about how they managed the influx of refugees in The Gambia, especially without the UN office to share that responsibility.

Like most refugee programs, the Anglican Mission, and the UNHCR before them, helps refugees reach one of three goals. The options are 1) local integration, 2) voluntary repatriation, 3) resettlement. Local integration is fairly common in The Gambia. Refugees move in, settle, find homes, jobs, and stay. Refugees that have received an education are especially likely to find jobs in the host country and settle there. The Gambia College has hired a handful of refugees who qualify for teaching positions. Mr. King mentioned that some of the resettled refugees were quite successful, although we both knew that this was not the case for most of them.

Those who decide that it is safe for them to go back to their home country go through 'voluntary repatriation.' This is a truly frightening process, but can be the most constructive. A few thousand Sierra Leonean refugees were sent home from other parts of Africa during the summer of 2002, to find their homes destroyed, hoping to see the familiar faces of family and friends. Many were disappointed, and they are all taking a risk in hoping for stability for their country, community, and family. However, they will be the ones who rebuild the country when the time comes. The labor of the people who come home to pick up the pieces is invaluable to a post-war society.

Finally, there is the option of resettlement. Most refugees apply for resettlement because emigration seems to be an option that holds more promise and opportunity than resettlement or local integration. Resettlement is a process that sends a refugee to another country altogether, not to the home country or the host country. That means it is possible to be assigned to a developed country. People all over Africa desperately want out. Not all, but a great many, have pinned their aspirations to the prospect of leaving the continent, of moving to a developed country to study, to work, to send money to their families. Refugees clamor for this opportunity. After all, what do they have to lose? The number of refugees allowed to resettle in the United States has dropped since 9/11, as security measures impede movement into the country. Germany takes in a high number of refugees from Africa and the Middle East. No developed country has doors open to refugees; the process of resettlement is complex, costly, and selective.

After interviewing Mr. King, I went to the counseling center in Bakote, which was a division of the AMDM There, I met Mr. Jobe and Ms. Mendy whose dedication and hard work instantly commanded my respect and admiration. Mr. Jobe began

working as a counselor for UNHCR. Ms. Mendy was a medical social worker before she came to the Anglican Mission. The counseling center is where the refugees, especially those who have begun to resettle in the greater Banjul area, go to get approval for various medical, educational, and family aid. The refugees who came to that office were fortunate. They had an empathetic and experienced audience with Mr. Jobe and Ms. Mendy, who are helping them get food, medical care, education, and apply for repatriation, resettlement, or integration.

Mr. Jobe and one other volunteer founded the Anglican Mission Counseling Office in Bakote. At the time, they worked with UNHCR to establish a bureaucracy that vied for government funding to provide services for refugees, especially health care. Certain cases such as cardiac problems and broken bones cannot be treated in Banjul area and are flown to hospitals in Dakar, where specialists can be found. In Banjul, patients can have check-ups and minor injuries and illnesses treated. The bus ride from Basse to Banjul costs anywhere from fifty to two hundred dalasais, depending on the vehicle, so the counseling center arranges to have transportation for these visits funded. The office in Bakote can arrange home visits if patients are not well enough to travel. They also provide psychiatric services and trauma counseling. Steve Fox, an American psychologist working and studying in West Africa, told me that he was astounded at the number and severity of depression cases in the camps. People lose hope.

The office also deals with the security of the refugee camps and for individuals who are traveling. One of the most important tasks of the counseling center is to help refugees find jobs. They direct income-generating activities in the camps, such as farming, and direct employment for refugees outside the camp, jobs in education, vending, and a number of services in the private sector.

### **Stories of Displacement**

My real motive in choosing this project was to talk to refugees. My interviews with people like Mr. Jobe, Mr. Cacogne, and Rex King helped me understand the implications of being a host country to a refugee population, and how resources are organized to support incoming refugees. When I interviewed refugees, I did not bother with the list of questions I formulated for the other people I interviewed. I introduced myself, told them about the trip and about my research, and asked if they would be so kind as to share their story with me. I interviewed two teachers at the Gambia College, one young woman in Bakote, and three young men. Each story was incredible in its own right, and I will never forget any of them. I will share only two in detail, but I hope these experiences are as shocking to the reader as they were to me.

### **Adama**

The first refugee I interviewed did not want her name published, so I will call her Adama. Currently an English tutor with The Gambia College, Adama is a Sierra Leonean living in The Gambia, and one of the fortunate few refugees who have found steady employment in The Gambia. Adama began her story in 1997, with the coup that overthrew President Kabbah. She was the single mother of four, with a home in Freetown. Her surname had political implications that made

Adama and her family a primary target to the rebels. Upon hearing of the rebels' approach, the family took on fictitious names and began to run. They stayed at the home of Adama's sister and her family.

Looking at the ceiling Adama recalled a date – February 13, 1998, when the rebels came to her sister's home in Freetown. There were fifteen people in the house at the time. The rebels broke into the house at 1:30 in the morning and stayed until 8 a.m., placing the house under siege. They took Adama's sister and her husband upstairs, leaving the rest of the extended family to pray in the basement. The rebels would occasionally come into the basement and demand money, food, cars, among other things. One soldier took Adama by the neck and demanded that she turn over her daughter to the soldiers. The man evidently lost interest and Adama was not strangled to death, nor was her daughter "turned over." Two of Adama's nieces, however, were raped. Adama told me about the games the rebels played with her and her family. While looting the house, they would force the family to carry the goods out. They had Adama put a crate of dishes on her head and walk upstairs, threatening to shoot her dead were she to allow the crate to fall.

When the soldiers left, Adama and one of her daughters went upstairs to check on Adama's sister and brother-in-law. They found their bodies, shot through the head in their own bedroom. Adama, her family, and now her sister's family changed clothes quickly to avoid being recognized, and began to run again. They crossed a river to get to the hometown of some relatives. They spent two weeks in East End, doing all they could to avoid rebels. They had no food, nothing but what they and neighbors could scrape together. Every time they gathered anything of value, anything edible or sellable, it was bound to be taken by the rebels.

The rebels in East End would come around the town at night, looting, burning, and raping at any home that appeared deserted. Adama told me that her family and the neighbors would burn things, mostly tires, to keep the homes lit and stay awake all night singing, dancing, and drumming so that the rebels would not come. They gathered pots, pans, scrap wood and metal, to make music, and they sang songs of peaceful times until morning came. Then it was time to wander about and forage, with nothing but an empty belly and weeks of sleepless nights to fuel an endless search for food and rest. The house they were squatting in had been burned twice already. When news reached her family that the rebels had picked up machetes and were cutting people's arms to match their sleeves, they headed back to the river.

Anti-combatant forces had moved into the area, and people were flocking to the ECOMOG forces. Adama had to be carried to the ECOMOG camp, where she got word of her son, who had moved to The Gambia in 1997. He bought tickets for the family, got them into The Gambia, where they have settled and found jobs, or found tickets to Europe.

## **Mohammed**

Mohammed Dumbuya was also a resident of Freetown. In January of 1999, during Ramadan, the P.D.P. Presidential candidate Mbora died. Mohammed was

listening to the radio with his wife, hearing of rebel uprisings moving toward the capital.

He was with his immediate family when his cousins ran into the house, stripped naked and afraid for their lives. They could hear and smell the gunshots and smoke from the East End, where ECOMOG forces met the rebels. Mohammed, a young man at the time, ran to Guinea Conakry, where he found shelter among Brazilian missionaries.

He had traveled to the border with his sister, who had been shot and paralyzed. The missionaries did what they could for her, and she survived, but her sickness limited Mohammed's mobility. He crossed back into Freetown, to resettle until January, then embarked on a trip that took through at least five different towns, surviving all the while on the charity of missionaries who had set up camps along the way. On January 6, 1999, Mohammed was captured. The rebels had taken full control of the town where he was staying and demanded that everyone come out of their hiding places with a white cloth to show that they were unarmed and peaceful. At night, Mohammed and the people of the town built fires and made music to keep the rebels away, just as Adama had done while she was in hiding.

Mohammed's story had an aspect unique to the others, especially to the women. He had been forced by the rebels to participate in raids, road blocks, and other menial tasks that the rebels needed young men to do. He was forced to lead a raid into a local hospital, where wounded rebels would be treated by hostage doctors and nurses. Looking at him, I understood. Mohammed was very animated – he was always jumping out of his seat and gesturing, pulling off articles of clothing to show me scars from machetes, fire, and the butts of guns. He kept talking and gesturing so much that it took ten minutes for him to get his tank-top back on. He was young and strong, and would be among the first to serve rebel forces.

Because Mohammed had been used by rebels and then his validity as a refugee and an innocent citizen had faltered at the feet of aid. ECOWAS forces questioned him, beat and tortured him – as a rebel. He was in an execution line when his most unlikely rescue came from a guard who, for some reason, believed his cries that he was not a rebel. People recognized him from the roadblocks. They remembered his uniform, his face, his name, and they turned him over to whatever authorities were persecuting rebel forces.

The most striking part of Mohammed's story, however, was not the Catch-22 that he had struggled his way out of, but the way he was living at the time of the interview. He had finally made it from Guinea to The Gambia, and stayed at the refugee camp in Basse. He gathered wood for a while to sell to artisans, and set aside the profits to open a small boutique (a boutique is where soap, bread, eggs, drink, cooking oil, incense, and other low-priced goods can be bought along the roadsides). He had pictures of his wood-hauling bike, of his boutique, of his room in Basse, receipts from every medical visit he had made in Banjul. It was evident that Mohammed was investing all his energies in becoming independent and that it was paying off exruciatingly slowly.

## **A Warm Welcome**

The Gambia boasts a warm, welcoming population. Hospitality in The Gambia is a point of pride for most citizens, and a point of sale among tourism operators. I had to be careful to remember that, to refugees and other foreigners, and among Gambians themselves, relationships were different.

Most of the people that I talked about my project with – namely the hotel staff and taxi drivers-seemed quiet on the topic of refugees. There were a few who had a lot to say, but what I did hear was usually either a passé remark about a refugee that someone knew of who was living nearby, or an expression of some kind of reservation about refugees. The first type of remark led me to believe that a lot of refugees had integrated in urban areas and were leading lives that were either nondescript or that people did not want to rehash for me.

The warnings were stories of people who were posing as refugees, getting shelter, medical care, tickets out of Africa, or of refugees who had somehow bested their neighbors in visible wealth. Some refugees were infamous for living easier lives than some Gambians themselves. My own experience assured me that these people were around, but that they were few and far between, and talking to Gambians brought to light the double insult it was to be a poor Gambian watching a refugee receive benefits from the government that was working with such scarce resources. Mohammed said “You know, there are good people and bad people everywhere. Some people help, some look away, and some are angry.”

## **Conclusions**

In the end, my research lacked a few topics that I am still interested in. The question of having refugees testify at war crime tribunals was an issue that I would like to learn more about. I did learn that refugees who might testify at tribunals are likely too busy trying to rebuild their own lives or horrified at the idea of putting themselves in the public eye and denouncing a political or ethnic group in their home country. They fear permanent alienation, further persecution, and they fear for the lives of their families and loved ones. There needs to be a real incentive established for refugees to testify; moreover, ground rules are needed for the protection of refugees who serve as witnesses in international tribunals.

This research was difficult, not because the work was tedious or the information complex. The challenge was sitting in the room with someone who has nothing, knowing that in their eyes you have everything. You know where your family is, you know when your next meal will come, you have room in your life for things like aesthetics, gifts, travels, education, romance, and e-mail. And then to ask them to share with you these painful memories, the memories of events that took their entire lives away from them, is not easy. One of the women I interviewed never looked me in the eye. She left giant holes in her story, but I never asked her for details. She chose to leave them out, and I had no reason to coax them out. The stories spoke more poignantly than any data I could have collected. As a researcher, it is really easy to think you understand, and to be pitifully wrong. I believe that this is a major problem in government and policymaking today. There are people all over the world making rules that affect people they have never



met, regions they have never visited, families, pieces of earth they have never touched and probably never will.

So, to my reader, I say, Travel! Meet people, learn your position in the world, learn the true value of your assets. Your education, your laptop, your piles of pens and paper are not just for schoolwork. They represent a thousand opportunities that you will never see as anything but deskwork unless you see how the rest of the world lives. Everything to someone is nothing to someone else, so take advantage of that! Help people, in whatever ways you can. It is contagious, it is noble, and it is good for you.

Refugees are orphaned from their home countries. Some lose their families, friends, homes, communities. They live in new countries, usually very poor ones, that have no place trying to sustain them. They often do not share a language, and stand on the edge of seemingly insurmountable cultural barriers.

### **Acknowledgements**

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