

DISPATCH: Sudanese Refugees Eager to Vote, Uncertain about Returning Home

KAKUMA, Kenya – With their country at war far more often than at peace in the 54 years since independence, Sudan's people have often been on the move in search of security. For the southerners living in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, this week's referendum on independence represents the best chance for returning to their homeland, and they are turning out in droves.

Of the 8,000 to 9,000 southerners living in Kakuma, the Southern Sudan Referendum Commission registered 5,525 voters.

"I don't know anyone who didn't register, and everyone is going to vote," said Andrew, 28, who has lived in refugee camps since he fled South Sudan in 1989. He added that children account for the discrepancy between the registered voters and total number of southerners in the camp.

"The first days of voting have been so nice," Andrew said. "People lined up from early in the morning; they were dancing. I feel very happy, and I hope we soon hear that the country is separated and peaceful."

While the conditions in the camp are far from ideal or sustainable, many of the people Enough spoke to in Kakuma refugee camp in northwestern Kenya, about 65 miles from the Sudan border, said they were fortunate to be there.

The U.N. refugee agency, UNHCR, opened the camp in 1992 to accommodate what was mostly southern Sudanese fleeing the civil war that had restarted in 1983. Many countries in the region took in Sudanese refugees, but Kenya hosted the most. At its height, UNHCR provided services for 75,000 Sudanese in Kenya.

With the signing of the North-South peace deal in 2005, UNHCR oversaw the repatriation of tens of thousands of Sudanese. Still more returned home on their own. Today, Kakuma is the largest camp of Sudanese refugees outside of eastern Chad, which hosts people displaced by the conflict in Darfur.

While many people have repatriated to Sudan, there are numerous instances of Sudanese returning to Kakuma after finding that conditions at home were not as stable as they hoped. In the months prior to Sudan's referendum, UNHCR and the Kenyan government said they were preparing contingency plans in anticipation that if fighting in Sudan erupts around the vote or in subsequent months, Kenya will be one of the first to have to absorb an influx of refugees once again.

Circumstances that Brought Sudanese to Kakuma

Kakuma opened as the result of a war that, in the end, would kill 2 million people and displace another 4.5 million. Today, Kakuma's Sudanese residents carry with them personal testimony from Sudan's multiple internal conflicts, many of which result from longstanding government policies that leaves outlying regions in Africa's largest country marginalized, underdeveloped, and insecure.

Simon from Jonglei

Among the people Enough interviewed, it was a common experience to have been displaced more than once. Such was the case with Simon. Simon was a young boy when he and his parents left their village in Jonglei state and found refuge in a camp for internally displaced people, or IDPs, farther behind SPLM lines near the Ugandan border. But a Lord's Resistance Army attack on the camp set Simon on the run again. "The LRA were looking for able boys my age," he said. Simon headed across the border to Kakuma alone. He later learned his parents had returned to Jonglei. Now 27, Simon said he was in primary school the last time he saw his parents. "Up to now, I have just heard they are there [in Jonglei]. Whether they are safe or they are wounded, they are disabled or not, I don't know. But they are there, I heard they are there."

Anis from South Darfur

Anis was about 11 years old when *janjaweed* fighters came to his village in South Darfur. The militia on horseback began burning down huts and shooting people, so Anis tried to stay close to his uncle as they ran. But there was nowhere to go, and the militiamen caught up to them and shot his uncle. They spared Anis. "I was small, and the *janjaweed* didn't always kill kids," he said. He started running, eventually finding his way to Kalma IDP camp. After three years there, he moved to Kakuma with other young men who had been separated from their families.

Miriam from Jonglei

A middle-aged woman named Miriam, also from Jonglei state, said that she came to Kakuma after her husband and four children all died suddenly of a skin disease over the course of several weeks. In a remote part of southern Sudan, where there is little government presence, Miriam said that she struggled to survive without a family network. "I had heard that Kakuma was a good place for a woman who is all alone," she said. Life in Kakuma is good because she has a ration card and therefore knows that she will have enough food to eat, she said.

One Community in a Mini East Africa

"Over the years the face of Kakuma has changed a lot," said Emmanuel Nyabera, the spokesperson for UNHCR in Nairobi. As the Sudanese, the most populous community inhabiting the camp, began returning home after the signing of the 2005 peace agreement, the population at Kakuma began to drop – an encouraging scenario for a U.N. agency always looking for "durable solutions" to displacement crises. "We started cutting down on some of the services, and we thought that eventually we would close it. But the developments in Somalia changed things quite a lot," Nyabera said.

Fourteen different nationalities are currently represented in the camp, creating a microcosm of east and central Africa. The Somali neighborhood could be mistaken for a town, with its strip of Internet cafes, hair salons, juice stands, and general stores. In the Dinka neighborhood, lanky men lean against bicycle taxis waiting for customers. Young men from Darfur live together in a compound of small houses, many of them having traveled to Kakuma on foot alone or in small groups when the IDP camps in Darfur became too dangerous for able-bodied would-be fighters. Over time, UNHCR has found a fragile but workable arrangement for maintaining good relations and security within the camp and with the host community. Put in place like a Rubik's cube, pockets of people from the same ethnic group are given space to build their homes with careful consideration for which communities they border.

In addition to the sometimes volatile dynamics across the different refugee communities, the camp has also seen flare-ups with the host community in the area, Kenya's Turkana people, who are traditionally pastoralists who largely lived in isolation before the camp opened. "Even without the camps, the area has traditionally been insecure," Nyabera said. "There have been times when people from the host community have come in and attacked businessmen. We work closely with the Kenyan government, but security is always a main concern." UNHCR and aid groups working in Kakuma now provide some of the same assistance to the Turkana that they give to the refugees to help minimize tension. Curfews are strictly enforced, and the Kenyan police patrol throughout the night.

Strict rules set by the Kenyan government to deter immigration prevent refugees from moving freely within Kenya. So people await stability at home or news of permanent resettlement in a third country – both of which feel a long way off to many of the people Enough interviewed. "UNHCR is now my mother and my father," was the fatalistic phrase often uttered.

Outlook to the Referendum and Beyond

Until this year, the Sudanese refugee population in Kenya was steadily declining. But instability in the South prompted new Sudanese refugees and some former refugees to come to Kenya. [UNHCR noted](#) that as of October, 5,000 more Sudanese were seeking refuge or asylum in Kenya compared to a year ago. While the majority of new arrivals say they are fleeing inter-ethnic fighting in the South, uncertainty about the referendum has impacted returns. "There is some anxiety about the coming referendum in January, so this has also slowed down the [returns] process and we've seen even a few coming back because of this anxiety and fear," Nyabera told Enough. "This is a population of people who have seen a lot of trouble. They definitely don't want to take risks."

If worst comes to worst during the period following the referendum, UNHCR said as many as 100,000 southern Sudanese may flee to Kenya. Nyabera emphasized that this figure is an extreme and that the U.N. does not expect a worst-case scenario. However, it's better to be ready for the worst rather than be caught unprepared, he said.

An elderly man, who asked not to be named because he is involved in the polling process, offered this prediction for the upcoming months: "What I see after the referendum, there will be fighting. Because when somebody comes and takes something you have been eating, something very sweet, you will ask him, 'Why are you taking it away?' So you will do something bad for him. So this is what's going to happen [to South Sudan]."

As people watch and wait, they are eager to participate in the referendum. A young man working as a civic educator during voter registration said that people in Kakuma felt proud when they learned their opinion would be considered during the referendum. "They feel proud that they are being recognized and that the people of Sudan have not forgotten about them," he said. Since Sudanese in Kakuma were not eligible to vote in the April election, the referendum is the first time people in this community are participating in a formal polling process.

There is a cautious optimism in Kakuma that the referendum may eventually pave the way for them to return to a peaceful South. But after years of living as refugees, people did not express a great urgency to return, citing concerns that conditions in the South may get worse before they get better.

Some people are resolute that they will never return home because they are not convinced their lives would ever be different in Sudan or because they have nothing to return to. Others are hopeful and said they will watch what happens post-referendum and go back as soon as it looks safe. One young man mentioned staying at Kakuma to finish school because education opportunities in southern Sudan are limited. The ambivalence of the reactions to the question about returning to Sudan underscores the uncertain future for the country, even as a festive mood permeates the southern Sudanese community. A 14-year-old boy from Darfur who arrived at Kakuma alone two years ago said that at this point he can not imagine going home, but he added, "There is no way to plan for life."