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# THE REFUGEES AND THE DISPLACED IN AFRICA: A CHALLENGE TO CHRISTIANS

*Michael T. Katola*

*Michael Katola presents a sober picture of the refugees and displaced in Africa and the world who cry for a Christian response of compassion. He clearly points out from the Scriptures that God is deeply concerned about the suffering among aliens. This humanitarian task belongs to the Christian church. As Paul taught the Galatian Christians, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, **let us do good to all people**, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Gal. 6:10). Herein is real challenge for Christian churches in Africa and the world.*

## INTRODUCTION

Population mobility in Africa has been in existence for many centuries. People migrated to find security in the face of marauding neighbours or famine. Occasionally this gave rise to the subordination of some ethnic groups by others (Kibread 1983:11). It was also common for people to move from one place to another, practising shifting cultivation or in search of grazing areas and potable water both for human beings and livestock. Another major cause for mass movement was slavery. One is therefore led to state that the refugees and the displaced have always existed in Africa although history has not known refugee problems of such magnitude as during the present century.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Report (UNHCR 1993) and Maloney (1995) give statistics showing the number of refugees in various countries of the world. The data presented shows that there are about 18.2 million refugees in the world. This implies that an average of 10,000 people become refugees in every single day throughout the year. The UNHCR

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further shows that some 24 million people are displaced within the borders of their own countries. Once this painful sum is added to that of the refugees, roughly one in every 130 people on earth has been forced to flee. This situation leads one to agree with Malander et. al. (1978:11) that the refugees and the displaced persons in the world constitute one of the biggest political and humanitarian tragedies of our time.

Kibreab (1983:23) shows that the number of African refugees was estimated at 4,000,000 in 1964. This number has drastically increased over time to about 20 million refugees including 15 million internally displaced persons (Kanyandago 1992:171).

The plight of refugees is a global problem. However, UNHCR (1993) observes that the refugee problems in Africa are the worst and the least known in the entire world. Aseka (1996) also says that some of the largest and most serious refugee problems of the world are found in Africa.

The African refugees are as varied as African people. They range from the good to the bad, from the educated to the uneducated, from the genuine ones to the liars, from poor nomads to presidents. In spite of these differences, all types of refugees are human beings with a right to life. They all need a chance to regain the dignity of being self-reliant and make a contribution to the development of their respective countries.

Eriksson et. Al. (1981) has classified refugees into seven groups. These groups can be narrowed down into two principal categories in the present-day Africa. The first category includes political refugees who are mostly urban dwellers and to a greater or lesser extent educated people. In the past, most of the political refugees came from the countries which were still under colonial yoke. But the political and social upheavals in independent Africa have now also contributed to the number of political refugees. The second category consists of men, women and children fleeing from war, from racial, religious or natural disasters.

For a number of refugees, the problem from which they are fleeing is a temporary one. Sometimes it may be a matter of months until they can go back home. But although all refugees initially expect to return home at some time, some of them find it almost impossible to return even after many years.

In situations where neighbouring countries import and export refugees, internally displaced people often intermix with refugees and suffering citizens who have not been forced to flee. The Hartishelk refugee camp in Eastern Ethiopia clarifies our argument. According to UNHCR (1993:25), the camp had

become one of the largest refugee concentration camps in the world with a population of 250,000 by 1993. The camp and the adjacent areas had Somalis and Ethiopians who had escaped the violence and disorder in their countries. The Ethiopians had been refugees in Somalia and were sent back home when conflict in Somalia reached alarming proportions after the crumbling of the Mengistu Mariam's regime. This diverse mix of refugees, returnees, internally displaced, drought affected locals and ex-soldiers faced harsh conditions of extreme deprivation and similar needs for assistance (UNHCR 1993:28).

A number of conferences to discuss the plight of the African refugees have been held in the past. In spite of this, the total number of refugees and the displaced continues to grow relentlessly. It is therefore opportune to examine the problems of the refugees and the displaced in a biblical context in order to make practical recommendations that would help in alleviating their problems.

## REFUGEES AND THE DISPLACED

In 1951, the office of the UNHCR was established to protect and aid refugees throughout the world (Sobel 1979, Maloney 1995). According to Melander (1979), the UNHCR has defined refugees as persons who have crossed an international border because of a well-founded fear of being persecuted. Such reasons include race, religion, nationality and membership in a political group. This legal definition of a refugee excludes those people who have been displaced for similar reasons but who have not crossed a border. In spite of this, the needs of the internally displaced people and those of the refugees are often the same. Maloney (1995) argues that if the number of the internally displaced people is added to that of refugees in the official sense, about 10 per cent of the total population of Sub-Saharan Africa is displaced.

The United Nations' (UN) definition of a refugee is too narrow to encompass the general African refugee situation. The Organisation of African Unity (O.A.U) (1969) defined a refugee as every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality (Melander 1978:93). The O.A.U definition is so broad that virtually everyone who has been displaced qualifies as a refugee. Added to this are self-exiled individuals who for the same reasons are forced to run away from their homes. Generally, these people share the fact that external circumstances force them to abandon their homes and flee to another place either within or outside their homeland. But as Kanyandago (1992) argues, one should exclude from this group those people who are obliged to flee their countries or homes for having committed crimes against individuals

or their countries.

## REASONS FOR FLIGHT

It is not the concern of this paper to discuss all the factors behind the flight of the refugees and the internally displaced people. Only a few of the salient factors are highlighted.

Many reasons for flight are given by different scholars. There is a category of people who argue that refugees are the result of bad luck, or that the supernatural powers are unhappy and no longer give security for the people, or that individuals move away from their homeland due to rumour-mongers. Maloney (1995) believes that such people create fears and anxieties even when there is no reason to get excited. Reliably, the refugee problem is caused by a types of persecution and discrimination based on tribal, or racial differences, ideological differences or even religious differences.

Most writers like Stein (1981) take the "tribal" factor as the main cause of the refugee problem in Africa. This view is based upon the assumption that the root cause of Africa's refugee problem is the arbitrariness of colonial boundaries. The borders created by colonialists are almost never coincidental with the areas inhabited by traditional ethnic groups or common linguistic patterns. In short, the various ethnic groups that were herded together within the boundaries of the colonial state were former enemies. Hence there was no way they could live peacefully together. Arguing along the same lines, Keller (1975) contends that a major cause of the problem of refugees in developing countries (Africa) is ethnicity. The refugees are victimised just because they happen to have a different ethnic identity than those exercising state power. This argument can be accepted when Rwanda is taken as a case in point. The inter-tribal rivalry between the majority Hutu people and the minority Tutsi has generated thousands of refugees fleeing to the neighbouring countries.

Wars, especially civil conflicts, which have almost become a fetish in some countries like Mozambique, Ethiopia, Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi and Somalia, result in mass flights. In Mozambique, for example, it has been estimated that more than a million people have been displaced by the war (Maloney 1995:11). Ordinarily, these civil conflicts begin due to favouritism, discrimination, bad governance and political excesses.

Many Africans are forced into exile because the land on which they live has become uninhabitable or is no longer able to support them. It is no coincidence that those countries of Africa which have been hit by soil erosion,

drought and other environmental hazards are also the major theatres of armed conflicts, recurrent famine and consequent refugee movements. UNHCR (1993) cites some of the countries in this category as the Sahel, Horn of Africa, Senegal, Mauritania, Ethiopia and Mozambique.

The root cause behind mass flight in Africa is the violation of human rights. Aseka (1996) and Kinoti (1994) have clearly shown how the African governments themselves are responsible for these violations. According to Hughton (1988:17), the UN declaration of human rights proclaims the right to:

- life
- freedom from subjection to torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, or slavery, servitude or forced labour.
- liberty and security of the person,
- fair trial,
- freedom from retroactive criminal laws or punishments,
- respect for private and family life, home and correspondence,
- freedom of thought, conscience and religion,
- freedom of expression, peaceful expression and association,
- an effective remedy against officials who violate these rights,
- the enjoyment of these rights without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status.

Today, many people in Africa are held in bondage which denies all or most of the UN declaration. In fact, countries involved in civil wars and conflicts can hardly guarantee even the basic human rights of food, clothing and shelter. This causes undue suffering and pain.

### **PROBLEMS FACING THE REFUGEES IN AFRICA**

Most of the refugees and the displaced in Africa are found in poor countries which can hardly assure the well being of their own citizens. In those countries, the refugees live in conditions of extreme insecurity, abject poverty, isolationism and misery.

Presently, refugees are vulnerable. Many have left their homeland without their personal effects. Often, families have been torn apart without any surety that they will be re-united. As foreigners, refugees are often subjected to police brutality. Therefore, refugees deserve special attention despite the fact that they are not the only poor of the day.

In many instances, refugees are herded into camps where life is pathetic. Maloney (1995:21-22) highlights the misery faced by the refugees in the camps. He shows that death rate in the camps is high due to poor health condition.

In Dagahaley, Ifo and Hagadera camps in Kenya refugees suffer from attacks and rapes by gangs of bandits. *Daily Nation* (November 29, 1997:8) reports that 78 rapes had been reported between January and November 1997. These rapes occurred when women left the camps to fetch firewood.

With regard to those who are internally displaced, life is no better. In 1991, the Sudan government began to send the southerners back to their homes in lorries. They were only taken part of the way and left to cover the rest on foot. This callous disregard by the government for the welfare for his people was pitiable. But as if that was not enough, the government demolished shanties around Khartoum occupied by displaced people and forced the people to desert areas outside Khartoum where there was virtually nothing.

Due to sudden and involuntary uprooting, some of the refugees flee with no other possessions than the clothes they have at the time of flight, while others exchange their cash possessions at a very low exchange rate. In view of this, the only option left for refugees to earn their daily bread is by availing themselves of wage labour. Sadly, the available literature shows that the refugees are mercilessly exploited by the rich section of the local population. But just as a drowning person grasps anything within reach, refugees accept wages far below the value of their labour.

Lack of educational opportunities is a problem that faces the refugees, particularly the children. In the Eastleigh Estate of Nairobi, which has been baptised, "little Mogadishu," the many Somali refugees attest to this fact. In the estate, school going children are seen roaming around without any hope of ever going to school. This affects them negatively because their chances of climbing the academic ladder is locked out.

## **BIBLICAL ASPECTS OF THE REFUGEE PROBLEM**

The Bible indisputably emphasises love and concern for the poor and the stranger. In the Old Testament, for example, one can manifestly see how Abraham's family left Haran and became refugees in Canaan (Gen. 12:1-9). Abraham's descendants had to depend on the hospitality of aliens for their survival. Later in life, God guided Abraham's generation in setting up laws which guided their lives and which included protection and care for the poor and the stranger. A few examples of the laws are shown hereunder:

"Do not ill-treat or oppress a foreigner; remember that you were foreigners in Egypt" (Exod. 22:21).

"Do not go back through your vineyard to gather the grapes that have fallen; leave them for the poor people and foreigners" (Lev. 19:10).

"Do not ill-treat foreigners who are living in your land. Treat them as you would a fellow Israelite, and love them as you love yourselves" (Lev. 19:33-34).

"Do not deprive foreigners and orphans of their rights; and do not take a widow's garment as security for a loan" (Deut. 24:17).

"For all time to come, the same rules are binding on you and on the foreigners who live among you. You and they are alike in the Lord's sight" (Deut. 15:15).

The Old Testament prophets were equally concerned about the plight of the poor and the stranger. The following verses illustrate this:

"No one in the city honours his parents. You cheat foreigners and take advantage of widows and orphans" (Ezek. 22:7).

"Stop taking advantage of aliens, orphans, and widows" (Jer. 7:6).

It is evident from the Old Testament verses quoted above that God is interested in defending the rights of the poor and the stranger. God is emphatic that the two groups of people should be clothed and fed. They are portrayed as God's people who deserve attention and care.

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament is full of many examples that show love and concern for the poor and the stranger. In Matthew 2:13-23, for example, the infant Christ and his family are portrayed as refugees fleeing into Egypt. Thus, Jesus can be identified very closely with refugees. It is no wonder that there was so much concern with the poor and the oppressed, the stranger and the outcast in his entire life. Jesus' message of freedom, as recorded in Luke 4:18-19, is perhaps the single greatest contribution to human rights in history.

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."



Refugees, doubtless, are among those poor and needy whom Jesus wants us to regard as our brothers and sisters. James 1:27 defines the essence of practical Christianity to include care for the poor of the day. "What God the Father considers to be pure and genuine religion is this: to take care of orphans and widows in their suffering and to keep oneself from being corrupted by the world." And although Jesus came seeking every individual, his ministry had a significant impact on the poor (Matt. 11:5). This is very clear in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-27) which defines our neighbour as anyone who crosses our path and is in need, regardless of colour, creed or country of origin. Paul sums it up in Galatians 6:10, "So then, as often as we have the chance, we should do good to everyone, and especially to those who belong to our family in the faith".

From the foregoing, one can affirmatively say that the phenomenon of refugees in Africa is a wound against Africa in particular and against humanity in general (Kanyandago 1992:177). But since Christ identified himself with the poor and the needy, we can assert that God is present in a special way with those who suffer, particularly the refugees and the displaced. Evidently, God speaks to us in and through the refugees and the displaced as they cry to us for assistance and help in the changing conditions which caused them to flee their homeland.

### **A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO THE REFUGEES AND THE DISPLACED IN AFRICA**

The UNHCR is perhaps the most influential inter-governmental organisation dealing with refugees in Africa. However, Kanyandago (1992:177) argues that the contribution of outsiders must never overshadow the fact that solutions to problems have to come from the people concerned. Besides the international organisations churches are concerned with the problems of African refugees. These include the All African Conference of Churches (AACC) and the variety of Roman Catholic organisations.<sup>1</sup> According to Ericksson et.al. (1981) the other church organisations originating from overseas but operating through local ecclesiastical institutions are the Lutheran World Federation, Lutheran World Service, Church World Service, Catholic Relief Service and the World Council of Churches (W.C.C.). The other major religious faiths in Africa have no programmes of great importance if any at all in this regard.

In a number of ways, the contributions of the organisations named

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<sup>1</sup> There are also many evangelical relief organisations including *World Vision*, *Compassion*, *Food for the Hungry*.

above are indispensable since they provide the refugees with the basic needs of food, shelter, clothing and medical care. Despite this, the refugees also require the compassion of Christians to assist them recover from the hardships and agony they have faced. Thus, Christians should not only recognise that refugees are human beings created in the image of God but should respect them and give them hope for the future.

The sure way of eradicating the refugee problem in Africa is by dealing with the root cause to the refugee problem. Maloney (1995:33) says that the church calls us to analyse critically the causes of their forced displacement and to reflect prayerfully on what they, as contemporary expression of God's "word", say to us in and through their suffering. In this regard, if war is one of the causes, Christians can be in the forefront in educating the masses on the need for non-violent conflict resolutions. This would be a sure way of bringing peace in the continent. Closely related to this, Christians, especially the church leaders, would do a lot of good if they would consentize their governments and the people on the need for promoting human rights. Refugees have a right to food, shelter, education, freedom from religion, and all other rights which the rest of us enjoy. Nevertheless, Christians have been complacent to human rights violations, yet God wants them to work on changing unjust situations that cause untold suffering from being uprooted. This implies that Christians must add to their praying for peace by becoming involved practically in working for peace.

The problem of refugees and the displaced call for Christians to give a hand towards both short and long-term solutions. The assistance referred to could be in the form of reading materials, food or clothes which can be forwarded through one's local church to refugees and the displaced people. Christians can also invite some of the displaced into their communities and share their testimonies with them. This would not only be a sign of friendship and solidarity with the refugees but would make the latter feel respected and loved. It is therefore evident that Christ, who identified himself with the refugees, speaks to Christians and invites them to reach out to them in their need for physical assistance and human relationships. Thus, Christians can be healers in these moments of greatest need for troubled groups. Such actions would show that Christians understand that refugees and the displaced are not victims of bad luck but are victims of forces which have historical and cultural roots and which are beyond their control.

## CONCLUSION

The subject of refugees and the displaced is high on the list of international concerns to day, not only because of its humanitarian significance but also because of its impact on peace, security and stability. The concern is commendable because the world cannot reach a new world order without effectively addressing the problem of human displacement.

In Africa, refugees are forced to flee their homeland because of armed conflicts, violence, severe disruptions of public order or widespread abuses of human rights. The refugee problem is, therefore, of our own making and not an accidental phenomenon. The life led by refugees and the displaced is stressful, humiliating, and insecure. They have no source of income and so they rely on other people for their basic needs. Christians should, therefore, transcend praying and identify themselves with the refugees and the displaced people the way Christ identified himself with the poor and the needy. By so doing Christians will be applying the gospel to the world situation.

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