

## Living on the edge – refugee and migrant workers in Africa

*Conflicts within or between African States and the precariousness of life in many African countries are leading to mass displacements of people. Among them are workers who are by no means assured of a job in their new surroundings. The problems of refugee or migrant workers are becoming more and more pressing across the continent.*

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David Ndachi Tagne

Journalist

Yaoundé

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The 2000 *Global Report* of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees defines *refugees* as “persons recognized as refugees under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, and/or the 1969 Organization of African Unity (OAU) Convention, in accordance with the UNHCR Statute, as well as persons granted a humanitarian status and those granted temporary protection.”<sup>1</sup> *Asylum-seekers*, on the other hand, are “persons whose application for refugee status is being processed according to the asylum procedure or who are otherwise registered as asylum-seekers”. The specialist terminology also distinguishes *internally displaced persons (IDPs)*, namely “persons who are displaced within their country and to whom UNHCR may extend protection and/or assistance pursuant to a special request by a competent organ of the UN”.

Beyond this labyrinth of more or less formalized displacements and registration categories, it should be noted that many population movements are in fact clandestine. Certainly, in a region like West Africa, such displacements between countries cause fewer problems, due to the free movement of people and goods, but in Central Africa, although the same prin-

ciple has been accepted by the six countries of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC), clashes between expatriate and local workers are regularly reported in the press.

Alongside the official data from countries or institutions, a better overview of the problems facing migrant or refugee workers can be gained from the media or from reports that circulate informally.

The primary concepts underlying the present article are those of *migrant workers* and *refugee workers*. Closer analysis will show that these two groups constitute very different realities. Both relate to workers who have jobs or are seeking jobs in a country or region other than the one where they originated, but people in the first group move of their own volition, whereas those in the second have left their original surroundings involuntarily and will have to seek new employment, either on their own or with the support of the relevant bodies.

While on the topic of concepts and categories, mention should be made of the very special case of *child workers*, who are generally subject to involuntary migrations. The most active source of child labour is West Africa, where children are taken from Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, Nigeria or Togo to work in the

fields or in domestic service either within the same subregion or in Central Africa and more specifically in Gabon. These children, who are real slaves of our times, often do not even benefit from the fruits of their toil. Sold by their relatives and then placed with an employer or an illegal guardian, child labourers are subjected to a form of exploitation that is now condemned by the international community, notably the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Labour Office (ILO). An estimated 800,000 children are engaged in the worst forms of child labour in Cameroon alone, in the context of internal migrations within the country. For Africa as a whole, the number of children subject to trafficking and to the worst forms of child labour is put at 80 million.<sup>2</sup>

### Impact of armed conflicts

In Africa, movements of refugees have for the most part been caused by the outbreak, pursuit or resumption of armed conflicts. In East Africa and the Horn of Africa, despite negotiations with the Organization of African Unity and UN mediation efforts, fighting broke out again in May 2000 between Eritrea and Ethiopia. As a result, 97,000 Eritreans fled, mostly to Sudan, while another million had to move within the country. In Sudan itself, clashes between the army and opposition forces caused other internal displacements, plus a regular exodus into neighbouring countries. Still in the Horn of Africa, Somalia counted some 45,000 refugees on its territory in 2000, while thousands of Somalis, who had long been refugees in other countries, had to give up all hope of ever returning home.

The Great Lakes region has also suffered from internal and international conflicts, marked by repeated violations of the Lusaka ceasefire agreement and the bogging down of the peace processes. More than 100,000 people fled the fighting in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). For the most part, they have gone to the Republic of the Congo, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia. A reported 1.5 mil-

lion people have been displaced within the DRC itself. This global jigsaw of displaced people also includes the 80,000 Burundians who have now taken refuge in Tanzania, which already hosted another 500,000 Burundian refugees. Add to that the 10,000 Rwandese in Tanzania and Uganda, the 10,000 Ugandans in the DRC, the 300,000 Angolans displaced across their own country and the 80,000 others who have gone abroad, notably to Zambia.

In West Africa, similar migrations have been happening in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea Conakry, Liberia and Sierra Leone. But there is one difference between West Africa and the Horn of Africa or southern Africa. In West Africa, we are dealing here mainly with migrant workers. Elsewhere, they are refugee workers, with or without specialized skills. It should also be noted that population movements are sometimes due to natural causes, such as severe drought, particularly in the case of nomadic herders.

### Search for survival – chasing a mirage?

Whether fleeing a conflict, drought or flood, or travelling in search of a job, all of these migrants are chasing after survival. It is noticeable that similar migrations take place when major construction projects are launched or a country experiences a development boom. For example, large-scale labour migration took place when work started on the *Chad-Cameroon pipeline* in December 2001. There were also massive migrations into *Equatorial Guinea*, where the oil bonanza opened up big new construction sites.

For the oil pipeline project, the initial labour recruitment needs within Cameroon were put at 5,000 workers. Migrations have occurred from other regions of the country towards the pipeline site. This is bound to produce conflicts with the local inhabitants. Both the oil consortium and the authorities have received petitions expressing the "frustration" of local youth over the "importation" of labour. On the same project, similar ill-feeling has been noted in

the Doba region of southern Chad. In this case, the main butts of local resentment are the Cameroonian workers who have come into the area in search of jobs, and whom the employers generally consider to be more productive. Some of them were sent back to Cameroon, despite CEMAC's commitment to the free movement of people and goods.

A similarly bitter lesson was learned when Cameroonians and other nationals of the subregion started pouring into Equatorial Guinea. Incidents have frequently occurred during identity checks, to the point where 150 Cameroonians sought refuge in their own embassy in Malabo for a week in August 2002. It took full-scale diplomacy to defuse the situation and even then, about 50 Cameroonians opted to go home. The embassy chartered a ship to take them back. When the present author was in Malabo in April 2002, preparing a series of reports for Radio France International, a Cameroonian told him quite bluntly: "We come here in search of survival, because we earn a lot more here than we would get for the same work in Cameroon. But we suffer assaults by the police, who generally rob us, whether our papers are in order or not. Sometimes, we're obliged to leave the originals of our official documents at the embassy for safekeeping and just carry photocopies around with us, because sometimes the policemen are so furious when they find that you're legal that they actually tear your papers up."

Recently, the problem of *migrant artisans* was highlighted by the drama of the Beninese fishermen in Libreville, Gabon, whose equipment and houses were destroyed prior to their repatriation. In a dispatch from its Geneva bureau, Agence France Presse wrote: "Seven hundred and twenty Beninese fishermen and their families, who had been left homeless in Libreville, have been repatriated by Libreville over the past few days, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) announced in Geneva on Tuesday. The operation, coordinated by the IOM, consisted of four flights by the Belgian air force, in cooperation with the authorities of the two

African countries, IOM spokesman Jean-Philippe Chauzy told a press briefing. The fishermen were left homeless after the Gabonese authorities demolished the huts that they had built illegally and in which they had been living, along the coastline near Libreville."<sup>3</sup>

So almost 1,000 people who thought they had found both a foothold and a living, and who had in some cases been in Gabon for several decades, suddenly found themselves homeward bound, empty-handed and with no assurance of any basic provisions at the end of their journey. According to the Gabonese authorities, the shanties were demolished and their inhabitants expelled in a search for suspected offenders. "The fishing boats and equipment have been stored in a safe place and will later be returned to their owners, probably by sea," the IOM's Pierre King declared after the expulsions. It was King who supervised the whole operation. "We have authorized each of these people to take with them 50 kilograms of personal effects," he added, "so that they won't be completely bereft when they arrive home." When the returnees reached Cotonou, the Benin Red Cross arranged temporary accommodation in two schools.

These are a few classic examples of a quest for survival that ends in a sad return to the point of departure. Refugees, on the other hand, are often feared in their host countries. They are all too readily seen as people who were bandits, militiamen or rebel soldiers back home and have come to "cause shit over here", to quote a senior official of one host country.

## Migrant professionals

Migrants in the professions are a specific category with specific problems. Doctors, professors, engineers and other professionals may leave their countries either because of political difficulties or simply in search of a better life elsewhere. This may well be a "brain drain", as analysed by André Linard in *Labour Education* No. 123.<sup>4</sup> However, it is understandable, particu-

larly in the case of gifted Africans moving to the West in search of a better reward for their knowledge and know-how. The attractions of such migration, Linard writes, are mainly “better pay and better working conditions”. But a brain that moves from one African country to another receives no such guarantees and advantages. Newly arrived doctors are not automatically recognized as competent. In fact, they will sometimes first have to take tests in order to gain recognition from the authorities or the medical council, depending on local regulations. Failing which, they may have to work clandestinely. And that does not pay well. Engineers are in a similar position, and may become the targets of xenophobic outbursts.

It should also be emphasized that an African migrant worker and a Western development worker with equivalent skills will not generally receive equal treatment so far as pay is concerned. So even intellectual migrant workers, with internationally recognized qualifications, have absolutely no guarantee of happy integration in another country. And in the case of harmonious integration, everything can suddenly be called into question if there is a change of regime. Côte d’Ivoire after the death of Houphouët Boigny is a case in point.

### The solution: repatriation or regional regrouping?

Both for migrants and for refugees in Africa, work is a chancy business. Whether

children or adults, peasants, cattle breeders or intellectuals, they experience constant rejection from the host societies, despite Africa’s legendary hospitality. Even when regional regulations promote them, these types of integration keep running into barriers. So is repatriation a solution for these men and women who thought that the grass was greener on the other side? Not necessarily. What is needed, within the countries of origin themselves, is reception and re-employment policies, together with effective initiatives to overcome unemployment. The reintegration of refugees in the aftermath of a conflict is one of the most difficult tasks tackled by the UNHCR, as its *2000 Global Report* recognizes.

At a time when everyone is talking about globalization, the construction of bigger entities in Africa, the dismantling of barriers and selfishness, could be of more help than political or humanitarian speeches in solving the problems encountered every day by refugee and migrant workers.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR: *2000 Global Report*, Geneva, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Figures published by the ILO Office in Central Africa in January 2002 as part of the *Red Card to Child Labour* campaign.

<sup>3</sup> AFP dispatch from Geneva, dated 13 August 2002 (unofficial translation from the French).

<sup>4</sup> ILO: “The brain drain: losing one’s head”, in *Labour Education* No. 123, pp. 47-50.