

**Sudanese Demonstration in Cairo:
Different Stands and Different Opinions**

Presented by

Assad Khalid Salih
The American University in Cairo

as part of the panel discussion

**Sudanese Refugee Protest in Cairo:
Community Dynamics and Broader Implications**

**The 4th Annual Forced Migration Postgraduate Student Conference
University of East London
March 18-19, 2006**

Introduction:

The historical relationship between Sudan and Egypt harkens back to Pharonic and Nubian civilizations. As a consequence of both Turkish and British occupation, Sudan and Egypt have a shared experience of colonial rule and therefore share commonalities. During the period of occupation, many Sudanese and Egyptians settled in each others countries and many became citizens of both countries or intermarried.

The relationship was, for many decades, peaceful and harmonious. However, the tranquility was disrupted in the 1980s when, as a consequence of the seizure of power by Pro-Islamists in Sudan, the relationship between the countries became one of tension. Relations deteriorated further after the Sudanese Government was accused of the assassination attempt on the Egyptian President Mubarak in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa in June 1995.

Before that date, very few Sudanese were coming to Egypt formally seeking refuge, as Sudanese were treated on an equal footing as Egyptians. However, after the assassination attempt Sudanese lost their special status as Palestinians had before them, and the Egyptian authorities issued a decree to deprive Sudanese of their privileges. Henceforth-newcomers had to acquire residence, which were not required before that decision.

What lead to the to the demonstration:

Because of the intensity of the war in Southern Sudan, which escalated along side conflict in the East, and the political suppression of opposition parties in the North many

refugees started to come to Egypt. Additionally, Egypt reputation as promoting resettlement in the Europe, Northern America and Australia created a strong pull factor.

Most of the "newcomers" were Southern Sudanese fleeing the war or the difficulties circumstances of living as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) mainly around the Sudanese Capital Khartoum. Also, many students fled to avoid military conscription, as many young people were sent to the war zones. UNHCR statistics show that number of refugees started to rise gradually in the second half of 1990s, reaching its height in 1999¹. These refugees had to go thorough UNHCR's Refugee Status Determination (RSD), which was conducted in many cases by unqualified officers. As a result, many applicants were denied leading to appeal and closed file. The result was depression and frustration among those refugees. In addition, because of the increasing number of refugees, and subsequent backlog the RSD process took longer and longer and waiting for an interview became a lengthy ordeal. In many cases that lasted for more than one year. Thus many Sudanese refugees found themselves in limbo. Those with closed files, who did not have any legal status, recognized either by UNHCR or the Egyptian authorities felt particularly hardship. As a result, they were pushed to live in an atmosphere full of fear of deportation and arrest by the authorities, especially as it was known that many had to work in the informal sector where they were exposed to degrading exploitation.

On the other hand, those who were accepted had to wait for yet another interview - known among Sudanese refugees as the "resettlement interview". Before the increase of refugee numbers in Egypt, many recognized refugees were referred for resettlement, but as numbers kept increasing (while available resettlement opportunities were decreasing) many faced local integration as the only option. Local integration was hindered by little

¹ UNHCR statistics of 1997-2005

aid and assistance and lack of adequate coordination between different bodies, particularly UNHCR and the government of Egypt. The situation deteriorated gradually leading to the sit-in (protest) that ended tragically in the end of December 2005 after a period of three months.

The Refugees stand: Determination to achieve all the demands

The beginning of the organization of the sit-in can be traced to an Arabic short course on international law that was organized by Forced Migration and Refugee Studies at The American University in Cairo. Some of the original initiators of the sit-in attended this short course and according to them from this moment, the idea of the sit-in flashed in their heads. The eight core organizers were eight had varying status with UNHCR. After the short course they started secretly to collect information about refugees' situation in Egypt and came up with a list of demands reflecting their findings.

It is not clear to what extent the organizers played a role in spreading rumors of chances of increased chances of resettlement to those who come and participate in the sit-in. The protest began on 29th of September and word spread many started to gather in the park ultimately reaching around 2500 people of different ages, backgrounds, ethnicities and genders.

During the sit-in the demonstrators established many committees, namely: security, media, social and medical. The media was dominated by the organizers who were consequently able to filter information. Other committees were run by non-organizers, except the medical committee which was run by a single organizing member.

The leaders of the sit-in launched a media campaign and an e-mail address under the name of “Refugees voice in Egypt”. Refugees used media, local and international to disseminate their demands. In one instance, they used it to declare a hunger strike until their problems are resolved, ultimately they did it on for long and it turned out to be an attention strategy. The demonstrators also, used the media to respond to UNHCR media repeatedly dismissed them as being "economic migrants". In addition, the media was main outlet for the dissemination and announcing of their demands² which were:

- 1) We call for all Sudanese closed files to be looked into once again and to review reasons of closing these files taking into consideration the period in which they were closed and finding a just solution to these files based on the rules of asylum. *That demand created indiscriminate situation, because many refugees lost their genuine grounds for refugee status, as the situation in Sudan changed.*
- 2) We call for a refugee status determination for all asylum seekers especially the elderly, unaccompanied minors, widowed women and single mothers and providing them with the necessary assistance.
- 3) We call for resuming refugee status determination interviews for Sudanese asylum seekers on an individual basis due to the variation in the reasons for seeking asylum. *That demand goes in opposition to what UNHCR was doing recently as it started to give prima facie recognition, giving temporarily protections.*
- 4) We call on not withholding assistance and services from recognized refugees or those receiving temporary protection or group protection with the aim of forcing

² Voice of Sudanese Refugees- Cairo, In response to UNHCR’s Statement dated 17 November 2005.

them to voluntarily repatriate during this time where Sudan is suffering from security instability and the ruling party's manipulating the national party in implementing the peace agreement with transparency. *UNHCR indicated many times that repatriation is involuntarily. However, refugee thought of it as involuntarily. The argument was that UNHCR policies and suspension of RSD are pressures on them to repatriate.*

- 5) We reject local integration based on the fact that there are no national legislations in the host country for refugees to enjoy nationalism starting from citizenship, freedom of expression, political participation and others, limited job opportunities and access to social services are hardly adequate for the nationals, dense population is met with opposite in the economic reality, the country's policy with regards to foreigners as well as the cultural and ethnic difference and sometimes the religious difference has all led to the rejection of refugees and discrimination which has significantly minimized the chances of integration and dissolving into the host community. *Egypt made reservations to 1951 convention in regard to giving refugees the same rights as citizens. Refugee's argument was that they can not integrate in Egypt, because they are deprived of many rights granted to citizens. Also, because of differences of religion, culture, etc...In addition, racial discrimination was mentioned as one of the reasons.*
- 6) We reject the unjustified arrest of Sudanese refugees without them committing any legal crime or them standing before a just court. *In Egypt sometimes there are round-ups which are directed against Africans, and because of their appearance*

- many refugees found themselves caught up. Usually it takes a refugee two weeks to be released.*
- 7) We call for the immediate registration of the new comers of asylum seekers to ensure that they are not deported or returned the country of origin from which they escaped out of fear and to seek protection. *This demand needs more scrutiny examination as the cases of deportation are very few and it is an exception not the norm.*
 - 8) We call for a search for the missing Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers who disappeared in the country of asylum so that the Sudanese National Party in Cairo is not accused as the ones going after refugees and asylum seekers or any other organization. *The fact reveals that many of these missing cases have either returned to Sudan voluntarily or traveled somewhere else.*
 - 9) We call that no social or Sudanese ethnic associations be authorized to speak on behalf of Sudanese refugees since these organizations do not properly represent refugees. *This demand highlights the leadership problem in the refugees' communities. Paradoxically, organizers of the protest themselves were not elected and there were many internal conflicts where they tried to control it by threatening the dissidents.*
 - 10) We call on abiding by international standards in the refugee status determination process and that it be carried out in honesty and transparency.
 - 11) We call on finding a solution to the problems of Sudanese refugees, asylum seekers and new comers or that they be moved to another country where their refugee status would be determined with a more clear and transparent way. *This*

demand is concluded to mean resettlement, as refugees perceive resettlement countries as being the haven where they could live peacefully.

UNHCR stand: Mistrust and confusion

UNHCR has a drastic mistrust relationship with refugees in Cairo. One of the main reasons is a demonstration of August 2004 which ended in violence. That demonstration was driven by frustration of many, especially those who are locally integrated under extremely challenging circumstances. Many of these demonstrators were driven by the misunderstanding of resettlement. They perceived resettlement as a right and not as a solution and UNHCR did not make the efforts to clear this misunderstanding.

In June 2004 UNHCR stopped interviewing new or appeal cases of the Sudanese, and started to encourage Southern Sudanese refugees to return back to Sudan through “Voluntarily repatriation” and it offered them money which to cover travel by the steam and train to Khartoum. On the other hand, those who had been recognized were having durable solution interviews that gives them a chance for resettlement. However, only those who are recognized under 1951 convention were eligible for resettlement.

In regard to the sit-in, UNHCR stand changed many times during its three months. During many meetings, one of which was on 3rd October with the leaders, UNHCR made clear that many of the demands are out of its hands and there is nothing it can do about them. Then it began in what I called “media war” against the refugees, making statements labeling those in the demonstration as "economic migrants" rather than refugees.

In its 25th October media release UNHCR refuted what it called "false information" disseminated by refugee leaders. UNHCR made it clear that there will be no money or

resettlement for those who are in the sit-in. Also, it refuted the rumors that it asked the Egyptian government to disband the demonstration by force.

UNHCR changed its stand again on November 17th in a statement responding to some of the demands. In this press release it stated that it would provide financial assistance to those who need it, but only for one time. In addition, it stated that those who are willing to repatriate to Sudan are going to be provided with plane tickets to Juba in Southern Sudan, and indicated this would be completely voluntarily. Furthermore, it stated that it would try to influence resettlement countries to accept them under migration rules. Also, UNHCR declared that it would cooperate with the Egyptian government to address the demand of finding the missing cases and arbitrary detentions. Further, there was a statement to help children to get elementary schooling.

In a 17th December press release, UNHCR offered to give some good supplies in Juba in addition to plane tickets to those who are willing to repatriate. This press release was concluded as the last offer from UNHCR. It was obvious that refugee leaders were not convinced of what UNHCR had offered and they were asking for more, specifically a present solution to all their demands and needs.

After the forced eviction, UNHCR interfered to release those refugees who are under its protection and started to give a house allowance.

Egypt stand: Waite and watch

Egypt has been a host to many refugees for thousands of years and has been a signatory to 1951 convention and its protocol. In addition, it is a signatory to OAU convention of 1969. Egypt has put reservations to articles 20, 22 (paragraph 1), 23 and 24 of the 1951 convention, as these articles give refugees the same rights as citizens. These

reservations have an impact on the Sudanese refugees who demonstrated in Mustafa Mahmoud and were stated in their demands. Refugees in Egypt do not have the same right as citizens and they were and still are deprived of many rights like right to education, work and citizenship.

In dealing with the sit-in, even though it was illegal to have such gathering in Egypt according to the Egyptian law, Egyptian authorities did not use force to evict the demonstrators' gathering for three months. This is interesting as the authorities did use force with other Egyptian demonstration organized by Egyptians. For instance, there was a demonstration of Islamists after the latest parliamentary elections in Egypt near the park where the sit-in was taking place; while the Egyptian police officers suppressed that Islamists' demonstration it did not harass the refugees. The Egyptian authorities were waiting and watching what was going on and gradually started to get involved. That is due to their perception that UNHCR is the central main caregiver of refugees in Egypt. Also, Egyptian authorities tried not to interfere hoping that UNHCR and refugees leaders would reach a solution. Besides, the parliamentary elections took precedent over the refugees.

Nevertheless, at the end when it was obvious that a timely solution was out of reach, Egyptian authorities started to give threats to the refugees to evacuate the park asking the leaders to evacuate children, women and elderly people. At the end, refugees leaders agreed to leave but the other refugees refused to move. Being in the park together made refugees feel more secure. On 28 December thousands of police officers evacuated the park by force. This is contrary to statements issued by Egyptian officials claiming that they would deal quietly with the situation. For example, the Egyptian foreign Minister in a

meeting on 22/12 with Sadik Al-Mahdi stated that in spite of the friendship and brotherhood felt towards Sudanese this situation can't go on. On 26/12, he declared that Egypt would deal quietly with the situation. As a result of the forced eviction around 30 refugees were killed, many were injured, and the rest were kept as prisoners. All the prisoners were released after UNHCR intervened on their behalf and none were deported.

The Egyptian authorities stated that UNHCR asked the Egyptian authorities for help in breaking up the demonstration after UNHCR personnel received threats from protestors. Authorities claimed that, as refugees refused to leave, they had to remove them by force.

In a survey the writer of this paper conducted while the sit-in was taking place, he interviewed many Egyptians from different backgrounds. Some did understand the plight of these refugees, even though they did not know anything about them. Some viewed these refugees as not being refugees, but as brothers-what they called Egyptian-Sudanese brotherhood. In this situation, historical relationships still exist in people's mind. Some were unaware of what was going on and for what reason these refugees were gathering. On the other hand, some were caught up with false information and rumors about these refugees who they perceived as having better incomes than Egyptians and having greater chances of traveling to the West. In the same vein many accused refugees of competing With the natives in a country where there are many people who can't find jobs.

The Sudan stand: Passivity and late intervention

The Sudanese embassy in Cairo did not interfere since the beginning of the sit-in as refugees refused its interference and accused it of sending some of its agents to corrupt

the demonstrators. The refugees even managed to catch one of the drivers who was driving one of the embassy's cars and got the diplomatic plate of the car he was driving.

Many Sudanese political and official leaders tried to mediate and some opposition figures tried to use the situation for their own political gain. Nevertheless, at the end nothing was achieved by these efforts. Many Sudanese officials and political leaders, whether representing the government or the opposition, tried to interfere and convince the demonstrators to end the demonstration. This was refused by the leaders. The Sudanese official stand was not clear and there were no statements which could be traced to give an idea of what the government was thinking. Many Sudanese officials visited Egypt, but it seems the issue of the refugee sit-in was not discussed. For example, the Sudanese-Egyptian joint committees met on November 17th without discussing the matter.

Some of Sudanese opposition leaders, like the Sudanese former minister Sadeik Al-Mahdi, tried to come and visit, encouraging the demonstrators and promising to resolve their problems. Al-Mahdi made two visits: In the first one he encouraged the refugees to stay and in the second one he was arguing them to leave. Also, former director of the Arab Lawyers association, Farouk Abu Issa tried to coordinate and promised the leaders to help them.

An interesting point that could be raised when talking about the repatriation of Southern Sudanese to the South is that many of the Southern Sudanese who came to seek refuge in Egypt were IDPs in Sudan living mainly near Khartoum. That raises the question of returning to the South which is not considered as an option by many refugees. Those who are willing to return to their homelands in the South have to suffer from the situation there. Many UN reports have indicated that the many parts in the South are not

safe for refugees to, because of clashes there which are still going on³. Further more, the peace, which had been signed between the Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), is not definitive and many efforts are needed before refugees can safely return back. Yet, it seems that refugees are returning already from neighboring countries in an effort to test the peace. Another obstacle is the land mines in Sudan which are estimated to number between 500,000-2,000,000 and constitute a great danger to the lives of thousands of returnees.

After the break up the Sudanese embassy and foreign minister intervened to enable the transfer of dead bodies to Sudan. In addition, the Sudanese foreign minister is reportedly to establish a committee to receive 100 returnees, but this information could be validated.

Conclusion:

The demonstration and the way it was broken up showed that there is a lack of coordination and cooperation between UNHCR, the protestors and the Egyptian government. It was obvious that each group had its own interests which were seen as being conflicting. A broker was needed and none of these players were trusted enough to take on that immense role.

Lack of trust was increased by the mismanagement of communication, which had been going on for many years. This created frustration and desperation which lead to the protest and its tragic end.

Even though it is hard to get a positive lesson from that experience, there is the sense that event proved to everyone that a change is needed. What lead to the demonstration

³http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=51623&SelectRegion=East_Africa&SelectCountry=SUDAN

took years and fixing and moving on towards a better future for refugees will take even longer. Specially, more involvement of different stakeholders is needed.