

Refugees From and To Sudan

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I. Introduction

This paper attempts to provide an overview of refugees to and from Sudan. It is a preliminary contribution that seeks to highlight the question of refugees coming to Sudan (with focus on Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees), and Sudanese refugees fleeing Sudan to neighbouring countries and further a field. The paper is an overview and is based on the existing knowledge on the subject. It does not represent research findings and aims at initiating debate around the question of refugees. It also seeks to highlight possible future research areas. In addition to the sources consulted, the author also uses his own experience in refugee studies. Informal discussions were held with two Eritrean refugees in Khartoum.

In terms of refugee crisis, Sudan represents an interesting case in the Horn of Africa. This is due to the fact that it is both a source and a receiver of refugees. The country is an interesting case because, in spite of long civil wars and political instability, Sudan is receiving refugees from neighbouring countries whose conditions are not as worst as the Sudanese case. In terms of relative security and stability, Uganda, Chad, Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are better than Sudan. Yet, people from these countries have been seeking refuge in Sudan for the last 30 years. One obvious reason for this is that Sudan has a generous refugee policy (Kibreab 1996), but it also has no effective mechanisms of guarding its borders. Another reason is that since the 1980s, Sudan ceased to have a clear or coherent refugee policy. (Karadawi 1999) This, however, does not mean that refugees and asylum seekers in Sudan fully enjoy rights enshrined in the Geneva Convention of 1951, to which Sudan is a signatory, since Sudan is not well endowed economically to provide reasonable livelihood conditions for refugees. Sudan

does observe, however, generally speaking, the principle of non-refoulement. (USCR 2006) In the end, the lack of clear asylum and refugee policy is contingent on political conditions and alliances in the region.

Presently (2007), there are 296,400 refugees and asylum seekers in Sudan. Eritreans, Chadians, Ethiopians, Ugandans and Congolese make up the population of refugees and asylum seekers. Their numbers for the year 2007 are as follows: 230,000 Eritreans, 25,000 Chadians, 20,000 Ethiopians, 7,000 Ugandans, and 2,000 Congolese (USCR 2007). These numbers (especially for Eritreans and Ethiopians) must be dealt with carefully since they do not represent reality. The actual numbers of Ethiopians and Eritreans are much more than the reported figures, which are provided by the UNHCR. I will get back to this point later. Here, however, it must be emphasized that although interesting, the Sudan case is not unique. It is part of the political crises and instability in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Region. Like Sudan, many countries in these two regions are producers and receivers of refugees and asylum seekers. While Sudan presently hosts almost 300,000 registered refugees and asylum seekers, there are 636,800 Sudanese refugees in neighbouring countries and further a field. (USCR 2006: 92) It is interesting to note that the same countries that send refugees to Sudan also host Sudanese refugees. The following table shows the numbers and distribution of Sudanese refugees in some neighbouring countries:

Table 1.

Country	Number of refugees and asylum seekers
Chad ¹	228,800
Uganda	213,000
Kenya	77,200
Ethiopia	73,900
Egypt	23,600
Central Republic of Africa	20,300
Total	636,800

Source: USCR 2006: 4

It is not possible to procure precise figures neither for refugees from neighbouring countries to Sudan nor for Sudanese refugees, and it is not the purpose of this paper to do that. The objective of this paper is to provide an overview of refugees to and from Sudan; with the intention of highlighting some basic features and a possible future research agenda. In doing this, the focus will be on two main issues: (1) factors leading to the creation of Sudanese refugees, with a focus on the 1990s; and (2) Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees to Sudan.

II. Refugees from Sudan: Factors, Distribution and Trends

It is important at the very beginning to stress the point that the phenomenon of Sudanese refugees, fleeing especially to neighbouring countries, is not new. Sudanese refugees started fleeing the country 50 years ago when the first civil war started in southern Sudan. Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia provided refuge for Sudanese refugees who fled the war in southern Sudan. At the time of independence in 1956, economic conditions in Sudan were stable and the British colonial rule left a well established civil service apparatus in Sudan, which was described as the best civil services in Africa. Unlike the present collage of factors creating Sudanese refugees, the first waves of refugees from Sudan

¹ Chad has not been a destination for Sudanese refugees, historically speaking. This figure represents refugees who fled the current crisis in Darfur, and are located in refugee camps in eastern Chad.

were an outcome of civil war. When the Addis Ababa Agreement was signed in 1972, some Sudanese refugees repatriated to Sudan, while some stayed in Uganda and Kenya. The second wave of Sudanese refugees to Ethiopia, Uganda and Kenya started during the mid 1980s, at the onset of the second civil war which ended in 2005 when the so-called Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed between the Sudan Government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). It is yet to be known whether southern Sudanese refugees in neighbouring countries will repatriate. In any case, civil wars in Sudan stand as the main factor leading to refugee migration. A striking reality is that there are, to the best of my knowledge, very few studies on earlier waves of Sudanese refugees in neighbouring countries. However, Abusharaf (2002) and Assal (2004) touched on some aspects of the convoluted journeys Sudanese refugees go through before arriving at some designated or desired resettlement countries. Here, however, I will focus on some factors which expounded the numbers of Sudanese refugees, especially during the 1990s and beyond.

In so far as refugee migration is part and parcel of international migration, it is important to say some few words about Sudanese out-migration. The history of migration by Sudanese is closely linked to the Gulf countries. This type of (arguably) economic migration dates back to the last quarter of the 20th century, following the oil boom in the Gulf and the beginning of the deterioration of Sudan's economy. (Galal el-Din 1988) In 1988, Galal el-Din (ibid. p. 293) estimated the number of Sudanese migrants in Arab oil countries to be 207,000. A recent source (Abusharaf 2002, 73) provided a figure of 1,000,000. The main purpose of migration during the 1970s was to improve one's economic lot. It is hard to document the contribution of Gulf expatriates to the GNP in the Sudan, but their contribution to supporting families back home is significant as thousands of families in the Sudan depend on money and other items sent by expatriate relatives. The economic vibrancy of Gulf migrants during the 1970s and early 1980s was glorified in the Sudanese society. Wedding events are also occasions where young men were encouraged to migrate, come back with money to build nice houses and marry beautiful girls. (Abusharaf 2002, 174)

But the glamour of the Gulf expatriates dramatically waned during the 1990s and beyond, due to factors both at home and the Gulf countries. In the Sudan, the 1989 military coup inaugurated a long suffering whose effects are still present today and are likely to continue for many years. The process of 'purge' adopted by the new government, along with economic policies that further jeopardized the beleaguered lot of a wider section of the population in Sudan, siphoned off savings of expatriates and increased their social and economic burdens. The stringent economic policies also implied that expatriates must be 'milked' to the limit, exemplified by the excessive taxes they are subjected to. As a consequence, expatriates started to prolong their stay abroad and avoid unnecessary visits to the Sudan. Some would send their children to the Sudan for education (since they cannot afford the cost of education in the Gulf).

The Sudanese expatriates in the oil rich Arab countries faced yet another challenge: the Gulf war of 1990. The Sudanese, along with Somalis and Palestinians, were hit hard by the war. (Assal 2004, 43-46) One reason for this is that the Sudanese government sided with the Iraqi government at the time of war. Some expatriates, especially in Kuwait, were expelled, while others were subjected to a regimen of inconvenience. Going to the Sudan was not an option, given the prevailing circumstances. Abusharaf (2002) discussed in some detail the ordeal of the Gulf expatriates who started moving westward, to the US and Canada, either on 'lottery' or asylum and refugee tickets. Coming to Sudan is not an option even for those who are not politically active. Both economic and political factors combine to affect the decision of Sudanese either to flee the country or stay abroad. Thus, Sudanese general and refugee migration appears to be following a continuum.

The Sudan case stresses the point that it is difficult to procure neat boundaries between voluntary and forced migration. Whereas conventional wisdom in migration studies looks at refugees and migrants as having different motives for leaving a homeland (migrants for economic reasons, refugees for political reasons), recent studies (cf. Fuglerud 1999; Richmond 2002; Hein 1993, 43-59) show that a mixture of factors produces both categories. In fact, the above example of the Gulf expatriates suggest that forced and voluntary migration lie in a continuum whose axis are 'stable instability' and 'a

generalized state of insecurity,' so to speak. In Sudan, such insecurity may be economic (losing economic viability threshold as a result of the erosion of livelihood systems in the traditional sector, rising unemployment among millions of university graduates, etc.), political (totalitarian or autocratic regimes that vouch for legitimacy by recourse to sheer physical force against their foes), and physical (direct threat to life resulting from wars of different categories). The majority of Sudanese migrants in the aftermath of 1989 fall within the 'forced' side of the generalized insecurity continuum. Moreover, they face serious dilemmas in first asylum countries. For instance, those who are in Cairo (huge numbers, adverse living conditions, very limited resources), whose supposedly 'brief stay' in Egypt has taken many years, can barely manage their basic day-to-day needs.²

Leaving aside conceptual riddles, it is a sad fact that since 1989 and beyond, the chief dream of Sudanese youth is to leave the country. But the Sudan is not an exception in this regard. Recent images of Moroccan immigration authorities shipping West African illegal migrants back to their countries illustrates the general frustration of youth across the continent. But perhaps the extent to which some Sudanese youth go to achieve their dream of leaving the country materializes in a unique way. Abusharaf (2002, xi-xii) provides the following telling anecdote, which is an encounter she experienced in Khartoum airport while en route to the United States:

One [a young Sudanese] asks if I might do them a favour. I ask what it might be, and he begins to explain that they are looking for someone to mail application forms for the Diversity Visa Lottery Program- a chance to come to the United States. A second man explains that they would send them through regular mail but these forms are often ripped up and confiscated by postal workers. "They are told to do so," another adds. I agree to their request. The joy and appreciation of these young men is immense...

One feature of present Sudanese refugees is that unlike earlier waves whose members stay in first asylum neighbouring countries, contemporary Sudanese refugees and asylum

² The brutal onslaught by Egyptian police forces on Sudanese refugees in Cairo sheds light on a horrendous human tragedy. Over five thousand policemen armed with sticks and shields broke up the small square where the Sudanese refugees had been camping at around 5:00 am Friday, December 30, 2005. Twenty eight Sudanese refugees were killed while many others injured.

seekers use these countries as a springboard for resettlement in a third country. (Abusharaf 2002, Assal 2004, 2006b, Grabska 2005) In this, Sudanese refugees are not unique, though. Except for extreme cases where whole families or communities are uprooted, like the case of Darfurians who fled to Chad as a result of the crisis in Darfur, recent Sudanese refugees are composed mainly of young disgruntled university graduates who flee the country as a result of political repression, forced military conscription and lack of employment opportunities in Sudan. (Assal 2004, Grabska 2005)

Sudanese refugees of the 1990s and beyond use first asylum and neighbouring countries as transit locations. In some cases people keep moving between different countries in the same region before getting the chance to be resettled. Importantly, however, traditional migration to the Gulf countries is being used by some migrants to facilitate further migration particularly to Europe, the US, Canada and Australia. Since access to the first world is not easy, people could only get in on refugee and asylum tickets. My own research on Sudanese and Somali refugees in Norway (Assal 2004) and Abusharaf's work on Sudanese migrants and exiles in North America show that many of the so-called economic migrants end up as refugees and asylum seekers. In this connection, countries in the Middle East and North Africa (the Gulf countries and Libya- for Sudanese) are mostly transit locations, particularly for young university graduates. This suggests that refugees and asylums seekers at the present time are a product of complex political and economic factors. Their conditions cannot therefore be explained or understood by recourse to a single cause. Additionally, this also suggests the need to revisit categories and terminologies endemic in refugee studies.

While there are some recent studies on Sudanese refugees (cf. Assal 2004, 2006b, Abusharaf 2002, Shandy 2002, Holtzman 2000, Grabska 2005), still more research is needed. The relevance of kinship is one of the important issues that need to be investigated. My own research on Sudanese refugees in Norway shows that people use kinship networks to facilitate the migration and settlement of relatives, close and distant. Additionally, exile politics within Sudanese communities is yet another research area that is very interesting. The crisis in Darfur taught us that exile refugee communities could

play a vital political role that affects politics in the homeland. This brings to question the role of refugees in reconstruction, particularly in post-war situation such as the case of Sudan.

III. Refugees to Sudan: Eritrean and Ethiopian Refugees

Presently (2007), there are 230,000 and 25,000 Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees, respectively, in Sudan. These figures, to my mind, are gross under representations for a number of reasons. Firstly, these figures are about Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees who are formally registered with the UNHCR. Not all Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees and asylum seekers register with the UNHCR. Secondly, the numbers are obtained from specific refugee camps in eastern Sudan where Eritrean refugees in particular are located. Like the case with registration, not all refugees stay in camps, despite the fact that leaving the camp could lead to jail. Third, since the last war between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2000, there was a continuous influx of Eritrean refugees who crossed the eastern border into major cities, especially Khartoum, where employment opportunities exist.

Perhaps the significant numbers of Eritreans and Ethiopians could be explained by the fact that these two countries share borders with Sudan. Until 1993, Ethiopia and Eritrea were one country and the reference was then to “Ethiopian refugees” generally, although reference was made occasionally to the “Eritreans.” Kibreab (1996: 135-8) discussed some of the historical questions related to the migration and settlement of Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees in Sudan:

Even though the massive influx of Eritrean refugees to the Sudan began in the second half of the 1960s and of Ethiopian refugees in the second half of the 1970s, the history of refugees from Ethiopia to the Sudan dates back to the turn of the 20th century (British Legation 1915). For example, in 1915 the Ethiopian Government appealed to the colonial government in Sudan to repatriate by force those refugees who had fled to Sudan to escape slavery, oppression and ill-treatment (British Legation 1915). In 1920 a report of the Governor of Kassala Province also noted that there were "pagan refugees from Abyssinia who have been settled in the Gedaref District at a distance from the frontier" (Governor of Kassala

1920). Eritreans were, however, not allowed to become political refugees in the Sudan because the two colonial governments had agreed not to allow their respective subjects to settle in each others' territories, especially those "who cross the frontier in consequence of rebellion or direction of their chiefs" (Sudan Government Legal Dept. 1915). In other situations even though the governments of Eritrea and the Sudan had agreed to discourage their subjects from moving freely across the frontiers, the members of one of the border tribes were allowed to settle in Sudan permanently (ibid 136).

The influx of Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees goes back to the 1960s and 1970s. There were two patterns: initially Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees originated from urban centres and therefore they migrated to the major Sudanese cities:

Until 1967 almost all of the Eritrean refugees or persons in refugee-like situations who came to the Sudan were from the urban areas and their pattern of residence in the host country was strongly influenced by their backgrounds. All moved into the towns and cities of the Sudan as migrants. Those who fled in the second half of the 1960s and early 1970s were, however, from the rural Western and Eastern lowlands where the armed struggle for national independence was concentrated (ibid).

The repressive policies of the Dergue regime (1974-1990) were responsible for the influx of Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees. Generally, Sudan has a generous refugee policy. Treatment of refugees in the country was to be based on the general principles of international conventions, mainly that asylum is a peaceful and humanitarian act; that voluntary repatriation is the ideal solution to refugee problems; and in the absence of any foreseeable repatriation refugees are to be settled away from the border areas with the aim of helping them to become self-supporting.

Sudan has its own asylum and refugee law, which was enacted in 1974: "the Regulation of Asylum Act." Although generally generous, the act imposes some restrictions on refugees: refugees are not allowed to own land or immoveables (Article 9) and they are not allowed to leave the place of residence designated for them by the authorities concerned. Non-compliance is punishable with imprisonment not exceeding one year (Article 10 (2)). The limitation on freedom of movement and residence is meant to

discourage refugees from integrating into the host societies because they are only accepted temporarily until the factors that forced them to flee are eliminated.

In spite of the law that organized the presence of refugees, the authorities during the 1970s and 1980s (and presently) are, for the most part, ambivalent towards Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees. Apart from making sure that refugees are confined to their designated camps (with little success), the government is not doing much by way of meeting the rights and needs of refugees. One reason is that the government does not have the economic capability. But there is also a lack of political will, since the manner in which the government treats Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees is subject to delicate political and diplomatic considerations, in light of the unstable political relationships between Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea.

But during the late 1980s, there was a hostile attitude towards Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees, particularly towards those who are living in Khartoum. Refugees living in Khartoum are often made the scapegoat for problems facing the city. Thus, in 1987, the Commissioner in Khartoum asked Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees to leave the city on their own in ten days or risk being forcibly evacuated. Part of the reason underlying this attitude was the “falasha” scandal; the transfer of Ethiopian Jews to Israel, orchestrated by the Sudanese intelligence and the CIA. The anti-refugee attitude was strange for some scholars at a time of a democratically elected government. (Kibreab 1996: 145) The anti-refugee campaign did not achieve anything except that many refugees were treated in a manner that fell far below the international human rights standards. The irony, however, lay in the fact that these excesses were committed at a time when the country was ruled by a democratically elected government and when there were over 20 daily newspapers in the capital. In spite of all this, the refugees stayed put.

Between 1990 and 1994, Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia enjoyed politically stable and good relationships. This has positively reflected on the government policy towards Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees: the government eased its restrictions on refugees who were as a result allowed to move between their designated camps and towns and allowed to work without

officially getting work permits. Nonetheless, relationships between Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan deteriorated dramatically in 1995 when Sudan was accused of plotting to kill the Egyptian President. Both Ethiopia and Eritrea also accused Sudan of supporting dissident opposition groups. In turn, Sudan's otherwise generous policy towards Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees changed. Refugees were detained, their movement curtailed, harassed, and in some cases deported.

While Sudanese-Eritrean relationships were severed during the period 1995-2006, Sudanese-Ethiopian relationships were restored in 1998, during the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Since 1999, the Sudanese government eased restrictions on Ethiopians in Sudan and made it easy for Ethiopians to enter the country. While this meant that Ethiopian refugees and asylum seekers in Sudan relatively have some freedom to move and work, it nonetheless meant that Ethiopian refugees who are politically active risk the danger of being deported. In fact, In May 2007, the National Intelligence and Security Services deported four Ethiopian asylum seekers who were members of a political opposition group and who risked prosecution and the death penalty in Ethiopia for treason, before the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or the Sudan Commissioner for Refugees (COR) could evaluate their claims. Between mid-May and early-September, the Government deported 18 asylum seekers and 6 refugees despite UNHCR's protests. (USCR 2007) On September 27th 2007, the Sudanese authorities deported 15 Ethiopian asylum seekers and handed them to the Ethiopian government.³

With regard to Eritrea, it was only in 2006 that diplomatic contacts between the Eritrean and Sudanese regimes were established. Early 2006, Eritrea mediated peace talks between the Sudan government and the Eastern Front. The mediation culminated in the signing of the ESPA (eastern Sudan Peace Agreement) in Asmara in October 2006. Since then, relationships between Sudan and Eritrea improved, and there were exchange of visits between high level officials from both countries. Like the case with Ethiopian refugees, restrictions against Eritrean refugees were eased, allowing refugees to move

³ <http://www.unhcr.org/news/NEWS/470e4b092.html>

and work in urban areas, although still the majority of Eritrean refugees were confined to camps in rural areas in eastern Sudan. (USCR 2007)

In spite of the fact that the presence of Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees goes back to the 1960s and 1970s, the government has consistently been refusing to integrate them. Thus, they continue to be labeled refugees for almost four decades. The refusal of the government to integrate refugees has a rationale:

The reason why the government labeled the Eritreans as refugees was also to prevent their integration into the host society by putting them in spatially segregated sites with minimum opportunity for social and cultural integration. Self-settlement of refugees in general and in the urban centers in particular have, therefore, been discouraged by the various state governments. (Kibreab 1996: 139)

IV. Current Trends: Preliminary Observations

According to the UNHCR, scores of Eritrean asylum seekers now cross into Sudan every week, joining their compatriots who are living in 12 refugee camps as well as urban and rural areas. For many Eritrean refugees, repatriation is no longer a viable option. The UNHCR is advocating for their local integration, while also discussing with Sudan and third countries the possibility of increasing resettlement referrals as a durable solution for some families.

Most of the new arrivals are young men in their late teens and early twenties who say they want to avoid military service in Eritrea. But lately, more women and children have been crossing into Sudan. Some of these new-comers are actually former refugees who decided to repatriate earlier, but who could stay in Eritrea. Those who have been living in Sudan previously do not go to camps, but instead to major urban areas where employment opportunities exist. Khartoum is the main destination for young Eritrean refugees who escape forced military conscription in Eritrea.

Local reintegration for refugees who have been living in Sudan for decades is under discussion between UNHCR and the government-run Office of the Commissioner for Refugees. The refugee agency's long-term aim, however, is to make refugees in the east more self-reliant and less dependent on aid. But it is doubtful if the option of integration is feasible, given the inadequate financial allocations from the part of donors and also the resistance of the Sudanese government.

Earlier in 2007, there was a row between the UNHCR and the government over the question of integrating Eritrean refugees. Given the lengthy presence of Eritrean refugees, particularly in eastern Sudan, the UNHCR, in 2007, put forward a proposal for integrating Eritrean refugees in Sudan. The government adamantly rejected the proposal, citing “national security concerns” for the rejection.

The new arrivals from Eritrea are mostly young men and women. Since obtaining an exit visa for those who have not done their military service is impossible, young men and women can only reach Sudan through smuggling. People pay up to \$2000 per person to be helped to cross the border to Sudan.⁴ Khartoum’s booming urban economy is absorbing young Eritrean refugees who make it to Sudan. Since many Eritreans are fluent in Arabic, refugees may just sneak in and disappear without being identified easily by the authorities. Moreover, there are already thousands of Ethiopian and Eritrean second generation refugees who were born in Sudan and are as fluent in Arabic as any Sudanese can be. Furthermore, Eritrean refugees adopt assimilative strategies that help them integrate in Sudan. (Kibreab 1999)

Truck driving, barberry, rickshaw driving and vending are some of the activities Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees engage in, while young refugee women work in restaurants and at homes of rich people as housemaids. Eritrean women are in fact preferred over Sudanese since the latter have too many social obligations to attend, something that distracts them from doing their work properly. But recently housemaids began to come from Indonesia

⁴ Personal communication with an Eritrean refugee in Khartoum.

and the Philippines, and they become competitors to the Eritreans and Ethiopians since they are cheaper.

While these new economic opportunities, particularly in Khartoum, make it a whole lot easier for refugees to eke out a living and may even save money and send it back home, there is a possibility that these young men and women are subjected to exploitation, since the majority of them do not have legal documents or work permits. They could be exploited by both the authorities (the police and security) and by employers. For many refugees, however, this is something that is tolerable since their aim is to stay in Sudan for a while before leaving for resettlement in a third country.

While resettlement in a third country is a dream for many refugees, given the current global anti-refugee rhetoric, the stay of Eritrean refugees in Sudan is likely to be longer. Additionally, the growth of Sudan's economy will also encourage many refugees to stay, since they could get work and may even become self-reliant in the long run. It is ironic that Sudan, which is a source of refugees, is becoming a lucrative place for refugees from other countries in the region.

These preliminary observations provide some clues with regard to possible future research on Eritrean refugees to Sudan. The contributions of Gaim Kibreab covered many issues relating to the lives of Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees in Sudan. Yet, "urban refugees" in Sudan did not receive sufficient attention. Attention has been focussed on refugees living in camps in eastern Sudan. With very few exceptions (cf. Kibreab 1996), there are no studies on urban refugees. Additionally, the demographic structure of the new arrivals to the major cities is one interesting research question that needs to be investigated. It is not clear whether these new-comers (young men and women) will stay in Sudan or make it just a transit to yet other destinations.

The relationships between refugees and their host communities need also to be probed. This would give us clues about the possibilities of local integration, since some Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees have been living in Sudan for the last forty years. Official policies

and whims aside, Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees are generously hosted by local communities in eastern Sudan. This is facilitated by the fact that there are cross-border tribes assisting in this endeavour.

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