

The Central African Refugees in Southern Chad:

An Untold Humanitarian Crisis

BY CATHERINE J. SWYSEN

In March 2008, during one of my trips to southern Chad with the Chad Relief Foundation (CRF), I encountered a young girl in the refugee camp of Dosseye. She was twelve years old and paralyzed. She was from the Central Republic of Africa, known as CAR. Her village was attacked by armed forces. We were unable to tell whether the attackers were rebels, bandits or government troops. She was with her mother when they were shot down. The bullet went through her mother and lodged in the girl's leg. The young girl was trapped under her dead mother's body for three days before being rescued. She has not spoken since.

This young girl was one of the recipients of the wheelchairs we distributed during our visit. We were able to help her only because she had been given refugee status under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees as amended by the 1967 Protocol. Chad, one of the five poorest countries in the world, is one of the 147 signatory nations to the Convention. Under the Convention, this child, along with thousands of other refugees, was allowed to enter Chad and reside in a camp set up by United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR).

The Convention was adopted a few months after UNHCR began its work on January 1, 1951. UNHCR's mandate is to lead and coordinate international action to protect refugees and solve refugee problems worldwide. Its primary purpose is to safeguard the rights and well-being of the refugees. It strives to ensure that everyone can exercise their right to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another State, with the option to return home voluntarily, integrate locally or to resettle in a third country. The 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol have been instrumental to UNHCR's efforts.

The Convention is based upon the fundamental principle of the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that all human beings shall enjoy fundamental rights and freedoms without discrimination. At first, the Convention granted protection only to European refugees in the aftermath of World War II. In

1967, its scope was expanded to include refugees throughout the world. Refugees under the Convention are persons outside of their country of nationality or habitual residence who, because of a well-founded fear of persecution due to their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, are unable or unwilling to avail themselves to the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution. The Convention sets forth the kind of legal protection, other assistance and social rights the refugees must receive from the states that have signed it. It also defines the refugees' obligations to host governments.

It is this Convention that mandated that Chad, as poor as it is, act as a host country not only for the refugees from Darfur in eastern Chad but for the less known CAR refugees in southern Chad where the Santa Barbara based CRF has been working since September 2007. CAR is a failed state facing an armed rebellion in the northern part of the country where a largely unpublicized humanitarian crisis has been unfolding since 2003. Northern CAR is characterized by a complete state of lawlessness, the absence of any institutional services such as schools and health centers and little non-government organization (NGO) presence due to the insecurity. The local populations have been subjected to killings, destruction of property, rape, burning of villages and kidnapping for ransom at the hands of government troops, rebels and "coupeurs de route" or road bandits who operate with complete impunity. Faced with this violence, they fled into the bush without the basic necessities of life and relocated in vast number to the most remote part of southern Chad.

The ability of UNHCR to maintain contact with these refugees is remarkable in light of the remoteness of the areas where the refugees are located and the permanent state of unrest in Chad. When we travel to southern Chad for our Foundation, we arrive in the capital of N'djamena. More than once and as recently as February 2008, it has been under attack by rebels. From there, we travel by Land Rover for over ten hours on a road and then on a dirt track to get to Goré where UNHCR has set three camps for the CAR refugees, Amboko, Gondjé and Dosseye and where it has a small compound.

We traveled another 12 hours by small plane, by Land Rover on dirt tracks into the brush and pirogue to reach 14,000 refugees camping out by the border waiting for UNHCR to process them. It is difficult to convey with words the helplessness and desperation I saw. The refugees, mostly women and children, fled horrific violence with nothing but their clothes on their back. They had been living in the open under makeshift shelters made of branches

and leaves for two months. The heat was intense, 115° by 10:00 a.m. The only source of water was a pond of standing water in the dry river bed. Due to the harsh conditions they endured in the bush before crossing to Chad, the lack of water and food, the refugees were in poor physical health. Through sheer dedication, a four-member UNHCR emergency mission evacuated the refugees to a transit camp set up in Dembo 32 miles away. A UNHCR Protection Officer and a representative of CNAR, the Chadian refugee authority, registered each refugee. Once registered, each refugee received a blue UN bracelet and was transferred by truck to the Dembo transit camp. UNHCR set up camp on an open dirt field. Since there was no source of water, they brought in huge bladders that they filled with water from the river many miles away by trucks. Upon arrival, the refugees went to a health screening/feeding station where they received a hot meal. Once done they moved to the distribution center where each family received food rations from the World Food Program. Finally, they settled in huge "hangars," structures framed with wood sticks and covered with plastic sheeting holding several hundred people. Not everybody survived. The day I was there I saw a family bring back the body of their toddler who had died most likely of a combination of malnutrition and diarrhea or malaria.

The refugees were later moved to a permanent camp farther south in Moula. Once in the camps, the refugees

continue to receive assistance from the UNHCR. Their main mandate is the protection of the refugees, but it also coordinates all the activities of the NGOs it contracts with to provide basic services: education, community services, medical services and food distribution. Attention is also paid to the local population which is extremely poor as well to avoid tension between autochtones and refugees. Life expectancy in Chad is only 47 years old and one out of five children will not reach the age of five. Infrastructure is inadequate and in most of Chad, there is a lack of access to basic resources such as clean water, health services, education and energy.

CRF has followed the same approach. To date, CRF has provided funding for projects that UNHCR could not fund. CRF provided 50 wheelchairs/tricycles manufactured in Chad for handicapped refugees and autochtones. It also built a shelter, latrine and well in the town of Bitoye at the border of CAR, Cameroon and Chad. These facilities are used not only by the refugees who cross the border there while waiting for UNHCR to pick them up but also by the local population. This month, CRF contributed funds to build a secondary school mid-way between the Amboko Camp and the Gondjé Camp which will serve both the refugees and the local population.

As desperate as the circumstances are, they would be far worse if it were not for the implementation of basic tenets of civil and human rights under international law. Our Foundation was founded by Bill Felstiner, former Associate Dean of Yale Law School and Director of the American Bar Association, Stan Roden now retired from private practice, and Richard Applebaum, Professor of Sociology and Global & International Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara. There is no doubt that our lawyerly belief in the concept of human rights and the concept of enforcing those rights under international law helps us to do our job. We understand and support the United Nations' determination to enforce the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. It is that Convention that allows the United Nations and the NGOs, including the Chad Relief Foundation of Santa Barbara, to help these desperate human beings. ■

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