

**SHORT TERM HEAVEN, LONG TERM LIMBO  
A visit to a UNHCR refugee camp in Rwanda**

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No less than 20 million of people, escaping incommensurable risks of social violence –wars, civil wars, persecution, ethnic cleansing and the like—, are currently living as refugees, beyond the borders of their own countries, and a still larger number are living as uprooted, displaced persons within the boundaries of their country. The protection of the former and, more marginally, of the latter, is the core mission of the United Nations refugee agency, the UNHCR, an agency that developed and manages (frequently with the collaboration of NGOs) hundreds of refugee camps throughout Africa, the Middle East, the Balkans, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Timor, Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia and Colombia.

The logistics entailed in providing shelter, services and security for this population when an emergency of this kind arises is enormous. And those humanitarian harbors are reasonably conceived and designed as short-term, emergency refuges, as temporary stations for desperate people awaiting return to their homeland when the conflagration is over, or resettlement in a third country when return is not viable. However, while the expectation that the triggering violence and socially disrupting crisis could be short lived, and that once resolved, the refugees would be able to return to their own countries, violent conflicts can be, and currently are, protracted, lasting for years. Consider, for instance, the decade of steady violence and civic turmoil in the region of the Great Lakes in central Africa or in Colombia, or the five-year long crisis in Chad, or Afghanistan. In this and other circumstances millions of people escaped their countries – saving their own lives and that of their children—and obtained harbor in refugee camps organized for a short term stay...while remaining there for years, without any other place to go. Thus, refugee camps conceived and designed as short-term solutions become in many cases de facto long-term provisional cities, but never designed for that purpose.

A few years ago I spent several weeks in Rwanda as part of a research project on coexistence jointly sponsored by UNHCR, Harvard University and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.<sup>i</sup> In that land-locked, impoverished country we visited several cooperatives of extraordinary women who had been able to pull themselves from the horrors of the 1999 genocide --their families hacked to death in a frenzy of race-hate--, and, with courage, persistence and illumination, managed to create within three years a thriving agricultural collective enterprises and new communities. We interviewed some of those women and spend time recording their feat. We also interviewed others, who were still struggling to emerge from the social chaos of the prior years. We also met with officials responsible for the development of the *Gachacha* native process of reconciliation. We shared meals and conversation with the then director of the Rwanda office of UNHCR, the extraordinary Cindy Burns (she currently directs the even more complex UNHCR program in Uganda) as well as with other vibrant people working in local NGO programs.

And we visited a UNHCR refugee camp in northwest Rwanda, a camp populated by some 17,000 Congolese refugees, mainly *Banyamulenge* and *Banyamasisi* tribesmen (of remote *Tutsi* ethnicity), who had been steadily escaping the violence of the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) since the beginning of the civil war in 1997, with new streams emerging in 1999 with the exacerbation of violence in that regional hotbed<sup>ii</sup>.

Approaching it from the road, the camp emerged as an extraterrestrial design, an out-of-this-world experience: following the contour of barren meadows and covered by a light but visible canopy of dust, interminable rows of blue tarp tents draw a seemingly endless labyrinth, stretching to the horizon. We were cordially welcomed by the camp responsables –UNHCR employees originally from Gabon, Sierra Leona, and Rwanda itself, who manage the facility and control the flow of people in and out. To be precise, while the control of who entered into the camp is reasonably tight, in order to reduce the possibility of infiltration by *Interahamwe* militia, the exit is not controlled, and people could leave the camp at will. However, to go where? Back to Congo and its chaos? Into Rwanda, an arid country with a 0.4% of irrigated cropland, a GDP per capita half of that

of Bolivia or Lesotho, where 60% of the population lives below the poverty line and 42% of children under five years old are malnourished? Most of the refugees, already in the camp for years, seem to settle into a temporary-but-indefinite stance toward staying in the camp, where at least they receive food, shelter, health care, and live in a low-risk environment. Their future seems to project not as anything to do with their own life but that of their children: the camp's school system is impressive for its extension and robustness. It includes a broad program of elementary and secondary education in dozens of solid buildings –in contrast to the message of emergency and provisionality conveyed by the tarp tents where refugees lived--, and even the promise of scholarships for university studies for those students who excel.

We walked through the camp with its director. We visited their common open market –with very few goods being displayed: some turnips or potatoes, cigarettes, soap. And then rows after row of tent, interspersed every so many by a common toilet facility and water facets, children surrounding us with a lot of brouhaha, women looking at us with dead-pan expression from their tents, occasional men –a minority in the camp-- just walking around in small groups. Broad space between some rows creates open avenues, where kids play soccer or run around. We also visited the camp health facilities, several wooden huts both for out and inpatients, managed by four nurses and medics, three nursing assistants, and one part-time medical doctor shared with other camps.<sup>iii</sup> I chatted extensively with the health personnel, seasoned by years of camp experience. The health facility, open to the general population of the camp, paid special attention to newcomers –where the bulk of malaria, infections, and child malnourishment and dehydration was detected and treated following pragmatic but medically sound protocols detailed in hand-painted instructions in *Kenyarwandese* hanging in the inpatient huts: –“During the first two days, if the symptoms are this, then do this and for the following two days, do that...”

We drank cold drinks –dry, very hot weather is the rule—while chatting with the staff in a mixture of English and French, genuinely praised them for their extraordinary work, and returned to the bumpy road back to Kigali. The dust behind our vehicle soon erased the eerie vision of a labyrinth in the middle of nowhere and of people suspended in time, prisoners of their fate while blessed to be alive, hoping for a better life for their

children, waiting not knowing very well for what, dreaming of returning home while the world as they know it disintegrates, while the world as we know continues to offer them little acts of kindness and enormous acts of indifference.

As we were leaving, I was flooded with admiration for the way UNHCR was carrying on its daunting mission. I was also musing on how much the course of regional wars has changed over time, and the potential impact of those changes in the agency's mission. In fact, it may be the case that now, like with so many other institutions, UNHCR will be confronted with the task of evolving new ways of providing its services—balancing the reality of both short and long term stays with the need not to relieve the pressure on the international community to provide security in the regions where these people come from.

How could one design, I asked myself, camps that would take into consideration both the short-term needs and the pragmatic reality of long-term stay? In a first—probably naïve—attempt at answering that question, I envisioned some first steps:

- Camps redesigned not in rows of tents but in clusters of perhaps ten dwellings, open inward toward a central, common space—recreating a small village. Those dwellings could be offered to families that knew each other from before, or with whom they share language or even ordeal, so as to facilitate the development of steady social networking—so central to foster resilience and well being. In fact, refugee camps should be re-designed by urban planners/ architects, so as to maximize their communal living-friendliness
- Adult-oriented educational programs for the refugees aimed at general education, health-related issues, and even a basic orientation to sociopolitical issues so as to provide the refugees with a broader context for their own plight
- Refugees enticed, from the beginning, to participate in collective activities, from music making to artisan skill-building, including perhaps the development of some steady production of their own native arts and crafts, connected in turn with a fair-price crafts venture that would sell their products abroad. That would not only enhance their skills and provide them with a project for day-to-day living but would

add meaning, connections and a sense of shared endeavor, not to mention a remunerated future-oriented activity, crucial both when they happen to return or to resettle, and if they end up in one of those protracted waiting, interminable even in the heaven of the refugee camp.

In sum, I was musing, refugee camps may need to be somewhat re-thought – without entailing a major shift in the agency’s current overall process--so as to allow the integration of long with short term needs, while remaining faithful to UNHCR’s current mandate.

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By the dawn of 2006, the picture on refugees has not improved. 200,000 refugees from Darfur have been pouring into Chad, over 2 million Afghani refugees are still living in refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan, other 2 million refugees from different parts of the world are seeking harbor in Germany, Tanzania and the United States, while new or renewed conflagrations keep on uprooting new streams of defenseless and resourceless civilian populations away from their homeland. And, for those living in the camp we visited, the violence in East Congo continues unabated, and the flow of new refugees far exceeding the flow of people in process of repatriation. In sum, they are still living in limbo.<sup>iv</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> This team, led by Antonia Chayes and Martha Minow, included Eileen F. Babbitt, Cynthia Burns, Sara Cobb –currently the Director of the Institute of Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University--, Brian Ganson, Laura McGrew, Mark Sommers, and myself. Description of that project can be found in Chages A and Minow M, Eds. (2003): *Imagine Coexistence: Restoring Humanity After Violent Ethnic Conflict*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

<sup>ii</sup> This figure amounts to only 5% of the 330,000 Congolese refugees from the DRC who are spread throughout neighboring countries, and a minuscule figure, considering the 1.8 million persons internally

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displaced within the Congo itself, and the estimated 3.8 million Congolese who have died from easily preventable diseases and malnourishment resulting from the disruption of health service, agriculture and infrastructure and from refugee displacement as a result of that conflict.

The complexity of the political situation in eastern Congo that led to that diaspora is mind-boggling: in an attempt at controlling (and looting) this resources-rich region, the territory is roamed by confronting military forces from the central government of DRC, Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, Sudan and Angola. To this list should be added disaffiliated bands of marauders –mainly armed groups from other countries in the region that became “independent agents” when their central governments ceased paying their soldiers—and the *Interahamwe*, a force composed by large contingents of the Rwandese Hutu militias responsible for the 1994 Rwandese genocide who subsequently escaped to the neighboring Congo and were in turn rearmed by the DRC to contain the Rwandan [Tutsi-based] army’s border threat. In turn, the regional jigsaw puzzle of refugees displaced from one country to another is equally complex: in addition to the Congolese who fled into Rwanda and other neighboring countries, tens of thousands of people escaped from Rwanda in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide and remain in exile in neighboring countries, and the same happens with more than 800,000 refugees from Burundi, who fear returning to that strife-torn nation, countless Sudanese refugees are escaping to other countries, and so on.

<sup>iii</sup> This health provider/inhabitant ratio –appalling by US standards-- fits the national profile of Rwanda, with 0.018 physicians per 1000 inhabitants, translated into a national total of 160 physicians for their 8 million inhabitants, with an average life expectancy of 40 years.

<sup>iv</sup> Sites consulted for accuracy of data in this article include <http://www.globalsecurity.org/>, <http://www.unhcr.ch>, <http://www.unicef.org>, <http://www.aacn.nche.edu>, <http://www.usaid.gov/>, <http://www.internal-displacement.org>, <http://www.cdc.gov> (specifically IERHB); and <http://en.wikipedia.org/>

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