

A Tragedy of Failures and False Expectations. (Three months sit-in and forced removal of Sudanese refugees in Cairo September-December 2005)

INTRODUCTION

On September 29, 2005, dozens of Sudanese asylum seekers and refugees initiated a sit-in near the office of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in Cairo to protest UNHCR's ongoing suspension of refugee status determination procedures as well as their conditions in Cairo, a situation they considered unbearable, their number quickly grew to an average of 1,800 to 2,500 and remained at those level throughout the following three months. Periodic meetings and negotiations among the sit-in leadership, UNHCR, and number of other parties failed to meet the demonstrator's demands or to result in a satisfactory end to the protest.

In the early morning hours of December 30, 2005 thousands of Egyptian security personnel forcibly removed the protestors to various center in and around Cairo. Tragically, 27 refugees and asylum seekers were killed in the removal, at least half being children and women. A 28th person, a 14- year-old boy, died in hospital a month later, and one man committed suicide in detention.

Most card-holding refugees and asylum seekers were released within a few days, but more than six hundred remained in detention until their status was clarified between UNHCR and the government of Egypt. The tragedy continued for weeks, with families trying to find loved ones, children being left unaccompanied over night or held in separated facilities from their parent(s) and people not knowing whether their relatives were in another detention facility, in hospital, or in morgue. Two months after the event, no one remained in detention, but several children were missing and families still were not allowed to take possession of the bodies of relatives for burial.

Calls by national and international human rights organization for an international inquiry into the deaths were rejected by Egypt, which was rumored to have initiated an internal investigation. The forced removal and its aftermath elicited criticism locally and abroad, strained relations between UNHCR and the government of Egypt, and exacerbated an atmosphere of distrust between UNHCR and Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers.

Egyptian and international media coverage of the event was replete with charges of police brutality and countercharges of racism and abuse of Egyptian hospitality by "drunken" and "disease-ridden" refugees and other xenophobic statements. At the same time, human rights and other civil society organizations worked hard to provide needed assistance by tracing families, identifying the deceased and raising funds to aid victims.

There is little information in the public domain on what happened that evening or what led up to it. Many questions surrounding the issue remain unanswered. Who was protesting in the first place, and why? Why did they reject several offers by UNHCR? Could UNHCR and the government of Egypt have offered the protesters more? Why was such excessive force used in the removal, and how did so many people die? Why were autopsy reports not released? Why did it take so long before bodies of victims were released to their relatives for burial, and why were none allowed to be transferred to Sudan for burial? Why was there so little information and care in the immediate aftermath, when dazed asylum seekers and refugees were left wandering the streets of Cairo? Who is responsible and who should be held accountable for which aspect of the problem? Could this tragedy have been avoided and, most important, could it happen again?