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The Forgotten Refugees
By Peter Browne

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If we’re all starting to feel impatient about the war in Iraq after two weeks, then try to imagine how the 83,000 refugees at the Kakuma camp in north-west Kenya are feeling. Driven from Sudan, Somalia and half a dozen other countries by war and famine, some of them have been waiting for more than ten years in this arid, remote region.

The refugees at Kakuma depend on the UN High Commissioner for Refugees for housing, sanitation and schooling, and on the World Food Program for food. But the cash-strapped UNHCR is struggling to provide a basic level of services in the camp, and the WFP is so short of food that it has cut the daily ration to 75 per cent of the minimum calorie requirement. Non-government organisations like the Jesuit Refugee Services and Don Bosco are doing remarkable work in the camps in very difficult circumstances, but they too are under-resourced in the face of enormous need.

Elsewhere in Africa, the WFP is struggling with acute food shortages in the Horn of Africa, Southern Africa and Western Sahel. For its part, the UNHCR has been weathering a significant shortfall in its annual budget, and – although the figures aren’t made public – there are strong indications that Africa is bearing much of the brunt. One group of refugees at Kakuma decided it was safe to return to Somalia; they’re still in the camp because the UNHCR couldn’t afford to provide transport.

But it’s not a good time for either of these organisations to be appealing for extra funds for Africa. Both the UNHCR and the WFP are highly dependent on donor countries responding to special appeals as new needs arise, and the flow of funds from the West tends to reflect which humanitarian emergencies are in the news. Donor countries are gripped by the war in Iraq, just as they were preoccupied by Kosovo in 1999 and Afghanistan in late 2001.

This shift in priorities comes on top of a growing wariness about Africa among donor countries. “There’s a sense of ‘God, these people! Why should we continue to bail them out?’,” says David Lambo, head of the UNHCR’s African division. Aid spending is down worldwide, and the flow of assistance to sub-Saharan Africa has been hit hard.

Yet refugees in camps like Kakuma, often confined to barren, inhospitable land, have no alternative but to rely on donor funds. And the presence of large numbers of refugees places an enormous burden on host countries. In Kenya, more than 400,000 refugees arrived in a matter of months in 1991 – on a per capita basis, the equivalent of more than a quarter of a million boat people arriving in Australia – and around 240,000 refugees are living within its borders today. Across the continent, countries with their own economic, social and political problems are host to a combined refugee population of nearly four million.
Africa’s problems can seem insurmountable, and this means that countries like Australia often lose sight of where we can offer help. As our attention wanders, an apparent breakthrough like the international agreement to supply HIV/AIDS drugs at much-reduced cost to African countries can be blocked by the powerful commercial interests.

Yet Australia can make a difference in Africa by recognising the enormous burden on refugee-hosting countries like Kenya. Australia takes a modest quota of refugees from Africa each year, but we can do much more to assist the UNHCR, the WFP and host countries in meeting the needs of people whose chances to provide for themselves are extremely limited.

The Australian government has made much of its humanitarian argument for joining the war against the government of Iraq. But, as Ruud Lubbers, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, said last month, “already too many people have paid a price because of the exclusive focus of the international community on the Iraq situation”.

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