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Where refugee camps are becoming a way of life
by Peter Browne

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Despite the intense midday heat, the Don Bosco Vocational Training Centre at the Kakuma refugee camp is teeming with activity. In one shed twenty young refugees are clustered around an old four-wheel drive truck, which they’ve pulled to pieces and almost finished reassembling. In another, a dozen masonry students are building small mudbrick walls with quiet concentration. Elsewhere in the camp, young refugees are learning dressmaking, tailoring, word processing, plumbing carpentry and agriculture.

Walking through the leafy training compound it is almost possible to forget that Kakuma, a hundred kilometres from the Sudan border in arid north-west Kenya, has been one of the UNHCR’s most troubled camps. Its population – currently a little over 83,000 – is not only much larger than the organisation considers manageable, but is more diverse and more volatile than many camps in Africa. And, like a growing number of camps across the continent, Kakuma has been experiencing the difficult transition from emergency settlement to a semi-permanent community with many of the characteristics of a small town.

Established by the UNHCR in response to an influx of mainly Sudanese refugees in 1991, the camp quickly dwarfed the existing town, and its estimated population of 7000 members of the region’s Turkana people. With their traditional nomadic existence already disrupted by banditry and intensifying competition for land and resources, the Turkana were hostile to the newcomers — but also attracted by the growing economy of the camp. A decade later, an estimated 48,000 local people live in and around Kakuma and have access to many of the services available to refugees.

It’s hardly surprising that the transition from a small town of 7000 to a combined population of over 130,000 has been characterised by violence – especially against women and girls collecting firewood outside the camp – and by conflict within the refugee communities. “Increasing incidents of inter-nationality and inter-ethnic fights, thuggery and banditry have resulted in a situation of hazard and risk,” reported one UNHCR officer in 1999. Despite its growing permanence, the camp remained on emergency footing.

But a slow transition was underway, and Don Bosco, an aid organisation run by the Salesian Brothers, played an important role alongside the Lutheran World Federation, which handles much of the day-to-day management of the camp on behalf of the UNHCR, and a range of other NGOs. Don Bosco’s micro-credit scheme provides in-kind assistance – bicycles, groceries, small pieces of equipment – to refugees starting their own businesses; the bicycles are used as taxis throughout the camp. Trained masons from the Don Bosco program are employed by World Vision to build mudbrick houses for
refugees, replacing the makeshift shelters that have characterised the camp for much of its life.

The figures suggest that the program is gathering pace. Last year 531 students were enrolled at Don Bosco’s three training centres at Kakuma; this year 1500 applied and 749 (including 65 Turkanas) were admitted.

A turning point for the camp came in 2001, according to Br Jose Kaippananickal, who manages the Don Bosco program at Kakuma. In a blaze of publicity, the US government accepted a first group of just over 3000 of the ‘lost boys of Sudan’, the group of young, unaccompanied Sudanese who formed the original nucleus of the camp. Of course, the boys were ten years older by this time, and had formed relationships – not least through marriage – in the camp. Soon after they arrived in the US, according to Br Jose, funds began to flow back to Kakuma, accelerating the growth of the camp economy.

Other camp residents benefit from a different source of funds – the “incentive payments” made to the several thousand refugees who have jobs with the agencies operating in the camp. The Jesuit Refugee Service, for example, has 160 trained refugees providing counselling, childcare and other services. Although the payments are modest, they provide the money to shop at the remarkable diversity of shops and stalls that have sprung up in the camp’s markets. They also help lift these refugees and their families out of the absolute poverty they would suffer if they were forced – as many others are – to rely entirely on the rations provided by the World Food Program.

For most of the past two years those rations have been below the World Health Organisation’s recommended daily minimum of 2100 calories, and often delivered in the form of a very narrow and monotonous group of foods. Last month, according to the UNHCR’s Kakuma Programme Officer, Khalid Shah, the WFP ration was providing 1800 calories a day. Partly filling the gap was a further 100 calories from the UNHCR’s programme funds, which have already been diminished by a reduction in donor funds for the organisation’s African operations.

Serious funding problems have helped produce a situation at Kakuma in which the facilities and services needed in a longer-term settlement – from sanitation to schools – are uneven and uncertain. Kakuma is not alone in this respect. According to the UNHCR, long-term camps can also be found in Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Sudan and Algeria. Skills training programs have become a feature of many of these camps.

In the case of Kenya, the existence of two large camps – Kakuma and, in the north-east, Dadaab – is a result of the former government’s controversial camp-confinement policy, which is likely to be relaxed somewhat under the new government. Although there are arguments for and against camps (as opposed to the alternative of ‘self settlement’, which also occurs, illegally, in Kenya) they’re likely to remain a feature of the refugee protection system in Africa.
For refugees in the camps the options are limited. Repatriation is difficult or impossible. Resettlements places in the West are severely limited. Self-sufficiency is unlikely. So the key question for donor governments is how best to make life less desperate in these relatively new, artificial communities. Supporting the work of organisations like Don Bosco and the Jesuit Refugee Service seems like a good place to start.