

# Dadaab. . . a forgotten city in the 21st century

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If we don't end war, war will end us — (HG Wells)

My research examines the whole humanitarian response system, looking in particular at how it responds to complex emergencies. Using the Dadaab refugee camps close to the Kenyan/Somali border as a case study, the many and varied issues at play in this ongoing intervention are being investigated. Some of these range from the insecurity of the region due to geography, bandits and Islamists, interclan feuding, ethnic tensions, logistical difficulties, interagency coordination, the quality and effectiveness of the Kenyan security forces as well as the tensions between the host community, the refugee community, the Government of Kenya, the international community and UNHCR in agreeing on an appropriate response to this complex emergency. It is envisaged that this research will be fed back to the Irish Government and UN agencies such as UNHCR in order to suggest practical but effective ways of improving the security situation on the ground there, thus leading to increased protection of the population in Dadaab.

## Introduction

Let's close our eyes for a minute and imagine that the Ireland we know today doesn't exist. Let's assume that, after the 1916 rising and subsequent independence of the 26 Counties, Northern Ireland took a different path, gaining independence as the Radical Christian state of Ulster in 1960. Impoverished and underdeveloped after years of occupation, it took just nine years of failed governments before a coup would take place, leading to the takeover of the country by a brutal and corrupt Dictator. His claim of Donegal and Monaghan being part of Ulster would lead to three wars with the Republic of Ireland (itself still a poor developing country), as well as famine, death and extreme suffering in his own country. This Dictator was then overthrown in 1991 by a loose coalition of armed militias who then turned on one another as the country splintered and descended into chaos with different regions ruled by warlords, pirates, bandits and radical Christians. Three armed humanitarian interventions by the UN failed leaving Ulster without a functioning government since 1991. Fourteen peace conferences eventually saw a US-backed Transfederal Government elected in 2004 but the reality today is that the TFG only controls a few blocks in Belfast City centre and would immediately fall if it wasn't for the armed support of a few thousand European Union troops. The rest of the Ulster is controlled by a radical Christian group called "the Young Crusaders" who impose an extreme form of law based

on obscure passages from the bible. Some of these laws include the practice of slavery, the burning of non believers (infidels) and adulterers to death, the stoning to death of rape victims, homosexuals and blasphemers, as well as the overall aim of the imposition of this law on everyone in the world.

In response to the displacement of tens of thousands of people in 1991, UNHCR was invited by the Republic of Ireland's government to set up refugee camps. These camps were located 50 miles from the border in an obscure, underdeveloped and lawless region of Donegal and were constructed to hold 90,000 refugees. Radical Christians, bandits and corrupt Gardai have continuously preyed on refugees trying to get to the camp, with Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reporting regular rapes, sexual assaults, torture and killings by the various groups including the Irish police and army. In recent times, fighting between the TFG and the Crusaders escalated resulting in another mass movement of refugees towards the camps, which now holds 400,000 people and are bursting at the seams. The population is completely dependent on aid as the Irish Government operates an encampment policy forbidding anyone leaving the camps and the international community barely acknowledge the existence of the Donegal camp, at this stage; the biggest in the world...

Now open your eyes and decide, could something like this happen in the 21st century, with all of humanity's progress and technology. The answer is yes, not only has it happened but it continues to happen even today. Substitute Ulster with Somalia and Donegal with Dadaab, and you have the truth. Welcome to Dadaab, the largest refugee camp in the world, the "city" the world forgot.

## **Dadaab... where the hell is that?**

Located in the North Eastern territories of Kenya, Dadaab is a small outpost town approximately 50 miles from the Kenya-Somali border (Figure 1). The North Eastern province is a very insecure area, with special Kenyan government permission being needed before any travel is allowed by anyone to Dadaab. The presence of bandits and Islamist militias such as Al Shabaab, as well as the periodic outbreaks of inter-clan feuding, means that the threat of violence and kidnapping to humanitarian workers is very real. As a result of this threat, as well as armed attacks on humanitarian workers in the past, the UN mission in Dadaab operates under phase three security restrictions; travel is by convoy and armed police escort, there is no free movement of staff without armed guards in the camps and humanitarian workers are under curfew in a secure compound from 6 pm to 6 am. This insecurity and the subsequent restrictions has a detrimental effect on the humanitarian operation there because of the insufficient time workers are allowed to spend in the field due to curfew, with this then impacting negatively on services such as protection and field operations.

The Dadaab refugee complex was established in 1991 following the collapse of the Somali Government of Dictator Siad Barre. The region where the Dadaab camps are located is remote, harsh, hostile, semi-arid, and suffers from flooding in the rainy season and temperatures of up to 48 degrees Celsius in the dry season. It was sparsely populated by nomadic Somali-Kenyans before the arrival of refugees fleeing the chaos in Somalia. There have been hostilities between Kenya and Somalia ever since independence in the early 1960s, with Muslim Somalia claiming the Somali-inhabited Northern Frontier District (NFD) as a missing Somali territory and supporting regional independence movements, to the anger and suspicion of the mainly Christian Kenyan government. The scale of refugee flight across the Kenyan border in the early 1990s overwhelmed both the small local nomadic population and the scarce natural resources of the area. UNHCR was thus invited by the Kenyan government to set up camps in Dadaab to deal with the humanitarian emergency. The Dadaab complex consists of Dagahaley, Hagadera (Figure 2) and Ifo (Figure 3) refugee camps, with a population (as of August 2011) of 400,000 people, comprised mainly of Somali refugees (94%) with small numbers of Sudanese, Ugandans, Eritreans and Ethiopians (UNHCR Kenya, August 2011). Within Kenya itself, Dadaab presently is the fourth largest population centre after Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu, unacknowledged and forgotten in the desert.

### **Sorry... we're full!**

When they were established in 1991, the refugee camps were originally to accommodate 90,000 refugees and presently hold nearly four times their intended capacity. The fact that the camps have existed for over 20 years have resulted in them now holding three generations of refugees. Over 6000 grandchildren of the original arrivals have been born in the camps with little or no hope of them, like their parents and grandparents before them, ever leaving. The camps are now bursting at the seams as resources and infrastructure within the camps have been stretched to their capacity. In 2008 the UNHCR declared the camps full and, because of the lack of land available for new arrivals, it has been impossible to provide over 150,000 new arrivals with a plot of land. These instead have been forced to stay with relatives and clan members, but even that has now run its course. The new devastating famine that is ongoing in Somalia at present, coupled with an escalation in fighting between the TFG and Al Shabaab has caused huge displacement and a massive influx to the camps, recently reaching 10,000 per week. This has resulted in 70,000 people living in illegal settlements outside the camps because there is no more room. These settlements have little or no access to essential services such as water and sanitation, are very insecure and open to attacks by the armed bandits operating freely in the area, as well as wild animals such as hyenas which have a history of attacking children there. Especially at risk are women and young girls who go to find firewood, with many rapes and sexual assaults occurring.

The UN Dadaab operation has two *de facto* operations running side by side: the long term protracted refugee population on the one hand and the emergency operation (influx of new arrivals) on the other, both of which offer a mountain of challenges. The long-term protracted refugee population could be looked at as a developmental type intervention, with the camps in need of updated and more permanent infrastructure in terms of improvement in water systems, provision of additional schools, hospitals, police posts etc. Services such as the education and health services were already in need of expansion prior to 2008, when the new increased influx of refugees from Somalia began.

The second, emergency-based operation is focused on coping with the new arrivals and providing the most basic resources and services. In situations of displacement, there is always loss of personal property. Very often people flee with little more than the clothes they are wearing. In addition to food, people affected by crisis need basic life saving non-food items for their survival. UNHCR therefore struggles to provide items such as blankets, sleeping mats and plastic sheeting to safe-guard them from rain, sun, and other environmental conditions. As well as this, when resources allow, they provide kitchen sets including pans, plates and spoons which are essential items for every family, soap necessary to ensure personal hygiene, and jerry cans which are needed to collect drinking water and to keep it safe from contamination. Clothes or material for making clothes and shoes may also be needed. In addition, women and girls need sanitary supplies. Children too have specific needs especially those who may have been orphaned and require baby food, clothes, diapers etc.

The Kenyan Government implements an encampment policy which dictates that all refugees in Kenya live within the limited confines of the refugee camps. Thus, the majority of refugees in Dadaab are primarily dependent on UNHCR and its Implementing/Operational partners such as the World Food Programme (WFP) for food rations and other assistance. This policy dictates that refugees are required to stay within the perimeters of the camps unless given explicit permission by the Kenyan authorities, in the form of a travel document called a movement pass. This lack of mobility effectively “imprisons” refugees and limits their ability to accomplish commercial growth and independent enterprise. In many cases also, new arrivals whose lack of knowledge in relation to Kenyan law and these travel restrictions have been arrested and imprisoned. Many Human Rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch consider the Government of Kenya’s encampment policy a violation of International Humanitarian Law and have documented many cases of rape, sexual abuse, extortion and refoulement (the forced return of refugees and asylum seekers to persecution, torture, and situations of generalized violence that seriously disturb public order. Kenya is bound by the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, the 1984 Convention against Torture, and the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention not to carry out refoulement) by Kenyan police against refugees while in their custody.

## The situation deteriorates further

The recent escalation of the fighting and violence in Somalia has led to another significant increase in the influx of refugees with Dadaab now registering over 35,000 new arrivals per month, and this number showing no sign of abating. This increase is adding further pressure to already scarce resources, inadequate infrastructure and insufficient services while leading to a further deterioration of conditions in the camps. This deterioration is in turn leading to further suffering, increased conflict between the new arrivals and the older arrivals, refugees and the host community as well as inter-clan violence. It is also causing great concern to the Kenyan government, who have stepped up security in fear of the infiltration of Kenya by Al Shabaab operatives with the aim of carrying out terrorist attacks similar to those in Kampala in July 2010, which killed 74 people. As this complex emergency worsens, a significant increase in people's vulnerability is occurring, leading to increased protection and security concerns. The research that is being carried out will examine these many and varied concerns in detail, look at the work being done (or not being done) in these areas and, where appropriate, suggest ways of improvement or solutions. Hopefully, it will assist in making life a little less dangerous in Dadaab, a forgotten city in the 21st century.

*Damien Mc Sweeney is a PhD candidate from the Department of Government supervised by Dr. Andrew Cottey. He was deployed to Dadaab as a member of Irish Aid's Rapid Response Corps to work with UNHCR for eight months in 2010. His research is focusing on Humanitarian Interventions especially in the area of protection and security of vulnerable populations in complex emergencies.*

## References

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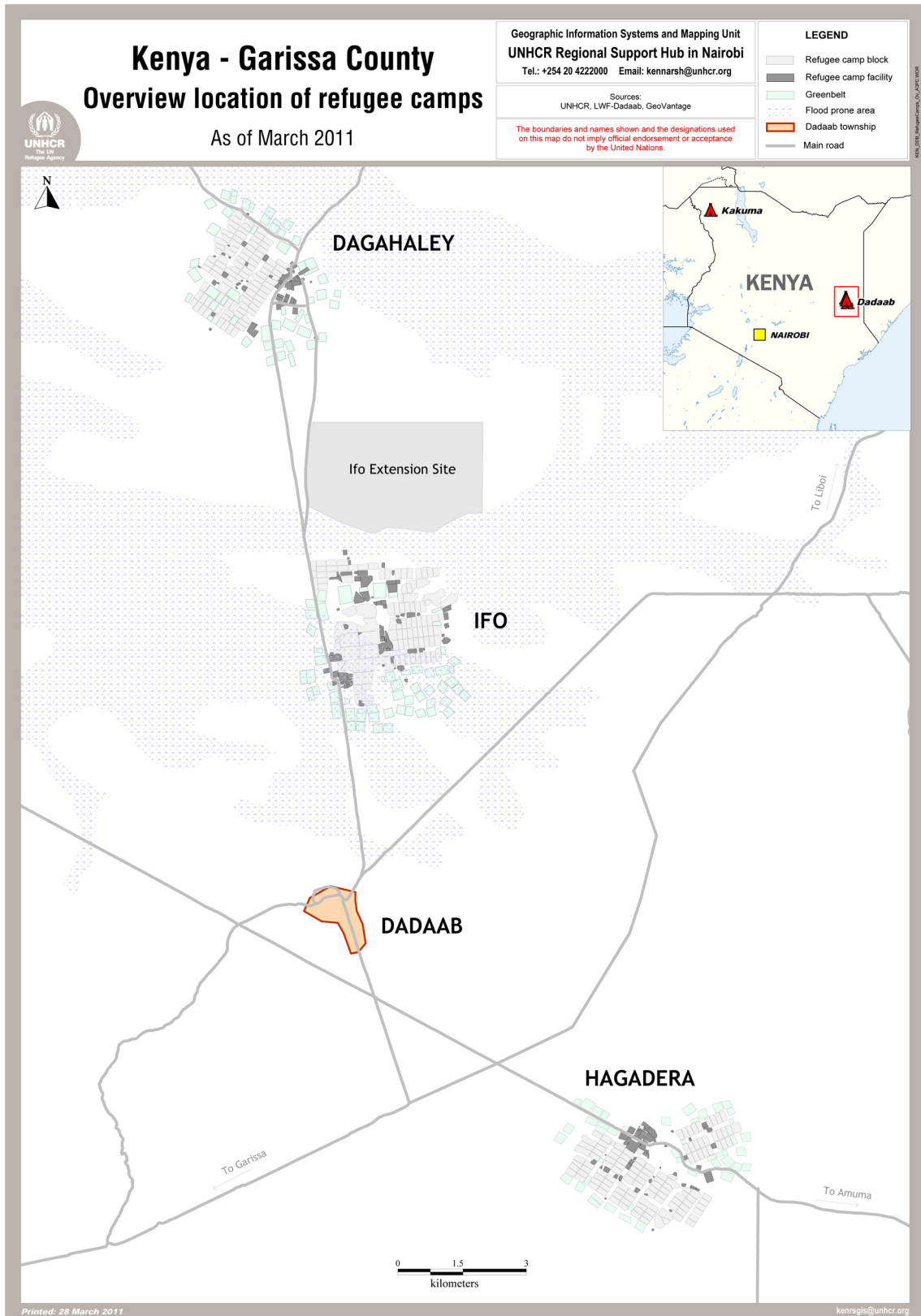


Figure 1: An Overview of Dadaab Refugee Camps (UNHCR, March 2011)





Figure 2: a section of Hagadera camp, home to over 110,000 refugees



Figure 3: Newly arrived Somali refugees waiting outside UNHCR registration in Ifo camp