

SOMALIA

Returning 'home' from Dadaab camp

With nearly 900,000 refugees from Somalia living mainly in Ethiopia, Kenya and Yemen, the cross-border displacement of Somalis is a regional phenomenon.²⁴⁹ Another 1.1 million people are internally displaced within the country, more than 890,000 of them in south-central areas, and Somalia hosts significant numbers of refugees from other countries.²⁵⁰ All of these factors both contribute to, and are a result of its persistent insecurity.

There were 324,000 Somali refugees registered with UNHCR in Kenya at the start of 2017.²⁵¹ Many arrived in search of protection as long ago as 1991. Others have been born and raised in the country. Life, however, is extremely precarious, particularly for those in the Dadaab refugee camps. The Kenyan government announced in May 2016 that it would make further attempts to close the camp complex and disband its Depart-

ment of Refugee Affairs, which had previously been responsible for the registration, coordination and the revocation of prima facie refugee status for Somali refugees.²⁵²

These moves have increased pressure on Somalis to return to their country via a voluntary repatriation scheme established under a tripartite agreement between UNHCR and the Kenyan and Somali governments in 2014. The scheme helped more than 33,000 to do so in 2016, compared with 6,000 in the preceding two years.²⁵³ The Somalia Protection, Return and Monitoring Network (PRMN) recorded a further 28,355 spontaneous returns outside the repatriation scheme.

This brings the total number of recorded returns in 2016 to more than 67,000. A UNHCR survey in mid-2016, however, found that 74 per cent of Somali refugees in the Dadaab camps did

A Somali family looks on as a plane arrives in Dadaab refugee camp to take them back to Mogadishu, Somalia. They were one of 40 families returning that day as part of a voluntary return programme.
Photo: NRC/ Fredrik Lerneryd, September 2016



not want to go back.²⁵⁴ A subsequent survey of Somali Dadaab residents conducted by Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) put the figure even higher, at 86 per cent.²⁵⁵ Among the reasons for their reluctance to return in the UNHCR survey, 66 per cent cited fears of insecurity and ten per cent their inability to access shelter.²⁵⁶ Of those who did return under the voluntary repatriation scheme in 2016, the vast majority moved to three of 12 designated return areas – 50 per cent to Kismayu, 22 per cent to Baidoa and 19 per cent to Mogadishu.²⁵⁷

For 25 per cent of the returnees, however, the three areas are not their place of origin or previous residence.²⁵⁸ They are also located in south-central Somalia, which hosts the vast majority of the country's IDPs, and there are concerns that many returnees are simply adding to their number. High levels of acute malnutrition persist in most settlements of IDPs across Somalia.²⁵⁹

The likelihood of returnees being forced to move again in search of basic assistance, services and sustainable livelihoods is high. Much of Somalia is suffering the effects of recurrent and severe drought on pastoral and agricultural livelihoods and food insecurity, and there are warnings of impending famine if the situation does not improve. Returnees are coming back to a country where around half of the population are in need of emergency food assistance, and all 12 designated return areas are affected by food insecurity.²⁶⁰

Former refugees previously registered in Dadaab are already among an increasing number of Somalis crossing into Ethiopia.²⁶¹ PMRN has also recorded incidents of refugees previously registered in Ethiopia returning to Somalia only to cross back into their former country of refuge.²⁶² The same has also been reported of Somalis returning to Dadaab, a phenomenon which has continued into 2017: 500 refugees arrived in Kenya's Dadaab camp in March, 100 of whom who had previously received UNHCR support to voluntarily return to Somalia.²⁶³

Accounting for returned Somali refugees remains a challenge since some settle in IDP camps, where they may not be distinguished from people who had not crossed an international border. Returnees who remain in Somalia temporarily before moving on again to their prior country of refuge, or another country, are also not accounted for in the year-end headcount since they have not remained within the borders of their country.

To complicate matters further, UNHCR considers much (if not all) of the displacement in Somalia to be the same people being displaced repeatedly and, as a result, did not update its stock figure during 2016. Indeed, despite the number of new displacements and cross-border returns, UNHCR reported the exact same number of IDPs (1,106,751) in January, February, March, April, May, June, July and December 2016.²⁶⁴

It appears clear that Somalia is not in a position to support sustainable returns on the large scale already seen from Kenya, and numbers could increase dramatically if the government in Nairobi goes ahead with its decision to close the Dadaab complex in 2017. Unless the Somali government, the local authorities in Jubaland and international organisations scale up their relief and reintegration efforts, backed by multi-year funding, the upshot may be increased internal displacement, circular movements back into Kenya and more cross-border movements into Ethiopia.