# Sanctuary without end: The refugees the world forgot

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It's late morning as Mohammad Abdula fishes into a drawer and hands a couple of heavily worn shilling notes and a phone card to a customer through the bars of his corrugated iron shop.

Outside, women in brightly-colored abayas hustle down a dirt road lined with the rundown metal shacks containing local businesses, making last minute purchases before the oppressive midday heat settles in.

Tailors step on foot-pedalled Singer sewing machines, and barbers sit in salons under hand painted signs.

Butchers hang goat meat under metal awnings, and fresh goods arrive in giant trucks that carefully make their way under the tangle of electricity cables strung up on wooden poles.

A fine dust clings to every surface here, yet Abdula is dressed immaculately in a striped Tommy Hilfiger shirt and jeans.

Mohammad Abdula works at this money transfer shop in Dadaab. As a refugee, he can't buy his own goods to sell and can't leave the camp without permission.

Abdula closes up his shop and makes his way towards his home. He stops for a moment to buy a melon juice from a vendor, who pulls it out of a chest freezer that billows condensation into the hot air. Abdula sits alone at a metal table, quietly sipping his drink.

The scene could be from the main street of almost any sizeable town in northern Kenya. But there is nothing normal about this place, or the lives of the more than 300,000 residents that exist here.

For Dadaab is the largest refugee camp in the world. If it was a city, it would be one of Kenya's largest.

But most of the people here do not come by choice. They're men, women and children who have fled famine and war. And even though the camp has existed for 24 years, permanent structures are banned by the Kenyan government.

In the older parts of the camp where Abdula lives, there are shops and hospitals. In the newer parts, families live under tents in patches of desert, battered by winds that whip up the occasional violent dust storm.

Refugees here aren't allowed to build permanent structures. Many live in tents or structures made from old tarps.

The walls of Abdula's house are made of wooden poles stripped from thorn trees, the roof a vaulted tin sheet.

Sixteen-month-old Semeya runs up to her father as Abdula enters the enclosure outside their home.

"Nacnac," she says, tugging at his shirt. "Nacnac," she says again, repeating the Somali word for candy. "She always wants sweets," says Abdula.

As Abdula arrives, his wife Sahra, who was born in Dadaab, places a crimson hijab on Semeya, as is customary when a family receives guests. Abdula's mother Hawo rests against the wall of their hut.

They are three generations of refugees living under one roof.

Abdula and his family fled Somalia's brutal civil war for Dadaab in 1994. The 26-year-old has been living here since childhood and knows little else.

"I don't know any other country, what I know is only this refugee camp," says Abdula. His closest foray into the non-refugee world has been brief stops at the town that sits next to the camp. But he needs written permission to go further.

Sitting cross-legged on a woven mat outside his home, Abdula says Dadaab is like a prison.

"I am not allowed to get a proper job," he says. "I depend on Kenyans to buy my goods, I can't leave the camp."

"More than 20 years in one place, not being able to travel freely, that is difficult, very difficult."

**Dadaab: A refuge from famine and war**

**Interactive: Dadaab from above**

Click and drag to change your perspective. This interactive feature was created by stitching a series of aerial photographs together. Photo by: Wojciech Treszczynski/CNN

Dadaab rose from modest beginnings, set up in 1991 as a temporary shelter for 90,000 refugees fleeing the civil war engulfing neighboring Somalia. Almost a quarter of a century later it is a complex of five distinct camps, and it is still growing. After years of conflict, famine, and floods, Somalis continue to stream over the border into the camp.

Europe's migrant crisis may have grabbed all the headlines this summer, but two-thirds of the world's [roughly 20 million refugees](http://www.unhcr.org/558193896.html) live in protracted situations like the one here in Dadaab.

Nearly 60 million people around the world were displaced by war, conflict or persecution by the end of 2014 -- the highest figure since records began. An average of 42,500 people are forced from their homes each day, [according to the U.N. refugee agency (UNHCR).](http://www.unhcr.org/558193896.html)

Camps in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, overflowing with the millions of Syrians who have fled the country's devastating war, are quickly becoming the new Dadaabs.

This past summer, Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan marked its third anniversary. Carved out in an equally harsh desert environment, it is now home to more than 80,000 Syrians, making it the largest camp in the Middle East. Yet it is still just a quarter of the population living in Dadaab.

**'The agencies have abandoned us'**

Dadaab is unforgiving at the best of times. And if the situation here seems grim now, it was even worse four years ago.

During the height of Somalia's 2011 famine, tens of thousands of refugees made the journey by bus, donkey cart and foot to escape hunger and the Islamic militant group Al-Shabaab. A quarter of a million people died during the famine. Most were under the age of six, according to the U.N.

We first met Aden Noor Ibrahim in 2011 as he was carrying his daughter Sarah's lifeless body through the camp.

Ibrahim and his brother wrapped the young girl in a pristine white sheet and prayer mat. Ibrahim led a small group of men to the edge of their makeshift camp in Dadaab. After a simple prayer facing Mecca, they dug into the red soil with their hands to make a shallow grave. Ibrahim and his uncle climbed in and carefully laid Sarah's body inside, covering her first with earth, then with thorn branches.

Sarah was four when she died. Ibrahim said that the meager rations of food provided by aid groups weren't enough for her to survive.

He didn't even have the dollar it would have cost to transport his daughter to the hospital.

Four years later, the UNHCR helps us locate his name in the register. Like many of those that arrived during the famine, Ibrahim's family was moved into Ifo 2 camp, one of the newer expansions in the complex.

Mohammad Abdula's sister Shukri Ali recently arrived in Dadaab.

But when we arrive, he is not there. Ibrahim's wife Aday says he left his family and children behind a year ago to go back to Somalia to try and farm their old patch of land. But he's only been able to send some paltry support he has received from well-wishers in Somalia who have heard his story.

"He felt so ashamed that he couldn't provide for our remaining children," Aday says. "He went to Somalia to try to find some work. The agencies have abandoned us."

Like all the refugees here, Aday's rations have been cut. Because refugees can't get Kenyan IDs or seek employment, they depend on food aid -- in some cases for decades.

**As the attention fades, so does the funding**

The World Food Program (WFP) has struggled to fund its operations in Dadaab, and [dropped rations by 30 percent this summer](https://www.wfp.org/news/news-release/lack-funds-forces-wfp-reduce-food-rations-again-refugees-kenya) -- meaning that the daily nutrition refugees now receive is roughly a third less than the bare minimum recommended by the U.N. itself.

At one of the largest hospitals in Dadaab, doctors deliver 300 babies a month. All of them enter the world as refugees, many to parents also born in the camp.

Doctor John Kiogora checks on Rahmo Abdi as she cradles her nine-month old daughter Munira in her arms.

Munira is roughly half the weight of a healthy baby her age. She's had trouble breathing, and doctors believe she may have heart problems.

As Abdi awaits the diagnosis from doctors, Kiogora tells us he is worried that the food cuts will have an effect on nutrition rates.

Rahmo Abdi, 20, came to Dadaab as an infant. Now she has one of her own. Munira is nine months old and doctors believe she might have heart problems.

Four years ago during the famine, this hospital was struggling to cope with sick, hungry and sometimes dying infants lying on beds, mattresses and the floor.

But as the crisis faded, so has the funding. Kiogora says they aren't able to fully staff the hospital, which is run by the International Rescue Committee, with enough health workers.

"I think the world has gone to other emerging emergencies like Syria," Kiogora tells us. "There's no long durable solutions for the population here."

Some believe that the [Kenyan government's plan](http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/11/africa/kenya-dadaab-refugee-camp/index.html) is to squeeze refugees like Abdi out of Dadaab.

"The international system puts them in a position of dependence and then doesn't give them enough to survive. It's totally unacceptable," says Charles Gaudry, the head of mission for Doctors Without Borders in Kenya.

"Sometimes I think they want to make it so bad that the Somalis feel forced to leave."

In a speech on Saturday, Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta tackled the criticisms head on.

"African countries with scarce resources lead in taking in refugees -- of the ten countries which host most refugees relative to their size, four are African, more than any other continent," he said. "This is a story of African solidarity and resilience."

**Will Kenya close the camp?**

Despite the dire conditions in Dadaab, the people here are trying their best to maintain some semblance of normalcy.

Halema Mahadi sells clothes at a market in Dadaab, but says she relies heavily on the dwindling food rations provided by aid groups.

Halema Mahadi, 45, sells clothes at the market in Dadaab. She is one of the hundreds of thousands here who relies on food rations, and she wishes she had more power to make money for her family.

"If I had freedom of movement, I could choose where to put my business," she says.

Wacy Mohammed Bulle sits inside his tailoring shop and assesses life in the camp. "Life here is normal at times, and it's not normal at times," the 52-year-old says. "It's okay and then it's not."

If Bulle has hopes for a better life elsewhere, he also seems prepared for the possibility of living out his days in Dadaab.

"I don't want Kenyan residency, I don't want a Somali passport, I want to be resettled," Bulle tells us. "I've worked very hard to at this job, but still feel like I'm in an open jail. I just want to lead my own life."

Refugees should have three options if they want to leave the camps for good, according to international law. They should be able to apply for resettlement in a third country, return to their country of origin or integrate into their country of asylum.

Wacy Mohammed Bulle is a tailor in Dadaab. He says he feels like he's in an open jail.

But settling in Kenya isn't an option because the government is unwilling to grant Dadaab's refugees citizenship. And historically less than one percent of refugees worldwide are resettled in a third country.

After April's [devastating terror attack](http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/02/africa/kenya-university-attack-scene/index.html) in nearby Garissa -- where [Al-Shabaab militants](http://www.cnn.com/video/data/3.0/video/tv/2015/04/14/orig-al-shabaab-terrorist-group-somalia-sciutto-the-brief.cnn/index.xml) murdered 147 people, most of them university students -- the Kenyan government, which has for decades carried much of the burden of Somalia's refugee exodus, has [repeatedly threatened](http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/11/africa/kenya-dadaab-refugee-camp/index.html) to close the camps entirely.

[The government claims](http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/24/africa/kenya-back-door-porous-border-security-threat/index.html) Dadaab is a major planning, recruiting and brainwashing base for Al-Shabaab. Last month Kenyan security forces claim to have broken up an Al-Shabaab cell they say operated right out of the camps.

"There is no doubt that this huge camp has become highly insecure for the last few years, and it is not possible for the Kenya police and the UNHCR to police it," says Rashid Abdi, an analyst at the Crisis Group.

But Abdi says that the Kenyan government exaggerates the threat. "Kenya views the refugee situation through a security prism."

**Heading back to a home they never knew**

Kenya never officially called for Dadaab to close, but it is certainly trying to reduce the camp's numbers.

While it can take years of paperwork for a refugee to obtain one of the few spots for resettlement to a third country, voluntary repatriation back to Somalia is a picture of efficiency.

A Dash 8 turboprop plane ferries a batch of refugees several times a week back to Somalia. Each refugee is given around $100 before being settled in one of nine different regions in the country.

The number of regions has recently been expanded as more areas are deemed safe, but experts like Abdi say that the security situation in much of the selected zones are still precarious. African Union troops and Somali government forces still face a significant threat from Al-Shabaab and refugees say the war that forced them from their homes is still going on.

Habiba Yussuf Abdi lives with her grandmother in Dadaab. She recently lost her grandfather. "He wanted us to live a better life," the 19-year-old tells us. "He left us very sad."

"We never left Somalia because we wanted to come here," she says. "We left because of the war. The war is still going on."

Habiba Yussuf Abdi, 19, recently lost her grandfather. Despite Kenya's push to voluntarily repatriate refugees, Abdi says the war in Somalia is still going on.

But for Mohammad Abdula, it's about more than the war. "I don't have a farm, my family lost everything in the war, I know nothing about Somalia," he says. "The only government I know is UNHCR."

His wife Sahra holds the couple's daughter in her lap and utters a sentence that could have come from thousands of mothers in Dadaab. "I want my daughter to have a good life, to have good health and, mostly, to have freedom in her future," she says.

But like many refugee families here, they are trapped in a terrible cycle. Abdula and his wife can't become citizens of the country where they've lived for decades. They are stuck within the boundaries of Dadaab, and his family is dependent on dwindling food aid.

But more than anything, Abdula is afraid of returning to the country where he was born.

"I think the world has forgotten us," he says.