

**Field Trip**  
**Kakuma Refugee Camp**  
**Kenya**

**Eileen Pittaway and**  
**Linda Bartolomei**

**UNSW Centre for Refugee**  
**Research and ANCORW**  
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# Introduction

Kakuma camp is situated in an extremely remote semi arid area, in the north of Kenya temperatures in the day are near to 40 degrees and only drop to the low 30's at night. Water and food rations are in short supply and many in the camp face nutrition problems in the coming months. The camp is designated a danger area by UNHCR. Staff and NGO's are not allowed to take their families to live in or near to the camps. There is little email access and only radiotelephone. This is not available to all workers in the camp, so both workers and refugees are isolated from family and the mainstream Kenyan community. Travel to the capital Nairobi 840 km away is difficult and dangerous.

The local people are often antagonistic towards the refugees and there are conflicts within different groups within the camps. The prevalence of AK47 rifles adds to the danger of the situation. There is a very high incidence of rape and sexual abuse of women and girls.

Eileen Pittaway the Director of the UNSW Centre for Refugee Research and Linda Bartolomei a senior research associate at the Centre visited the camp for a 6 day period in early February 2002, as guests of the Don Bosco project. Don Bosco run an excellent project and enjoy good working relationships with community members, UNHCR and other NGOs working in the camp. Not only do they offer vocational training, but unlike UNHCR and all other NGOs they insist on living in the camp, instead of the NGO Compound, which has a 5pm curfew. As a result they play a pivotal role as a point of contact for refugees in the hours between 5pm and 8am when other NGOs are not available. With Don Bosco's support we were able to move freely within the camp, to meet and talk at length with many of the refugees living in the camp and with NGO workers and UNHCR.

## **Physical Location**

Kakuma Camp is located in the north of Kenya half way between Lockichockio and Lodwar, on the lands traditionally inhabited by the Tukarna people. This is the hottest and most arid part of Kenya and has been largely ignored by both the current Kenyan government and the former British rulers. The Tukarna people are traditionally nomadic, depending on goats and donkey herding for their livelihoods. Due to the difficult geographic conditions, the lack of water and vegetation and firewood the sustainability of this existence has relied on their ability to move their temporary dwellings frequently across a large area. The presence of large numbers of refugees during the last decade has placed increasing pressure on these limited natural resources. This has lead to escalating conflict between the indigenous Tukarnas and the refugee populations.

## **Access to Kakuma Camp**

Lockichokio, located close to the Sudanese border, hosts a small airport which provides access for Aid organisations to both Kakuma camp and the Sudan. Lockichokio airport is composed of a collection of shacks, the tents of the World Food program and a small tarmac dotted with UN planes. Along one side of the runway are a series small igloo like dwellings made from twigs and desert scrub, home to the local Tukarna people.

Lockichokio town is characterised by dusty roads lined with shanty style stores selling 2<sup>nd</sup> hand western clothes, wilted vegetables, barbershops and ‘hotels’ ( rough shacks in which men drink beer!), the streets and squalid dwellings scream of poverty - the sense of desolation is over whelming. Groups of Tukarna women (their necks bound by coloured beads) and children walk by the roadside, water containers on their heads or sit sorting piles of gritty black coal, surrounded by the black grim, in clouds of black and acrid smelling dust. Faustine the administrator from the Don Bosco Project in Kakuma, explained that the poverty of the Tukarna people is so extreme that collecting and selling coal is one of the few methods by which they can earn any income. Many of the Tukarna women have been forced into prostitution servicing the mainly transient population.

### **Refugee Reception Centre in Lockichokio**

At the time of our visit in early February 2002, refugees from Sudan were crossing the border into Kenya in increasing numbers (50-60 per day) – as indiscriminate bombing on the part of the Sudanese government had escalated. Many of these were unaccompanied minors who have been separated from their parents during the attacks. Others were female-headed family groups. In order to be processed and taken to Kakuma Camp all new arrivals are required to register at the reception centre. Once they have been processed they are required to wait, often for several days in the reception centre until there are sufficient numbers to fill a cattle truck prior to being transported the 120 kilometres down the road to Kakuma camp. Some of those arriving can remain in the reception centre for many weeks whilst their claims for protection are checked. \* Conditions in the Reception centre are appalling. There are half a dozen tin roofed concrete buildings, open on three sides. There is no adequate protection from the heat or the swirling red dust. A high cyclone wire fence topped with razor wire encloses the compound. There is no food available at this centre only water and firewood and some limited medical assistance are provided.

*\*According to the UNHCR Kenya report; all Sudanese and Somali are granted prima facie refugee status however all other nationalities have their claims examined individually.*

### **Travel to Kakuma**

Kakuma camp is located midway between Lockichokio and Lodwar and can be accessed by road from either town. Travel on this road is dangerous and is only undertaken by NGOs and UNCHR staff as part of a daily convoy or with security guards, carrying rifles. There have been regular attacks on travellers by bandits who sweep down from the hills alongside the road. The road south of Kakuma is particularly dangerous and also in very poor condition. Overland travel from Nairobi to Kakuma is generally not recommended and is avoided by all who can afford air travel (UN and International NGO staff). However despite the danger and poor road conditions, the Don Bosco teaching and administration staff are forced to regularly travel overland to Nairobi. The limited funds received by the project do not enable them to travel by air and requirements for materials for their courses require regular visits to Lodwar and Nairobi.

The journey from Lockichokio to Kakuma takes approximately an hour and a half. The landscape is dry and arid deeply scarred in places from the wild and occasional desert

floods, which – drive thick sand across the road and cut deep gullies in the landscape. Occasionally there are small Tukarna settlements or small groups of Tukarna people herding goats or carrying water containers on their heads, from water pipes connected to sunken bores.

## **Kakuma Camp**

Ever thickening clouds of red dust signal the approach to Kakuma camp. The UNHCR and Lutheran World Federation compounds mark the entrance to the camp – each surrounded by double wire fences, the exterior fence topped with rolls of razor wire and entrance controlled by high secured gates. The compounds are home to all of the UN and most NGO staff. Don Bosco are the only NGO who live in the camp, all other workers are required to leave the camp by 5pm each day.

Kakuma camp has operated for over ten years and has increased in size as the camp population has expanded. The camp is now composed of three sections Kakuma 1, 2 and 3 and covers an area of 25 square kilometres. At the time of our visit the population of Kakuma camp was over 84,000 people and was increasing daily as a result of the escalating conflict in the Sudan. We were advised that in the following week that the camp population was expected to increase dramatically as 11,000 Somali refugees were due to be transferred to Kakuma from Dadaab camp in the south of Kenya. Despite ever reducing donor support, and pressure on NGOs to develop exit strategies and to work towards the self-sustainability of the camp inhabitants, there is no expectation that the camp will be closed in the near future. Indeed at the time of our visit UNHCR were discussing a 10 year plan for the camp. Conditions in neighbouring Sudan and Somalia in particular, currently preclude any plans for repatriation. With limited opportunities available for self sufficiency due to the semi-arid environment, lack of employment opportunities and lack of access to markets for the sale of goods, camp inhabitants will continue to rely heavily on international assistance for their survival.

## **CAMP CONDITIONS**

### **Climate and geography**

Kakuma camp is located in one of the hottest parts of Kenya, close to the equator. Year round the average daytime temperature is 40 C, dropping only slightly at night. The terrain is flat, barren and dry. Dust storms are an almost daily occurrence, water is scarce, and rain is occasional and frequently leads to flooding. During the infrequent rain, the red dusty earth turns to mud and as it dries forms a hard crust. Vegetation is sparse and in many parts of the camp non-existent. Cultivation of crops is almost impossible due both to poor soil quality and the lack of water. GTZ a German environmental organisation have recently made some positive improvements to the camp environment. After extensive research they have identified some trees, which can survive in these conditions and have developed a tree nursery and planting project. They have also had some success in establishing small kitchen gardens in some parts of the camp. GTZ have also supported the establishment of some limited cultivation projects outside the camp along the river lands in order to provide some assistance to the Tukarna people.

## **Shelter**

Approximately half of the camp's current population is housed in mud brick huts. Families are required to both make the mud bricks and to construct the walls of their homes. UNCHR staff then assist with rooving, using either tin or a woven flax like material. Neither material is ideal for the hot climate, the tin turns the huts into ovens and the flax leaks during the rains. Worse still are the 'temporary shelters which were constructed after the floods some 8 months ago. During these floods approximately 1/3 of the mud huts which housed the camps population were washed away, leaving some 25,000 people, mainly Southern Sudanese, without shelter. Emergency shelters were constructed by UNCHR using white polythene sheeting. Conditions in these plastic tents are unbearable due to the heat, and yet provide the only shelter against the swirling and almost relentless dust storms. New arrivals to the camp are housed in the Kakuma reception centre until such time as they have constructed accommodation. Those in need of protection in the camp are kept in the Protection area, described below.

## **Kakuma reception Centre**

The physical conditions in the Kakuma reception centre are similar to those in the Lockichokio Centre. People are crowded together in half a dozen tin rooved shelters, open on three sides. They sleep on thin straw mats on the concrete floors, share a small number of pit toilets. Many remain in these conditions for more than 1 month, some for as long as one year. During our visit this centre was particularly overcrowded due to the recent arrival of some 300 Ethiopian University students. The students were to be moved to a series of large canvas tents in a dusty compound. However the high winds and frequent dust storms had prevented the erection of the tents.

## **Kakuma Protection Area**

Those who are in particular danger in the camp are effectively imprisoned in an enclosure know as the Protection area. They are confined in rotting canvas tents in an area approximately the size of a football field behind 6 foot high barbed wire fencing. Some 120 families live in this area. Most are women and children including women who have been raped or abducted or sexually harassed. Some men from minority groups who in particular danger in the camp are also confined in this area. Many have lived in this confined area for up to four or five years.

## **Camp population**

Whilst over 12 different nationalities are represented in the camps population the vast majority are from the Sudan and Somalia. The table at appendix x outlines the number of male and female members from each community who were recorded as being in the camp in January 2002. Kakuma camp is unusual in that the ratio of males to females is significantly greater in every age group. We were perplexed by these ratios and whilst a number of explanations were provided they did not satisfactorily explain this discrepancy in every age group. Given the large number of boys recruited as child soldiers, it is reasonable to assume that young men would flee the Sudan ( and Somalia) in greater numbers than young women, given also the widespread rape and sexual violence it also reasonable to assume that were some form of family group remains intact in the Sudan (in particular) that young women would simply not be permitted to flee alone. We also

heard stories of massacres of entire clan groups in the South of Sudan and one in particular some years ago in which hundreds of people were forced into the river. We were told that it was the women and girls who drowned as the boys and men were able to swim. We also heard of high numbers of abductions of women in particular back to the Sudan. However none of these explain the disproportionately high number of male babies and infants in the 0-5 age group.

### **Food and water**

There is insufficient water in the camp to meet the basic needs of the population. The minimum international standard in emergency situations is 18 litres per person per day. In Kakuma the daily water allowance is only 14 litres per person per day. This allowance is not sufficient to meet even the basic requirements for cooking, drinking and washing and therefore seriously limits opportunities for the cultivation of kitchen gardens or the rearing of chickens or livestock. The camp inhabitants are required to queue for many hours at water taps and many must then walk long distances to their huts carrying their daily water allowance. Those lacking the physical strength to carry large containers or those arriving at the tap late in the day often do not even receive their daily allocation.

Food rations in the camp are also insufficient. According World Food Program standards the Food Basket necessary for minimal survival must include vitamins, carbohydrates and protein and must provide a minimum daily kilo calorie intake of 2100Kc daily. At the time of our visit to Kakuma the daily food basket distributed provided only 1300 kc per day and was composed only of maize, salt and oil. It was expected that in the coming weeks due to further reductions in donor support that the basket would reduce to only 900 kcs. The supplementary feeding program, which was available to high-risk groups in the camp, was also under threat. UNDP support for the school breakfast program, which had provided porridge to students, had already been discontinued due to lack of funding.

### **Security Issues**

Safety and security fears are high in the camp. We were advised that there is frequent ethnic and clan fighting between various groups including between the refugees and the local Tukarna people. Most of the Tukarnas and a number of the refugee inhabitants own AK 47 guns. Although this last Christmas\* things were relatively quiet in the camp we were advised that Christmas's in Kakuma were generally characterised by major outbreaks of fighting. As a result of the high insecurity UNHCR have forbidden their staff and other NGOs from living in the camp and all workers are required to leave the camp by 5pm. Don Bosco have refused to comply with this directive and are therefore the only NGO who lives in the camp with the refugees. In our view this is one of the critical factors, which underpins the success of the Don Bosco project. As the only NGO in the camp at night, Don Bosco staff play a critical role in providing emergency support and refuge to those who are ill or whose lives are threatened as a result of harassment or during outbreaks of violence. Don Bosco staff habitually drive those who are the sick or injured and women in labour to the IRC run hospital in the middle of the night. During one particularly severe outbreak of violence in the camp a large group of women and children sought refuge in one of the Don Bosco school compounds. A striking example of the degree to which the Don Bosco staff have won the trust and support of the local

community was provided during a major conflict which erupted in the camp in April 2001. During this particular conflict all staff, including the Don Bosco staff were forced by UNHCR to leave the camp. This meant leaving their homes, offices and classrooms in the camp, unattended. When they returned to the camp several days later, everything remained perfectly intact. Members of the refugee community had encircled the school during the conflict in order to ensure that no damage or looting occurred.

*\*(In a brief impromptu conversation with the UNHCR head of social programs she indicated that this Christmas many of the women in the camp had come together to arrange an enormous Christmas party involving 1000's of the camps inhabitants. Whilst we did not discuss this initiative in detail, the degree to which this activity may have contributed to a reduction in tensions within the camp is perhaps worthy of consideration. Don Bosco staff had also emphasised that unless occupation and activity was provided for the refugee community that violence did escalate)*

### **Relationship with the Local Community**

Tensions between the refugee and local Tukarna community are very high. Outbreaks of violence between the two are frequent. Women from both this communities are most often the victims of this conflict. There are regular reports of rape and sexual mutilation of refugee women by gangs of Tukarna men. Most recently a 60 year-old woman was raped and her genitals were mutilated. These rapes had often occurred when women walked long distances from the camp to collect firewood. As firewood is a scarce and essential resource in the area this has been an ongoing source of conflict with the local Tukarna people. Tragically although firewood is now provided to the refugees it appears to have little impact in reducing the number of rapes.

The difficult conditions in which the Tukarna live and the abject poverty which many face has also lead to increasing numbers of Tukarna women turning to prostitution in order to survive. Some of these women are used by some of the refugee men living in the camp, that small minority in Kakuma who have money or a source of livelihood in the camp running small shanty style shops or 'hotels'.

In an attempt to reduce the conflict an increasing number of Tukarnas are now the beneficiaries of a range of NGO projects. Access to water and some agricultural assistance has been provided and educational services within the camp are now open to Tukarna children and young people. Over 7% of the young people enrolled in the Don Bosco project are from the local Tukarna Community.

### **Women at Risk**

The lack of safety in the camp particularly for women and girls is a factor of major concern. The incidence of rape and sexual violence is extremely high and domestic violence is commonplace. A range of factors contribute to the high incidence of violence against women. These include; conflict between clan groups and with the local Tukarna people, a high rate of alcoholism, lack of economic independence and an almost complete lack of social structure. Women and girls are in the minority in the camp and in some age brackets are out numbered three to one by men and boys, this dramatically compounds their degree of risk. The abduction and sale of young girls as brides, the

forced marriage of widows and the physical and sexual abuse of those in mixed marriages is commonplace, women are raped and sexually mutilated by gangs of men. Women who are raped by rival groups, especially those who give birth to babies are stigmatised and harassed and are in urgent need of protection. Yet for most of these women there is simply no protection available.

Despite the recent establishment of a system of mobile courts and the successful prosecution of some of the perpetrators of sexual and domestic violence, the abuse and violence continue with almost complete impunity. The JRS Safe haven though an excellent and critically important project can only provide safe accommodation to a maximum of 6 women at any one time and is at best a short term solution. Women are only able to remain in the Safe Haven for a maximum of one month. Many then return to situations of ongoing domestic violence and community abuse. The only other option available to women who experience ongoing abuse and harassment is to seek protection in the UNHCR protection area. The Protection area is a compound enclosed by barbed wire in which women and their families are accommodated in rotting canvas tents. Many women have lived in this protection area for 4- 5 years; some have been there for 8 years. Women confined in this area have no opportunity to access the camps educational services nor to develop any income generating activities. Although for most of these women resettlement is the only durable solution only very few ever achieve this.

Several meetings were held with UNHCR Resettlement officers and gender advisors in both Nairobi and Kakuma. These officers confirmed that despite the risks and the large number of extremely vulnerable women in Kakuma, very few women from the camp have been offered resettlement. Fewer still have been considered for the Women at Risk scheme, which is both a UN program and a Visa category offered by certain resettlement countries including Australia, and is designed to fast track vulnerable women to situations of safety. Indeed none of the NGOs we meet with during our visit to Kakuma had even heard of the scheme. Until only several days prior to our visit that had been no dedicated resettlement officers located in Kakuma camp. To date most refugees resettled from Kenya have been the so called urban refugees living in Nairobi. Over the last year UNCHR Kenya have undergone a complete restructure, in part due to a major investigation which identified widespread corruption within the resettlement section. This has meant that few refugees have been resettled from Kenya in the last 12 months as government posts have often been reluctant to process claims. This has had particularly serious implications for those in need of urgent protection, especially women at risk. However despite the UNHCR restructure and a clear willingness on the part of UNHCR staff to attend to urgent claims there appeared to be less willingness on the part of many resettlement countries to institute processes which would fast track these claims.

### **NGO Culture in Kakuma Camp**

A phenomena was noted amongst NGOs in Kakuma camp which has been observed in other similar situations. This can be described as 'five different versions of reality' It refers to the propensity of many NGO workers to unthinkingly propagate myth and anecdotes about the refugee populations as fact, leading to a confusing pastiche of truth, myth and misinformation. Typical of this phenomena were comments such as "the Sudanese come to the camp deliberately to get education and training. The implication in this comment is that the Sudanese are not real refugees and denies the reality from which they flee, and the danger they face in returning. That they access education and



training whilst in need of protection is lost in the rhetoric of their reasons for seeking asylum.

Similarly there was a myth that the Turkana people do not perform well at school. This goes directly against the evidence freely available from local schools and training institutions which indicate that the Turkana people perform exceptionally well when given the opportunity.