

Why Closing Dadaab is a Bad Idea

In 2018, the United States carried out 45 air and drone strikes in Somalia, according to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, a London-based non-profit organisation. It is not clear how many Al Shabaab militants and civilians were killed in these attacks because, like most covert military operations, it is difficult to obtain and ascertain the veracity of information about casualties.

Meanwhile, President Donald Trump has in recent months intensified the US drone strike programme in Somalia, a disturbing decision that is likely to lead to more radicalisation and revenge attacks, both in Somalia and in neighbouring Kenya, which has borne the brunt of Al Shabaab's terrorist attacks abroad.

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In addition, there is a 20,000-strong presence of African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) troops in Somalia. Ugandan, Burundian, Ethiopian, Djiboutian and some 4,000 Kenyan troops have their feet on the ground in parts of central and southern Somalia, including the capital Mogadishu. Even the Somali president is protected by AMISOM forces as the Somalia National Army is still not fully operational. Although there is a semblance of normalcy in Mogadishu, with new buildings and businesses coming up every day, much of the Somali capital still has the look and feel of a city under siege. Al Shabaab regularly wreaks havoc on the residents via IEDs and suicide bombers. In areas it controls, it also extracts "taxes" (protection money) from residents and imposes its own version

of Sharia.

The last time Kenya threatened to close down Dadaab was in April 2015, shortly after the gruesome terrorist attack on Garissa University. Deputy President William Ruto claimed that the camp was a security threat. It was a clear case of scapegoating – Ruto failed to mention that all four terrorists who attacked Garissa University College were Kenyan citizens, not Somali nationals – and only one of them was an ethnic Somali.

Given that Somalia is pretty much still a war zone, why does the Kenyan government feel that it is safe for the 230,000 or so Somali refugees in the Dadaab refugee camp to return home? According to a leaked United Nations document dated 12 February, the Government of Kenya wants the Dadaab camp to be closed by August this year.

The last time Kenya threatened to close down the camp and send all the refugees to their home countries was in April 2015, shortly after the gruesome terrorist attack on Garissa University College, which is about 100 kilometres from the camp in Dadaab. Deputy President William Ruto claimed that the camp was a security threat to the country and that all refugees in the camp would be given three months to leave the country. He added that if the refugees did not leave voluntarily, the government would arrange for their forcible transfer across the border into Somalia. It was a clear case of scapegoating – Ruto failed to mention that all four terrorists who attacked Garissa University College were Kenyan citizens, not Somali nationals – and only one of them was an ethnic Somali.

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repatriation of refugees to Somalia.

In May 2015, after terrorists attacked Kenyan soldiers in Yumbis, which is very near Dadaab, Haron Komen, the Commissioner for Refugee Affairs, called for a quicker closure of the camp, claiming that “footprints” of terrorism could be traced there. Meanwhile, the Interior Cabinet Secretary, the late Joseph Nkaissery, announced that a wall would be built along the porous 900-kilometre Kenya-Somalia border.

These declarations not only stunned the more than 350,000 “Dadaabians” living in the camp (more than half of whom were under the age of 18), but also shocked the international community, particularly the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, and key donor countries, who made frantic efforts to reverse what amounted to an expulsion order. They argued that Somalia had no institutions or resettlement programmes dealing with refugees, including the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people who still live in and around Mogadishu. Asking refugees to return to conditions where there are few or no services could lead to further tensions and could force them to flee again.

It is also important to note that many of these refugees were born in the camp and have known no other home. (In many countries, they would qualify for citizenship.) Their parents and surviving relatives have also probably lost all their land and homes in Somalia, so they have nowhere to return to.

Increasing attacks on Kenyan and Ethiopian forces in Somalia have made the prospect of repatriation difficult. It appears that the top brass of the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) in the Jubbaland region that was supposedly “liberated” from the clutches of Al Shabaab have entered in a cosy relationship with the leadership of the Jubbaland administration...

This, however, was not the first time that Kenyan officials

had expressed a desire to send Somali refugees back home and to close down the camp, which has been in existence for almost thirty years. The government of Mwai Kibaki initiated the repatriation programme, which eventually forced UNHCR and the Federal Government of Somalia to enter into a tripartite agreement with Kenya in November 2013 to facilitate the “voluntary and organised” repatriation of refugees to Somalia. The Kenyan government’s decision to close the camp was probably based on an overly optimistic assumption that once Kenyan forces “liberated” Al Shabaab-controlled areas in southern Somalia, all the refugees could safely go back home.

However, increasing attacks on Kenyan and Ethiopian forces in Somalia have made the prospect of repatriation difficult, if not impossible. Moreover, it appears that the top brass of the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) in the Jubbaland region that was supposedly “liberated” from the clutches of Al Shabaab have entered in a cosy relationship with the leadership of the Jubbaland administration, which has raised questions of conflict of interest. Several reports, including those by UN monitors, have accused KDF in Somalia of being “in bed” with not just leaders like Ahmed Madobe (KDF’s comrade-in-arms during Kenya’s invasion of Somalia in October 2011) but also with Al Shabaab via extortion and smuggling rackets where all parties collect “taxes” at check points and ports and share the loot. (See the report “Black and White: Kenya’s Criminal Racket in Somalia” published in 2016 by Journalists for Justice.)

Kenya’s fourth largest city

In 2015, when the announcement to send all refugees homes was made, Asad Hussein, a former “Dadaabian” who is currently a student on a fully-paid scholarship at the prestigious Princeton University in the United States, wrote in his blog “Diary of a Refugee Storyteller” that when he heard the statement, several questions flooded his mind: “Will they come with a big lorry and cart me to a country I’ve never seen

before? Will police officers throw me into the back of a truck against my will? Will they ask my 80-year-old dad to get out of the mosque and quickly pack his stuff? Will my dad go back to his hometown Luuq in Somalia's Gedo region? Will my mom insist on going to her birthplace in Negelle in Ethiopia? Will they settle in a completely different place?"

Hussein, an aspiring writer who I met at various literary events in Nairobi, was among many young refugees in Dadaab who wished that they could be integrated into Kenyan society and eventually acquire Kenyan citizenship, given that they had known no other home. But like Ilhan Omar, the dynamic US Congresswoman who once lived in the Kakuma refugee camp in northern Kenya, it is likely that Hussein's skills and talent will now benefit his host country, the United States, and Kenya will be the poorer for it.

Unlike in Uganda, where refugees are not just given land to till but are also allowed to work (which has earned Uganda a reputation for being among the most refugee-friendly countries in the world), refugees in Kenya are not allowed to work or to move about freely. In 1966, Kenya acceded to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees that recognises the right of refugees to choose their place of residence and the freedom of movement within the territories of the host countries. However, in the case of Dadaab, the Kenyan government has chosen to ignore this convention.

In 2014, the Kenyan MP for the area complained that deforestation was becoming a real problem and that the persistent drought in the area had forced his pastoralist constituents to pose as refugees so they could access free food and services in the camp.

Although Ifo camp, one of the oldest of the five camps that comprise the Dadaab complex, has the look of a dusty rural village, with goats and camels wandering around small shops

that sell everything from mobile phones to camel milk, the donated plastic sheeting tents that residents call home and restrictions on movement, make it feel like a sprawling open prison. Most refugees in Dadaab live in makeshift shelters (because the Kenyan government does not allow them to build permanent houses) that do not provide adequate protection from the elements. UNHCR and humanitarian agencies provide water and rations, but do not consider other needs, such as fuel for cooking, with the result that refugees are forced to cut down trees for firewood. In 2014, the Kenyan MP for the area in which the Dadaab camp is located complained that deforestation was becoming a real problem and that the persistent drought in the area had forced his pastoralist constituents to pose as refugees so they could access free food and services in the camp. Sexual assaults on female refugees – both by male refugees and Kenya’s security forces – have also been reported.

There are schools, clinics, food distribution centres and boreholes set up by aid agencies, but as Raouf Mazou, UNHCR’s Kenya representative told me in 2015, the camp provides “a false sense of normality” in a highly abnormal environment.

And despite the inhospitable living conditions in what has been described as “Kenya’s fourth largest city”, business in Dadaab and its environs has been booming. Hanshi Palace, located opposite the Dadaab camp’s main office, earns millions of shillings every year leasing out Toyota Landcruisers to the more than 20 international NGOs that operate in Dadaab. It is estimated that Dadaab’s economy generates about \$25 million a year and that the local host community around the camp earns approximately \$14 million a year in trade and contracts.

Nonetheless, for many of the refugees living in Dadaab, camp life is preferable to life in war-torn Somalia, where basic services are broken or non-existent in many parts, and where

the risk of being killed, through clan warfare, drone strikes or Al Shabaab, is much higher. While madrassas (Islamic schools) tend to be the only formal education Somali children receive, in Dadaab children are able to attend the 20 secular free primary and seven secondary schools and can even sit for the Kenya national examinations. Scholarships are also available and some of the brightest children have earned places in universities abroad, including in Canada and the United States. In 2013, Kenyatta University even opened a satellite campus in the town of Dadaab and reserved two-thirds of the slots for refugees. These are opportunities that few Somalis enjoy back home.

And despite the inhospitable living conditions in what has been described as “Kenya’s fourth largest city”, business in Dadaab and its environs has been booming. A UNHCR-commissioned study in 2013 found that business owners in and around Dadaab earn their income by selling goods and services to the hundreds of aid workers and refugees who live in or near the camp site. For example, Hanshi Palace, a business that is located opposite the Dadaab camp’s main office, earns millions of shillings every year leasing out Toyota Landcruisers to the more than 20 international NGOs that operate in Dadaab. More than 50 trucks carrying supplies from Nairobi and Mombasa enter the camp every week, earning truck owners millions of shillings. The World Food Programme spends millions of dollars every month buying, shipping and distributing tonnes of food to Dadaab. The now defunct Kenya Department of Refugee Affairs (that stopped processing refugees after the tripartite agreement) has been quoted as saying that Dadaab is not an ordinary refugee camp but “a big business centre” and that Kenya risks losing billions of shillings if the camp is closed. It is estimated that Dadaab’s economy generates about \$25 million a year and that the local host community around the camp earns approximately \$14 million a year in trade and contracts.

UNHCR says that the majority of the refugees in Dadaab view local integration as the most favourable solution to their plight, but the Kenyan government will not allow it. On the contrary, the Kenyan government's position on refugees has become even more hardline, with ever more strident calls for the camps to be shut down permanently. Officials at the UN refugee agency say that given the political, social and economic implications of integrating hundreds of thousands of refugees into Kenyan society, the government's position is understandable, but refugees' rights under international laws must also be respected – and that repatriation must be voluntary, not forced. The tripartite agreement that aims to bring about the voluntary repatriation of Somali refugees is being implemented, but had not yielded significant results. The camp's population has not decreased significantly since 2015 – it has decreased by only about one-third since then, which suggests that a majority of the refugees in Dadaab are still not comfortable about returning to Somalia.

Why close the camp now?

So what could lie behind the latest threat to expel the refugees? I can speculate on four possible reasons.

Powerful politicians from Garissa, such as Aden Duale, have a vested interest in having the camp closed and sending the refugees home as the multi-clan composition of the refugee population in Dadaab could threaten the power and clan balance in the region.

One, this Kenyan government, with its anti-ICC antecedents, would not find difficulty trying to ape neo-fascist governments in places like Hungary and the United States, which are becoming increasingly intolerant of refugees and migrants. By showing that it can be tough on refugees – particularly Somali refugees – it would be scoring points with the Trump administration. Kenya is, after all, a key ally of

the US and its “war on terror” and has benefited militarily from US government assistance, particularly in the area of counterterrorism. Depicting the camp as a dangerous place that breeds terrorists only adds to Trump’s narrative of migrants and refugees being criminals harbouring ill intent for the populations of the host countries, a narrative that Kenya is happy to parrot. (Wasn’t Kenya one of a handful of shameless countries that was represented at the opening of the US embassy in Jerusalem?)

Two, powerful politicians from Garissa, such as Aden Duale, have a vested interest in having the camp closed and sending the refugees home as the multi-clan composition of the refugee population in Dadaab could threaten the power and clan balance in the region. It is estimated that the refugees in the camp outnumber the host community population by a ratio of three to one. The Ogaden clan is predominant in Garissa County, and Kenyan Somali politicians (most of whom are Ogaden) would like it to remain that way.

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On a slightly different but related tangent, many economic activities have grown around the camp, and it is possible that local politicians and businessmen in Garissa want a piece of the action. What they don’t realise is that once the camp is closed, many of these activities will also die. Aid agencies will abandon the camp and the businesses that serviced them will also collapse or move elsewhere. One UNHCR official told me when I visited Dadaab that if there was no refugee camp, there would be no town in Dadaab. “Dadaab exists because we exist,” he said.

Three, the latest declaration to repatriate refugees to

Somalia is simply an arm-twisting tactic to force the international community, including the United Nations, to continue funding KDF operations in Somalia. The African Union and the UN Security Council have agreed to withdraw AMISOM troops from Somalia by 2020 but Kenya has asked for a delayed exit. Perhaps the Kenyan government feels that it can use the refugees as a bargaining chip to maintain its troop presence in Somalia as long as it is financially and strategically beneficial for it to do so.

Keeping KDF in Somalia for as long as is possible could also be a ploy by some in government to protect KDF's illicit activities. These elements would be afraid that once KDF pulls out of Somalia, the truth about what KDF generals did there might come out. If Kenya's military is found to have financially benefitted from Somalia's war economy, its credibility as a trustworthy partner in the war against terrorism and in peace-building will be severely eroded.

Four, the expulsion order could also be seen in the light of Somalia's dispute with Kenya over a section of the Indian Ocean that Somalia claims as maritime territory. Kenya may just be taking revenge on Somalia for taking the dispute to an international court in a childish game that is unfairly targeting Somali refugees.

Whatever the case, sending helpless refugees back to the dire situation they escaped from is not only unethical, but also against international law. Kenya must not rush into a situation that will tarnish its reputation internationally and put thousands of innocent lives in danger.