Beat: News

SUDAN REFUGEES STRUGGLE TO EXIT TO ETHIOPIA

While Aid Workers Are Turned Away

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SUDAN REFUGEES STRUGGLE TO EXIT TO ETHIOPIA, WHILE AID WORKERS TRYING TO ENTER ARE TURNED BACK
This story was originally published by The New Humanitarian.
By Sara Creta
For thousands of people trying to escape the violence and mayhem of Sudan's civil war, the southeastern border post with Ethiopia is a frustrating choke point – staffed by unsympathetic Sudanese immigration officials and suspicious security police.

Galabat, the main Sudanese border town on the escape route to Ethiopia, is clogged with would-be refugees. There's a constant stream of mini-buses and trucks overloaded with people and their belongings: Donkey carts and wheelbarrows teetering with bags and suitcases manoeuvre past the knots of people standing by the roadside.

Since fighting broke out between the army and rival paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) on 15 April in the Sudanese capital, Khartoum, around 30,000 people have crossed into Ethiopia over the Metema bridge that separates the two countries.

But new, heavy-handed security checks by Sudanese border officials mean those numbers are dropping – from roughly 1,000 people arriving each day to recently around 600, an immigration official, who asked not to be named, told The New Humanitarian.

"They started to question why I was leaving Sudan, and they accused me of not being Sudanese," said 32-year-old Shams al-Din, who abandoned his house in Khartoum, close to the international airport, after it was occupied by RSF fighters.

The petty harassment by Sudanese immigration officials meant "they didn't even allow me to bring my bag with the few clothes I had with me", he told The New Humanitarian.

Ibrahim* said he had heard of people "who spent days jumping through [administrative] hoops" in Galabat. He recalled a long list of questions before being allowed to cross and travel on to Kenya: "We were asked the reason for leaving, our onward tickets, and our job."

Other refugees interviewed in Metema described similar hounding, with Sudanese officials asking them "why are you leaving us behind?", or "are you planning to ask for asylum and make us ashamed?"

Pro-democracy activists, still in Sudan, said they were worried about being intercepted at the border by the security police, who are believed to be on the look-out for high-profile individuals. "They have a list with names," one activist, who asked not to be named for security reasons, told The New Humanitarian.

The Ethiopian government has said it welcomes "any Sudanese who cross its borders at this trying time". But all those who arrive – either to stay in Ethiopia or as they transit to a third country – must pay $80 for an entry e-visa.

International aid teams turned back

Sudanese security police are also frustrating attempts by teams of international relief workers to enter Sudan, even if they hold valid visas, aid officials said.

"Not much progress to note in terms of access despite some visas issued in Nairobi & Paris," said an internal email from an international aid agency shared with The New Humanitarian. "Crossing from Ethiopia did not work, joint teams … were blocked and sent back to [the capital, Addis Ababa]."

Other aid organisations shared similar stories, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The UN's air bridge, connecting Kenya to the eastern Sudanese city of Port Sudan, has also suffered repeated flight cancellations – affecting the movement of people and supplies.

Humanitarian needs in Sudan were already critical before April's fighting, and have worsened as a result of repeated ceasefire breakdowns. More than half the population – 25 million people – are now in need of humanitarian aid and protection.

One Sudanese security officer in Galabat said a list of aid workers had been compiled: "Next to their names they are just adding the word 'spy'." The New Humanitarian could not verify this allegation.

Eritreans fear abduction

Most Sudanese arriving in Metema have flight tickets and money and move on – Kenya and the Gulf countries are among the destinations of choice for those who can afford it. But 5,366 people have also asked for asylum, according to the UN's refugee agency, UNHCR.

"We feared kidnappings by Eritrean authorities, or traffickers, as we heard that some people were abducted near Kassala."

Nearly 90% of the asylum seekers are Eritreans – half of them previously registered as refugees in Sudan. They are among the more than 136,000 Eritreans who had fled their country's authoritarian regime – and the risk of near-indefinite military conscription for young men – to settle in neighbouring Sudan.

Threatened by the fighting between the Sudanese army and RSF, some had left the string of refugee camps in eastern Sudan for Metema. But throughout the journey they were worried about abduction by Eritrean agents, especially around Kassala, a town close to the Eritrean border. Sudanese security forces have also been accused of forcibly deporting Eritreans.

"We feared kidnappings by Eritrean authorities, or traffickers, as we heard that some people were abducted near Kassala," said 34-year-old Kaka*, who arrived in Metema with his wife and three children.

He had spent $700 to bring his family across the border, but for the past three weeks they had all been sleeping in a makeshift tent. "We have no money and nowhere to go," he told The New Humanitarian. "We sold our tv for $250 and we have almost nothing left."

Aman*, 26, originally from the Eritrean capital, Asmara, arrived in Metema weeks ago from Khartoum with his wife and 10-year-old daughter. "We are running out of money, all our savings [have gone], and we have nowhere to turn," he said.

Although UNHCR has offered all asylum seekers the option of being settled in a camp in Gondar, in northern Ethiopia, Aman was hesitant, asking: "How can I raise my daughter in a camp?"

'I don't know where to begin, but thankfully I'm still alive'

Other refugees in Metema have moved into whatever accommodation they can afford.

Al-Din, from Khartoum, along with more than 60 other people, lives in a run-down hotel with intermittent electricity and no running water, and where rooms still cost $6 a day per person.

Forced from his home by RSF soldiers, he left virtually everything behind – including his passport. "They just kicked me out of my house," he said. Now, he is stranded in Metema, "I don't know where to begin, but thankfully I'm still alive," he added.

Forged Ethiopian identity cards are on sale for $900 for those who need papers and are willing to take the risk. But the copies aren't very good, and people have been arrested at the first security checkpoints outside Metema as a result, and then sent back to the town.

Meanwhile, in an acknowledgement by the authorities that the crisis in Sudan won't end anytime soon, a new 57-hectare camp is under construction by the Ethiopian Agency for Refugees and Returnees Affairs in Kumer, 70 kilometres from Metema.

It will house refugees arriving in Ethiopia who have no money or tickets to travel on, or who are claiming asylum.

It's not an option that Jonas*, 36, originally from Asmara, relishes.

"I spent my life in refugee camps," Jonas, who worked as a teacher in Khartoum before the war, told The New Humanitarian. "Why do I have no right to have a normal life?"

*For security reasons, these men have asked that only their first name is used.

Edited by Obi Anyadike.

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United Press Association, Inc.
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(702) 943.0321 Local
(702) 943.0233 Facsimile
info@unitedpressassociation.org
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