

1-1-1981

The Forgotten Refugees Of Africa

Alexandre Mboukou

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections>

Recommended Citation

Mboukou, Alexandre (1981) "The Forgotten Refugees Of Africa," *New Directions*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 6.
Available at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol8/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Directions by an authorized editor of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact digitalservices@howard.edu.

By Alexandre Mboukou

In August 1980, Channel 9 (WDVM-TV), an affiliate of CBS in Washington, D. C., aired a program on the plight of refugees in Africa. The special, reported by J. C. Hayward, who with a technical crew travelled to Somalia, captured on film the massive human suffering and the agony of hunger and disease. Somalia, with the help of international relief agencies, is currently caring for more than one million refugees who fled from Ethiopia as a result of military conflicts or political suppression.

The telecast by WDVM-TV represented the first major effort by the television media in the United States to publicize, dramatize, and sensitize the American public to the plight of the African refugee.

Historical Notes

The problem of refugees in Africa can be traced back beyond the current crises to the period of the slave trade centuries earlier, and later, to the era of colonialism and the years of struggle for independence in the 1940s and the 1950s.

During the slave trade, as the African was hunted by slave traders, he fled to places where he could find safer refuge. At this time, unlike the era of wars for independence from colonialism in the 1950s, during which the idea of the modern nation-state was already in full force, identification papers were conspicuously absent. No militia men endangered the safety of the refugee. The "African buccaneer" was perhaps his only most formidable *bete noire*.

The implementation of colonial rule not only laid down the foundations of the modern African refugee problem, but also created harsher conditions for the refugees. For instance, in the 1940s, at the height of the struggle against the three francs head tax in what was then Middle Congo, many Balari-Bakongo people fled to the then Belgian Congo. (Middle Congo is now the People's Republic of the Congo. Until 1970, it was known as Congo-Brazzaville. Belgian Congo is now Zaire.) Al-

though they were allowed by the Belgian authorities to settle in the capital and surrounding areas, they were always registered as "alien French subjects," liable to deportation at any time.¹

Most important, the armed struggle for independence in Kenya, Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau, gave rise to precarious settlement conditions for the African refugee. Crackdowns by jurisdictional colonial authorities through extradition arrangements with other colonial authorities, along with military pursuits into adjacent neighboring states, put the lives of African refugees in serious danger.

In addition to these developments, Africa in recent years has witnessed the rise of interstate struggles—such as the Ethiopia-Somalia and the Uganda-Tanzania conflicts.

John Hatch, in "Historical Background of the African Refugee Problem," divides the causes of the African refugee problem into three major groups. The first group forms the "politico-economic factor" group. It applies to African-governed states. Here, political and economic tensions have led to ethnic discontent and strife, causing people to flee their countries of origin. Cases in point are Zaire, (1960-1967) Simba wars; Front National de Liberation du Congo wars or the Shaba invasions (1976-1977); Burundi, Tutsi-Hutu backlash (1962-1963); Rwanda, Hutu-Tutsi backlash (1963-1964); Sudan, the Anyanya wars (1965-1970).

The second group constitutes the "politico-systematic factor" group. It applies to minority regimes in Southern Africa. Here, liberation struggles have uprooted a great number of Africans from their native land. Cases in point are Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa.

The third is the "imperialist legacy factor" group. This includes the impact of the slave trade and colonial rule. In this context, Hatch noted that much attention has been given to the impact of the slave trade

on African societies. Yet, this examination has been somewhat superficial, dealing mainly with the depopulation of the African continent. Underplayed, not to say overlooked, have been the facts of destabilization and dislocation caused by European economic imperialism.² It was precisely these facts which led significantly to the resettlement problems of a number of Africans who had managed to evade European and Arab slavers.

As a package, these three groups constitute a significant historical landmark. However, group one and group two remain the most worrisome in that they are fraught with great signs of resiliency.

"In the postwar years," writes Robert Matthews, "the problem of refugees was for some time essentially a European one. With the exception of 100,000 Algerians in Tunisia, Africa did not experience a large scale movement of population until 1961. Since then, however, one wave after another of African refugees has redirected the central focus of international concern from Europe to Africa."³

Beyond the issue of resiliency loom far more serious problems which are political, economical, social, and ethnic in character. These pose an eminent threat to the stability and viability of the African nation-state system.

According to Neville Rubin, the African refugee question has been associated with a series of definite problems ranging from internal security, movement of refugees, asylum, resettlement, education to employment opportunities.⁴

Matthews, for example, has indicated that refugees, particularly political refugees, have been one of the leading sources of conflict between African states. To him, in addition, the instability of African countries—a state of affairs earmarked by many scholars as the single most important cause of the African refugee problem⁵—has been exacerbated by external political conflicts.

Irrespective of its causes, the African refugee problem seems to have no immediate solution, having now grown to

26 the status of an epidemic. The numbers of refugees are on the increase daily, and relief assistance is not getting to them fast enough.

Statistical Notes

Today, the total number of African refugees is estimated at 4.2 million. It is the highest number on any continent.⁶ According to an article in *U.S. News and World Report*, "one out of every 101 Africans is displaced. About 2.2 million live in camps scattered from Sudan in the north to Mozambique in the south. Two million are trying to survive on their own in their homelands or neighboring nations."⁷

To this statistical picture, John Madeley has added the following: "Every day Africa gains 2,500-3,000 refugees."⁸ In Somalia, in particular, one out of every four people is a refugee,⁹ with some of Somalia's refugee camps holding, on the average, 75,000 people.¹⁰

In addition to these figures, there are the 2 million others who have been displaced in Ethiopia and Zimbabwe.¹¹

In 1976, C. P. Potholm put the total population of African refugees at more than 1.2 million. He also noted that one of every 360 persons in the continent was a refugee.¹² What this particular total signifies is that there has been an increase of three million refugees in the span of four years. Broken down further, it means that on the average there has been a yearly increase of 75,000 refugees.

In 1974, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that the number of refugees had increased substantially during the decade of 1960-1970, with figures indicating a rise from around 400,000 in 1964 to nearly 1,000,000 in 1970.¹³ But even here, the figures were not completely accurate, given the fact that the situation was changing so rapidly.

The significance of all these numbers becomes more vivid and overwhelming when total relief assistance efforts are statistically measured. (As an illustration,

REFUGEE DISTRIBUTION COUNTRY BY COUNTRY

Location	Number of Refugees	Country of Origin
Algeria	52,000	Western Sahara
Angola	56,000	Zaire, Zambia & South Africa
Botswana	23,000	Namibia, South Africa & Angola
Burundi	50,000	Rwanda
Cameroon	100,000	Chad, Equatorial Guinea
Djibouti	20,000	Ethiopia, Somalia
Gabon	30,000	Equatorial Guinea
Kenya	5,800	Uganda, Ethiopia
Mozambique	150,000	Zimbabwe
Rwanda	7,800	Burundi
Senegal	5,000	Guinea & others
Somalia	1,115,000	Ethiopia
Sudan	450,000	Ethiopia, Uganda, Chad, Zaire
Uganda	112,000	Rwanda, Zaire
Tanzania	156,000	Burundi, Rwanda
Zaire	299,000	Angola, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda
Zambia	56,000	Angola, Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe
Others	52,000	

in this report, only U.S. relief assistance efforts will be used, although a number of international organizations and agencies have equally been involved in these efforts.)

F. Kazadi, in "The Politics of U.S. Foreign Assistance," recently argued that "despite the severity of problems, Africa remains the stepchild of U.S. development assistance."¹⁴ To emphasize his stance, Kazadi uses as one of his major examples the relief assistance program to refugees in which he pointed out this: "The Carter Administration, in its assistance proposals for fiscal year 1981 has asked \$54 million in aid for African refugees which total more than three million or approximately one half of the world's displaced persons. In the same budget proposals, however, the Administration re-

quested \$323 million for Kampuchean refugees."¹⁵

To throw some light on the gaping discrepancy, particularly in light of the numbers of Kampuchean (Cambodian) and African refugees, he quoted the director of the International Development Cooperation Agency, Frank Erlich. According to Erlich, the differences in request were due to two major factors. First, U.S. public attention had been focused primarily on the Kampuchean refugees. Second, although several million African refugees were facing equally serious problems, these problems had not been dramatized to the American people in the same kind of ways.¹⁶

It ought to be noted, between 1967-1969, the U.S. total relief assistance effort in the Nigerian civil war amounted to

\$70 million. The reason was clear. The United States had a higher stake in the conflict—oil.¹⁷

Except for Zaire, which has been targeted by the United States as a country of greatest political, economic and strategic importance, most of the countries which are presently exporting or receiving refugees do not lend themselves to be of great political and economic stake for the United States (Botswana, Burundi, Cameroon, Djibouti, Gabon, Mozambique, Rwanda, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, Tanzania, etc. . . .)

In 1965, when the total number of refugees was reported at 500,000, the United States contributed only \$1,600,000 to the relief assistance effort. When critics voiced concern over this insignificant amount, Elmer Falk, then director of the Office of Refugees and Migration (State Department), countered that the United States had not tried to establish a separate U. S. refugee program of its own because it was not a palatable move. In particular, he commented that African countries generally preferred to get assistance through international organizations.¹⁸ This was certainly not a plausible explanation, given the fact that agencies such as the U. S. Agency for International Development and the Peace Corps have existed and held ground till today. The fact of the matter was simply this: there was never a media or public outcry on behalf of African refugees.

Politics and Race

With the exception of the Igbo refugees who received substantial press and television coverage during the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1969), African refugees have been very little appreciated in the United States. In the case of the Igbo refugees even, the coverage was elicited by the United States tacit support for the Biafran cause. Two major concerns dictated this support. One was oil and the other Christianity. (The Igbos were predominantly Christian while the Hausas and Yorubas (representing the Federal Government of

Nigeria) were predominantly Muslim).

Although the U. S. government provided \$60 million in cash and supplies, and U. S. private donations totalled more than \$10 million, the overall gift of its relief program was similar to that of Great Britain. It was designed to appease a few private and public elements who sought to sensitize the public to the suffering among the civilian population in Nigeria.¹⁹

As a rule, the fate of the African refugees in the American media bears a lot of resemblance to the fate of the Palestinian refugees. Like the more than two million people uprooted from Palestine, the African refugees are either an exotic legend or mere abstractions.

Halin Barakat writes with respect to the Palestinian refugees:

*The two million and a half Palestinians can be classified as either refugees outside their country, Palestinians under occupation, or refugees under occupation in their own country. About 600,000 are living in camps; 313,000 are accorded second class citizenship in Israel; and about one million are under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza. The rest, whether established or not, are living like all other Palestinians in a state of exile and uprootedness. To some, the existence of Palestinian refugees is a legend; to several nations, associations and groups, the Palestinians are mere abstractions.*²⁰

Unlike the Palestinians, however, the African refugees have sporadically received press coverage in newspapers and magazines such as *The New York Times*,²¹ *The Washington Post*,²² *The Christian Science Monitor*,²³ *The Baltimore Sun*,²⁴ and *U. S. News and World Report*.²⁵ In addition, owing to efforts by organizations such as Africare, television announcements have been featured from time to time, particularly in the wake of the Sahelian drought.

Congressional hearings on African refugees have also taken place, having increased somewhat significantly in recent

years with the growing Black presence in the Congress. Earlier hearings (in the 1960s) were, however, conceived and scheduled in keeping with and within the politico-ideological context of the day. In 1965, for instance, Senator Philip A. Hart opened the first hearing on African refugees by noting:

*The refugee problems are weighted heavily with political and military overtones. One needs only read the daily newspapers to sense the fact that Communist agents find inviting fields of activity in the seething movement of peoples, not alone in Africa, but elsewhere. Refugees provide Communist agents with the raw material for organized efforts, politically and militarily, to establish pro-Communist nationalist regimes. The increasing competition between Moscow and Peking merely stimulates these efforts.*²⁶

Within the comparative framework, perceived advantages of the African refugees over the Palestinian refugees in terms of U. S. press and TV coverage become significantly nullified when assessed against advantages given to the Indochinese refugees. Lee Mullane, editor of *Agenda*, observed in 1979: "While the plight of the Indochinese boat people captures headlines, little public attention has yet focused on Africa's million homeless."²⁷ And Jan Hoogstraten, in a 1970 issue of *Africa Report*, complained that despite occasional press coverage of specific examples (as in the case of Biafra), Africa's refugee problem was one of the least widely publicized and yet perhaps the most intractable results of political disturbance in various parts of the continent.²⁸

By diametrical opposition, not only were the Indochinese refugees made the subject of an international campaign by both the United States government and the media, but also U. S. immigration laws were relaxed in order to admit them into the country.

28 Daily front page news headlines and special programs by the TV networks, along with TV announcements for contributions by private organizations such as CARE and visits by American personalities, including Rosalynn Carter, played on the emotions of the average American.

With regard to these publicity and relief efforts, two schools of thought have emerged. One holds that the United States had a duty (moral obligation) to all those Indochinese who were risking their lives to flee from North Vietnamese Communist rule. And the other contends that the United States was morally obligated to save the boat people because America was directly responsible for all the subsequent upheavals created by the Vietnam war.

Be it as it may, the Ethiopian refugees who have flocked to Somalia (aside from those who fled from the Ogaden region), have also been fleeing from a so-called "Marxist and Communist regime." Yet, no rescue operation scheme has been deployed to resettle some of these refugees in the United States. Such a move would substantially alleviate the social and economic pressures confronting the government of Somalia.

Although, at present, there is no such thing as an American "modern African guilt complex" to warrant a resettlement scheme for Africans in the United States, such a scheme would have hardly been considered even if this "modern" guilt complex were present. (The word "modern" is added here to make a very important point. There is such a thing as an American "African guilt complex" because of the slave trade). Africa is the land of Black people and until now, a firm U. S. policy has not even been formulated, despite recent efforts by the Carter administration. Africa is still the preserve of former colonial powers, and whatever development takes place in the continent continues to be appraised through the responses of the European powers.

Robin Knight, in an article in *U. S. News and World Report* wrote:

Despite the drama surrounding the tide of Cubans fleeing to the U. S., the exodus is dwarfed in sheer numbers by the mounting waves of refugees now flooding strife-torn Black Africa. Unlike the Cubans, few Africans can find a haven in the U. S. or the other prosperous nations of the West. The industrial world is too far away, its immigration barriers too high. Instead, they face hardship and dependence on doles from host countries and international relief agencies.²⁹

Within the context of the Cuban "freedom flotilla" even, charges of double standard in treatment have been voiced, although the United States has denied them. In particular, the United States has argued that if the first batch of Cuban refugees, who were predominantly white, has been almost totally resettled, it is primarily due to the efforts of the Cuban community whose members fled from Cuba in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The second batch, which was mostly made up of Black Cubans, is still living in military camps or in tents near Miami, not because of lack of effort by the United States government, but rather because of lack of American families (Black and white) willing to sponsor them.

Far more serious have been the charges of "official racism" levied in the case of Haitian refugees. Between April and May 1980, 6,000 Cubans were given asylum in the United States. During the same period, more than 1,000 Haitians were knocking at Florida's ports. To the dismay of many human rights and civil rights activists, the Carter administration denied them the privilege of asylum by ordering the Immigration Service to arrest them as illegal aliens.³⁰

Equally important is the fact that the U. S. media had totally ignored the existence of these Haitians until charges of "official racism" were made during the Cuban "freedom flotilla."

Cheryl McCall, in a poignant article in *People* magazine observed:

By now, it has become a familiar story: refugees fleeing a Caribbean dictatorship for the haven of South Florida. But the parallels between those Haitian men and women and the Cubans of the Freedom Flotilla ended abruptly as they stepped off the boat. These are Haitian Blacks, the forgotten people of the Caribbean exodus, and neither "open arms" nor "open hearts" await them on U. S. soil. While the Cubans are given identity papers, food, clothing and asylum, the Haitians face imprisonment and the indefinite threat of deportation.³¹

The U. S. Department of State in refuting the charges of "official racism" argued that the Haitian boat people were economic rather than political refugees, and that to open the door for these Haitians would force the U. S. to admit unlimited numbers of refugees from impoverished nations.³²

Richard Schroeder, in a "Refugee Policy" study, made these very interesting observations:

Both groups (Cuban and Haitian) are technically illegal aliens seeking asylum in the United States. The conditions that have pushed them out of their homelands are similar. The Communist dictatorship of Fidel Castro has its counterpart in the repressive Haitian regime of Jean Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier. A report by the International Commission on Human Rights released on April 22, 1980, alleged that the Haitian government uses torture, arbitrary arrest, and summary executions to stifle internal political dissent. In both countries, there are strong economic reasons to emigrate. Cuba has long been plagued by shortages of basic commodities and rationing of consumer goods. In Haiti, conditions are worse. Their once rich soil is depleted and their natural resources are scarce. Population outstrips resources.³³

In this same context, more devastating comments have come from Gary McEoin of *Progressive Magazine*. "Under the then existing laws governing political refugees," he noted, "none of the new Cubans who arrived at Key West was eligible for political refugee status. The Haitian boat people had a much greater claim. Many of them face prison or death if returned and all are literally starving to death. None of the Cubans is in jail, and nobody has charged the regime with killing opponents since the 1960s."³⁴

If anything, the Cubans were given immediate asylum in the United States for two major considerations. The first consideration had to do with lending credence to the idea that the Cuban regime does not have the support of the people. And the second more powerful consideration was the actions taken by the 8,000,000-strong Cuban community in the United States. Ignoring warnings of fines and imprisonment, they organized a flotilla of boats that openly, but illegally, landed Cubans in Florida. The United States, for its own reasons, created this concentration of Cubans in Miami as a continuing threat to the Cuban regime.³⁵

What appears to lend support to McEoin's comments is that recently it was learned that a number of the Cubans in the "freedom flotilla" were deviants in the purely sociological sense (homosexuals, criminals, etc. . . .)

In the end, although both the African and the Haitian refugees have received very little attention in the United States, some poignant differentiating notes need be struck. First, charges of "official racism" by human rights and civil rights activists have buttressed the chances of refugees from Haiti being given asylum in the United States. Longer distances deny the African refugees any such consideration. Second, while the Haitian boat people are seeking refuge because of worsening political and economic conditions, the African refugees are, in addition, victims of inter-ethnic and interstate conflicts, such as the Ogaden conflict between Ethiopia

and Somalia. Third, the Haitian refugee problem can be eradicated much more easily if the United States government and the media were to put pressure on the government of Haiti for human rights violations, and if U. S. economic assistance was increased through a Marshall Plan of some sort.

Haiti is a member of the Organization of American States, and in this capacity, it can be ostracized from the community on grounds of human rights violations.

The African refugee problem, on the other hand, is much more complex. It is a combination of political, economic, military, and social (ethnic) intangibles whose impetus is sometimes triggered by outside forces—neo-colonialism and ideological warfare. □

Alexandre Mboukou, Ph.D., is affiliated with the Career Education Institute, University of the District of Columbia.

REFERENCES

¹ Alexandre Mboukou, "Reflections on the Slave Trade: A Linguistic Study" in Sulayman S. Nyang (ed) *Seminar Papers in African Studies*. Washington, D. C., 1974.

² Joh Hatch, "Historical Background on the African Refugee Problem," in Hugh C. Brooks and Yassin El Ayority (eds), *Refugees South of the Sahara, An African Dilemma*. Westport, Connecticut: Negro Universities Press 1970.

³ Robert O. Matthews, "Refugees and Stability in Africa," *International Organization* 26 (Winter 1972).

⁴ Neville Rubin, "Africa and Refugees," *African Affairs* 73 (July 1974).

⁵ Robert O. Matthews, *op. cit.*

⁶ Robin Knight, "A Continent Awash in Refugees," *U. S. News and World Report*, May 26, 1980.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ John Madeley, "Refugees—Problem or Resource?," *Africa Economic Digest*, August 8, 1980.

⁹ Gregory Jaynes, "A World Awash in Other Problems, All But Forgets Somalia's Refugees," *The New York Times*, October 11, 1980.

¹⁰ Gregory Jaynes, "Ogaden's Homeless: Hungry, Ill and Dying," *The New York Times*, October 8, 1980.

¹¹ Bernard B. Nossiter, "Africa Wars Bring a Host of Refugees," *The New York Times*, May 11, 1980.

¹² C. P. Potholm, "Wanderers on the Face of Africa," *Round Table* (January 1976).

¹³ Neville Rubin, "Africa and Refugees," *African Affairs* 73 (July 1974).

¹⁴ F. S. B. Kazadi, "The Politics of U. S. Foreign Assistance," *Africa Report* (May-June 1980).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Audrey Smock, "The Politics of Relief," *Africa Report* (January 1970).

¹⁸ U. S. Senate, Hearing Before Sub-Committee to Investigate Problems Connected With Refugees and Escapees (January 12, 1965).

¹⁹ Audrey Smock, *op. cit.*

²⁰ Halin I. Barakat, "The Palestinian Refugees: An Up-rooted Community Seeking Repatriation," *International Migration Review* 7 (Summer 1973).

²¹ *The New York Times*, April 27, 1980; May 11, 1980; May 24, 1980; October 8, 1980; October 11, 1980.

²² *The Washington Post*, May 23, 1980.

²³ *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 2, 1980.

²⁴ *The Baltimore Sun*, August 3, 1980, October 2, 1980.

²⁵ *U. S. News and World Report*, May 21, 1980; July 27, 1980.

²⁶ U. S. Senate Hearing Before Sub-Committee to Investigate Problems Connected With Refugees and Escapees (African Refugees).

²⁷ Lee Mullane, "The Unnoticed Refugees," *Agenda* (September 1979, published by the U. S. Agency for International Development).

²⁸ Jan Van Hoogstraten, "What Hope for Africa's Refugees," *Africa Report* (May 1980).

²⁹ Robin Knight, *op. cit.*

³⁰ Richard C. Schroeder, "Refugee Policy," *Editorial Research Reports* (May 30, 1980).

³¹ Cheryl McCall, "A Maverick Priest Fights for the Caribbean's Forgotten Refugees: Haitian Blacks," *People* 13 (June 9, 1980).

³² *U. S. News and World Report*, "Double Standard for Cuban and Haitian Refugees" (May 5, 1980).

³³ Richard C. Schroeder, *op. cit.*

³⁴ Gary McEoin, "Playing Politics With Refugees," *The Progressive* (July 1980).

³⁵ Ibid.