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HELPING REFUGEES TO HELP THEMSELVES

For Mohammed, one day must be much the same as the next. As the temperature soars into the hundreds, he is revising for his exams in a temporary mud-brick classroom. Mohammed is a refugee child, caught in a war he cannot stop - over a land he cannot remember.

At stake is the Western Sahara, a strip of territory on the West Coast of Africa which contains the world's largest known reserves of phosphate. But for the presence of this mineral - which nowadays is also used to make uranium - few would even be interested in this area of desert. When Spain abandoned its colonial claim to the territory in 1975, its northern neighbour, Morocco, invaded with US guns and ammunition. Despite a temporary ban on the sale of some American aircraft to Morocco in 1978/9, the US still lends a considerable degree of support in a war that continues to the present day. Since 1981, US military advisors have taught Moroccan troops and pilots.¹ An American Deputy Secretary of State visiting the region in 1978 commented that 'a strengthened Morocco will be better able to seek and achieve a just and peaceful solution'.²

150,000 of the indigenous Sahrawi are left as refugees from the war in a desolate area of southern Algeria. They were forced to flee in the face of napalm attacks and a war described by some as 'genocide'.³ They are safe only outside their homeland, as temporary refugee camps inside the territory were bombarded.⁴

In April 1984, a field study group from the Refugee Studies Programme at Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford,⁵ visited the Sahrawi. Despite their suffering, and in contrast to the conventional media image of refugees, the people were not malnourished, demoralized or stricken with disease. Instead, we found a society in the process of rebuilding itself out of the ashes of the war.

In 1976, a United Nations mission noted that the refugees had only two university graduates - a doctor and a lawyer - and twelve with technical diplomas. There were no trained teachers. Now there are schools for all ages, ranging from creches for infants to a technical college opened at the start of this year, and an adult training centre for women.⁶ In Mohammed's school alone there are 116 teachers for 3,000 children, and all these teachers have received their training since 1975 in the camps. English was introduced into the curriculum three years ago. Mohammed, who is just fourteen years old, is already quite proficient: he hopes to become a journalist and one day travel to London.

Last year he was among a group of children who visited Sweden: this trip was organized by Swedish university students. His teachers told us that the experiences of these children are shared throughout the camps and that this international contact is of great

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educational value. In contrast to this appreciation of the value of widening the horizons of refugee children, one British agency wondered whether 'a glimpse of life in a much more sophisticated society than that to which they would normally be able to aspire would, perhaps, not complicate their problems?'⁷

Another major concern of the Sahrawi is preventative health care. A doctor in the new central hospital built by the refugees explained to us: 'All children born in the camps must be vaccinated in the local clinic.' Each of the twenty-two camps has such a clinic which, in addition to providing curative medicine, teaches mothers how to feed and care for their families. In one of these clinics, a large bowl of lentils was simmering on a burner, powered by bottled gas supplied by the Algerian government. Twenty young children waited with their mothers for this 'medicine'. The nurse who was cooking the meal confidently told us: 'Drugs will only work if the children are properly fed.' A medical school in the camps provides the staff for these clinics, and this year a further fourteen nurses completed their training.

In an area that can support no vegetation, the refugees are inevitably dependent on food aid - this is hauled over 1,000 miles from Algiers by lorry. However, there is no evidence of the so-called 'dependency syndrome'. The refugees themselves distribute the rice, lentils and gas fuel for cooking - even the Algerian Red Crescent, which supplies the food, has no place inside the camps. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) gave only 1.6 million dollars in 1982.⁸ Up to 1981, UNHCR did not contribute at all; separate international appeals failed to reach their targets, and the Algerian government was almost certainly left with the bill. The reasons for this lack of international interest are not clear.

The Sahrawi are followers of Islam, yet their interpretation is quite progressive. They believe that the Prophet forbade polygamy, and women receive military training. In addition, 'Responsibles' from among the women and old men of the camps are held accountable for their actions in annual elections, in which everyone over the age of sixteen years participates. Their political awareness extends beyond their own situation, and we were bombarded with questions. One old man insisted on a discussion of the worth of the International Court of Justice at The Hague. 'What use are these international organizations', he asked, 'if they cannot protect small nations?'⁹

Up to 1975, when the Spanish left, the Western Sahara had no newspapers - Arabic or Spanish. Now there is a national radio station and a monthly newspaper. In one school there is a 'radio station' with programmes organized by the children.

Why is there this attitude of independence and solidarity in a situation that has produced demoralization in other societies? Is it because, traditionally, they were

nomadic? Is it the fact that they are all Muslim and share the same language? They have all undergone the same injustice of being forced from their homes by napalm bombs, with many families being broken up by death in their horrific trek across the desert to safety. There was a timely intervention by their own men, who stopped fighting to evacuate civilians to Algeria. This may explain their ability to accept responsibility and their remarkable solidarity, more especially because the help came from within their own society.

Possibly more remarkable is the Algerian attitude to receiving refugees. From the outset, the Sahrawi were not regarded as a burden, but were given autonomy as a state-in-exile. Travelling south from Tindouf, it seems as if you are entering another country. At the reception centre, just outside the camps, your passport is handed over to refugees. No 'experts' are at work in this part of the Sahara. It is refugees who assess their own needs and their own priorities.

Mohammed has lost more than his home. His father is among the war dead. Many of his relatives are prisoners in the occupied Western Sahara towns. But, for Mohammed, the future is not as bleak as it might be. The Sahrawi are keenly aware of the psychological consequences of life in exile. For many of the children, the bleak landscape around Tindouf is all they have ever seen. Although when in school they are encouraged to draw pictures of bunches of grapes, flowers and cars to widen their experience and to alleviate some of the psychological deprivations of their desert environment, everywhere we were told: 'The children need toys.' As one teacher put it: 'There are only so many games they can play with a stone.' Aid agencies do not supply refugees with such 'luxuries'. Oxford University Third World First Society has decided to organize a collection of suitable toys to be sent to hospitals and creches in the camps.

In formulating policy towards refugees, it is important to consider the problems and attempted solutions in different areas of the world. The experience of the Sahrawi is relevant to the decision-makers, for it provides an excellent example of how refugees can be helped to help themselves.

References

1. Hodges, Tony: 'The Western Sahara File' in Third World Quarterly, 6 (1) 1984, p. 113. A complete account of international involvement in the war, and historical rights to the territory can be found in Hodges, Tony: Western Sahara: The Roots of a Desert War, Lawrence Hill 1983.
2. West Africa, 5 November 1978.
3. Harrell-Bond, B.E.: 'The Struggle for the Western Sahara: Part II', American Universities Field Staff Report, No. 38, 1981, p. 5.
4. Mercer, John: The Sahrawis of Western Sahara, Minority Rights Group Report, No. 40, 1979, p. 9.
5. Queen Elizabeth House is an international study centre for basic and applied development research at Oxford University. One of the activities at Queen Elizabeth House is the Refugee Studies Programme, begun in 1982. In addition to sponsoring such field/study trips for undergraduate students, it conducts and promotes multi-disciplinary research in refugee issues and aims to be international in scope. For further information contact: Dr. B.E. Harrell-Bond, Queen Elizabeth House, 21 St. Giles, Oxford OX1 3LA, UK.
6. Black, Richard: 'Building a society in the middle of nowhere', Times Higher Educational Supplement, 25 May 1984.
7. Britain is the only European country not to have organized a visit by Sahrawi children. This quote was part of the response by one agency to our team's suggestion that such a visit should take place.
8. British Refugee Council, Refugee Report 1984, p. 42.
9. The old man referred to the decision of the International Court on historical rights to the Western Sahara, which found that there were no ties which constituted a state of territorial sovereignty between the Western Sahara and Morocco or Mauritania (who were also involved in the war at that time), or that affected the right of the people of the Western Sahara to self-determination. International Court of Justice, Western Sahara: Advisory Opinion of 16 October 1975, The Hague, I.C.J., 1975.