

Somali refugee camp expanding into Kenya's third-largest "city"

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Nairobi, Kenya, August 18 (ENInews)--The Dadaab refugee complex in northern Kenya, where several Christian relief agencies are delivering humanitarian aid to Somali migrants fleeing drought, war and disease, has become Kenya's third-largest "city."

With a population of nearly 450,000, the community of white tents and makeshift houses is located about 100 kilometers from the Somali border. More than 1,000 severely malnourished people arrive daily, fleeing the drought and famine affecting more than 12 million people. Opened in 1991 and originally meant to hold 90,000 people, the complex is bursting at the seams and there are indications many are seeing it as a permanent home.

"We talked to one of the ladies (at the camp) who said she was there with her four children," said the Rev. Elieshi Mungure, Africa regional secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, which is managing the camp for the U.N.

High Commissioner for Refugees. "We asked her if she would go back to Somalia if there would be food and peace. She responded no, she wouldn't go back because she has everything she needs here. Although she is sleeping in a tent, she said, this is a better life than where she came from," Mungure said.

Three camps -- Dagahaley, Ifo and Hagadera -- make up the complex. Many of the migrants arrive badly weakened and traumatized by an average three-week journey dodging militiamen, wild animals and bandits.

"When I put myself in the situation of these people, walking long distances ... to such a place, it's a relief. It is a place where one can find hope to live a night and more," said Bishop Wakseyoum Idosa, the President of

Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, in an interview.

Three months ago, Halima Abdi arrived at the camp with her four children. Each passing day, now gives her more hope when she sees her family is living in peace, and her children accessing education and better health services.

"We don't see the gunmen surrounding us anymore. We can find water, food and healthcare. This was hard to imagine back at home," said Abdi, who spoke with ENInews by telephone through a translator. Her children were immunized on arrival at a clinic run by Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors without Borders (MSF) and the family received high energy biscuits and three weeks of food from the U.N.'s World Food Programme.

Muslim communities in Kenya have also been sending aid to the camps. Sheikh Shamsu Diin Sheikh Liban, a community leader in the Dagahaley camp, said residents have been collecting food and clothing and in some cases opening their houses.

"Those who are arriving have nothing. No food, no money. Many of them are sleeping in the open. Even when they get some food it's not enough," said Liban who has lived in Dadaab for 20 years, in an interview.

But as tents go up on every available space, tensions are emerging. These are being addressed through community policing programmes, according to Moses Mukhwana, LWF Dadaab project coordinator, speaking with ENInews by telephone from the camp.

The LWF and the U.N. refugee agency have been implementing a program called Community Peace and Security Teams. Volunteers get two weeks' training on camp life, gender-based violence, and conflict resolution, then help police keep law and order.

The refugees themselves are building their own communities, Mukhwana said. Some are selling inexpensive food, wheat flour and sugar from Somalia. "Shops are springing up selling all kinds of commodities. Trade is picking up quickly among the refugees, with many of them acquiring some livestock like goats, and putting up tukuls (traditional huts)," he said.

Back in Somalia, people are receiving news of relatives or friends in the camps, according to Mukhwana. He cites a vibrant exchange of information

between camp residents and the arriving refugees. The result has been a settlement pattern reflecting the refugees' areas of origin. "Hagadera is absorbing those from urban areas, while Ifo is taking in farming communities. Those from pastoralist areas end up at Dagahaley," he explained.