

Etching a living in the Egyptian Informal Economy: Experiences of Darfurian Refugees

Since 2001, Darfur region of Sudan has been in the throes of ethnic cleansing. Recently, the US Secretary of State labeled the atrocities committed by the *Jangaweed* (or Arab) militias, who are supported by the Sudanese government, against black Africans as genocide (DPA 2004). Over a million people have been turned into internally displaced persons within the country or forced to flee into refuge in Chad and other countries. Egypt has recently received a rising number of these forced migrants. However, the arrival of more refugees to the sprawling city of Cairo has added the pressure on the already difficult economic and social climate for its inhabitants. It is argued that the new arrivals have further put pressure on the informal sector which has served as a safety value for the burgeoning number of Egyptian who have not found gainful employments in the formal sector. The consequence has been conflict and lesser opportunities for the refugees to participate in the informal economy.

There are about 67 million Egyptian who live on only four per cent of the country. Most of the territory of Egypt is desert, and cannot human habitation. Over ten per cent of Egyptians live in Cairo, where most of the refugees stay. However, Egypt has embarked on establishing communities away from the bustling major cities. The 6th of October city is one of the planned communities established to relieve the population pressure on Cairo. Because of relatively lower cost of living, some refugees have chosen to relocate to the 6th of October city. A Darfurian refugee claims that over 1,000 Sudanese, mostly originating from Darfur, live in the city.

Most of the Sudanese forced migrants earn money by foraging on the garbage dumps on the outskirts of the city. Some of the Cairo's garbage is dumped in the desert close to 6th of October city. There are traders who purchase metal items recovered from the refuse, and resell them to industries. There are also poor Egyptians involved in this work. They often compete with the new arrivals from Sudan. Occasionally, the competition degenerated into fights.

Since August this year, I have been documenting the testimonies of the Darfurians in the 6th of October city in order to establish the reasons that led them to flee into Egypt. Moreover, I have been interested into finding out the nature of refugee/host relations in this particular locality. This is part of a wider research project on the livelihoods of Sudanese refugees in Egypt, whose numbers were estimated at nearly 20,000 at the end of 2002. For sure, the number of Sudanese refugees has been significantly increased by the conflict in Darfur. Moreover, I have been interested in determining the roles of the Egyptian government, NGOs and UNHCR, the agency responsible for determining refugee status in Egypt, in refugee struggles to establish livelihoods.

Reference:

DPA (2004) US concludes genocide took place in Darfur, 10 September.