

PLUS:
OUR ELECTION-
SEASON GUIDE
TO DISABILITY IN
AMERICA. P14

Pacific Standard



Featuring exclusive photos
of Sandra, a "non-human
person" and bearer of legal
rights, inside the now-closed
Buenos Aires Zoo.

APES ARE PEOPLE TOO

INSIDE THE
FIGHT FOR
NON-HUMAN
RIGHTS



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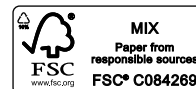
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Permanent Displacement

The road to Kakuma, in the northwestern corner of Kenya, is long and full of potholes. Occasionally, young boys spot our car approaching and quickly begin pouring dirt into these potholes, pretending to repair them—hoping we'll give them some loose change for the favor.

"Do they ever actually fix it?" I ask our driver, John.

"No, not really."

But for the occasional four-wheel-drive vehicle belonging to one international agency or another, the road is empty. The only time the road does fill up is when a convoy of trucks—sometimes 20 or even 30 of them—rumble toward Kakuma to deliver food to one of the world's oldest refugee camps. On this day, all we pass is one broken-down bus, its passengers wilting beside it in the hot sun.

The landscape that surrounds them is unforgiving. "You see, this place is very dry," John says. "You cannot farm, you cannot grow anything."

"What, then, is the main business here?" I ask.

"NGOs."

Kakuma camp and the non-governmental organizations that operate within it are overseen by Kenya's government and by the United Nations Refugee Agency. When we reach the U.N. compound at Kakuma's western edge, we're greeted by the head of refugee protection. It's a blisteringly hot day in October, and she offers me and the photographer I'm traveling with some warnings as we head into the camp. "Be careful of scorpions when you put

on your shoes," she says. She asks us if we brought flashlights. "Be careful because at night when you go out there are a lot of snakes. They call this Snake Valley."

She apologizes that she can't accompany us as we wander the camp's dirt roads and alleyways. Maintenance asked her to spend the weekend organizing her office. The rainy season is coming, and water will soon flood in, soaking any boxes of files that remain scattered about her office floor.

In 1991, 20,000 boys and some girls settled here after walking hundreds of miles of unforgiving desert to escape Sudan's civil war and turmoil in neighboring Ethiopia. They were later referred to as the "Lost Boys of Sudan." Many died, some from fatigue, dehydration, or starvation. Others were attacked by lions.

In 1992, the U.N. formally recognized Kakuma as a refugee camp—a temporary shelter. A quarter-century later, Kakuma hosts more than 150,000 refugees—victims of all manner of East African calamities, from Ugandan homophobia to political unrest in Burundi. Presently, it is filling up once again with people fleeing civil war in South Sudan.

Last May, Kenya announced that it would shut down Kakuma as well as the country's other main refugee camp, Dadaab, sending inhabitants back to their home countries. It's a threat Kenyan officials have made before. Refugees are a convenient distraction, a scapegoat in Kenya's ill-designed war against terrorists. Officials later backed down from closing Kakuma, but still insist on emptying Dadaab.

Long before the Syrian civil war, before millions of people began fleeing to camps in Turkey, Jordan, and elsewhere in search of safety, Kakuma was something of an icon in the global refugee crisis. Today, it stands as a solemn reminder of the permanence of humanity's displaced masses.

"It's bloody hot," a Ugandan refugee tells me one afternoon. So hot that donkeys lie down in the middle of the dusty road that winds through the camp. On their sides, they rest motionless, surrendering themselves to the unrelenting sun.

During the dry season, temperatures regularly reach 110 degrees. The rainy season can be worse. Huts flood; clothes and personal items mildew. The ground turns so muddy it weighs down your shoes, making it difficult to walk.

Rainy or dry, most days in Kakuma are uneventful. There are few formal jobs except for "volunteer" positions with the U.N., its partner agencies, and NGOs. Often, stipends are just \$60 a month. At mealtimes, which is usually just once a day, refugees cook using sticks and charcoal. Meat is expensive, so they mostly eat vegetarian—corn, flour, beans. If they can afford them, sometimes they throw in goat intestines for flavor.

Most live in huts made of mud and rusting metal roofs. To maintain them, one must scrounge for scraps and nails. These are not the homes of people who expect to be here only fleetingly. Some have built fences around their plots. Others have constructed small restaurants or bodegas. Indeed, most of Kakuma looks ▶





▶ more like a developing city than a tent camp.

What few material possessions people have, they hoard. Inside one hut, a pair of large suitcases explodes with unfolded clothes and sheets. A clothesline crowded with towels, blankets, and shirts hangs obtrusively through the middle. Outside, a small solar panel sits atop the hot roof, collecting sunlight. At night, people who own cell phones use the stored power to charge them. Behind the hut there's a metal bar, the ends of which have been cemented into large tin cans filled with concrete—a makeshift barbell, for exercise.

"We don't do much here," the barbell's owner, Odonga, explains. "Wait, eat, cook. For water, you wait in lines. The lines are huge."

The only time the pace of life quickens here is when food distribution takes place. Once a month, masses of people line up to receive their rations. Just behind the U.N. distribution center, a pop-up market forms, where vendors crowd together between bags of food-stuffs to buy, barter, and sell.

Odonga, who fled Uganda and asked to go by a pseudonym to protect his identity, hopes to get a job teaching at a school funded by the U.N., as many of his friends have. "The parents prefer their kids to be handled by Ugandans," he says. "The kids think our English is better, and they understand us more."

"People don't even know we exist here," Odonga says, reflecting on the indefinite nature of his predicament as a Ugandan laid up in Kenya. Although most refugees tend to hang out only

with people from their own clan or country, to better persuade NGOs and agencies to meet their respective needs, privately Odonga admits that everyone here faces the same hardships. "If I were a Somali, I would say the same thing."

ONE AFTERNOON a Kenyan U.N. protection officer sits in the shade of a tree surrounded by about 60 refugees. Young and old, Somali and Sudanese, they voice their concerns to him. Some say the water tap keeps running dry. Others complain that strangers have been allowed into the fenced-in protection area where they live. One woman complains that a security guard refuses to let her *out* of the protection area.

Darkness sets quickly in Kakuma. I board a motorcycle taxi out of the camp, but the back tire gets a flat. There's a warm breeze blowing across the barren landscape, which, apart from the stars, is completely dark. Somehow we manage to make out the gate of a primary school in the distance. The driver struggles to push his bike toward it, a couple hundred meters through the thick, sandy dirt. A sign next to the gate reads ANGELINA JOLIE GIRLS PRIMARY SCHOOL.

While we wait and hope for some sort of vehicle to pass, the school's security guard explains that Jolie visited in 2002. Fourteen years later, its classrooms are occupied not only by children who fled their home countries, but also by a whole generation of children born in the camp. Most likely, they will never leave.

—JACOB KUSHNER

“
Be careful
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of snakes.
They call this
Snake Valley.
”

CHAMPASAK PROVINCE, LAOS

A fisherman's son rests on the Mekong River. Nearby, workers are building the Don Sahong dam, which threatens the river's fish population.

PHOTO BY DAVID GUTTENFELDER

