

Refugees and the sociology of living in a “closed camp”: evidence from Oru International Refugee Camp, Nigeria

By

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Extended Abstract

The Oru settlement was created in 1990 by the General Ibrahim Babangida administration in the wake of Liberian civil war when the first shipment of over a thousand Liberian asylum seekers arrived in Nigeria. Oru, near Ijebu-Ode, was considered as the immediate environment for the housing of these people and they were settled in the premises of the campus of the defunct Muslim Teachers Training College. When, in 2007, the Oru International Refugee Camp (in Nigeria), which hosted about 6,000 forced migrants,¹ was declared “closed,” all of the core institutional actors – the UNHCR², the NCR³, the Red Cross and Crescent, the JDPC⁴, the NRCS⁵, NEMA⁶, the Ijebu North Local Government and a few other minor ones – working with the refugees and overseeing their day to day affairs immediately stopped all ‘humanitarian activities’ and completely withdrew their services. Unfortunately, many of the refugee-inhabitants were (and still are!) ‘unsettled’ as they did not opt for any of the post-refugee plans – repatriation, internal integration or resettlement. Thus, these refugees remained in the ‘closed camp’, doing anything possible to fend for themselves and their families. This situation has created for them unacceptable living and sanitary conditions, as well as exposed them to many vulnerable conditions of human insecurity, both at personal and group levels.

¹ The refugees were from Liberia, Sierra Leone, DR Congo, Rwanda, Eritrea, Côte-d’Ivoire, Sudan and Togo respectively.

² The United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR).

³ The National Commission on Refugees (NCR) of Nigeria.

⁴ The Justice Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) of the Catholic Diocese of Ijebu-Ode, Ogun State, Nigeria.

⁵ Nigeria Red Cross Society (NRCS).

⁶ The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA).

Four principal questions guided this study. They include: Why have many of the refugees refused to return home, even long after the conditions that dislocated them no longer exist back home and in spite of the dangerous atmosphere at the camp? How have they been coping without any form of assistance? Who is to blame for their helpless condition? What is the way forward in this situation? This paper, thus, seeks to unearth certain issues of concern regarding the refugees' life and experiences in the officially closed Oru camp. Of interest here is what I have called 'the sociology of life in a closed camp', which encompasses and critically explores the different dimensions of these refugees' experiences. It notes and exhibits the various trends in human rights abuses in the camp, including rape cases (by members of the host community), robberies, a breakdown of basic amenities – water supply, electricity, medical care, religious access, etc – in the camp.

In showing how the human conditions in the camp have degenerated since its closure, the paper takes a case study approach looking at the lives of four inhabitants in the camp. Most of the respondents/participants in this study averred that the conditions in their countries were not conducive enough for anyone to return. It is argued in the paper that despite the fact of the existence of the controversial "exemption clause" on which grounds the camp was closed, the closure of the camp constitutes an abuse of office and social justice ethics, which incidentally has had diverse implications for the lives of the camp resident. It is further demonstrated in the paper how the Nigerian government and the UN were directly responsible for the criminal neglect which has existed in the camp since its closure. It thus argues that the logical corollary of the continued existence of the status quo in the camp will be a perpetuation of criminality and human rights abuses. The paper concludes with some recommendations on some directional steps to follow for better camp affairs' management.

Due to the trans-disciplinary nature of the concerns of this paper, a multi-disciplinary framework in social research was adopted. Essentially, data for this study were got through both primary and secondary sources, including in-person interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), non-participant observation method, as well as the use of extant secondary source material.