

On Repatriation: Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose

by Barbara E. Harrell-Bond

are taken to prison and from there sent to work on white farms. Sam Ngomane, for instance, was arrested in October 1983 and, after several days detention, was turned over to white farmers, for whom he worked for a year for an average salary of R 30 (about US \$15) per month.

Refugees who find their way to Swaziland are, upon arrival, screened to determine that they are political refugees and not just seeking work. About half are turned back. The rest are sent to Ndzevane, where today there are about 5,000 Mozambicans. Naturally, some try to settle in villages with members of their extended family, but because the government is opposed to their integration into Swazi society, they are generally rounded up and sent to reception centres. Some others have found work and housing on the large sugar estates that dot Swaziland's countryside.

The war shifted north in 1986 after the bulk of the MNR moved into Malawi and the MNR headquarters at Gorongoso were captured by a joint Mozambican-Zimbabwean army operation. This accounts for the decline in the number of refugees reaching Swaziland recently and the massive influx of Mozambicans into Malawi and Zambia.

Permanent settlement of Mozambicans inside Malawi is discouraged by the government there. Already overcrowded and with one of the highest child malnutrition rates in the world, Malawi does not wish to play host to refugees created by a war which it has fostered by supporting the MNR. By the end of 1986 some 200,000 Mozambicans had had to take refuge there, but most returned as soon as possible, complaining of inadequate food rations and high child mortality rates.

While the situation facing Mozambicans in each of the neighbouring states is difficult, the millions who remain and who have been displaced by the war face death, torture and starvation. Here crops are burnt or stolen, transport of goods and relief supplies disrupted, hospitals and orphanages poorly supplied. But the Mozambican, Zimbabwean and the Tanzanian armies are on the offensive, clearing areas of bandits. International aid agencies have begun a major relief effort and grain, abundant in Zimbabwe, is being purchased by international donors for delivery in Mozambique. Agricultural implements and inputs, along with fuel, clothes and household necessities are needed. But most of all, it is peace that is in short supply and until Mozambique gets this much-deserved peace, refugees will continue to pour across the borders.

In October, I visited Uganda and spoke with Banyarwanda refugees who have been there since 1959. Uganda is considering offering citizenship to these people, and one of my interests was to ask people I met just how they might respond to such an offer. As one put it, "Even if I can never go home, why should I deprive my children and my grandchildren of their homeland. I will never become a Ugandan." While it may not be "pragmatic" or "practical", every refugee I know longs for all of those symbols which are bound up in the notion of home.

It is interesting how strong is the tendency for Europeans to forget their own recent history. Today, however, there are not only differences in scale and locality, but also in the attitude of the wealthier host and donor nations. Then, countries outside of Europe were willing to receive large numbers of refugees, and vast amounts of capital were poured into Europe to promote its rapid recovery. Another, and very important, difference between post-war Europe and many refugee-producing parts of the world today, was that the promise of political stability encouraged investment and the rebuilding of Europe.

Humanitarian refugee agencies often lament their own lack of a "institutional memory" and their tendency to re-invent the wheel each time they are called to respond to a new refugee crisis. It is only through the publication of independent research that such a memory will be developed. It is through an analysis of past mistakes and successes that progress can be made.

We believe that historians have an important role to play. As Howard Adelman has noted, "... historical research into past attempts to solve refugee problems is invaluable if mistakes are not to be repeated. In that sense, refugee research shares a kinship with the refugees themselves. For it operates, if it does so at all, with little sense of its own history. Milan Kundera, the famous Czech exile writer, ... describes the function of forgetting or repressing one's history. It allows the past to be invented and old solutions to be 'reinvented'. In all the invention and artifice, culture is destroyed. We live in a fabricated world, rootless in time and in space, floating in a dream world of fantasy and not reality."

Let us think a bit more about the role of independent academic study of refugees and why up to now there has been no accountability for the work undertaken by the humanitarian community -- and, why the incredible resistance to inde-

pendent research. During your meetings you will be talking about forced repatriation after the Second World War. You will be discussing events in which many of the actors are long dead if not forgotten. For your data you have relied upon interviews with survivors and upon archives which contain materials which would not have been available to you at the time these events were taking place. You will be exposing actions and events which will reveal enormous injustices and breaches of basic human rights which happened some forty years ago. You will be seeing the results of actions which were designed to serve political "interests" rather than the needs of people. Some of these actions were taken by those who were called humanitarians as well as by the politicians.

What if you had written your papers at the time these crimes against humanity were being committed? What were scholars doing at that time? What are they doing today? Very few people are aware that the same practices continue today. How many of you are aware that even while we talk in this open forum about the past, secret meetings are taking place at which much more ambitious plans are afoot to "solve" today's refugee problem? The strategy, once again, and which is already being implemented in Africa, is repatriation. It is called voluntary, but one of the incentives for people to agree to go home, is that ration cards have been taken away from the refugees.

I believe that you will find that contemporary approaches to repatriation differ very little from the period you are studying at this conference which you have so bravely labelled "forced", not voluntary repatriation. The challenge I would like to put to you as historians is to ask you to point your readers towards the contemporary situation and to make your findings accessible to aid practitioners in the field. Refugee research must be rooted in history. The historical material exists to provide those roots and your work during this conference will belie the claims that the material is lacking. Though no two refugee situations are comparable, there are lessons we can learn from the past.

The above are excerpts from Barbara E. Harrell-Bond's address, "Forcible Repatriation: The Continuing Relevance of the Subject" which opened the Canadian-funded symposium "Forcible Repatriation After WWII" held at the Oxford University Examination Schools, Oxford, England, March 20-22, 1987.