



REFUGEE RETURNS FROM KENYA TO SOMALIA: “THIS IS ABOUT FEAR... NOT ABOUT CHOICE”

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Front cover: A Somali refugee waits outside a Returns Help Desk in Dadaab, Kenya. She said she is registering for return to Somalia out of fear of what the Kenyan government might do if she does not. *This page:* Students walk the grounds of a secondary school at the Dadaab refugee camp. One headmaster told RI that the daily attendance rate had dropped from 95 percent to 50 percent since the announcement to close Dadaab.

INTRODUCTION

The Kenyan government's threat to close the Dadaab refugee camp by the end of November would not only endanger the lives of several hundred thousand Somali refugees but has already caused irreparable harm and damage. With no alternative options, some refugees have been coerced into repatriating to Somalia, where insecurity and an ongoing humanitarian crisis continue. The United Nations Refugee Agency's focus on expediting the pace of returns – through a program that is supported by donors and implemented in partnership with non-governmental organizations – in the face of political pressure from Kenya, promotes large-scale returns that are unlikely to be sustainable. Development and reintegration initiatives in designated areas of return in Somalia need time to take hold; and, in the meantime, support for Somali refugees who remain in Kenya cannot be abandoned.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❑ The Kenyan government must lift its deadline of November 30, 2016, for closing the Dadaab refugee camp, cease coercive efforts to promote premature returns to Somalia, and assure refugees that they will not be forcibly repatriated;
- ❑ Beyond improving the quality of information provided at Return Help Desks in Dadaab, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) must expand its information campaign – with participation from Somalia-based sectoral partners – to share details about service availability, livelihoods opportunities, and security conditions in Somali areas of return through local radio messaging, social media, and direct engagement with and outreach to refugees;
- ❑ UNHCR must increase and extend post-return monitoring activities through regular phone communication with returnees to gather detailed information about the conditions and needs of returnees and inform coordinated planning for reintegration programs;
- ❑ As outlined in the Somali National Development Plan, international donors and the UN should support the Somali government's strategic goal to enhance the absorption capacity of basic services for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugee returnees through improved coordination mechanisms between humanitarian and development actors;
- ❑ International donors, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union, should increase protection funding for the Dadaab refugee camp and in areas of return inside Somalia;
- ❑ Donors must increase humanitarian assistance for Somalia to close a \$500 million gap in funding the UN's 2016 Humanitarian Response Plan and address urgent needs, particularly relating to food insecurity;
- ❑ UNHCR's Cross Border Working Group must devise clear and transparent terms of reference and expand its membership to include all relevant actors. Additionally, the leadership of UNHCR Kenya and UNHCR Somalia should make regular cross-border visits to each other's field locations to inform programming and to improve coordination between the two country teams.

BACKGROUND

Kenya had long been a generous host to hundreds of thousands of refugees from neighboring war-torn countries and those throughout the region. On May 6, 2016, however, in a statement from the Ministry of Interior, the Kenyan government announced that it was ending its role as a host to refugees. Citing the “economic, security, and environmental burden” of hosting refugees, the government planned to close both the Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps in short order, and with immediate effect, disbanded the Department of Refugee Affairs.¹ The government soon backed off its threat to close Kakuma, home to mainly South Sudanese refugees, but officials publicly maintained their resolve to close Dadaab, arguing that the existence of the camp represented a national security threat. On May 31, Cabinet Secretary for the Ministry of Interior and National Coordination Joseph Nkaissery said, “The decision we made to close the camp is explicit and final....The refugees must be repatriated to their countries, and we hope to close the camp, latest November.”² Despite softened rhetoric at times and international pressure to lift the deadline for closing Dadaab, the Ministry of Interior’s Principal Secretary, Karanja Kibicho, reaffirmed the government’s plans in mid-September, stating, “Our timeline is November 30 for the closure of the camp.”³

Previously, and particularly in the wake of attacks attributed to the Somalia-based armed group Al-Shabaab, high-level Kenyan officials have made camp closure threats that did not come to pass. Following the infamous Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi in 2013, then-Interior Minister Joseph Ole Lenku called for the immediate closure of Dadaab. In March 2014, the Kenyan government blamed urban refugees for insecurity in Kenyan cities and executed a crackdown by security forces known as Operation Usalama Watch. Several thousand refugees were forcibly, and sometime brutally, rounded up and transported to the Dadaab and Kakuma camps (which officials explained as a first step toward returning them to their home countries), and at least 259 Somalis, several of whom had refugee status, were deported to Somalia by plane.⁴ After an attack on Garissa University in April 2015, an attack that left 147 people dead, Kenya’s Vice

President William Ruto stated, “We have asked the UNHCR to relocate the refugees in three months, failure to which we shall relocate them ourselves.”⁵

Kenya faces very real and very serious security challenges, but it is harmful and wrong to blame the Somali refugee population – people who themselves fled to Kenya seeking refuge from violence, persecution, and turmoil at home. Importantly, Kenya will hold national elections in 2017. Scapegoating refugees (a non-voting population) by portraying them as threat to national security serves political expediency, while tarnishing and punishing an entire community of people.

In response to pressure from the Kenyan government to expedite the pace of refugee returns to Somalia, UNHCR developed a revised Plan of Action to account for a reduction of the population of Dadaab by the end of the year by 150,000. This effort includes a population verification exercise, provides a ‘substantially enhanced’ individual return package, and bolsters community-based reintegration support in Somali areas of return.⁶ The Plan of Action is for ‘voluntary repatriation,’ but with Kenya maintaining its deadline for closing Dadaab and offering no alternative for refugees who do not wish to return to Somalia, returns in this context are at best induced and at worst forced.

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Inside Somalia, the humanitarian situation is dire. According to the United Nations, five million Somalis do not have enough food to eat, including 300,000 children who are acutely malnourished. Poor rainfall reduced the most recent harvest in south central Somalia by about half, and weather patterns are expected to reduce rainfall and cause drought during the current rainy season from October to January.⁷ Further, while certain areas of Somalia have stabilized over recent years,

much of the country remains insecure as fighting between Al-Shabaab and African Union peacekeepers (AMISOM) cause new displacement and long standing clan conflicts continue. There are currently more than a million Somalis displaced internally. According to UNHCR’s own *Position on Returns to Southern and Central Somalia*, “Civilians continue to be severely affected by the conflict, with reports of civilians being killed and injured in conflict-related violence, widespread sexual and



gender-based violence against women and children, forced recruitment of children, and large-scale displacement.”⁸ From data recorded from January 2015 to June 2016, 564,000 Somalis were displaced internally – a rate of more than 1,000 people displaced per day.⁹ Most recently, tens of thousands of people were forced to flee their homes due to fighting in the city of Galkayo between forces loyal to semi-autonomous regions of Puntland and Galmudug.¹⁰ And with national elections scheduled for the end of this year, the situation across the entire country is tense.

In September, Refugees International (RI) staff traveled to Kenya and Somalia to assess the implications and impact of the repatriation program from Dadaab.

UNSUSTAINABLE RETURNS

“ I constantly have returnees showing up at our office saying, ‘I have no money. I’m thinking about going back to Dadaab so my kids can go to school.’ The whole voluntary repatriation program needs to be revised. ”

-Aid worker in Kismayo

Since UNHCR began implementing its voluntary returns program in December 2014, around 33,000 refugees have repatriated to Somalia, the majority arriving in Kismayo in the Jubaland region of south central Somalia. Until 2012, Kismayo was controlled by Al-Shabaab – a non-state armed group that controls territory throughout much of south central Somalia. The city of Kismayo is itself under the control of the local Jubaland authorities, but Al-Shabaab maintains a potent presence throughout the surrounding rural areas.

From December 2014 through April 2016, before Kenya made its Dadaab closure announcement, returns were moving at a gradual pace – about 13,000 people had repatriated to Somalia through the return program. After the May announcement, UNHCR increased the monetary return package, and in its appeal to funders, based on the revised Plan of Action, foresees an additional 50,000 supported returns to Somalia this year.¹¹

In Kismayo, RI staff met with recently returned refugees from Dadaab. Returning refugees receive \$200 (U.S. dollars) per person from UNHCR when they depart Dadaab and then another \$200 per person upon arrival at Kismayo. Additionally,

refugee returnees receive \$200 per household per month for the subsequent six months, as well as \$15 per month for food. An allocation for housing and education costs is planned by UNHCR but not yet implemented.

In discussions with RI, a group of women returnees described an intense campaign by Kenyan government officials at the Dadaab camp, as well as on local radio, to the effect that security in Somalia had improved and assistance would be received upon arrival. This was combined with propaganda on the imminent closure of the camp. Women with school-aged children were particularly anxious and disillusioned, as they found that beyond the financial package, they were left to fend on their own in an environment that was very challenging, with limited access to basic services. Shelter and education were repeatedly raised as critical issues. One woman, a mother of six, said, “They promised that it was safe and that we would be helped, but I am not sure where to go. I have no shelter and must rent a place, and there are no schools for my children.” Some of the women said that they are using their return package to pay for rent and that they are worried about what they will do for shelter once their package runs out.

One couple said they had invested the package money in buying a small plot but had no funds for making a decent shelter. With regards to education, all the parents RI interviewed were at a complete loss on how to guarantee their children would not lose the knowledge and the investment in education that they had acquired in Dadaab. Some women stated that had they known what they knew now about the lack of services and support available to returnees, they would not have registered for return. Further, they said that they were communicating this information back to friends and other contacts in Dadaab.

Several of the men interviewed by RI said that they decided to return home now rather than face a forceful eviction from Dadaab. One young man, 18 years old, said that he wanted to return to Dadaab to finish his education. “In Dadaab,” he said, “I had education, I had security, and I had water.”

As noted above, south central Somalia is experiencing a humanitarian crisis. Kismayo itself is home to more than 40,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), displaced due to conflict and food insecurity, living in deplorable conditions in displacement camps around the city. RI visited one of these camps to see first-hand the dilapidated shelters and lack of adequate services. According to a June 2016 study by the Jubaland government’s refugee and IDP agency, “The scale of displacement [in Jubaland], and the fact that the region is still in the midst of a protracted war, has resulted in a situation in which thousands of people, more than half of them children and adolescents, are living under emergency conditions where basic needs are not being met across health, food, nutrition and protection sectors.”¹² The global acute malnutrition rates in



A camp for internally displaced people in Kismayo, Somalia. There are more than 40,000 IDPs in Kismayo living in very poor conditions.



Children at a displacement camp in Kismayo, where access to primary education is extremely limited.

the IDP camps are just below 15 percent, the threshold which constitutes a critical emergency.

Access to basic education is particularly problematic since years of conflict led to a dilapidated education system with only private and/or Quranic options available. The same study reports that only 7 percent of respondents completed primary education.¹³ Further, as in other areas of Somalia, IDPs face the constant threat of eviction because they do not have secure land tenure. They can be evicted without notice and with no information on where else to go. They also face incidences of harassment by local security forces, according to an aid official interviewed by RI.

A UN official told RI that the greatest challenge for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in Kismayo is gaining access to populations in need. Aid workers can generally only travel and work within a 10 kilometer radius of the city. During periods of heightened insecurity, UN staff can be prevented from leaving the AMISOM-guarded airport. During an NGO meeting, one aid worker said that people are going hungry along the Juba River, but there is limited aid access because the area is controlled by Al-Shabaab. An additional challenge is the lack of funding for the humanitarian response in Somalia. For 2016, the UN's humanitarian response plan for Somalia is less than 40 percent covered, with a shortfall of more than \$500 million.¹⁴ Refugee returnees are expected to sustainably 'reintegrate' into areas of Somalia that are still facing humanitarian crises. According to a recent regional overview report from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "Drought, flooding, disease outbreaks, evictions, insecurity and lack of basic services drive humanitarian needs in the Jubaland area."¹⁵

In September, in the face of this reality, the Jubaland authorities suspended the reception of returning refugees to Kismayo, citing "severe humanitarian challenges."¹⁶ Indeed, a local government official told RI that there is an urgent need for shelter, medical facilities, and education programs to accommodate the returnees. He said, "It's like Kenya and the UN are dumping refugees in Kismayo." He also cited the lack of employment and livelihood opportunities available and worries that non-state armed groups might attempt to forcibly recruit returnees.

“They promised that it (Kismayo) was safe and that we would be helped, but I am not sure where to go. I have no shelter and must rent a place, and there are no schools for my children.”

-Recently returned Somali refugee from Dadaab and mother of six

Some women stated that had they known what they knew now about the lack for services and support available to returnees, they would not have registered for return.

Aid officials reported that, at present, about 60 percent of refugee returnees are finding accommodation in Kismayo town, 25 percent the move to the rural areas, and 15 percent are living in IDP camps. A key concern is that after the monthly stipends from UNHCR and the World Food Program (WFP) conclude six months after arrival in Somalia, more returnees will

be dependent on humanitarian support and will seek shelter and assistance at IDP camps. This is worrying on many levels. Existing IDP camps in Kismayo are already extremely congested. Some refugees have already decided to return to Dadaab, and more are likely to follow.

One aid worker told RI, "I constantly have returnees showing up at our office saying, 'I have no money. I'm thinking about

going back to Dadaab so my kids can go to school.' The whole voluntary repatriation program needs to be revised."

It is clear that, in addition to the involuntary nature of the repatriation program, large-scale returns are unlikely to be sustainable and the whole process could cause more harm than good by adding to the existing humanitarian caseload in Somalia and straining the fragile stability and development gains in certain areas of Somalia. If local communities and governments in Somalia are not in an adequate position to receive, absorb, and reintegrate returnees, returns will not be durable. And durability requires development and security to take hold in Somalia to the point where returnees are not dependent on humanitarian aid after six months or are forced to flee again because of violence.

To its credit, the Somalia Federal Government recently finalized a National Development Plan for 2017 to 2019 that includes a detailed list of priorities and strategic objectives for achieving durable solutions for refugee returnees and IDPs. This includes protecting the rights of displaced people and returnees, but also prioritizes securing access to land, affordable housing, education, and vocational training. Further, there is a particular emphasis on the need to create job and income opportunities for youth IDPs and

returnees that are integrated into the broader social protection priorities of the Plan. Of particular importance is the Plan's strategic goal to enhance the absorption capacity of basic services for IDPs and refugee returnees.¹⁷

At the same time, UN leadership is promoting a durable solutions strategy that includes collaboration with development actors like the World Bank, engagement with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and direct support to local governments that are on the frontline of reintegration activities. Further, the UN's Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General for Somalia (DSRSG) appointed Walter Kaelin, a leading expert on internal displacement, to lead the IDP Solutions Initiative – a process aimed at linking development and humanitarian interventions for IDPs to promote durable local integration.

The priority of donors and UN agencies should be on improving conditions in Somalia, not succumbing to political pressure from Kenya to speed up the pace of returns through monetary inducements.

These development efforts should be supported. But to that end, UN leadership must implement clear mechanisms for coordination between these various development efforts, with the National Development Plan at the center, and between development and humanitarian actors. Though an Operational Solutions Platform has been devised by the DSRSG, multiple aid workers told RI that there is ongoing confusion about how the various initiatives fit together and how cooperation between development and humanitarian actors can be operationalized for all displacement affected populations – including IDPs, returnees, and host communities. Additionally, there is a need to harmonize assessments of the conditions in areas of return. Joint area based analysis, as promoted by the Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat (ReDSS), is an important step toward this objective.

Ultimately, no matter what kinds of plans and roadmaps are in place, improvements on the ground must take hold before further large scale returns take place, and all actors involved must be realistic about the potential pace of progress in a context as volatile and insecure as Somalia. At the moment, the push for returns from the Kenya side is driving repatriation, rather than conditions on the Somalia side of the border. As one aid worker said, NGOs are playing catch-up. “People have started moving,” he said, “but actors are still planning.” At present, the UN, supported by the international community, is complicit in facilitating returns to the same kind of deplorable conditions that caused refugees to flee their homes in the first place.

Very recently, the Jubaland government lifted its restriction on allowing new returnees to arriving in Kismayo. In this context, much more must be done to expand post-return monitoring. Refugees receive cell phones and sim cards upon arrival in Kismayo, and they are transferred their monthly return stipend via mobile phone banking. There is some effort to contact refugees to inquire about their situation (where they are living, how they are sustaining themselves, etc.) but post-return monitoring efforts must be expanded. Knowledge about the situation of refugees post-return must be shared with shared with humanitarian and development actors (including NGOs and local government authorities) operating in areas of return to inform how best to tailor and focus reintegration program, as well as apply lessons learned. Further, UNHCR's Protection and Return Monitoring Network provides important data and that should be shared more broadly and regularly throughout the humanitarian and development community in Somalia.

Returns in Somalia will only be durable if conditions on the ground allow for that. The priority of donors and UN agencies should be on improving conditions in Somalia, not succumbing to political pressure from Kenya to speed up the pace of returns through monetary inducements.

THE PUSH FROM DADAAB

**“ But what is my choice?
This is about fear.
It's not about choice. ”**

-Somali refugee at a Return Help Desk in Dadaab

The Dadaab refugee complex was established in 1991 to accommodate Somalis seeking refuge in Kenya after the collapse of Somalia's government plunged the country into civil war. Over the past two decades, continuing bouts of insecurity and hunger forced more Somalis into Kenya. When famine hit Somalia in 2011, around 130,000 Somalis arrived in Dadaab. The camp complex is currently home to around 260,000 refugees.¹⁸ Dadaab has existed for so long a number of its residents have spent no time living in Somalia. Not only have many refugees been born in the camp, but there are approximately 10,000 third-generation refugees there.

UNHCR maintains that its refugee returns program is voluntary, while the Kenyan government has called for the Dadaab refugee camp to be closed by November 30, with no alternative for refugees who do not want to return to Somalia. The logic simply does not square. While some refugees have indeed returned spontaneously and there is a true voluntary intention to some repatriating to Somalia, the current context is poisoned and must be revised.¹⁹ The monetary inducement



Left: A sign outside a Return Help Desk in Dadaab states, “Return is my choice.”

Right: A transit center in Dadaab where returning refugees wait for transportation to Somalia.

from UNHCR, supported by donors and implemented by NGO partners, combined with psychological pressure on the side of the Kenyan government, runs counter to the premise of voluntary returns.

Over the course of several days in Dadaab, RI spoke with refugees about their concerns. One refugee, Mahat, told us that people are not returning willingly. They are worried about what the Kenyan government will do if they do not leave now. “Maybe the government will beat us or set the camp on fire.” She said that government officials have been heard on local radio saying, “We are going to show you the way to go back if you don’t go on your own.” A young man sitting next to her said, “But if we go back to Somalia, we’re going to be slaughtered.”

Anxieties about being forced back to Somalia were reiterated over and over again. A group of men at the Kambioos section of the camp said they were afraid about the possibility of being bundled into trucks by the Kenyan security services. “Everybody wants to take the money before being kicked out.” Again, another man explained that announcements from public officials on the radio – such as “People should move out” – contributed to a context of fear in the camp.

At one of the camp’s Return Help Desks, where refugees can sign-up for the repatriation program, RI met a woman who had just registered to return with her eight children. ‘Standing next to a UNHCR poster that read, “Return is my choice,” she stated unambiguously that hers was not a voluntary decision, but that she “did not want to be punished by the Kenyans if or when the camp is to close.” Interestingly, she was perfectly aware of the conditions that RI had recently witnessed in Kismayo,

which she deemed not conducive to a safe and sustainable return. ”But what is my choice?” she asked. “This is about fear. It’s not about choice.”

It is a mockery to call the process voluntary while the deadline [for Dadaab’s closure] still exists.

The Kenyan government must lift its deadline for closing Dadaab. There is reason to be skeptical that Kenya would actually close the camp on November 30 given the logistical difficulty and the severe violations of international law that would entail. However, as long as the deadline is there, refugees have reason to worry, and it compromises the notion of voluntary returns. It is a mockery to call the process voluntary while the deadline still exists.

UNHCR must do more to counter the government’s push for returns. The agency must show that it is standing side by side with refugees in spite of the detrimental stance of the Kenyan government. For example, UNHCR must expand its use of local radio and other media outlets to try to counter the government’s information and propaganda campaign and redouble its own efforts to enforce the notion that return is truly a choice. Further, UNHCR and its partner organizations must do a better job to inform prospective returnees about the reality of the situation in areas of return. Rights groups, such as Human Rights Watch, have reported that information pamphlets about areas of return that refugees receive at

Return Help Desks in Dadaab are out of date and sparse in detail. UNHCR has pledged to address this issue, but more can be done. UNHCR can and should expand its information campaign beyond the Return Help Desks to inform refugees about the true conditions in Somalia. Shortly after RI's visit to Dadaab, the Somalia Education Cluster (humanitarian agencies coordinated through OCHA) conducted a mission to Dadaab to engage partners and students on the education situation across the border. This is a good step. UNHCR should encourage visits from additional Somalia humanitarian cluster leads to Dadaab, including the protection, health, and shelter clusters to bring first-hand, comprehensive information about service availability inside Somalia.

Additionally, UNHCR must be very clear with refugees about where it does and not have a presence. While the agency has designated twelve areas inside Somalia as safe and viable for return, UNHCR staff are only permanently present in a handful of locations, and even there, movement is restricted due to insecurity.

Several aid workers explained that there is poor cooperation and communication between UNHCR Kenya and UNHCR Somalia. In an operation this complex and challenging, this issue must be remedied. There is a UNHCR-led Cross Border Working Group, but it lacks clear and transparent terms of reference and its membership must be expanded to include all relevant actors. The recent appointment of Mohamed Abdi Affey as the UNHCR Special Envoy on the Somali Refugee Situation is, possibly, an important step to improve cross-border cooperation and coordination. But it is also critical for UNHCR leadership in Kenya and UNHCR leadership in Somalia to visit affected populations on each side of the border. For example, the UNHCR representative in Kenya should visit places like Kismayo and Baidoa, and the UNHCR representative in Somalia should make periodic visits to Dadaab. Certainly, information can be shared by staff, but first-hand evidence from each side of the border can and should inform each other's policies and programs.

“ We want to stay in school. We want to show the world that education is the major tool to uplift people's lives. ”

-Somali refugee secondary student in Dadaab

Some refugees with whom RI spoke had returned to Somalia but were now back in Dadaab. One 17-year-old boy had returned to Somalia a month prior with his parents, but they faced threats from Al Shabaab and so his parents told their son to

“ We need an environment that is suitable for learning. The news about the repatriation has affected us emotionally. We came here for a better life and the problems in Somalia are still there. ”

-Somali refugee secondary student in Dadaab

return to Dadaab, where it is safe and where there is access to education. “I want to go back to school here and take the national exam,” he said. Since his refugee status was revoked upon repatriation, he no longer has access to food distributions and must rely on support from other refugees in the camp.

The focus on repatriation is having a detrimental effect on service delivery in the camp, particularly as it relates to protection. Several refugees told RI that when they tried to raise protection concerns with UNHCR staff, such as the needs of unaccompanied minors, the UNHCR field offices were overrun with other refugees inquiring about the return program, and their concerns went unaddressed.

Indeed, UN staff acknowledged the voluntary repatriation program “definitely drains resources” and that staff have been pulled from other offices to work on the repatriation program. This is unacceptable. There are still more than 260,000 refugees in Dadaab who need support and protection.

NGOs working in Dadaab are similarly in a difficult situation. According to one aid worker, “All of our meetings and trainings have been hijacked by repatriation issues.” And planning programs for 2017 is difficult when the government maintains its threat of camp closure.

Other NGO staff explained that there is increasing criminal activity in the camp because as more people leave to return to Somalia, there is more space for criminals to operate, with community protection systems breaking down.

There are limitations to what UNHCR and the donor community can do in the face of Kenya's ominous threat. But there is more action that can be taken. This is precisely the time that UNHCR and donors should be increasing protection resources and ensuring that service delivery is as strong as it can be.

Another critical sector that has been negatively impacted by the repatriation program is education. One headmaster at a secondary school in Dadaab told us his school used to have a 95 percent attendance rate. But now, attendance has dropped to 50 percent and at times, drops even lower. While some

students have already returned to Somalia, many, he said, have just dropped out because their motivation is gone. They say to him, “What’s the point of being in school? Even if I sit for my exams, I’m going back to a place where there are no schools.” RI spoke with several students in Form 3 (the equivalent of junior year of high school in the United States). One young man told us, “We need an environment that is suitable for learning. The news about the repatriation has affected us emotionally. We came here for a better life and the problems in Somalia are still there.” Another said, “I wanted to try for a scholarship to university, but now all those dreams have come to an end.” A young woman said, “We want to stay in school. We want to show the world that education is the major tool to uplift people’s lives.” There is too much at stake to give up on important gains that have been made. Kenya’s announcement to close Dadaab by November 30 may well be just a threat, but the harm that this threat has already caused is real.

CONCLUSION

Many refugees describe Dadaab as an open prison – basic services are provided, but physical, professional, and social mobility is limited. Even refugees who arrived in the 1990s (or who were born in the camp) are not allowed access to Kenyan citizenship, nor can they legally work full-time, according to Kenyan law. However, it is unacceptable that the only option provided to refugees in the wake of shuttering the camp is return to Somalia – a country that continues to experience violence and hunger on a significant scale and where large numbers of returns are unlikely to be sustainable. It is fair to criticize Kenya for not offering local integration for Somali refugees, but the limitation of options also represents a failure at the global level. Only about one percent of refugees worldwide are resettled to a third country each year and international efforts to bring peace to protracted conflicts, like in Somalia, too often fail. These failures, though, do not justify supporting large-scale returns to Somalia, where returnees are likely to face the very conditions that caused them to seek refuge in Kenya in the first place. Until alternatives are presented, and until durable peace and development in Somalia takes hold, Dadaab must remain an option for those who have nowhere else to go.

RI Senior Advocate Mark Yarnell and RI President Michel Gabaudan traveled to Kenya and Somalia in September 2016.

ENDNOTES

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