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Nothing Left to Lose?  
An Examination of the Dynamics and Recent  
History of Refugee Resistance and Protest

Matthew Themba Lewis

Presented at the 4th Annual Forced Migration Post-graduate Student Conference  
University of East London, London, England  
March 18-19, 2006

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## INTRODUCTION

Refugee protest is some of the most desperate, dramatic and spectacular. Instances of self-immolation, slow public starvation, and riotous violence are not rare, but public response and research has been limited at best. Simultaneously, it can be quiet, unnoticed, isolated, lonely - late night solitary suicides and disappearance from institutional routine. Coping with the harsh conditions of life in exile, institutional and otherwise, is an inherent component of the refugee experience - and a component that, as trends toward restrictive asylum policy grow, increasingly incorporates protest. Resistance in exile has become a tool of refugee identity, a vehicle through which feelings of empowerment can be achieved, cultural values can be maintained, a sense of worth can be created, and, perhaps most importantly, a feeling of *movement*, some sense of forward momentum, can be realized in what are often prolonged, stifling, powerless situations of physical and emotional limbo. Even the act of *becoming* a refugee, one could argue, is itself an act of resistance - a counter measure to increasingly hostile and unbearable conditions.

The debate around refugee issues rarely operates on a level at which refugees themselves are able to contribute. The Palais des Nations, once in the geographic heart of post-World War II refugee issues, is a distant location to many modern refugee crises. Policy decisions take place at high levels of government and through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) offices. Security and sustainability determinations are made not by those at risk, but through 'investigative missions', cost-benefit analysis, and political advantage - often weighted by interest in the security and maintenance of state agendas.

The response from refugee communities has long been silence - not for lack of dissatisfaction, but for want of entry into the dialogue and the risks of challenging those forces in charge of their protection. I do not intend to suggest there have not been efforts to include refugee 'voice' in the creation of refugee policy, nor that the great majority of refugees are dissatisfied with their treatment, but rather to draw attention to the areas in which resistance *has* become visible - where refugees are organizing, cooperating, and demanding their perspective be heard. This paper will explore the recent history of

refugee resistance and protest, both as a phenomenon attracting little critical attention thus far, and as one that is fundamental to the success of future dialogue and refugee policy. Through resistance, refugees are demanding that dialogue change significantly, while drawing much needed attention to areas of the refugee experience often invisible or ignored. Contrary to the popular image of the refugee - barely clothed, wide eyed, and begging - so often seen in mainstream donation solicitations, a new vision of the refugee is emerging: human beings, demanding to be recognized as such, demanding the rights afforded them under international law, and demanding their voices be heard.

## **PRECARIOUS POSITIONING**

*We are trying to avoid any hint of creating problems, because otherwise we might be kicked out even from here.*

*-Roma Refugee in Macedonia*

To fully appreciate the dynamics of refugee protest, one must first try to comprehend the conditions under which refugees often live, the precariousness of asylum, and the potentially tenuous relationship with the local community. Gaim Kibreab described urban refugees in Khartoum as similar in standing to "illegal residents [who] were living like fugitives and were not even in a position to protect [themselves] against the crimes that were committed against them."<sup>1</sup> A glance at many current protracted urban refugee situations - like that in Cairo - demonstrates that this is an increasingly common situation for urban refugees in strained economies of the global south. While those refugees 'lawfully staying' in the territory of a signatory state must be allowed "the most favorable treatment accorded to nationals of a foreign country, in the same circumstances,"<sup>2</sup> there exists no mechanism to guarantee that states allow popular association in any form for 'nationals of a foreign country' within their borders. In fact, even those states with the most liberal refugee policies have no obligation or incentive under the 1951 Convention to allow associations of a (widely defined) 'political' nature.<sup>3</sup> Through affiliation with a protest or resistance movement, refugees in host states often risk their hard won legal status, and quite possibly their safety and livelihood since host states, depending upon domestic policy, may imprison or deport refugees who have

violated local law or the conditions of their refugee resident status. The result is often considerable submission and quiet powerlessness on the part of refugees when it comes to claiming basic rights, demanding better treatment, and voicing grievances.<sup>4</sup>

The vulnerability of refugees in foreign circumstances is a substantial obstacle to critical self-expression, which can further jeopardize 'status quo' stability and protection in host countries. Additionally, refugees may often feel bound by the psychological restrictions of what Marcel Mauss termed the 'gift relationship'.<sup>5</sup> According to Mauss' theory, "unequal power is the essence of the relationship between the giver and the recipient - until the gift is reciprocated."<sup>6</sup> Refugees, as 'recipients' of aid and protection may perceive themselves indebted to those who provide the 'gift' and ultimately on the bottom end of a substantial power relationship. Resistance within this structured relationship is not only particularly unwelcome - and outright resented - by the 'giver', but a contradiction to the feeling of indebtedness imposed upon the recipient. The display of dissatisfaction can lead to a backlash from local populations, which can in turn worsen the quality of life for the 'hosted' refugees. It is with these factors in mind that the severity of risk that accompanies resistance and protest becomes clear.

## **INDIVIDUALIZED PROTEST & SUICIDE**

*People who have the power and resources to make choices and changes in their lives are usually also able to express their views in a variety of moderate and socially acceptable ways. For those who lack the power or resources to address the sources of their discontent, however, suicide may provide a last resort.*

*-Si-Si Liu, "Suicide as Protest"<sup>7</sup>*

*You have to kill yourself in this country to prove that you would be killed in your own country.*

*-Suicide Note of an Iranian asylum seeker who "used a knife to try to hack himself to death in Bigg Market" Newcastle, United Kingdom, 2003<sup>8</sup>*

The very nature of refugee existence is dynamically polarized. On the one hand the refugee belongs to a 'community', a greater identity of 'refugees' who share the common situational context of seeking protection from difficult circumstances. On the other hand, the refugee is isolated, often removed from social and cultural support networks, and at the mercy of unfamiliar organizations and host nation policies.

Language barriers accentuate this separation and can lead to individual inability to express despair, frustration, and lack of understanding in familiar or effective ways. Psychosocial refugee theory has begun to identify common patterns in 'refugee adjustment' strategies including reclusive behavior, mourning periods, depression, anger, etc. Lack of psychosocial and effective cultural adjustment programs has undoubtedly contributed to the perpetuation of isolation and confusion many refugees face.

For many refugees the combination of isolation, lack of support networks, psycho-social issues, and the trials of what can be de-humanizing institutionalized integration and assistance programs are simply too much to bear. These factors can combine to create a profound sense of lack of personal control - at times leaving the refugee without power over his or her own life and future. Self-harm may represent, in these cases, reclamation of personal power. Cases of refugee suicide in exile are innumerable and telling. While many go unnoticed, some are public, violent, and dramatic. Suicide confirms that the prospect of death is more appealing than the prospect of life - that hope, the critical inspiration of life, has come to an end; that circumstances are so dire that only death can relieve them and relay their magnitude.<sup>9</sup>

In Australia, circumstances surrounding notorious detention center programs<sup>10</sup> have led on more than one occasion to suicidal protest.<sup>11</sup> This dramatic resistance has been successful in drawing critical attention to abusive or otherwise harmful practices. The result has been a substantial backlash against Australia's asylum-seeker detention policy ultimately leading to reform. Australian authorities were sympathetic to suicidal protesters in 2002, for example, when they granted release from the Woomera detention center to nine teenage asylum-seekers who threatened suicide "unless they were taken from the Woomera centre and placed in adequate accommodation."<sup>12</sup> In a separate incident three years later, thirteen Chinese asylum-seekers in a Sydney 'immigration camp' slashed their wrists "to protest the government's refusal to release them."<sup>13</sup> Consequently, the government announced an ease in its detention policy, promising to let out "families with young children."<sup>14</sup>

The dramatic nature of this type of protest often garners substantial media attention, which can be a powerful pressure tool on governmental policy. Abas Amini, an Iranian poet and refugee granted asylum in the United Kingdom, harnessed this

influence in 2003 in order to draw attention to the plight of asylum-seekers worldwide.<sup>15</sup> Amini, faced with a review of his case, which could threaten his refugee status, used coarse, multi-colored cotton twine to sew his mouth, eyes, and ears shut in protest of the treatment garnered by all asylum-seekers facing what he called "desperation."<sup>16</sup> "Why is it," he asked an interviewer from the Daily Guardian newspaper, "that nobody listens until people have to commit suicide?"<sup>17</sup> A similarly sensational protest occurred in Australia's Woomera detention center one year earlier. In that case, several asylum seekers "sewed up their lips...as part of huge protests there about the conditions."<sup>18</sup>

Hunger strikes are a form of resistance employed by refugees and asylum-seekers worldwide, whether as individuals - as in the highly visible case of Abas Amini, or the relatively ignored death of an unnamed African asylum-seeker on a hunger strike in an Austrian detention facility<sup>19</sup> - or in collective and organized actions, as in the case of nearly one-hundred Zimbabwean hunger-strikers protesting "the lifting of a ban preventing people being returned to their country against their will" coordinated across several detention centers in the UK in 2005.<sup>20</sup> Coordinated collective resistance is significant as it can draw attention to much greater general grievances.

## **COLLECTIVE PROTEST**

Isolation as a component of refugee identity in exile is inarguable. While resistance narratives often employ individualized and isolated mechanisms of protest, as demonstrated above, many also unify refugees in collective and organized movements. While these efforts may not always be recognized as such by those disseminating public narratives of refugee experience, organized refugee resistance movements have a long history. Organized resistance has become increasingly visible in the last few years, with the recent refugee sit-in demonstration in Cairo being the most internationally recognized; in part for its violent and deadly end – in which at least 27 protesters were beaten or trampled to death and hundreds more injured and detained, but also for its extensive organization, articulate demands, and effectiveness at gaining public attention to the hardships faced by urban refugees around the world.



The protest began on 29 September 2005, when a small group of Sudanese refugees began a sit-in demonstration in a park near the UNCHR offices.<sup>21</sup> The ‘leaders’ of the protest, who had organized and planned the event after attending a seminar on refugee rights under international law, distributed a list of thirteen requests to the UNHCR, visitors, and press representatives detailing what they perceived to be critical issues to be addressed. Among these were the re-opening of files closed under questionable determination procedures, efforts to stem discrimination against them institutionally and socially in Egypt, and resistance to local integration as currently designed. Within weeks the protest had swollen into the thousands and refugee demonstrators were making their case to the BBC, Egyptian media, and attendees of a special session of the American University in Cairo’s weekly Forced Migration and Refugee Studies public seminar series. While action was not being taken to remedy their grievances by the Egyptian government, UNHCR, or donor countries, their voices were certainly being heard. UNHCR headquarters in Geneva sent a special delegation to investigate the circumstances of the protest, donor country representatives were being interviewed by media sources, and the government of Egypt was constantly aware of the crisis. The refugees had forced their way into the dialogue.

This is not the first such organized protest,<sup>22</sup> nor has it been the last. Dramatic coordinated resistance has also been present in camp settings as demonstrated by the massive rejection of camp ‘security’ in Honduras in 1987, in which 4,500 refugees walked out of their camp in favor of wartime repatriation, pointing to the failure of UNHCR and the host government to secure protection for the refugees;<sup>23</sup> the organization of Guatemalan refugees in Mexico to protest their handling at the hands of UNHCR, the Mexican government, and the Guatemalan government;<sup>24</sup> the occupation of a border settlement by Roma refugees in Macedonia protesting return to Kosovo and unlivable circumstances in Macedonia;<sup>25</sup> and the organized protest march of 800 refugees from Krisan camp in Ghana to the Ivorian border, to draw attention to what they considered unlivable conditions and to push for resettlement.<sup>26</sup> While these examples represent primarily non-violent techniques, violence has been employed in desperate circumstances. In Bangladesh, where Rohingya refugees were facing systematic refoulement coordinated in conjunction with the Burmese government, resistance to

armed repatriation police lead to widespread detention and protest that injured both refugees and police. Ultimately, refugees were permitted to protest the action in a non-violent sit-in, with the support of UNHCR.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, clashes between camp administration and refugees lead to violence in a series of protests in Saudi Arabia in the 1990's - leading to hunger strikes that ultimately killed three people and left 104 hospitalized in critical condition.<sup>28</sup>

Australia has seen the greatest and most varied forms of collective refugee and asylum-seeker protest. Resistance from within that country's asylum-seeker detention centers garnered so much concern, that in 2001 nearly 1000 Australian citizens marched on the Woomera detention center, tearing down an exterior fence, and 'freeing' a number of asylum-seekers.<sup>29</sup> The riot that ensued represented the first major act of civilian response to many months of resistance from within the center itself. Violent uprisings within the centers became so commonplace that the newer centers were constructed to be 'riot-proof', designed specifically to prevent the use of bed frames and furniture as weapons through the bolting of such objects into the foundation of the buildings. Protests from within the centers were less often characterized by massive violence. Many were coordinated hunger strikes and attempted suicides, often attracting media through vivid images of asylum-seekers with mouths sewn shut, refusing to continue living under the conditions of detention.<sup>30</sup>

While complaints from inside the walls about bad conditions were many, it has been suggested that the condition of extended uncertainty was paramount. As an Australian researcher for Amnesty International, referencing the hunger strikes, suggested, "People can put up with a lot if they know what is the outcome or if they have an idea of when a decision will be made. It is the uncertainty about the future which is the main determining factor in driving people mad."<sup>31</sup> The hunger striking asylum-seekers described their motivations differently, however, through a statement released at the time:

This protest is about freedom and basic human rights, it is no longer about visas. We are requesting that the international community intervene and remove us from Australia's barbaric immigration policy which locks men, women and children behind razor wires for months, even years at a time. We have come to Australia to escape persecution yet we find ourselves further persecuted by the Australian government. We are going to continue our hunger strike and sew our lips until we achieve our human rights.<sup>32</sup>

While the Australian immigration authority publicly refused to bow to what it called "blackmail" and "moral intimidation" by the protestors,<sup>33</sup> the official closure of the Woomera center a little over a year later was undoubtedly influenced by the extreme resistance encountered from within - and the external public response that consequently arose.

Generally speaking, the trend towards detention and encampment of refugees before, during, and after status determination, and for extended periods of time, has had a tremendous impact on the ability of refugees to progress in any meaningful way. Refugees in extended encampment face a variety of challenges, not least of which is the erosion of basic freedom, security, and human rights. Resistance movements have begun to form within these structures. At the same time, protracted situations of urban refugee limbo have created circumstances in which refugees and asylum-seekers have resorted to organized protest to present a challenge to the governments and institutions they perceive as responsible for the maintenance of their rights in exile. Little has been officially documented of resistance and information on the subject is difficult to find.<sup>34</sup> Histories of refugee resistance, like so many histories of resistance, survive only on the fringes of discourse - maintained by oral testimony and the occasional media glance.

## **REFUGEE VOICES IN INTERNATIONAL DISCOURSE**

Refugee voices have had little impact on the discourse surrounding refugee assistance, protection, and international obligation. The few cases in which refugee resistance efforts have borne fruit tend towards isolated and individual grievances, and rarely inform the greater debate on refugee policy. While the dominant narrative would suggest that refugees are powerless and at the mercy of those with the ability to 'save', feed, and shelter them, recent protests have shown that the refugees themselves may often be unwilling to accept the role prescribed them and are taking up resistance not only as a means to alter their circumstances, but also to cope with extended periods of 'powerlessness', re-affirming identity and social dynamics, and realizing collective security. Organized refugee resistance groups have staged protests to demand involvement in the decisions that directly inform their futures repeatedly in the last year.

The official response has overwhelmingly been one of rejection by the dominant forces, as the Cairo example demonstrates.<sup>35</sup> It is clear, however, that behind the scenes these protests are affecting the dominant discourse - forcing host governments, populations, and international organizations to recognize and realize the very real plight of refugees, particularly those in protracted limbo situations, unable to progress and unclear of their future.

While internal documentation and communication may be present in the governmental and international bodies who have obliged themselves to the assistance and protection of refugees, official public responses to refugee protest are hard to find and often directed not towards refugee communities themselves, but towards NGOs and other 'primary tier' actors. In Cairo, UNHCR held only sporadic meetings with the demonstration leaders,<sup>36</sup> whom they discounted as 'self-appointed' and not representative of the whole, yet validated by refusing to meet with any other refugee demonstrators. UNHCR Cairo also sent out over email (a media not readily available to those living in the park) a response to 'rumors' surrounding the protest. According to refugees in the park, and confirmed by the UNHCR Cairo public relations officer, as of the third week of the sit-in, not a single member of UNHCR staff (or representative of that staff) had been to the demonstration, less than fifty yards from the office's front door, to hear the refugees' complaints in an official capacity. In fact, before shutting the office doors altogether, the office responded by placing armed guards at the entry.

\* \* \*

There are several common threads permeating resistance movements and protest actions that have taken place in the last twenty years and continue currently. First is the reclamation of individual and collective autonomy as a demonstration of humanized empowerment - even when that action is demonstrated through the process of a suicidal act. A second is an increasing trend on the part of host countries of keeping refugees in situations of extended 'limbo' and stagnation - sometimes years - which has in turn led to increased refugee outcry, and will continue to do so for as long as such a trend continues. A third is an increasing shift towards organized public displays in the interest of gaining media and 'primary tier' attention. This trend has the effect of forcing refugee voices into international dialogue in a way never before seen.

The discussion surrounding refugee issues is slowly broadening to address refugee concerns and grievances. Even if refugees cannot, themselves, approach the immigration boards, donor countries, and international policy makers that so critically control their existence and futures, they are entering these hallowed halls through headlines and public response. This process is critical to the success of what UNHCR terms 'durable solutions' and livelihood of many refugee communities.

## CONCLUSIONS

*By employing...resistance narratives, the Sudanese could continually remind themselves of their own past, cope with the present, and envision an alternative future.*

*Elizabeth Coker, "Dislocated Identity and the Fragmented Body: Discourses of Resistance among Southern Sudanese Refugees in Cairo", 2004<sup>37</sup>*

*If you find someone to listen to you, just to listen to you, this will evacuate your anger and you will become tranquil. But if nobody will listen to you, you will think that you are ignored, that you are not of importance. Just listening is a psychological treatment. Listening to our voice, this protest.*

*Sudanese Refugee Demonstrator, Sudanese Refugee Sit-In Demonstration, Cairo, 28 November 2005*

While there is little literature thus far exploring the subject, refugee protest and resistance is varied, widespread, and growing in frequency, levels of organization, and intensity. This phenomenon is an unmistakable signal of the critical need for refugee input into the processes and policies that shape their lives in exile. It should serve as a wake-up call to asylum countries, international organizations, their donors, and host communities that the plight of the refugee can no longer be treated as that of an 'assistance burden', or feel-good financial donation, but must be approached in such a way as to employ the considerable benefits that refugee experience and contribution could make to improving the system into which they are delegated. How 'durable' is a solution that does not take into account the refugee communities' direct concerns about the necessary conditions of its success? Policy making power is ultimately in the hands of governments, but would it not be to the inarguable benefit of those governments to see policy succeed on all levels, including the creation of viable refugee circumstances and

populations, willing to invest in their immediate host communities and economies? Perhaps it is unrealistic to believe that governments, international actors, and donors are in a position to address many of the common grievances posed through refugee protest over the last fifteen years, but simply engaging in a wider dialogue and information exchange could create realistic and progressive efforts for change and mutual understanding that are fundamental. Resentment, misunderstanding, and anger will only continue to grow, jeopardizing any real steps forward in creating progressive, stable, and truly viable refugee policy, unless such dialogue is taken seriously.

The desperation indicated by the increasing wave of public suicide, self-mutilation, mass starvation, and organized protest indicates that significant attention to refugee voices is long overdue. The demand for further research and thorough critical analysis cannot be overstated, and testimonial and direct involvement from exiled communities will contribute immensely to this process. After all, who can speak with more authority on the experience and needs of the refugee than the refugees themselves?

\* \* \*

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kibreab, Gaim, as cited in Sommers, Marc, "Young, Male, and Pentecostal: Urban Refugees in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Volume 14, No. 4, 2001 p.358

<sup>2</sup> *1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, 189 UNTS 150, (22 April 1954), Article 15

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Chechen refugees seeking asylum in the Czech Republic, for example, when faced with the illegal banning of certain media in their camp quietly accepted the action: "The majority of refugees perceived this action as unlawful; however, they were afraid to express their disagreement because of their vulnerable position—they were worried that drawing attention to themselves by protesting would reduce their chances of asylum" (Szczepanikova, Alice, "Gender Relations in a Refugee Camp: A Case of Chechens Seeking Asylum in the Czech Republic", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 3, Published by Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005 p.288). Human Rights Watch found similar resignation among Roma refugees in Macedonia: "Most Roma parents have been reluctant to raise the issue of the mistreatment of their children with educational authorities, fearing further repercussions" ("Out of Limbo? Addressing the Plight of Kosovo Roma Refugees in Macedonia", *Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper*, Human Rights Watch, New York, December 10, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Harrell-Bond, B.E., "The experience of refugees as recipients of aid", in Ager, Alistair (ed.) *Refugees: Perspectives on the Experience of Forced Migration*, Cassell, London, 1999 p.1

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Liu, Si-Si, "Suicide as Protest", *Fueling Unrest*, No.1, China Rights Forum, 2005, p.1

<sup>8</sup> Moorehead, Caroline, *Human Cargo: A Journey Among Refugees*, Henry Holt and Co., New York, March 3 2005; p.138

<sup>9</sup> Take the following excerpt concerning Uzbek victims of domestic abuse: "Women commit suicide...as a form of protest against violence as there are no other ways of doing that...Shockingly, Uzbek women, women in some Tajik provinces and in parts of India, choose to end their lives by burning themselves publicly and when they are alone. There are no words to describe the horror, when young women running in pain burned and falling down on earth in deadly sufferings (sic). There is no power to analyze the situation and what has forced them to do that" ("Poverty, Inequality and Violence: is there a human rights response?", *Poverty, inequality and violence: The economic social and cultural root causes of violence, including torture: A human rights perspective, A study prepared by the World Organization Against Torture for the International Conference, Geneva, October 4 – 6 2005, Switzerland, 08/09/05 p.61*). Another example is that of Shahrzad Kiane: In early April of 2001, Shahrzad Kiane, a Pakistani national and recognized refugee granted asylum in Australia, decided to end his long battle with the Australian Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA). Mr. Kiane positioned himself strategically on the steps of the Parliament House, doused himself in gasoline, and set himself alight. This act followed "more than four years of frustrating obstruction and rejection of applications by his wife, Ms. Yasmin, and their three children, Asma, Anum and Afia, to join him in Australia" (Skeers, Jake, "Australian Ombudsman condemns officials over refugee's suicide", *World Socialist Web Site*, 19 September 2001, Internet Retrieved 12/02/05 from <http://www.wsws.org>). During a subsequent investigation, Ron McLeod, the ombudsman in the case, suggested that his examination of DIMA's files "raised 'serious concerns' about the department's 'fairness and professionalism' and suggested that its rejection of the family's visa applications were 'tainted by bias and irrelevant consideration'. The Australian government's initial response, presented through then Immigration Minister Ruddock, was to label the suicide a 'publicity stunt'; however, that response was soon 'softened' to the accusation that "Kiane [was] trying to coerce the government" (Skeers; 2001). McLeod stated: "It would appear that Mr. Kiane's frustration and loss of hope of ever being reunited with his wife and daughters led to this desperate and tragic act" (Skeers; 2001). The case of Suleiman Dialo, while certainly less public, demonstrates the point further: Caroline Moorehead, in her book *Human Cargo: A Journey Among Refugees*, describes in detail the factors leading up to the public suicide of Suleiman Dialo, a 30 year-old Guinean asylum-seeker in Britain. Dialo, a torture victim, culturally and socially isolated in Newcastle, had been informed that his asylum application

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had failed, and that detention, deportation, and repatriation were imminent. On New Year's Day 2002, Dialo leapt "from Newcastle's Redheugh Bridge to fall a hundred feet onto the towpath below" (Moorehead, C., *Human Cargo: A Journey Among Refugees*, Henry Holt and Co., New York, March 3 2005; p.132). Moorehead recounts multiple factors that contributed to Dialo's ultimate refusal to submit to the will of Britain's restrictive refugee policy. "He wanted not to be treated like a child, and he could no longer bear to depend on others for everything," she suggests (Moorehead; 2005; p.136-7). Ultimately, however, she focuses on the 'limbo' in which asylum-seekers live, and the desperation for some sense of security, stability, and belonging, that drove Dialo to his death (Moorehead; 2005; p.142). These are two stories among many. Moorehead recounts that of "an Iraqi Kurd who, hearing that he had been refused [asylum], hanged himself...in the park, on a spring day in 2002, holding a daffodil in his hand"(Moorehead; 2005; p.144). In another instance she tells of a ten-year-old boy who threw himself from one of the high balconies of Cairo's skyscraping buildings (Moorehead; 2005; p.11).

<sup>10</sup> Protests within detention centers were so common in Australia, that in the design of the Baxter facility, much like in the design of highly secure criminal corrections facilities, special steps were taken in order to "minimize the possibility of breakouts. Beds, which have been used in previous camp riots as barricades and tools for breaking down razor-wire fences, are welded into the ground in the new centre. The outer of two perimeter fences is topped with electrified lines, and floodlights and CCTV cameras are set up throughout" (Fickering, David, "Refugee protest camp raided by police", *The Guardian*, April 21, 2003; Internet Retrieved 12/05/05 from <http://www.guardian.co.uk>).

<sup>11</sup> Accounts of asylum-seekers in Australian detention centers ending their lives through poisoning, starvation, and, in one particularly gruesome and well publicized instance, by throwing themselves against razor wire fences, were common until very recently.

<sup>12</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, "Australia caves in after refugee suicide pact", *BreakingNews Archive*, Thomas Crosbie Holdings, Tuesday, January 29, 2002 internet Retrieved on 12/02/05 from <http://archives.tcm.ie>

<sup>13</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, "Asylum seekers slash wrists", *In Brief*, The Observer, June 19, 2005

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> According to the International Federation of Iranian Refugees, "Abas Amini's personal story is an indictment of the UK government's asylum policy that is not only inept and insensitive towards asylum seekers but also criminalizes, refuses and deports them and builds fortresses rather than giving refuge to those fleeing persecution" ("Abas Amini ends hunger strike", *International Federation of Iranian Refugees (IFIR)*, 30/5/2003 Internet accesses 12/05/05 from <http://www.blink.org.uk/>).

<sup>16</sup> Branigan, Tania, "Friends try to stop refugee's protest: Despite victory against the Home Office and fears for his life, Kurdish poet refuses to unstitch lips or end hunger strike", *The Guardian*, May 29, 2003; Internet Retrieved 12/05/05 from <http://www.guardian.co.uk>

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, "Protester's tortured past", *BBC News*, 27 May 2003, Internet Accessed 12/02/05 from <http://news.bbc.co.uk>

<sup>19</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, "Hunger-strike refugee dies", *News 24*, 4 October 2005 Internet Accessed 12/02/05 from <http://www.news24.com/>

<sup>20</sup> Allison, Eric, & Pallister, David, "Zimbabwean deportation halted at last minute, High court lets woman on hunger strike stay in UK", *The Guardian*, Monday July 4, 2005

<sup>21</sup> One year before the recent protest, in August of 2004, Sudanese refugees staged a protest in front of the Cairo offices of UNHCR. Reportedly, "an Egyptian NGO, SOUTH, mobilized a group of Sudanese to protest the issue of yellow cards. A meeting was organized with UNHCR at 2p.m. but refugees began arriving at 7 a.m. Around noon, things began to turn violent, police were called and tear gas was used to disperse the crowd. Twenty Sudanese were detained" (Gomez et al., "Sudanese refugees in Cairo: we'll wait here, we'll die here", *Pambazuka News*, 20 October 2005; Internet Retrieved 12/08/05 from <http://www.pambazukanews.org>).

<sup>22</sup> Following the start of the Cairo protest, two other refugee sit-in demonstrations began, the first in Nepal, and the second in Yemen. On 11 November 2005 a group of 27 Bhutanese refugee women began a sit-in protest against the UNHCR in Kathmandu to demand progress be made in finding a solution to their extended encampment in Nepal. The women represented all seven Bhutanese-refugee camps in Nepal and conducted their sit-in in daily four-hour installments until they received "assurance of stringent steps to be taken in favour of the refugees from a senior UN official" ("Bhutanese refugees call off sit-in", *Southeast Asian Media Net*, Wednesday, 16 November 2005; Internet Retrieved 12/08/05 from



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<http://www.southasianmedia.net>). In a memorandum submitted to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, the refugees asked the UN "to take an active role for resolving the problem since the 15 rounds of bilateral talks between Nepal and Bhutan failed to yield any result in favour of over 100 thousand refugees languishing in cramped camps in Eastern Nepal" ("Bhutanese refugees call off sit-in"; 2005). In mid-November 2005 a group of Somali refugees in Yemen began a sit-in demonstration and hunger strike against perceived violations of their rights "by the Sana'a offices of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR)" ("YEMEN: Somali refugees protest perceived injustices", *IRINNews.org*, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 27 November 2005, Internet Accessed 11/28/05 from [www.irinnews.com](http://www.irinnews.com)). The protesters claim that UNHCR has left them in a state of limbo for the past fifteen years, without guaranteeing them access to education, medical care, travel documents, or employment. Somali refugees in Yemen are granted status on a *prima facie* basis. (Al-Alaya'a, Zaid, "Somali Refugees in UNHCR Protest", *The Daily Chew*, Vol. VIII - Issue No. 45, 16 November 2005; Internet Retrieved 12/09/05 from <http://www.yobserver.com>) and as a result, UNHCR claims, have it better than other refugees in Yemen. Nevertheless, the refugees claim, "they're ready to die, one by one, if the UNHCR doesn't give them their rights" (Zeyed, Abdul Azeez, as cited in "YEMEN: Somali refugees protest perceived injustices"; 2005). While at least two died during the hunger strike, ultimately the protest ended when Yemeni police raided the camp, injuring four protesters and killing a fifth ("Somali killed as Yemen police end refugee protest", *Awdal News Network, Republic Of Somaliland*, December 17, 2005, Retrieved 02/23/06 from <http://www.awdalnews.com/>).

<sup>23</sup> An investigation into Central American asylum-seekers reaction to a 1996 US immigration law contained the following sentence, "in October 1987, about 4,500 Salvadorans in the Honduran refugee camp of Mesa Grande announced their plan to return to their villages in El Salvador" (Wasam, Ruth E., "Central American Asylum Seekers: Impact of 1996 Immigration Law", Congressional Research Service, Library Of Congress, 97-810 EPW, 21 November 1997, Endnote 20; Internet Retrieved 12/07/05 from <http://countingcalifornia.cdlib.org/>). While this massive and coordinated outflow was never officially dubbed a 'protest march' by either the refugees or the camp administration (or the report from which the statement was taken), there is ample evidence to suggest that it was the result of massive dissatisfaction on the part of the refugees towards camp conditions and treatment by authorities (Dr. Barbara Harrell-Bond, Personal Email Communication, 8 December 2005). An abuse case brought to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights suggests that, "[t]he Honduran authorities suspected that the refugee camps were rest areas for the Salvadoran guerrilla, as they were very close to the borders and this supposedly allowed the Salvadoran guerrillas to reach the camps, benefit from the humanitarian aid, rest, and then go back to fight. Therefore, the camps were subject to rigorous external control, as internally they were under the control of UNHCR by agreement with the Honduran authorities... The military commanders...were de facto outside civilian control. In some cases they may have gone too far ("Juan Humberto Sánchez Case, Judgment of June 7, 2003, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R., (Ser. C) No. 99 (2003)", *Humberto Sánchez v. Honduras, Series C No. 99, Judgment of 7 June 2003*, Inter-American Court of Human Rights; Internet Retrieved 12/07/05 from <http://www.humanrights.is>).

<sup>24</sup> In 1987, Guatemalan refugees in Mexico roundly rejected the "tripartite agreement" between UNHCR and the Mexican and Guatemalan governments regarding their repatriation into Guatemala. According to Steffanie Riess, "[w]hile conditions in Guatemala were not considered entirely 'safe' in the absence of a peace agreement, the election of a civilian government after more than three decades of military dictatorships and the emphasis given by the new president to the issue of repatriation of refugees were viewed as encouraging signs...The general view was...that...the most 'fundamental protection elements' had been covered" (Riess, Steffanie, "Return is struggle, not Resignation: lessons from the repatriation of Guatemalan refugees from Mexico", *New Issues in Refugee Research*, Working Paper no. 21, July 2000 p.12); The refugees, however, did not agree. While they recognized the change in administration they saw no improvement in the structure of power, and the military "not only remained institutionally unchanged from the days of the massacres, but it also continued to constitute a dominant force in Guatemalan politics and society" (Riess; 2000 p.13). The refugees, lamenting their absence from participation in the agreement and subsequent policy formulation, "organized themselves and set out to establish a framework for their repatriation that would provide them with concrete, comprehensive and credible guarantees regarding all the conditions whose fulfillment they considered essential for their security upon return" (Riess; 2000 p.13). This organization represented a strong and unified resistance to the institutional decision-making processes and ultimately succeeded in altering policy and drawing significant international media attention.

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Only through their direct involvement in negotiations were the refugees able to establish a number of safeguards against excessive military interference, not only did they secure a three-year exemption of returnees from military service, as well as a guarantee that they could not be “obliged to...participate in groups or associations of civil defense,” but more significantly, the negotiation process had provided the refugees with a platform for publicizing their aversion to an armed presence in their communities. This placed the military’s behaviour under international scrutiny, and, as a result, ‘army commanders instructed their troops not to patrol repatriated villages’ (Riess; 2000 p.14).

<sup>25</sup> “Between May 19 and August 9, 2003, 700 Roma expelled from Kosovo to Macedonia in 1999 were occupying an area in the immediate vicinity of the Macedonian-Greek border, near the village of Medzitlija, in an attempt to awaken broader attention to their desperate situation. They demanded resettlement to a member state of the European Union (E.U.) or another Western country, believing that their return to Kosovo was not a realistic option in the foreseeable future, and claiming that four years of refuge in Macedonia had brought only utter misery and hopelessness. The refugees moved to the border area after the [UNHCR] closed their camp, proposing to help them move elsewhere in Macedonia. On August 9...after eighty days of protest, the Roma abandoned Medzitlija and, in smaller groups, moved into several other locations” (“Out of Limbo? Addressing the Plight of Kosovo Roma Refugees in Macedonia” A Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper, Human Rights Watch, December 10, 2003 p.1). According to a Human Rights Watch briefing paper, “the four-year experience of living as refugees in Macedonia led [the refugees] to believe that they had no future in the country” (“Out of Limbo? Addressing the Plight of Kosovo Roma Refugees in Macedonia”; 2003 p.6). The sentiment was echoed in late 2003 by Rachel Denber, then acting executive director of Human Rights Watch’s Europe and Central Asia Division, “[t]hese refugees are in a cruel limbo. Most of them clearly can’t return to Kosovo while their prospects for integration in Macedonia remain dim. It’s high time that the Macedonian government and its Western European counterparts end this untenable situation” (“Macedonia: End Cruel Limbo for Kosovo Roma Refugees”, *Human Rights News*, Human Rights Watch, New York, 10 December 2003, Internet Accessed 12/02/05 from [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)). The refugees had been expelled from the Shuto Orizari camp “due to unacceptable health and sanitary conditions” (“Macedonia: End Cruel Limbo for Kosovo Roma Refugees”; 2003). Consequently, the Roma refugees saw themselves faced with integration into Macedonian society, an option that Human Rights Watch declared feasible “only if the Macedonian government and relevant international agencies significantly improve the legal, economic and social situation of the affected Roma” (“Macedonia: End Cruel Limbo for Kosovo Roma Refugees”; 2003). The report also declared that “Macedonian authorities have not taken adequate measures to protect Roma children from harassment and ensure their equal access to education. A formal ban...on employment prevented the Roma refugees from working legally in Macedonia. Some managed to find temporary seasonal jobs—such as construction work and canal digging—in the ‘black economy.’ Recently adopted legislation authorizes their employment under certain conditions. However...Roma continue to find it exceptionally difficult to find any employment. The high unemployment rate in Macedonia, compounded by discrimination against Roma in employment, is another impeding factor. The general unemployment rate in Macedonia is between 30 and 35 percent, while in the municipality of Shuto Orizari, where most of the Roma live, it is approaching 90 percent” (“Macedonia: End Cruel Limbo for Kosovo Roma Refugees”; 2003). As Denber concluded in her report, “[f]or more than four years now, the Macedonian government has failed to provide these refugees with a sustainable existence, making the prospect of integration ring hollow” (“Macedonia: End Cruel Limbo for Kosovo Roma Refugees”; 2003).

<sup>26</sup> “People are discouraged, they are fed up,” declared Franskkgav Freejust to a reporter from the United Nations Integrated Regional News Network (IRIN) late in the first week of November 2005 (“GHANA: Refugee protest turns ugly”, *IRINNews.org*, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 9 November 2005, Internet Retrieved 12/02/05 from <http://irinnews.org>). Refugee residents of Krisan camp, of whom Freejust was one, had just experienced a violent crackdown from police and camp officials as a result of an impassioned protest march from the camp to the Ivorian border. Some 800 of the camp's 1,700 refugees had coordinated and participated in the march designed to draw attention to the conditions under which they were living and to “push for the right to settle in a third country other than Ghana and their homeland” (“GHANA: Refugee protest turns ugly”; 2005). During the violence that preceded the returning of the refugees to the camp by authority figures, reports claim cars were set alight and buildings were damaged. Freejust conducted his interview with IRIN from “somewhere in the bush,” and concluded that

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“[p]eople are fighting for the future” (“GHANA: Refugee protest turns ugly”; 2005). UNHCR has maintained that Krisan camp, established in 1996, is 'up to standards' despite funding and supply problems.<sup>27</sup> Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh met tremendous hardship and fear in the face of governmental policies that systematically endorsed forced repatriation, a violation of the most fundamental tenet of International Refugee Law. In July 1997, "armed riot police entered Nayapara refugee camp in Cox's Bazaar district intending to arrest refugees *cleared by Burma* for repatriation. The refugees resisted, with some throwing stones, and tear gas was used to quell the protests. One hundred eleven refugees, mainly women and children, were held in the camp office overnight. The next morning, these people along with seventy-six other refugees were driven in buses to a repatriation point and forced onto boats to be taken back to Burma" ("Rohingya Refugees In Bangladesh: The Search For A Lasting Solution", *Bangladesh/Burma Report 1997*, Human Rights Watch, Internet Accessed 12/02/05 from <http://www.hrw.org> - emphasis added). This incident triggered widespread protest in the camp, including violence that injured both refugees and Bangladeshi policemen. Subsequently, protesters were allowed to perform a peaceful sit-in, blocking a road, without police interference ("Rohingya Refugees In Bangladesh: The Search For A Lasting Solution"; 1997). UNHCR was infuriated by the violation of refugee rights and the use of violence and objected loudly. Shortly afterward, according to a Human Rights Watch report, the Bangladesh government denied that there had been any use of force in the repatriations, but also said that there would be no further repatriations without the UNHCR's presence. In the days following, Bangladesh issued several statements reiterating their determination to repatriate all refugees, with Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad saying, "It is not possible for us to allow them a permanent settlement on our land. This problem has to be addressed by the international community." Nevertheless, by August 6, the 13,000 refugees in Nayapara camp were on a hunger strike, refusing to collect their daily rations and refusing to access the available services, including medical clinics, in the camps ("Rohingya Refugees In Bangladesh: The Search For A Lasting Solution"; 1997).

<sup>28</sup> The Rafha camp in Saudi Arabia was established in 1991 to host an influx of Iraqi refugees. Clashes between refugees and camp administration began very shortly after the camp was established, including some violent confrontations between camp residents and camp guards in which, Human Rights Watch reported, "scores of refugees were killed or injured" ("SAUDI ARABIA: Human Rights Developments", *Publications*, Human Rights Watch, 1993, Internet Accessed 12/02/05 from <http://www.hrw.org>). Refugee protesters resisted what they perceived as "restrictions on their movement, ... political expression, and religious freedom" ("SAUDI ARABIA: Human Rights Developments"; 1993). Refoulement of those identified as 'protest organizers' in the camp happened over the course of the next year and a half, as 25,000 others waited in the camp for any sign of progress and change. Ultimately, the situation became increasingly tense and frustrated until March of 1993, when "a violent protest... resulted in the death of at least eight Iraqi refugees and three Saudi government employees and the injury of over 140 refugees. The uprising at the camp, located near the Iraqi-Saudi border, was triggered by the refusal of Saudi authorities to permit family members fleeing Iraq to join their relatives in the camp. During the protest, fire was set to a camp administrative building and security forces subsequently opened fire to disperse the crowds. Following the incident, hundreds were detained. Many were known to have been tortured, in an apparent attempt by the authorities to find those who organized the protest" ("SAUDI ARABIA: Human Rights Developments"; 1993). The situation at Rafha camp stabilized for many years following the uprising, until the resettlement program was suspended in 1997 ("Iraqi refugees die on hunger strike", *PRIMA News Agency*, 11 July 2001; Internet Retrieved 12/09/05 from <http://prima-news.ru>). In the years following, increasing fear of forced repatriation spread through the camp, until, in 2001, a hunger strike began among the refugees. On the 11th of July 2001, a news agency reported that, "[t]hree Iraqi refugees have died in Saudi Arabia as a result of a hunger strike that has swept the Rafha refugee camp. Another 104 refugees have been hospitalized in a state of critical exhaustion. Others are continuing the hunger strike, which started on June 23" ("Iraqi refugees die on hunger strike"; 2001).

<sup>29</sup> The detention system in Australia was established as part of restrictive immigration policies enacted in the wake of highly publicized and politicized events surrounding asylum-seekers approaching Australia by boat through southeast Asia. The controversial mandatory detention policy was widely attacked by human rights and activist groups, as were the conditions within the centers, Woomera being the most notorious, with the Baxter and Villawood centers close behind. Resistance movements grew rapidly within these detention facilities and demonstrations, suicides, and protests were frequent, although "the media rarely report[ed] them due to the [Woomera] centre's isolation and the government's ban on access" (Tenenbaum,

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Linda, "Afghan refugees stage desperate hunger strike in Australia", *World Socialist Website*, 26 January 2002; Internet Retrieved 12/11/05 from <http://www.wsws.org>).

<sup>30</sup> From a 26th of January 2002 article: "Last weekend, at least 70 Afghani hunger strikers, including three children aged 12, 14 and 15, began sewing their lips together in an effort to convey the extent of their plight. Since then several have collapsed unconscious in the searing desert heat—up to 42 degrees Celsius or 108 degrees Fahrenheit in the middle of the day—and been rushed to the local hospital. Around 40 others, including four children, have attempted simultaneous suicide, either by hanging themselves or by swallowing a toxic cocktail of painkillers and shampoo...a group of children removed from the centre for a daytime excursion passed a note to the media. It said that the situation was becoming 'worst and worst' and that 'every five minutes one person faints because of hunger...Some persons have been here for two years and still they don't know [if] they are going back to their country or they are being accepted... We ask Australian people to help us and tell the Government to give us freedom. Young people and teenagers are killing themselves here" (Tenenbaum; 2002).

<sup>31</sup> Tenenbaum, Linda, "Afghan refugees stage desperate hunger strike in Australia", *World Socialist Website*, 26 January 2002; Internet Retrieved 12/11/05 from <http://www.wsws.org>

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Resistance narratives have long been relegated to the realm of oral and cultural tradition. I did not expect however, the extent to which narratives of refugee resistance - all but absent from mainstream international dialogue on refugee affairs - are quite present in cultural and alternative media. Modern Australian dance troops have performed choreographed interpretations of the struggle against refugee detention, theater troupes have staged testimonial monologues from refugee protest marchers, poets have read stirring interpretations of struggle in exile, and independent filmmakers have produced challenging documentaries. While I was unable to find a single detailed catalogued report of the Honduran Mesa Grande march either from international actors or international media, I was able to find the script from a play written by a pastor named Tom Pouliot. Its testimonial content is detailed and personal: "*Person 2*: After the massacre on the Honduran border, we were taken and put in a refugee camp, Mesa Grande, by the High Commission on Refugees. At first life was fairly normal but then a fence was put up and we were not allowed to go visit or to buy things. The army surrounded the camp. Anyone who left was shot. Toward the end, food diminished. When it got to that stage, we realized we were still living in repression so we organized ourselves to come back. *Person 4*: We asked for international help and asked to come back here. It was 1987, October 12, after the rainy season that we left to walk home. There was no chance for crops. Many international people accompanied us. At the border, the army said that the Salvadorans could come in but not the international people. But they found a different way. They snuck across and came to accompany us. We walked from Chalatenango. There were shots fired and some died. From Chalatenango to Guarjila there was a military escort. The soldiers were here to protect us, but they had their guns pointed at us (Pouliot, Tom, "Theatre Piece - Sister Parish Stories", *Sister Parish Inc*, October 2000; Internet Retrieved 12/07/05 from <http://www.sisterparish.org>). This is not the only such example. Abas Amini, the Iranian Refugee poet who bears the scars of sewing his mouth shut, has lent his experience to the writing of "1001 Nights Now," a touring production of Britain's Northern Stage Ensemble (Hickling, Alfred, "Sinbad as a suicide bomber", *The Guardian*, October 7, 2005 Internet Accessed 12/02/05 from <http://www.guardian.co.uk>). In Australia, the story of Shayan Badraie, a six-year-old refugee who stopped speaking, attempted suicide, and suffers extensive psychological damage after being forced into detention is the subject of a new film called "The Cage House." This film is not the first to be released on the subject - in 2004, "Through the Wire," an independent documentary focusing on the Woomera detention center riots, was shown at the Human Rights Watch International Film Festival in New York City.

<sup>35</sup> Dismissive attitudes towards refugee protest are prevalent. In Cairo, UNHCR claimed as 'clear fact' that the vast majority of those in the demonstration were non-refugee migrants 'not of concern' to the UNHCR, when, in fact, a survey done through the American University in Cairo provided evidence that over 75% of the parks inhabitants were yellow or blue card holders. These numbers are consistent with numbers determined through the process of release from Egyptian detention of the demonstrators after the protest break up. In Australia, protesters have been met by immigration authorities with accusations of 'coercion' of government by suicidal protest. This type of trivializing reaction exposes a dangerous and reprehensible attitude towards refugees as liars and thugs.

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<sup>36</sup> According to one refugee who attended this meeting, "[a]ll [UNHCR] did was tell us to leave the park." Another recalled that it "went like a meeting between a father and a child." The refugees suggested their claims were not heard during the meeting; when the refugees described their objection to prospects of repatriation, one refugee claims UNHCR responded with a suggestion that "a group of refugees take a trip to the south Sudan (sic) [coordinated and facilitated by UNHCR] to see if there is peace." According to the same refugee, "we asked them to go ask the newcomers [incoming Sudanese refugees] if there is peace or not." While representatives of UNHCR Cairo were present at the presentation at which these claims were made, they were not willing to comment. "Sudanese Refugees Sit-In at Moustafa Mahmoud Mosque", *Forced Migration and Refugee Studies Seminar Series*, The American University in Cairo, October 26, 2005

<sup>37</sup> Coker, Elizabeth M., "Dislocated Identity and the Fragmented Body: Discourses of Resistance among Southern Sudanese Refugees in Cairo", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 4, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004 p.412

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