



WORLD REFUGEE DAY

# It is an endless life of hopelessness and

*As the figure hits 70 million, Mary Mugarura recounts her life as an unregistered refugee 40 years on*

by Sandra Wekesa and Evelyn Makena

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The region is experiencing several open conflicts of different intensity -Gonzalez

Selling fish is her only source of income in Ayany Estate in Kibra, Nairobi where she has lived for the last . Although she is living in the country 'incognito' as an unregistered refugee, the 54-year-old, Mary Mugarura (not her real name) who fled her native country at 14 to escape the murderous regime of former dictator Idi Amin Dada, has found peace and happiness in her country of refuge.

But beneath that demeanor of calmness, she is constantly haunted by the image and trauma that has, for decades, denied her the chance to enjoy the comfort and security of her birth country, Uganda.

She remembers vividly when the 'King of Scotland' unleashed his wrath in Gulu in Northern Uganda, her birth place, sending thousands, including her family fleeing.

### Tough experience

"It was a tough experience, and nightfall was the worst because you wouldn't know what would befall your family and your loved ones. One night it could be your neighbour, and the next, it could be you; the slaughtering was just too much, I couldn't bear with it," she recalls, adding that she could not imagine losing her life to wrath of a leader who ruled his people with terror and insanity.

In his eight-year-reign as president, Amin oversaw the killing of thousands and the displacement of million others. He even instituted this terror by establishing the Public Safety Unit, the State Research Bureau and the Defence Council to carry out his 'dirty work.'

For Mugarura, the decision to escape came shortly after these secret agents had murdered her cousins. "My aunt and cousins had been murdered and I felt so afraid, I couldn't imagine someone slitting my throat, so on that



### GLANCE BOX

World Refugee Day is celebrated on June 20 every year to highlight the plight of displaced people all around the world.

According to the UNHCR, 70.8 million people have been forcibly displaced worldwide.

Out of this, 41.3 million are internally displaced, 25.9 million are refugees and 3.5 million are asylum seekers.

Most of these displaced people come from Syria, Afghanistan and South Sudan.

Currently, Uganda, South Sudan, and Ethiopia top the African countries hosting the highest number of refugees.

trekking, they reached Kenya. At first, they didn't know they had reached Bungoma for they had been in the dark for too long. When the reality dawned on them, they decided it was the best place to start a new life.

### Increasing numbers

Even after all these years, her greatest fears are the police and darkness. These two things bring back the memory of torture she faced in her teenage years. The fear of being deported to Uganda is so crippling that it has stopped her from seeking formal registration as a refugee in the country. However, the requirement to register for Huduma Number saw her scramble to start the process.

Now, the mother of seven spends all her days wishing she could get answers to what transpired in the eight years of torture and what innocent people like her and her family had to do with it. She still wishes she could find a way to forgive all the secret agents who tortured them.

Mugarura is one of the countless aliens finding new life in a new country. She is one of the many displaced people not captured by the verification process by the government with support of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

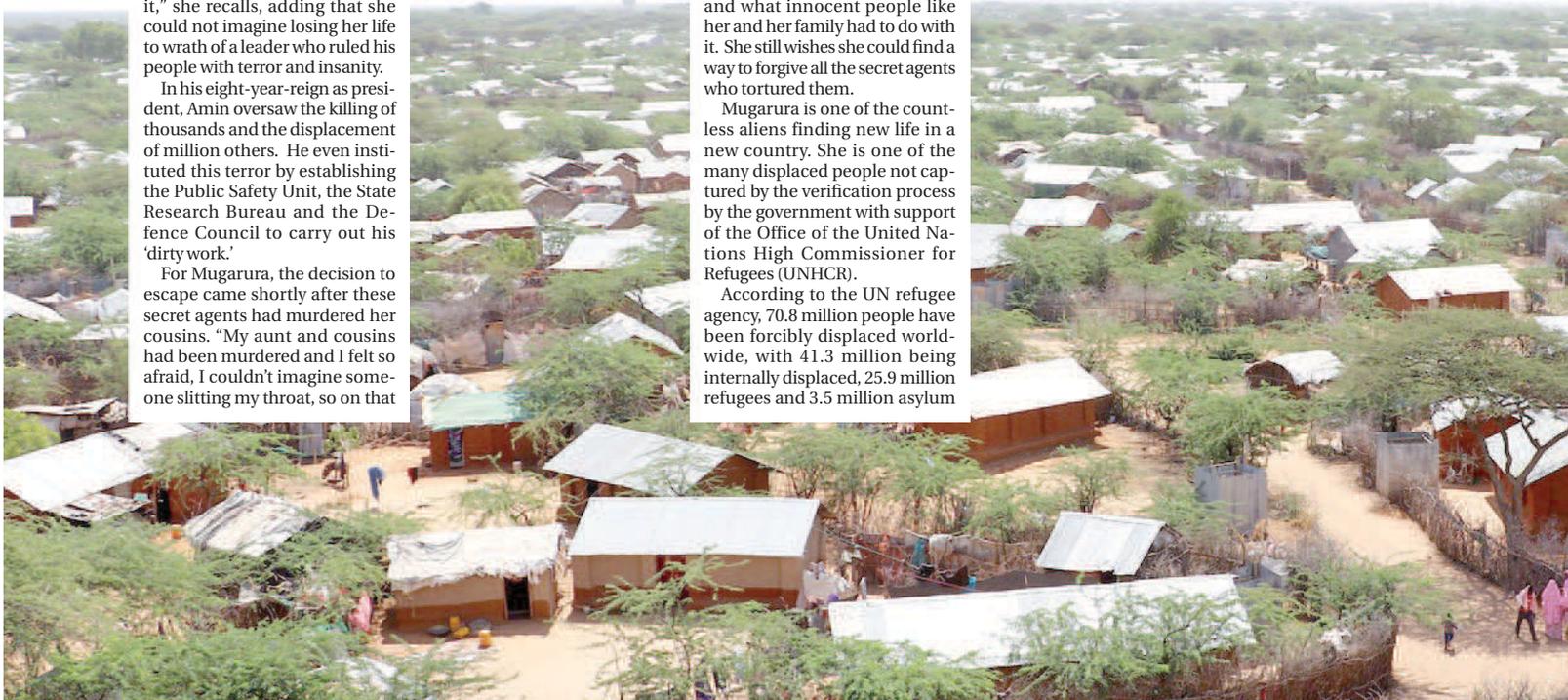
According to the UN refugee agency, 70.8 million people have been forcibly displaced worldwide, with 41.3 million being internally displaced, 25.9 million refugees and 3.5 million asylum



seekers. Of this, 80 per cent are in developing countries. Uganda is currently the top refugee-hosting country in Africa and South Sudan is the leading country from where refugees come, after Syria and Afghanistan. The organisation further estimates that every two seconds one person is dis-

placed due to conflict or persecution.

Besides Uganda, South Sudan and Ethiopia top the list of refugee host countries in Africa. While Uganda and South Sudan accommodate more than one million refugees each, Ethiopia has more than 900,000. "The



# anxiety for many refugees



region is experiencing several open conflicts of different intensity, humanitarian crises either man-made or driven by climate hazards and natural disasters that are forcing people to flee or keep them out of their homes, says Jairo Gonzalez, deputy operational manager East Africa, Medicins Sans Frontieres (MSF).

## Ripple effect

This has not only contributed to an increase in refugees but also rising numbers of internally displaced persons. Due to conflict and natural disasters like drought, the same three countries that accommodate the highest number of refugees in Africa are among five countries in sub-Saharan Africa, which combined, accounted for the highest number of new displacement at 46.4 per cent of the global total in 2017.

Gonzalez says it's essential to make a distinction between internally displaced people and refugees. While the internally displaced are people forced to flee their homes but remained in their countries, refugees cross international borders and are hosted in other countries.

Kenya hosts about 475,695 refugees based on UNHCR estimates by end of May this year. A disproportionately high number of refugees in Kenya originate from Somalia and South Sudan. Due to the ongoing civil war in Somalia, UNHCR predicts the humanitarian situation will remain unstable. It also says the ongoing political tensions in Burundi and unrest in Democratic Republic of Congo are likely to have ripple effects on the refugees' situation in the country this year.

ABOVE: A section of Daadab Refugee Camp. LEFT: Children at the Daadab Camp. RIGHT: Jairo Gonzalez, deputy operational manager East Africa, Medicins Sans Frontieres (MSF). BELOW: A bird view of the camp. PHOTO: COURTESY/TOM MARUKO

In Kenya, 54.5 per cent of refugees and asylum seekers are from Somalia. Among the other nationalities hosted in the country is South Sudan, 24.4 per cent, Congo, 8.8 per cent, and Ethiopia, 5.9 per cent. Other nationalities include Uganda, Rwanda, Eritrea and Burundi, with 44 per cent of all refugees hosted in Daadab, 40 per cent in Kakuma and 16 per cent in urban areas, mainly Nairobi.

Gonzalez notes that in the past few years, there have been intensified pressure to send refugees home. "One of the main trends in East Africa is increased pressure on refugees to get repatriated to their countries. There are a number of stakeholders pushing for closing of camps and repatriation against the will of the refugees," he says.

## Proper planning

Kenya has repeatedly pressed for the closure of Dadaab Camp. Such attempt in 2016 was thwarted when the High Court ruled in 2017 that arbitrary closure of the camp would be unconstitutional and violated national and international law. There has, however, been a renewed push to close the camp, which hosts 208,000 refugees and asylum seekers, many of whom fled Somalia during the 1991 civil war.

Through voluntary repatriation organised by UNHCR, 83,938 Somali refugees in Kenya have been assisted to return to their country in the past five years. The agency has, however, raised concerns

over this as some refugees are forced to return to unstable security situations and tough conditions.

In the absence of proper planning to ensure conditions back home are conducive for living, there is high likelihood repatriation will not work and refugees are likely to return to camps with additional challenges. Gonzalez gives example of Gedeo camp in Ethiopia which has been hosting a high number of internally displaced people due to tribal clashes. The camp was closed down last year, but within three months, almost all people had returned.

"The second displacement tends to increase the vulnerability of the people. In Gedeo, for instance, the people who came back had other challenges such as malnutrition due to lack of food in their homes," he adds.

The medical humanitarian organisation supports health-care in the camps by opening health facilities, distributing basic items and carrying out vaccination campaigns. Cholera and measles outbreaks are common in camps.

In the past three months there have been high incidences of malnutrition, especially in camps within Ethiopia, South Sudan and Somalia. Mental health issues have increased in camps for internally displaced people in South Sudan due to prolonged conflict. "For instance, in Malakal, Camp, with a population of about 30,000 people, there are at least five to six weekly attempts of suicide," adds Gonzalez.



## Using innovation to help displaced people stay safe

by William Murigi  
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When Michael Gathogo (pictured) first arrived at Pulka camp in Nigeria, which is home to more than 60,000 displaced people, it touched him to see a small child carry firewood on her back. She was exhausted and completely worn out as she dragged her feet across the camp to get the much-needed fuel home.

Pulka is one of the numerous camps scattered across northeast Nigeria and for the residents, protection often ends at the compound gate. Outside the camp, armed opposition groups and the Nigerian military are in constant conflict, placing the lives of these civilians at risk.

The innovation logistician at Medicins Sans Frontieres (MSF) Displacement Unit reveals he once got a small taste of the terror the camp residents had to deal with regularly, when a gun battle broke out in the camp. Although it didn't last long, it made him realise how volatile the situation was.

## Traumatic experience

During his time, he met people who had been attacked, each telling him the awful and traumatic experience. Many were caught up in their search for firewood. "For a bundle of firewood to cook their daily meal, they were forced to take their lives into their hands," Gathogo says.

In this dire situation, Gathogo birthed an idea. He was inspired by innovations back home in Kenya and set out to create alternative fuel sources in the camp, that were both renewable and affordable. It is at this point that the idea of biomass briquettes came up.

Growing up, he would dismantle toys and electronics to see how their design could be improved, much to the dismay of his parents. He, therefore, grew up specialising in sustain-

able solutions, some of which he had implemented in Sudan and South Sudan.

It meant that, at the camp, it would be easy for him to walk around and identify waste of different sorts—maize cobs, sorghum stems, groundnut shells and sugarcane peels—that were most promising for briquettes.

## Local input

Working with the help of local artisans and welders, Gathogo and his team finally designed presses that could easily be reproduced. Small briquettes could be made by cutting sugarcane peels into smaller chunks, wetting them, pressing and leaving them to dry.

They ended up selecting sugarcane peels because they were easily available as most camp residents are farmers, who are regularly escorted by the military to harvest the crop. With their ideal waste, the team worked out six prototype briquettes that could keep a fire going for an hour, which is plenty of time to cook a meal.

To ensure the product was usable for the residents, the team had worked with them, taking into consideration their opinions and the specificities of their needs and living conditions.

By the time Gathogo was leaving Nigeria, his idea had served 600 most vulnerable households. Afterwards, the community replicated the technology and used it beyond the initially planned number. About 70 per cent are still using the technology, more than a year after its introduction.

Following the success of the pilot in Pulka, MSF implemented the briquettes concept in Nduta Refugee Camp in Tanzania that hosts an estimated 101,000 Burundian refugees. With his innovation, Gathogo says that while the may not eliminate the need to gather fuel outside the camp, there's hope that it will reduce the number of injured people attacked in the process of gathering firewood.

