

## **Field Report: Revolution, its Aftermath, and Access to Information for Refugees in Cairo**

*By Eleanor Danielson*

### **Abstract**

This article explores the impact of Egypt's 2011 revolution and subsequent unrest amongst refugees in Cairo, framing it within the context of refugees' own activism in the city. It then turns to highlight the need for the expansion of communication channels between service providers and refugees in Cairo, both in times of civil unrest and of stability.

### **Introduction**

The Arab Spring directed the world's attention to popular struggles in the Middle East and North Africa, especially the political implications of revolution and its aftermath. Some policy and academic researchers have examined the Arab Spring's impact on forced migration, but have largely considered displacement that resulted from the events, such as migrations into Europe and from Libya into Egypt (Bonfiglio 2011, Fynn 2012). The effect of revolution on refugees already in host countries in the region has received less attention, outside of media accounts (Bates 2011; Gab Allah 2011; Hagen 2011; Hussain and Pitea 2011; IRIN 2011; Jensen 2011; Johnson 2012; Jones 2012; Lammers 2011; Malek 2011; Parietti 2011; Sadek 2012; SAHAfrica 2011). Egypt, for example, has long hosted refugees, especially in its capital, Cairo. How have the events of 2011-12 impacted refugees and asylum seekers already in Cairo, and what can be learned for other urban refugee situations? This paper frames these questions within the context of refugees' own activism in the city. It highlights the need for expanded communication channels between service providers and refugees in Cairo, both in times of civil unrest and of stability.

This paper is based on qualitative research conducted in Cairo in 2010-12 as part of doctoral work and a pilot project examining access to asylum (Danielson 2012). The research included desk research; twenty-four formal interviews with fifteen refugees working at community-based organisations in the major national groups in Cairo and nine service providers (around half conducted with interpreters and all recorded); field notes from eleven informal conversations with researchers, service providers, and refugees; and fieldnotes based on participant observation at multiple relevant workshops, trainings, presentations and performances. Given the ethical considerations of conducting research with refugees (see Jacobsen and Landau 2003) and the tense security situation in Cairo, issues of confidentiality and security were paramount.

For some refugees in Cairo, the revolutionary demonstrations of January 2011 held familiar echoes. For three months in 2005, several thousand Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers in Cairo held their own sit-in at Cairo's Mustafa Mahmoud Park (see Azzam 2006, Rowe 2006). Like Tahrir Square, the park became a place where people of different religions and origins could come together, raise their complaints, and imagine and enact an idealised, unified country (Danielson 2008; Lewis 2007; Schafer 2005). The bloodshed at the end of the refugee protest, however, heralded not revolution but more of the same, namely continued economic, legal, and social constraints on the lives of refugees and their livelihoods. The years since have seen episodes of violence between self-described 'gangs' of young Sudanese youth (Lewis 2011), the continued arrival of new asylum seekers from Iraq (Younes and Rosen 2007), and killings by

Egyptian border guards of refugees en route to Israel through the Sinai,<sup>1</sup> seeking exodus from Cairo's uneasy refuge. Overall, in the past decade, the situation for refugees in the city has only gotten worse.

The 2011 revolution dealt a series of further setbacks to the approximately 40,000 registered refugees and asylum seekers living in Cairo – people originally from Sudan, Iraq, Somalia, Eritrea, and Ethiopia (UNHCR 2012). During the uprising, mobility within the city became tightly restricted, both by soldiers ignorant of the meaning of refugees' ID cards – resulting in many arrests – and by neighbourhood patrols (Danielson 2011; Jones 2012: 16). Many employed refugees lost income or jobs because of their inability to get to their workplaces, or because their expatriate employers left the country. With access to money from abroad blocked by bank closures, many suffered hunger and reduced food budgets, the loss of housing, and the accrual of rent debt. UNHCR and many of its partners closed down their offices, with some staff evacuated and others working from home – reducing refugees' access to services, cash assistance, and subsidised healthcare. The government's release of prisoners into the city created greater insecurity in the streets, including refugee-hosting neighbourhoods.

In the time that has passed since the revolution's peak, both the city and the refugees in it have adjusted to the new reality of increased xenophobia and nationalism, sporadic political upheaval, rising crime and continued instability. Some refugees, hoping for resettlement from the increasingly tenuous situation, have taken political action and renewed protests outside of UNHCR. Linking his protest for refugee rights to the national events, a Sudanese man asked: "Where is *our* revolution?" (Danielson 2011b). Other refugees have taken advantage of the increased acceptance of public protest to rally at the embassies of their home countries or demonstrate for international attention to their governments' misdeeds. Many have continued their work helping their own communities through community-based organisations (Jones 2012: 16). A few refugees have taken the opportunity of the new government to try to press charges for the 2005 killings at Mustafa Mahmoud Park. But many refugees' unease toward the Egyptian government has been renewed by the 2011 appointment as new Interior Minister of former Giza Security directorate Mohamed Ibrahim Youssef, the man who oversaw the violent end of the 2005 protest (Unattributed 2011a).

Initially, with a new government finally in view, advocates for refugee rights were optimistic about the possibility of improving the legal context for refugees in Egypt, which is constrained by the country's reservations on the 1951 Refugee Convention – amongst other restrictions, refugees are barred from legal employment, making local integration virtually impossible (Kagan 2011: 18-19). A play written jointly by refugees and Egyptians and performed repeatedly throughout the city has opened a dialogue between Egyptians and refugees about refugees' role and treatment in Egypt (Wedeman 2010). Some Tahrir activists said that their own experiences made them see the 2005 refugee protest in new light. Thus far, however, efforts by refugees to advocate for their rights in the new political arena have been largely drowned out, and international, national and local contexts continue to constrain both refugees and service providers in Cairo.

One area that shows potential for improvement is information provision for refugees. Access to basic information about services, rights, the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) and resettlement processes as well as the roles of UNHCR, the Egyptian government, and other service providers is important both amidst political upheaval and in calmer times. Contemporary asylum in Cairo is shaped by a history of limited information about asylum policy, a tense

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<sup>1</sup> The Sinai remains an abominable site of the imprisonment, torture and extortion of refugees, mostly Eritreans smuggled through Sudan. See Greenwood (2012) for a summary.

relationship between refugees and UNHCR (exacerbated by the 2005 demonstration), repeated protests at the office, and a notoriously damaging rumour mill within refugee communities. These dynamics have contributed to problems as mundane as misunderstandings about services and as serious as arrests. As a result, both policy and academic research on asylum in Cairo has repeatedly recommended improvements to communication about asylum and information provision for refugees (Danielson 2012: 6-8).

In the wake of the revolution, service providers in Cairo took unprecedented and encouraging steps in this direction. When refugees staged large demonstrations at UNHCR to protest its closure, UNHCR's Regional Representative in Egypt and other staff held multiple meetings with refugees who had gathered outside the Cairo office. Although the representativeness of those refugees who were granted meetings has since been questioned (Danielson 2012: 9-10), the Regional Representative attempted to reach a wider audience by distributing three public letters addressed to all refugees and asylum seekers in Egypt detailing UNHCR's position and clarifying details of emergency assistance, the limited increase in resettlement spaces, and acknowledging the anxiety and hardships refugees in Cairo faced (Dayri 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). UNHCR emailed the letters to its partners, who printed and distributed them to refugees. Improved communications are also evident through the distribution of several emergency announcements through the same method, and the opening of a much-needed telephone hotline. The pioneering efforts of the Cairo office of Catholic Relief Services (CRS) to reach its refugee clients by mass SMS were harnessed in a successful inter-agency effort to inform refugees about a one-off, emergency payment after the revolution. UNHCR has held regular meetings with refugee communities in Cairo since, with other service providers assisting in their planning.

Yet more can be done to improve access to information for refugees, most of which is still only available through office visits, which require some refugees to take time off work so as to arrive during or before office hours, in a long and expensive trip. At multiple points since the revolution, uprisings and their suppression by the interim military government have resulted in the closure of service providers' offices, the cancellation, relocation or rescheduling of classes, meetings and events for refugees, and increases in street crime and transportation difficulty. There is a greater than ever need for access to information that does not require travel. In Cairo, mobile phone use is ubiquitous, including in refugee communities, and mass SMS systems are widely available and easy to use, as CRS has shown through its exemplary SMS program (Danielson 2012: 30-31). However, SMS use by service providers in Cairo is still in its infancy. Print is a basic and easily distributed way to spread information, but there is a dearth of simple printed information like brochures. Asylum seekers can learn of the progress of their Refugee Status Determination only from printed notices posted in certain locations, or visits to UNHCR. A significant portion of refugees access the internet at internet cafes and service providers' computer centres, and use it to share information about asylum in Cairo with other refugees (Danielson 2012: 31-36). However, service providers' websites remain primarily donor-oriented, presented in the style of annual reports with little content useful to people seeking services, such as office location. Despite the need for better information, and the availability of technologies to help in its spread, many local service providers lack the time and funding needed to develop new communication strategies.<sup>2</sup>

The Arab Spring elevated the importance of communication in Cairo to a global stage, through the online activism that fuelled it and, at the revolution's height, when the government cut all internet and local mobile phone access. Technology is not a silver bullet, but it can be one tool to help improve communication between service providers and beneficiaries and increase access to

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<sup>2</sup> See *Forced Migration Review*, Issue 38, for an in-depth look at the role of technology in information distribution and service provision in contexts of forced migration.

information for refugees. In order to take the time to build such initiatives, however, local service providers and refugee groups need the support of international donors, policy-makers, and funders. In the quest to improve urban refugee protection and assistance in emergencies as well as normal operations, the expansion of channels of communication is worthy of further attention, not just in Cairo but in refugee-hosting urban settings around the globe.

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