Life of a Refugee

**LEAD-IN:** According to Africa and Middle East Refugee Assistance (AMERA) organization in Egypt online, Egypt hosts the fifth largest refugee population in the world with official estimates of 38,000 refugees from 35 countries mostly coming from Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia. This 15:10 minute documentary explores the journey of two refugees starting from fleeing their countries until today. The documentary focuses on why they escaped their countries, what processes they had to go through to get a “refugee” status and some challenges they are facing in Egypt. A-U-C’s Heba Mamdouh reports.

I was finally in the “community outreach” office at the refugee organization where I was supposed to conduct my interviews. I met Bisrat Girma, an Ethiopian refugee who has been living in Uganda since 1998 and Yagoub, a Sudanese asylum seeker who has been living in Egypt for 11 years.

Music: “Lounge Oud” by Ben Othman featuring Fawzi Chekili taken from jamendo. (FADE-IN at 0:35, lower volume and start narration at 0:45 keep narrating while music is low, FADE-OUT by start of Yagoub’s soundbite).

Yagoub was detained and tortured in Sudan twice. In 1995, the Sudanese military overthrew the democratic government and began imposing extreme Islamic views that are against Sudanese values and traditions. So Yagoub joined political rallies organized by the National Democratic Alliance (N-D-A). In 1998, Yagoub had just completed his bachelor’s degree and was going to join the military wing of NDA in a neighboring country. But the security discovered masses of
people gathering to join NDA including Yagoub. He was arrested and extremely tortured. Finally, he was released but he had to provide the security information about NDA members in Khartoum and Western and Eastern Sudan.

YAGOUB: “I did report to the office like twice but the third one without having any information for them. By the third one they warned me and by accident I I found somebody. He’s he was seeming like attracted to me because or biased to me because of ethnicity bases because he’s from a specific area in Sudan and a specific the same area but working with the government. He told me he advised me please these people are going to kill you if you didn’t I know you didn’t bring information. And even he just he told me that and don’t tell anybody that I told that I talked to you.” (:45)

Yagoub had to flee from Sudan. But getting a visa from the Egyptian embassy in Khartoum was not easy.

Music: “Lounge Oud” (FADE-IN by start of above narration at 2:25, lower volume while narrating, FADE-OUT at 2:35 before start of Yagoub’s soundbite).

YAGOUB: “The relationship between the two regimes, the Egyptian regime and the Sudanese regime, it wasn’t good at that time because of the failed assassination of the former president Hosni Mubarak. Sudan was accused about committing this like assassination or failed assassination.” (:21)

Music: “Lounge Oud” (FADE-IN at 2:55, lower volume during below narration, FADE-OUT at 3:13).

The political party which Yagoub joined had good relations with Mohammed Ramadan, the former Egyptian ambassador to Sudan. Ramadan gave Yagoub a visa that was valid for a month. But, Yagoub was facing another problem.

YAGOUB: “I went to get the exit visa from Sudan then I found myself put in black list had been put in black list because of demonstration, because of political activism, because I’m considered in opposition, lying against government something like that. The most like you know...and because the organs they know already many active people like left Sudan and joined the NDA and like did affect on the NDA in different ways you know from different people okay? So when I found myself in black list so I tried by time by many means to get out but I
Yagoub’s sister has been spending her vacations in Egypt since 1994 and so she had strong connections in Egypt. Finally, she got a visa in paper from Tahrir compound and sent it to Yagoub. A year after Yagoub arrived to Egypt, he tried applying for a refugee status through United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (U-N-H-C-R) but his case was rejected. 11 years have passed since Yagoub arrived to Egypt. He still does not have a refugee status but he is living in Egypt as an asylum seeker and working as an interpreter for the community outreach team of the organization.

Music: “Lounge Oud” (FADE-IN at 4:11, lower volume during above narration, FADE-OUT by end of above narration).

YAGOUB: “I applied for UNHCR specifically in 1999 okay? And they gave me a long time to to come to office. Almost nine months okay just to come and to have this what I call it form of applications. And I get the form of application then I fill it. I went through RSD. (Refugee Status Determination) By the end, I got rejected according to their views because I think at that time they lack information regarding the country. They did full interview like last of a 30 minutes and then they rejected me. They don’t believe they didn’t believe my story although it’s true.” (:47)

Music: “See You On The Other Side” by Peter McIsaac taken from Premiumbeat. (FADE-IN at 5:43, lower volume and start narration at 5:47, FADE-OUT before Girma’s soundbite).

Girma adds that UNHCR has this disbelief of refugees because in many cases those escaping their countries and seeking protection in another country just cross borders to the host country without any visas, identifications or passports.

GIRMA: “Often people flee their country of origin due to violence or fear of persecution and it is not intentional and it is not, they are not prepared to leave the country so it’s all about escaping and saving your life without regard of legal, having legal permission to
travel or having a visa or a passport. Often people just simply cross border and seek asylum. That’s that’s the situation.” (:31)

Girma was a member of a political party that opposed the dictatorial Ethiopian government by rebelling and protesting to demand more freedom and human rights. As a result, Girma had to escape from Ethiopia to protect himself from being arrested, tortured and killed. It was a long and arduous process, but in 1998, a year after Girma fled from Ethiopia to Uganda UNHCR finally granted Girma a refugee status.

Music: “Salvation” by Olive Musique taken from Premiumbeat. (FADE-IN at 6:42, start narration at 6:44 and lower volume during narration, FADE-OUT by end of above narration).

Girma says that people and life in Uganda is similar to that in Ethiopia.

GIRMA: “I live in Uganda just like my country. I don’t see any difference between my country and Uganda. We live in harmony. Refugees they intermarriage with native peoples. They go to school and study. Being a refugee in Uganda being a refugee in Uganda mean the only difference between me and a Ugandan citizen, I’m a refugee and Ugandan citizen, the only difference we have legally is that I will never be elected for a president and I will never elect the president. This is the only difference between being a refugee and a citizen. And any refugee after staying 10 years in the country he he’s able to acquire citizenship and live like a citizen.” (:54)

But Girma says the Ugandan government and UNHCR do not really support refugees.

Music: “Bab Aliwa” by Ben Othman taken from jamendo. (FADE-IN at 8:02, start narration at 8:04 and lower volume, FADE-OUT at 8:10).

GIRMA: “The policy of both the Ugandan government and UNHCR is if people want to be assisted financially or housing, food, assistance they should live in the refugee campus. So I opt to live in the city for going the assistance. So it is a choice between having assistance from the government or UNHCR and live in the camp or not having any assistance from them and live in the city. So my choice is to work for myself and strive for myself and live in the city. So this is the policy of UNHCR.” (:45)
Music: “See You On The Other Side” (FADE-IN at 8:47 when Girma says “so my choice is to…,”, keep volume steady when narration starts at 8:56.5, FADE-OUT at 9:19 when it says “in AUC” before Girma’s soundbite).

After years of working in Uganda to support himself, Girma applied online for a scholarship to and the American University in Cairo (A-U-C) accepted his application. He is currently staying in Egypt on a student visa where he is preparing his masters in international human rights law while taking a diploma in “Forced Migration and Refugee Studies” in AUC.

Music: “See You On The Other Side” (FADE-IN at 9:48 when Girma says “they support you…” lower volume during narration, FADE-OUT at 10:10).

GIRMA: “I have the African Graduate Fellowship to look after me. So I have I’m supported by them. The African Graduate Fellowships gives scholarship to African students who have graduated and have their first degree and it gives opportunity to come to Egypt, AUC and study for second degree and but when they give this scholarship they support you in everything necessary for you to conduct your study. They give you pocket money and everything including medical insurance.” (:39)

Back in 2006 Yagoub also took several courses in AUC including “Women at Risk,” and “International Law.” Maysa Ayoub, the projects manager at the Center for Migration and Refugee Studies (CMRS) in AUC, talks about these short courses.

AYOUB: “Actually we do have summer school and winter school. In the break of the university during the summer and the winter we provide short courses for particularly for people working with refugees. So we have people working in NGOs, (non-governmental organizations) people working in doing the researches, doing the PhD or master’s degree and they want to know more about the psycho more about refugees. Sometimes it’s attended by refugees who are either interested or who work in psycho-social issues but the majority are people working in NGOs.” (:37)

Girma however says that being a Sub Saharan African refugee in Egypt is unfortunate and he would like to return to Uganda as soon as he is done with his studies in AUC.
Music: “Bab Aliwa” (FADE-IN at 10:51 when Ayoub says “are working in NGOs,” lower volume during narration, FADE-OUT at 11:04 before start of below soundbite).

GIRMA: “I don’t see any relationship or any harmony between Sub Saharan African refugees and Egyptian so it’s a parallel society existing. There is no way of integrating with the native people because of the many reservation Egypt have to the refugee rights one. Two is that there is a huge cultural diversity between Egypt and Sub Saharan Africa. Egypt is more like an Arab country than an African country so it is...the refugees face racism on a daily basis in Egypt.” (:43)

Music: “See You On The Other Side” (FADE-IN at 11:48, during below narration at 11:49 lower volume and keep it steady, FADE-OUT at 12:30 when Girma says “which or salary…”).

Even though the “Four Freedoms” agreement that was established between the Egyptian and the Sudanese government in 2004 states that Sudanese and Egyptian citizens have the right to work legally in both countries, the Egyptian government does not permit Sudanese refugees or any refugees from other countries to work legally in Egypt. Because of this, refugees work illegally to support themselves.

GIRMA: “So refugees are working in sort of underground world where they have no rights and possession to negotiate which or salary or to legally work and by the the very this reservation on the refugee law and makes refugees in a very weak position. Even if refugees got a job to work like as maids, house maids or cleaners and they can be their salary may be denied by the employer and the refugees have no right to take them to court because in first place refugees are not allowed to work.” (:45)

Music: “Bab Aliwa” (FADE-IN at 13:02.5, lower volume during below narration, FADE-OUT at 13:20.5 when Girms says “Egypt and Israel.”)

Because of racism and lack of access to jobs and education in Egypt refugees risk their lives to be resettled in other countries that refugees think have better living conditions such as Israel.

GIRMA: “Refugees die in the border between Egypt and Israel. They can get killed by Egyptian security forces in most cases. There are also tribes along the border on the Egyptian side who are taking refugees as hostage and there are refugees who are taken by Egyptian tribes alongside the border as slaves and working working for them. At times they are taken as hostage for ransom to get money from their relatives. (:38)
In 2004 three students studying at CMRS in AUC wrote a research report about the experiences and expectations of refugees in Egypt after being resettled in the West.

AYOUB: “The refugees in Egypt were always having a lot of hope about their life in the West very excited about going but so these students were interested to know does this expectation is true? Because they heard from other people who already left that it’s not. They always have very high expectation but then when they go and they find the reality is not as expected.” (:24)

Even after refugees are resettled in a country with better conditions most refugees come alone leaving behind their family members. Even though many will continue to miss their families back home and live in pain wondering whether they have survived after the conflict most of them are resilient enough to overcome obstacles, cope in a new environment and rebuild their lives.

Music: “Ocean Avenue” by Styve Bolduc taken from Premiumbeat. (FADE-IN at 14:44.5 when I say “even though…,” lower volume when narration starts at 14:45.5 then lower it a bit more at 14:57.5, FADE-IN music after “News”, gradually lower volume at 15:10, FADE-OUT at 15:16 when I say “for their valuable information…”)

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