

Dilemma facing refugees in SA

SALYM FAYAD

EVER since they were smuggled into South Africa through the Mozambican border last February, Nema Ali and her sisters have made the dusty patch under the shade of a tree opposite the Marabastad refugee reception office in Pretoria their home.

The five Somali women boarded a ship headed to Maputo from the port city of Kismayo in southern Somalia, a stronghold of the al-Shabaab insurgent group.

"There is no peace in Somalia, but we don't feel safe here." Black patches of ash and burned tyres mark the places where hundreds of refugees make fires to keep warm at night while they wait for their turn to apply for asylum documents.

"We have no money to travel anywhere else," says Ali, "and if they close these offices we will have to stay here illegally."

On Tuesday, the eve of World Refugee Day, about 200 people marched in front of the Marabastad office, protesting against the Department of Home Affairs' policy of closing metropolitan reception centres and moving them to border areas.

Representatives of the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (Commsa), who organised the demonstration, say that home affairs is trying to prevent migrants from reaching urban centres by arguing that 95% are economic migrants and not "genuine asylum-seekers".

Home affairs spokesman Ronnie Mamooa, who crossed the road to meet the protesters, said that "South Africa receives foreign nationals with open arms", and asked some of them to provide evidence of corruption within the reception centres to prove their complaints.

"We will work together to find a solution to all these grievances," he told them.

However, the closure of the refugee reception offices is just the most recent in a long chain of obstacles that refugees face in order to legalise their status in

- Anger at plan to close metropolitan reception centres and move them to border areas
- 'Corrupt officials make life difficult for asylum seekers'
- 'We have to pay just to get in the line [to enter the home affairs offices]'



MAKING HIS POINT: A protester states his case in Marabastad in Pretoria this week

South Africa, and corruption is at the top of these challenges.

"We have to pay just to get in the line [to enter the home affairs offices]," says a young Zimbabwean migrant.

"We pay R100 because they know we Zimbabweans don't have money."

But Ethiopians and Pakistanis have shops and businesses, so they pay R500 or R600, said the Zimbabwean.

According to him, the fee is

collected by local shop-owners, who work with the security guards that allow people inside the reception centre.

Several migrants say that once they are inside the offices they are requested to pay R300 for the asylum application and up to R3 500 to renew an expired permit or for four-year refugee status.

"We all know that those services are free," says Ali.

"But when I tell them [home affairs officers] that I don't have money they tell me to go back to my country."



OUTRAGE: A crowd gather in front of the Marabastad office, protesting against the South African Department of Home Affairs policy of closing metropolitan reception centres and moving them to border areas

Even if they remain open, under the current circumstances the refugee reception offices have not been very efficient.

A Congolese man, a father of four, explains that after 14 years in South Africa he still has an asylum-seeker permit, which he keeps having to renew every three months.

According to a report of the

'The system to legalise refugees is seriously corrupted and abusive'

African Centre for Migration and Society released last month, the problems and irregularities of the home affairs services "not only contravene the laws that govern the refugee and asylum system but also threaten its humanitarian purpose".

The consequences of the flaws of the system affect many different aspects of everyday life for many refugees.

Jaqueline, a street vendor from the DRC, wanted to sue a

school teacher who attacked her son at school, but the prosecutor refused to provide her with legal services because she had an expired asylum permit.

Other migrants complain of hospitals and doctors who refuse to treat them, of being unable to open bank accounts, or to study and get proper jobs.

Surrounded by a crowd of concerned fellow countrymen, Dereje Fanna, from the Ethiopian Community Association in

South Africa, says that they demand that all the refugee centres be reopened.

"The home affairs system to legalise refugees is seriously corrupted and abusive towards asylum seekers," he says, and emphasises that the move is not following the proper legal procedure, as closing down the metropolitan offices before the opening of new ones is only going to leave thousands of asylum-seekers legally stranded.

'Dagga activist' blows away Idols SA

SUTHENTIRA GOVENDER

AN IDOLS SA contestant, who was given the nod by the show's nastiest judge, Randall Abrahams, hopes that her fight to legalise marijuana won't send her chances of winning the contest up in smoke.

Capetownian Andiswa Yohane this week said she was campaigning for dagga to be legalised for medicinal use. Last week thousands of M-Net viewers were stunned at the 22-year-old law student's flawless rendition of Jennifer Hudson's *One Night Only* at the reality show's auditions in Cape Town.

Judges Unathi Msenjana, Gareth Cliff and Abrahams gave the University of Cape Town student a golden ticket to the next stage in Sun City in the North West.

"My passion to legalise marijuana has nothing to do with people smoking it and using it as a drug," said Yohane.

"It's used for a number of other positive things... but I don't support the smoking of it," said the law student.

Yohane grew up in a household where her 93-year-old grandmother, a practising traditional healer, used dagga to heal many of her patients.

"She uses marijuana to heal a number of her patients suffering from asthma and other chronic diseases," said Yohane.

The talented young singer, who until recently performed in some of Cape Town's popular night spots, even adopted the stage name, Queen Legalise.

"I adopted the name due to my university major in law and passion to legalise marijuana," she said.

M-Net this week said Yohane's campaign would not jeopardise her chances in the competition.

Spokesman Lani Lombard said: "At this stage in the Idols competition, contestants are



SMOKING: Andiswa Yohane just wants dagga to be legalised

judged on their singing ability and potential to pursue a career in the South African music industry.

"It's their right to have their own personal beliefs and passions and in the end, the voting public decides who South Africa's next Idol will be," she said.

Yohane, who started singing on stage in 2007, said she was still excited about making it through to the next stage of the contest.

"It's a step closer to my dream," she said.

The winner of the reality show will receive a recording contract from Universal Records, along with other prizes which will be disclosed later in the season.

"I really want to win," said Yohane.

"My granny has never watched the show or even watched me sing, so this is a big deal for both me and her," she said, describing how her grandmother screamed "now we will be rich" when she told her that she had made it through to the next stage.

20 years on, the world's biggest refugee camp still in dire straits

SET UP as an emergency measure 20 years ago, the refugee camps for Somalis in Dadaab in eastern Kenya have swollen to become the world's biggest — a dilemma for experts and an open prison for residents.

With more than 465 000 inhabitants at the end of May, the camps at Dadaab now constitute Kenya's third biggest town. But the health situation and the social situation are going downhill, insecurity has taken hold there and the Kenyan government is losing patience.

"It is clear that keeping the camps as they are for another 20 years is not an option. But what is the alternative?" Medecins sans Frontieres (Doctors without borders - MSF) asked at a conference on the subject this week in Nairobi.

The camps were set up in 1992 in Kenya's arid north-east, almost 100 kilometres from the Somali border, as what at the time was a temporary measure to aid refugees fleeing the civil war that followed the fall of Mohamed Siad Barre.

But things went from bad to worse in Somalia, with conflict aggravated by drought bringing on one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, notably last year, when tens of thousands of Somalis died of hunger and hundreds of thousands of others joined the ranks of those who were displaced or who fled.

Since then a coalition of regional military forces has pushed back the Shebab Islamists and a good rainy season has brought satisfactory harvests.

But nobody is moving out of Dadaab and the situation is becoming increasingly difficult.

"Continuing to bring supplies to Kenya encourages more people to cross the border," said Kenya's Prime Minister Raila Odinga told journalists this week.

"The best solution for the refugees is to go back home," said Kenya's Commissioner for Refugees, Badu Katelo, arguing that the setbacks to the Shebab in southern Somalia should open the way for "voluntary" repatriation of refugees.

For most of the humanitarian workers at the conference voluntary repatriation remains a pipe dream, even if they readily admit that Kenya bears



OPEN PRISON: Dadaab refugee camp, set up 20 years ago near the Somali border, is now Kenya's third largest town, with health and social conditions deteriorating

"a disproportionate burden".

"Voluntary repatriation is a possibility, but it is a bit elusive. The peace process is not very stable and I don't see us looking into an intensive promotion of a repatriation scheme," said Abel Mbilinyi, deputy representative of the UN refugee agency in Kenya.

The humanitarian agencies see integration in Kenya as the inevitable solution for the refugees who have been here the longest.

"They have nothing left in Somalia, it is the third generation, they do not know where they are coming from," said Elena Velilla, MSP's head of mission.

UNHCR's Mbilinyi said he personally advocated the opening up of "a frank dialogue on the prospect of local integration" for the refugees, noting that a good number of them were actually eligible for

claim Kenyan citizenship. Will they get it? No," replied one of the deputy speakers of the Kenyan parliament, Farah Maalim.

This MP, himself of Somali

'There are people who have been here for the last 20 years and who have never ventured outside the camp'

Kenyan nationality.

He cited the example of Tanzania, which in 2010 gave nationality to 162 000 Burundian refugees who had fled their country 40 years earlier.

"Yes, 350 000 refugees can

run Dadaab, to collect \$100-million last year. This year the agency raised only \$70-million.

Unrest in Somalia has spilled over into Dadaab, with a series of attacks in the camps and, last October, the kidnapping of two Spaniards working for MSF, who have since been held in Somalia.

"We are in an open prison," protested Bare Osman Abdi, deputy chairman of the young people in Dagahaley camp, referring to a ban on refugees working or leaving the camp without authorisation.

"There are people who have been here for the last 20 years and who have never ventured outside the camp," said Abdi.

— Sapa-AFP