

Lives in transition

The recent revolution brought long-awaited change to Egypt. But the Egyptian human rights movement needs to address the country's social, political and religious divides and take up the plight of the many refugees living in Cairo. Gasser Abdel-Razek, country director of the Africa and Middle East Refugee Assistance in Egypt, talks about the challenges facing human rights organizations in Egypt in these times of political uncertainty.



Reuters / Goran Tomasevic

Gasser Abdel-Razek is a human rights activist who has been involved with human rights movements in Egypt and the Arab world for the past 17 years. He was one of the founders in 1999 of the Hisham Mubarak Law Centre. He worked as advocacy director of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, acting director for regional relations at Human Rights Watch and Middle East media officer at Oxfam GB. He currently is the country director of the Africa and Middle East Refugee Assistance (AMERA) in Egypt.

Interview by **Ellen Lammers**

AMERA provides pro bono legal aid and advocates for the rights of refugees living in Cairo. Has the revolution of the past few months affected their lives?

Refugees are generally wary of political change because it introduces even more unknowns into their already insecure lives. Fortunately, refugees weren't targeted during the days of the revolution. No attacks against them were recorded, neither by Mubarak loyalists nor by the revolutionaries.

The already meagre support system available to refugees in Cairo did come to a complete standstill, however. UNHCR shut down its offices, and its international staff was flown out of the country. This sends a terrible message to refugees. There was no information, not even a hotline for them to contact.

AMERA also had to close down temporarily. Our office is located 700 metres from Tahrir Square and 100 metres from the British Embassy. Not only was it dangerous for our staff, but also unsafe for refugees to make a trip across the city to the fortified place we were in. Egypt hosts the fifth largest urban refugee population in the world. But most of the tens of thousands of Sudanese, Somali, Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees in Cairo have no formal legal status. This makes them very vulnerable to harassment and abuse.

The Egyptian revolution counts as a massive encouragement for its human rights movement, but the changes bring new challenges too. What does that mean for your work?

The challenges, indeed, are plenty. First of all, the current performance of the military police is appalling. Very recently, a major general admitted on CNN to conducting virginity tests on women prisoners. Under Mubarak we would have found a way to make a case against such violations, but the military are beyond anyone's reach. This situation is worse than our worst nightmare.

Eventually, however, the military will go back to the barracks, and the real challenge lies with the new government that comes through the ballot box. There are so many questions that the Egyptians need to answer. What do we

want this country to look like? What minimum of human rights will be enshrined in the new constitution? How do we restructure the police force and guarantee the necessary checks and balances to make impossible the human rights violations of the past?

Luckily we do not need to start from scratch. We can learn from other countries that have gone through similar major transformations. Egyptian civil society organizations are already exchanging lessons and ideas with organizations from countries such as Chile, South Africa and Indonesia, and Eastern European countries. We are waiting for the same to happen at the level of the transitional government.

What will refugees have to gain from these changes?

To be honest, there will be no major improvements in the lives of refugees in the short term. After 30 years of autocracy it will be hard enough to prioritize the pressing issues of Egypt's national population, let alone those of refugees. But it is my strong conviction that refugee rights should be on the human rights agenda – not as a separate issue, but central to the work of the Egyptian human rights movement. If you want to work towards a tolerant society, securing refugee rights is part and parcel of the package.

Many donors, foreign governments, NGOs and citizens movements show interest in our country's transition and the process of democratization. We have received dozens of visiting officials who want to discuss the fate of refugees. But they only talk about the refugees currently on the Libyan border. Not a word about the urban refugees who have been here for years and years, and who we know are going to stay for many more years to come. Now is a chance to pay attention to the legal, economic and social integration of these people into our society, to help them get a decent life in our country.

What role can research play in these efforts?

Research can help us gain a better understanding of how Egyptians perceive and think of refugees. This is very necessary. Day in and day out, our staff at AMERA listen to stories of racism, xenophobia and different forms of violence

against refugees. But none of this has been properly documented, let alone studied. Yet this problem should be studied in its historical context.

For many hundreds of years Egypt was known as a tolerant place. You have a problem with your chief or king? Run to Cairo and you will be safe! It is no coincidence that Egypt was one of the very last Arab countries with a Jewish community, most of whom didn't leave in 1948. Similarly, Egypt has been a safe haven for artists and freedom fighters, such as Kwame Nkrumah and his children, who grew up here and were granted nationality.

But that Egypt is no longer. Today, Egypt divides itself into rich and poor, Muslims and Copts, people from the Delta and from Upper Egypt, Bedouins and Nubians. The proverbial melting pot has ceased to exist. And yet many Egyptians still think of themselves as tolerant. They think making fun of refugees' dark skin is funny. Arrogance, ignorance and political corruption have isolated Egypt from its African role. But there is no academic work that supports or explains this change.

A better understanding of how and why society changed will be helpful to NGOs that work on intolerance and sectarianism in our society. It may also help our future political leaders to realize that an open and welcoming refugee policy is part of a progressive foreign policy that befits Egypt in the 21st century.

What other research project could be useful to AMERA's work in particular?

I would advocate for research that investigates migration routes to and from Egypt, for instance through Sinai, and starts tracing these routes. This information is important for uncovering human trafficking. We need to get a much better idea of what is really going on in this criminal business. At AMERA we are not qualified to identify trafficking victims, but our intuition tells us we see many of them in our office. Eritreans in particular. There are indications that increasingly they are taken to the Gulf States to work as housemaids or in other poorly paid and exploitative jobs. Research into this hypersensitive issue is very difficult, but very urgent too. ■