**Voices from Dadaab: Life goes on, but for how long?**

Ahmed lives in a large compound with his extended family on the outskirts of Dagahaley camp in the Dadaab refugee complex. He’s surrounded by an open dusty field to the south, and thorny shrubs to the north. Despite having made a compound using cut shrubs, his home turns dusty at the slight blow of winds, and he says they are not spared during the rainy days, which causes flooding around his house.

It’s 10:00 am when we meet Ahmed. His home is dotted with makeshift domes, made from any material that can possibly shelter them from the elements – from paper-bags to tattered clothes or pieces of pvc sheeting used in making tents. Members of his nuclear and extended family live here.

Ahmed returned to Somalia in 2018 through a voluntary repatriation exercise spearheaded by UNHCR, but came back just two months later, his family in tow. He says his mother, whom they left in Somalia when they fled to the camp in 2011, was unwell and they enlisted to go back and stay with her. “The government had planned to close the camp, so I thought what better opportunity than this, to go stay with my ailing mother,” he says.

“Life in Somalia was not as I had anticipated. I had hoped for an improved country, with better security and services, but what we got was different. My mother died shortly after our arrival and as we continued staying, it became harder fending for my family,” Ahmed says.

The father of 21 says he carried his family back after just two months, with the hope of a better life in the camp, but what he got was anything but. “We can access water for free at the tap stands, and MSF also provides healthcare services for free. However, we have no access to food or shelter. We go to the UN daily to cry for them but they won’t hear us,” he says. “For us who had been repatriated, we get no attention from the UN; new arrivals get a better treatment. You can see the environment we are in, we can’t even get a proper shelter.”

They have been surviving on well-wishers’ support and meager payments he gets from *Madrassa* classes he teaches in the camp, but this is not enough to feed his family. “It’s not easy because those who extend some of their rations to you also lack sometimes, and it’s hardly enough for them too,” he says.

“I am worried about what will happen to us if the camp is forced to close. If by use of force, I will go back to Somalia, if not, then I’d like to stay. While our living condition is difficult, it is certainly better than Somalia. Though I hope for a better solution and a ration card from UNHCR.”

**AHMED MUKTAR, 64 – RETURNED TO THE CAMP FROM SOMALIA**

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**Fear and loathing in Somalia**

This is Mohamed’s 31st day in Dagahaley camp, having fled Somalia due to insecurity. He says his seven-year-old son was accused of attempting to rape a 15-year-old girl, and despite going through *maslaha* – an arbitration process – and paying his dues, constant threats to his life and family persisted.

“At some point some armed people came and threatened to kill my whole family, we faced this a lot,” he says. “We were also an ethnic minority there and could not get much support from others as is often the case in our culture. I had to leave, and coming to the camp was the only certain solution for me.”

“When we got to the camp, our neighbours here helped us set up our makeshift domes. We approached UNHCR the following day but they (UNHCR) told us that they do not register new arrivals anymore, so we just came back here [to our house]. Since we’re not registered, we don’t have access to food, so we survive on well-wishers’ donations or go begging in the camp’s market.”

I came here on my own: hounded my family in a lorry that brought us all the way here. I settled myself here, without support from any organisation. We only carried a few clothes, utensils and that small mat my mother sleeping on.

I started begging for food but after a few days, people got tired of my begging and I had to go start looking for a way to provide for my family.

I would then go to the market up there to do any casual work that would give me some income. I am good at carpentry, so I help those who have things to fix, but sometimes when there’s no woodwork to be done, I dig toilets, fetch firewood by donkey cart which has a ready market, or help load and off load items in the market – whatever I can do to get some income to sustain my family.”

Being the period of Ramadhan, people’s kindness has been overwhelming. When I went to the market yesterday, I came back and found a well-wisher had brought us some 2 kilos of rice, others even brought us some bedding and mattresses.

**Calls to close the camp**

I was just a day old in the camp here when I heard from my neighbours about the calls to close the camp. I was shocked! The only safe place I could find refuge in was getting closed. I was confused. Where else was I to go? I have no other hope but to stay here, I can’t go back to Somalia unless they beat me up and load me into the vehicle. I will just wait for that day, but there’s no hope for me in Somalia. I will live here and move wherever life takes me.

I just need access to food and some decent shelter so that we can live like other refugees. I heard about an hospital here in Dagahaley where we can get free services, but we’ve been blessed to not have needed medical services yet. It’s only my wife who’s been suffering from some back pains and I’m yet to take her to the hospital.

Whatever happens, I’ll never go back to Somalia, I want to stay here until peace is restored in that country. Even if I have nothing here, it’s quite peaceful. Since I came, I haven’t heard any gunshots unlike Somalia where gunshot sounds rented the air every now and then, and you hear news of someone having been killed just near your home. You live in fear. Here I can even sleep outside peacefully. Despite the lack of food, we feel adequately safe.”

**MOHAMED OSMAN ISSACK, 58 – NEW ARRIVAL FROM SOMALIA**

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**Scars of displacement**

Halima\* moved to the camp with her family in 2008, fleeing violence that rocked Somalia then. They lived in the camp for seven years but had to return to Somalia when she heard that her husband had been arrested by the insurgent Al Shabaab. The husband had returned to Somalia earlier to prepare for their return, which they had planned for, owing to the voluntary repatriation exercise that was ongoing.

“Some people who came back from Somalia told me that he had been arrested. I had to take my family and go back. He had a nice building and was running a business,” she says.

They did not even stay a day when they were abducted by Al Shabaab. “They took me and my children and locked us up for a month. They continuously tortured and raped me and my children,” she bursts into tears. “We were released after a month when our health had deteriorated, but we escaped then and returned to the camp.”

Living in the camp since then hasn’t been easy for her, as some people had come to the camp who knew about her ordeal and started speaking ill of her and her children. “People call me a prostitute and insult my children, I can’t easily associate with people,” she says.

She has had to move houses every few months, living in rental houses in the camp. Despite this, she says life must go on. “I still have to provide for my family,” she says. She volunteers for one of the organisations in the camp, creating awareness about torture, rape and early marriage. Being good at the culinary arts, she is also often engaged to prepare meals during weddings in the camp, which gets her some additional income.

For more than three years now, Halima is being managed for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at the mental health clinic of MSF’s hospital in Dagahaley since she returned from Somalia. Her eldest daughter, now 16, is also goes for psychosocial support at the clinic. “It has been a struggle for Sowdo\*,” Halima says of her eldest child, “she has never recovered from the trauma she faced then, and this has affected her daily life and even performance in school.”

Despite being 16, Sowdo is currently in the second grade, same as her eight-year-old sister, though she goes to a special school in the camp. “While in school she is just okay, but when she leaves, other children make fun of her, calling her foolish for being in Grade 2,” Halima says.

Halima heard of the plans to close the camp over the radio, news that she says bothered her for a while. “I don’t have any hope of going back to Somalia. When I hear that name, I picture my children in their graves and it breaks my heart,” she says. “I’d go anywhere else that they take me, but not Somalia.”

“I always think of positive things in my life and try not to dwell on the challenges I face in life,” she says of the challenges she faces in life.

Halima lives with five children in the camp, two who were born in the camp. Her youngest is eight and they all go to school in the camps. She heads the parents, teachers’ association (PTA) for the school where Sowdo goes to, a position of responsibility bestowed upon her for being resilient and shown good example as a parent.

She still doesn’t know what will become of her husband, but she hopes he will be released soon. She says they abductors demanded USD 3,000 to release him – an amount she is not able to raise.

**Halima\* 33, RETURNEE FROM SOMALIA**

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**Healthcare for survival**

Twenty-year-old Idilo and two other siblings were born in Dagahaley. Her mother fled Somalia to the camp in 1992, coming with two of her siblings. Idilo and six of her siblings were born in the camp.

Idilo was first diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes in 2009 when she was in grade 6. Her mother says she would go to the toilet frequently, would complain of dizziness and even faint sometimes. She took Idilo to the hospital in Dagahaley and was told she had diabetes. “I was shocked!” Her mother exclaims.

She was admitted for a few weeks and would later be taught how to inject insulin by herself. Before being taught to self-inject, her mother would take her to the emergency unit every morning and evening for injections. “This was quite hectic. But then were both also taught how to monitor for low and high blood sugar,” her mother says.

“I started injecting myself the moment we were introduced into the program,” Idilo says. “I inject every morning and evening and take note of the readings on my glucometer, which I record in the booklet I was given at the hospital.”

“When my insulin is almost depleted, I go back to hospital with this book, my portable cooling box clutched on by side,” Idilo says.

“When I was young, I used to help my family to do chores around the house, but since I got tested, I cannot do much: I get tired too fast. I can however still bath the kids and do the laundry. I used to cook but I am still afraid of cooking as I could fall into the fire,” she says.

Idilo is married with three children, and is currently nine months pregnant with a fourth child.

**Child with Chronic Heart Condition**

Idilo’s five-year-old son was diagnosed with congenital heart disease more than four years ago. While the diagnosis was made, they have been waiting for more than two years for the child to see a specialist. “MSF called us but there seems to be a problem. They said they would call us when the doctors at MSF are ready – that was in early 2019, we are still waiting,” she says.

While they continue waiting, the child’s growth and development remains inhibited as he is not able to play as much as other children. His stunted growth is also something his parents attribute to this. He looks younger than his three-year-old sister. “He is just on medication, but he needs more than this. When he plays, he complains of chest pains. He also coughs and vomits a lot, and he doesn’t eat,” Idilo says. “As he grows, he gets better at expressing himself and explaining how he feels.”

Despite this, Idilo says she faces a lot of stigma from other refugees who say she is pretending about her condition. “When I find a queue at the water point, I usually request not to stand for too long as I would otherwise pass out on the line but people think I am only pretending to get undue advantage over them,” she says.

**IDILO BORO AMIIN, 20 – PATIENT OF HOME-BASED INSULIN PROGRAM**

***“My biggest worry is how to get insulin for my daughter”***

“I heard about the calls to close the camp through small talk by mothers while waiting in line at the UNHCR gate when I had gone to pick my grandkid’s birth certificate, borne to one of my daughters. It has caused a lot of fear and uncertainty. We are seriously worried, whether it’s true or not. When you have a patient like my daughter who is dependent on insulin, how will she get them in Somalia?” Idilo’s mother posits.

Idilo however says going back to Somalia is not an option for her. “What am I really ‘going back’ to? I don’t know a thing about Somalia, my whole life I’ve only known Dagahaley. My biggest worry, however, remains how I’ll get my insulin,” Idilo says.

“Somalia is my motherland and I have no option but to go back if it comes to that. I am not sure though if we’ll be able to get the kind of services we get here such as education, healthcare, water among others. Here MSF calls to check on the status of my daughter, for which I am grateful. However, the food we get here is not fit for human consumption, the only thing we can say is meaningful is the oil and soap,” Idilo’s mother adds, bringing out the pulses she received as part of the general food distribution.

“One thing I can say we get adequately in the camp is security. We feel quite safe here and have no issues. Water is also in good supply and the sanitation is okay. Not much has changed in my life over the years besides the family I have. However, Bamba Chakula by WFP is what is sustaining out lives, we can buy sugar, flour and others to substitute these pulses, which we would otherwise only eat as a last resort.

***Idilo’s Mother – Isnina Abdullahi Bare***

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***I had to stay because I wasn’t sure if I could get insulin in Somalia***

She smiles softly, her perfectly-aligned teeth showing. For a 10-year-old, she moves with confidence, and welcomes us to their home, her father standing next to her. Two mud-walled structures stand adjacent to each other at the centre of the compound, which is fenced by dried-up sticks.

This has been their home since 2017, when they relocated from Ifo 2, which was closed after a mass return of refugees to Somalia through a voluntary repatriation exercise spearheaded by UNHCR. Habiba was diagnosed with diabetes in 2017, just before the camp closed. Her father, Dahir Rage, had enlisted for repatriation, but changed his plans after she was diagnosed with diabetes. “I was ready to go back [to Somalia] but when she was found with this condition, I had to stay because I wasn’t sure if I could get insulin in Somalia,” he says.

Prior to being diagnosed with diabetes, Habiba would fall sick often and lost a lot of weight. For a child her size, it can be difficult to picture her losing any weight. She was admitted for two weeks in Ifo 2 for treatment then put on insulin.

“During the closure, I was given an option to either settle in Ifo or Dagahaley, but I chose Dagahaley because I have some relatives here who told me that MSF had good services for people with conditions similar to hers,” Dahir says. “So I brought my whole family here.”

“In Ifo 2, I would take her to the hospital every morning and evening for her insulin jab, but when we got here, we were trained by MSF on how to conduct blood sugar test, inject insulin and keep record of readings in a special book for better follow ups,” he says. “we were also taught the signs and symptoms of low and high blood sugar levels and how to manage them.” Habiba was also trained and can take record of readings in the glucometer, and injects herself with insulin.

“I was afraid of injecting myself at first, but these days I am used to it and no longer feel afraid,” Habiba says, smiling.

“When she was found with diabetes, me and my wife were also tested and history profiles taken. When we were told that she’d have to inject insulin for the rest of her life, my heart sunk. A deep sadness engulfed me, being that the camp was also being closed. Where would I get the medicine she needs, would I be able to afford it? Many questions ran through my mind that I could not answer,” Dahir says.

Despite her age, Habiba’s father is yet to take her to school. “In Ifo 2, she was too young to go to school and here the school is far and I am afraid that she might get hypoglycaemia (low blood sugar) along the way and fall down. I have however taken her to *Duksi* (Muslim Quran classes) where she has learnt to also read and write,” Dahir says.

Dahir fled to Dadaab after a drought that had swept Somalia in 2011 had killed all his livestock and his family was struggling to survive. They settled in Ifo 2 where they stayed until it was closed. He was the only one among his siblings who came to Dadaab. “It was the nearest place I could get to that I was sure I could get refuge from. The communities that lived here and those from Jubbaland were the same and some of my relatives were also here already, so coming here was the best option for me,” he says.

Dahir is the sole breadwinner for the family. He has nine children, one lives with his mother in Somalia. Habiba was five months old when they came to Dadaab; he had four other children in the camp. In order to survive in the camp, he does all manner of jobs he’s able to find including fetching firewood using donkey carts, though he says he is a skilled builder and that he built the house they live in by himself.

He says Habiba is quite responsible and helps with chores around the house. She fetches water from a tap stand about 50 metres away every morning and if they need some more in the afternoon, rolling the filled jerrycan to their home. “At this time of Ramadhan, she prepares Iftar in the kitchen, and can even do some cleaning around the compound. Though I am worried about her, being a child, she likes sweet things and this doesn’t go well with her condition. I get concerned when she’s far from me,” he says.

**Plans to close Refugee Camps**

“I heard about those plans on the radio. This is not the first time we hear such calls being made – in 2016 it was the same and back then I was ready to go back to Somalia. I had even enlisted for repatriation. I am not too worried because we are under the protection of UNHCR and I know that they will do what’s best for us. So when the time comes and it reaches that point where we have to get back to Somalia, we’ll see what to do. Somalia is my motherland and there’s no country I love more than my own, but my child’s condition is what worries me. I however don’t have any option but to do what UNHCR will say. If I had an option, I would ask to be resettled to a third country,” Dahir says.

“The services we get in the camp including healthcare, water, and education are good. The food, however, is too little and some of the foods provided such as sorghum require additional ingredients to be palatable.

I don’t face too many challenges that I can say, everything else is good. The security within the camp is also good,” Dahir says.

**HABIBA DAHIR ISSACK, 10 – ON HOME BASED INSULIN PROGRAM**

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**Fearing return to Somalia**

Mohamed Ali Koriyo is a new patient being managed for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – a mental health condition that's triggered by a terrifying event — either experiencing it or witnessing it – at the MSF hospital in Dagahaley.

Mohamed went back to Somalia under the voluntary repatriation program by UNHCR in 2016. While he would have preferred resettlement, he claims an impostor stole his identity and took his place for resettlement to the US.

Some of his friends then started inciting him to sign up for voluntary repatriation to Somalia. He consulted his family members and sought to take the token provided by UNHCR to refugees enlisted for repatriation, with the hopes of starting a business in Somalia.

Their ailing mother also wanted to go back to Somalia, which made this decision easier for him. They left together but the mother would later die in Somalia.

“After UNHCR gave us the token, they took us up to the border then left us there. We took private vehicles from Liboi. On the way, we met Al Shabaab militants took me but left my wife and kids to go. They would later release me after paying USD 100. It’s like they knew that people going for repatriation are given money and they ask for a share of it,” Mohamed says.

He was released after two days, then he went and joined his family in Mogadishu. “We got a house for rent then I bought a donkey and started a business,” he says. “In four years, my business had grown and I had opened a retail shop where I sold foodstuff and even bought my own house.”

Mohamed says his woes started in 2020 when he was arrested by the Somali government and jailed for one week “for no reason.” His family contributed money which they paid to bail him out. Four days later, he was arrested again. “This time, the armed people shot around my house and forcefully looted things from my shop. I was released two days later, with nothing to come back home to except my family. I got depressed but tried to pick myself up. I was thankful that my family was not harmed. A few weeks later, armed people came back, pulled me out of my house, covered my eyes and took me away. I would later learn that on that same day, they threw my family outside and demolished my house with a bulldozer. My family did not know where I was and neither did I. The people beat me up, held me hostage for close to 10 days and left me for dead in the forest. I woke up in a hospital in Kismayu. Some people who had goon looking for firewood had found me in the forest.”

Some of Mohamed’s relatives heard about this and went to see him at the hospital in Kismayu. One of his sisters, who lives in Somalia went to support his children as his wife went to tend to him at the hospital. Mohamed’s younger sister, Hawa, who lives in Dagahaley camp wanted them to be brought back to the camp “They said his condition was not good, and considering his young children, I told my sister to bring them to the camp where they would be safe and go to school,” says Hawa. “When they returned from Somalia, I took them all in and built a small mud house for them inside my compound in the camp.”

“But after some time, he started fighting with my family. I got him out of there and rented a place for him within the camp, but even there, he fights with neighbours, who now want him gone. I don’t know where else to take him,” Hawa, 35, says, looking at Mohamed. Mohamed looks back at her, and doesn’t say a word.

Mohamed lives his life in so much fear that he stays awake every night and only sleeps during the day. He has also refused to take his children to school. “There could be cameras in those *Duksis* (muslim class) where people can watch them. I live my life in fear, I know the people are now looking for me, trying to find where I am. I chew *miraa* (khat) every time to stay alert, lest the find me asleep. My neighbours don’t like me and neither do I them,” Mohamed says. Hawa smirks.

“I am worried about the children; they are just hanging around doing nothing all day. I can’t take them because he will fight me,” Hawa says. “I’d like to take them to school but he doesn’t want that.”

But Mohamed wasn’t always like this, his sister says. “He was okay before, but since he came back from Somalia, he is like a different person all together,” Hawa says. “Whatever happened to him in Somalia broke him. He is gone. He has lost his mind.”

“My brain is fried, I know, but I am not mad. I can perceive situations instantly and react,” eyes wide open, the innocence in Mohamed’s voice as he says this is almost comical.

Hawa says that since Mohamed came, he hasn’t been able to access any services from UNHCR. “His [ration] card was deactivated, they can only access water and healthcare services in the camp,” she says.

**Camp closure**

“We only heard on the radio that there were plans to close the camp. I don’t know about him, but myself I can’t go back there unless they force me to,” Hawa says.

“Who?” Mohamed interjects, “there’s no way I am stepping a foot back into Somalia.”

Hawa continues: “If they decide for us to stay in peace here like we have, it would be good also for our children to grow. I am happy to get resettled, even now I am just waiting for a flight to the UK as we are on the resettlement pipeline. If all else fails, I’d rather integrate locally than go back to Somalia.” Hawa was six when her parents fled Somalia in 1992. She has 10 children – all born in the camp.

“I feel safe in the camp, it’s quite peaceful here, though I hope my resettlement process is expedited,” she adds.

Hawa says she washes clothes for people in the camp to get some extra income to supplement the provisions she gets from the aid agencies in the camps. “I get health services from MSF and other support from UNHCR – I really appreciate your services, but I hope you get some help for him,” she says, pointing at Mohamed. “Even I can’t help him, yet he can’t help himself, I don’t know what to do.”

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***If the refugees leave, we’ll also have to leave because we can’t survive***

Mohamed lives with his wife and four children in the camp.

Mohamed was among the first two Kenyan families to start living in Dagahaley. “Before me, there was only the chief. At that time there were numerous challenges but now they are resolved,” he says.

He briefly narrates how he witnessed the kidnapping of two MSF staff in Dagahaley that occurred in 2011: “I was in danger that day: one of the attackers came to my home as they were trying to escape. I was in the area with the two ladies. At that time, I thought these were local men trying to disturb the staff. They were five in total – four others were waiting on the other side. After 15 minutes, the others came and pointed guns at their heads, and also threatened to kill me. That’s when I knew that this wasn’t a joke. The MSF driver was shot and they left with the MSF vehicle. I have never been so scared in my life. I lived in fear for the two months that followed, thinking they might reappear.”

Besides a few incidences that occurred in the few years that followed, security has greatly improved.

We have lived together with these refugees for 30 years. When they first came, we had lots of issues as we did not know them then. This was a huge forest before and we had huge droves of animals, the only challenge then was finding water. Some people had thousands of animals that having 300 heads of cattle was considered being poor. Despite that, there wasn’t as much drought as we have now. The massive deforestation that took place when the refugees came was like nothing I’ve ever seen. We were pastoralists, but now we have had to shift tact a bit. Even though UNHCR planted trees, what they planted is dangerous to animals.

The population then was also quite sparse, now the population is high. Though we appreciate as there is a market now and amenities have been put up. It’s like a town now. We all understand each other and have no problems. We don’t know the problem that our government has with the refugees, but for us we are okay. We conduct business together, share animals, and the market is booming as we all run our businesses together. We have also intermarried a lot with refugees, we go to the schools in the camp and have a good relationship with them.

I am aware of the discussions between the government and UNHCR to close the camp by June 2022. I also heard on the radio about MSF asking for refugees not to be forced out of the camps.

A person who was born here as a refugee when the camp was set up is now 30 years old. We urge the government not to force these people back to Somalia, which remains insecure. If UNHCR is tired of feeding refugees, then that’s a problem on their side and they should say so, not blame refugees. The refugees have been supported for a long time and we’ve seen the services shrink over time: the food, the other humanitarian services. They are tired.

We are not happy about these calls by the government to close the camp. If the refugees leave, this place will turn into a forest. It seems we’ll also have to leave because we can’t survive here without access to water and the other services that we enjoy now.

The refugees have been hosted here in kindness for 30 years. Forcing them out would not paint a good picture, even for us. Return should be voluntary and gradual, they shouldn’t be forced out.

We only learnt of the decision to close the camp through the media; nobody consulted us. No elders or security folks in the host community were consulted. The government just decided that now they will close the camp. I we had issues with the [refugees], we’d have reported. Right now you can move safely in the camp: no security threats.

The government says they want to close the camo because of insecurity, but if you observe keenly, insecurity is worse in other parts of Kenya where there are no refugees. Look at Mandera, Lamu, Ijara and others. The insecurity in these places is bad, yet there are no refugees there. The camp is safe.

This could be as a result of diplomatic tussles between Kenya and Somalia, and refeugees used as pawns in their fight. Being seen to be forcefully chasing them may actually lead to more issues for us. I don’t know where these problems that the government saw are from, because in case of any incidences, we are usually the first to be contacted to share our views, but there haven’t been any.

We are also agents of peace – we have pastoralists moving around the outskirts of the camps who are part of our family. They are always on the lookout for any unusual movements out there and notify us.

Since MSF is here to help refugees, will they stay to serve the host community once the refugees leave?

When MSF came, we are the ones who welcomed them with open arms, but it seems MSF is tired of staying in the camp and want to leave. They are no longer sharing information with us, or to involve us in some of the things and decisions they make. The relationship should improve.

We should work together with MSF as we need each other. It has been the best compared to the other organisations.”

**MOHAMED NOOR MOHAMED, 58 (KENYAN) – LEADER OF THE HOST COMMUNITY IN DAGAHALEY**