

Egyptian police kill at least 20 Sudanese protesters

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On December 30, Egyptian riot police brutally attacked a crowd of Sudanese refugees protesting outside the offices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Cairo, killing at least 20, and possibly as many as 30, while injuring scores of others.

Around 2,000 refugees and asylum-seekers from Sudan had been camped for the past three months, many of them sleeping in the open, in Mustafa Mahmoud square, Mohandiseen—an upper-middle-class suburb of the capital where the UNHCR has an office. They were protesting the treatment they suffer in Egypt and seeking resettlement in another country.

In September the UNHCR stopped hearing the cases of Sudanese asylum-seekers. The demonstration began after the UNHCR stopped aid to those who had applied and failed to get refugee status. The UN insists the decision is a result of the signing in January of an official peace accord that formally ended Sudan's 21-year civil war, even though many asylum-seekers have said they are in severe danger of being tortured or executed for treason if sent back to Sudan. A separate conflict in the western region of Darfur has displaced some 2 million people and left tens of thousands dead.

The UNHCR announced last week that it had reached a deal with some of the protest leaders, promising to resume hearing some cases and offering a one-off payment of up to \$700 (£406) for housing. Most of those in the camp rejected the deal. Those refugees who are receiving some UN support complain that it is inadequate.

In the early hours of December 30 thousands of Egyptian riot police deployed around the ramshackle camp. After a standoff that lasted several hours, the protesters dismantled their camp, made mostly of cardboard and plastic sheeting, but most refused to be led away onto the awaiting buses. While negotiations between police and protesters were still ongoing, the security forces began firing water cannon and then

invaded the camp en masse. Thousands of police wielding truncheons attacked the protesters from all directions.

A reporter for the Associated Press (AP) witnessed police attacking the refugees with truncheons and said that in many cases they continued to beat the protesters even as they were being dragged away. The reporter saw two adults and a four-year-old girl being carried away unconscious. A medical worker in an ambulance said the girl was dead. One protester dragged away by two policemen was clubbed with a tree branch about the size of a man's arm by a third officer.

Officials said that 25 protesters died and an interior ministry statement said 50 more were injured, "mostly elderly and children." The statement said 75 police were also injured.

The interior ministry blamed the violence on the protesters. "Attempts were made to persuade them to disperse, but to no avail," it alleged. "The migrants' leaders resorted to incitement and attacks against the police." According to the ministry, the casualties among protesters resulted from a stampede.

The AP reporter said he saw no stampede and that the protesters could not flee because the camp was completely encircled by police. "Protesters could be seen fighting back with long sticks that appeared to be supports for makeshift tents," the reporter wrote.

Officials at the South Centre—a Sudanese human rights monitoring group—said 1,280 protesters were forced onto buses and taken to three camps outside Cairo.

Witnesses said the refugees, including women and small children, were dragged towards buses as they tried to resist leaving the camp. "They want to kill us," shouted one protester. "Our demands are legitimate, it is our right to protest here, the only right we have."

One of the Sudanese asylum-seekers, Napoleon Roberts, told the BBC's "Focus on Africa" programme that he had been taken to a barracks south of the capital and was

being held with about 1,700 others in disgusting conditions. “We’ve been kept here since morning in disgust, and no water for drinking and no bathroom ... people are staying still with their wounds on their bodies,” he told the BBC programme.

Roberts explained, “The UNHCR offers an integration programme, but with no houses, no education, no work. We have been eating beans for weeks.”

In November, Roberts—whose wife is one of the women to have given birth during the sit-in—risked his life by jumping over security guards to reach the car of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, who was visiting Cairo at the time, to hand over a letter asking to be resettled in a Western country.

“It is our right under the 1951 Geneva Convention to seek asylum in a country that can afford to host us,” he said.

The desperation and resolve of the protesters have been well known to the authorities. Since the three-month sit-in began, seven demonstrators have died, three babies have been born, four women have suffered miscarriages and many have gone on hunger strike, vowing to continue until death.

New York-based Human Rights Watch said, “The high loss of life suggests the police acted with extreme brutality,” and has called on Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to “urgently” appoint an independent commission to investigate the use of force.

UNHCR spokeswoman in Geneva, Antonio Guterres, said, “We’re very shocked and saddened by what’s transpired. There is no justification for such violence and loss of life.”

But the UN was eager to wash its hands once more of the Sudanese refugees. The police action in Cairo followed the UNHCR’s urging of the Egyptian authorities to “resolve” the obviously embarrassing issue of the refugee protest outside its offices.

Commenting on the refugees’ plea to the UN to be resettled, Guterres said “[resettlement] is not really in UNHCR’s gift—it’s dependent on a third country agreeing to take them. We tried to maintain a dialogue with the protesters and there were several mediation attempts. What they seem to be saying is that conditions for them are tough in Egypt, but they are not in danger of being sent back [to Sudan]. They can work in Egypt and have education.”

The UNHCR’s Layla Jane Nassif in Cairo said, “I think that what will happen is very much up to them [the demonstrators]. We have been trying hard to work with

them to make clear what we can and cannot do in terms of their concerns.” She added that it was not always clear whether all those camped out were Sudanese or “other opportunists.”

There has been a marked difference in the coverage of the Cairo events in the Egyptian and Sudanese press. The mainly state-owned Egyptian media was sympathetic to the police and largely blamed the protesters, seeking to encourage popular hostility towards the refugees and asylum-seekers.

In contrast, the *Khartoum Monitor* wrote, “This is a very sorrowful end for a people who fled their own country’s frying pan only to fall into Egypt’s fire. The inappropriate use of brutal force was uncalled for and appallingly inhuman.”

Al-Adwa pointed to the complicity of the government in Sudan:

“The Sudanese government is wrong if it thinks that it is not responsible for this and it is astonishing that it has not issued an official statement about the incident. Those who died are Sudanese citizens and the government is responsible for their safety, even if they were under UN protection.”

Although only 30,000 Sudanese people are registered as refugees in Egypt, it is estimated that 2-5 million refugees from Sudan are thought to have fled to Egypt—only to face officially sanctioned discrimination in a country already suffering from poverty, official unemployment of 25 percent and inadequate social services. Photographs of Sudanese refugees who have allegedly disappeared or been killed in Egypt were displayed around the Cairo camp.

Three years ago, Egyptian police rounded up hundreds of Africans in what, according to Human Rights Watch, was referred to in a police document as “Operation Track Down Blacks.”



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