

# The hard lessons of Kakuma

Author: David Hollenbach

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/2764>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),  
Boston College University Libraries.

---

Published in *America*, vol. , pp. 13-15, February 2004

These materials are made available for use in research, teaching and private study, pursuant to U.S. Copyright Law. The user must assume full responsibility for any use of the materials, including but not limited to, infringement of copyright and publication rights of reproduced materials. Any materials used for academic research or otherwise should be fully credited with the source. The publisher or original authors may retain copyright to the materials.

# The Hard Lessons of Kakuma

*The suffering of refugees should raise new questions about the use of military force.* BY DAVID HOLLENBACH

**Y**OU WILL NOT FIND KAKUMA on most world maps. It is a small town in northwestern Kenya, located in the desert where anthropologists hypothesize the human race began. Twelve years ago, the Kenyan government picked the area for use as a refugee camp. Today Kakuma has 80,000 refugees.

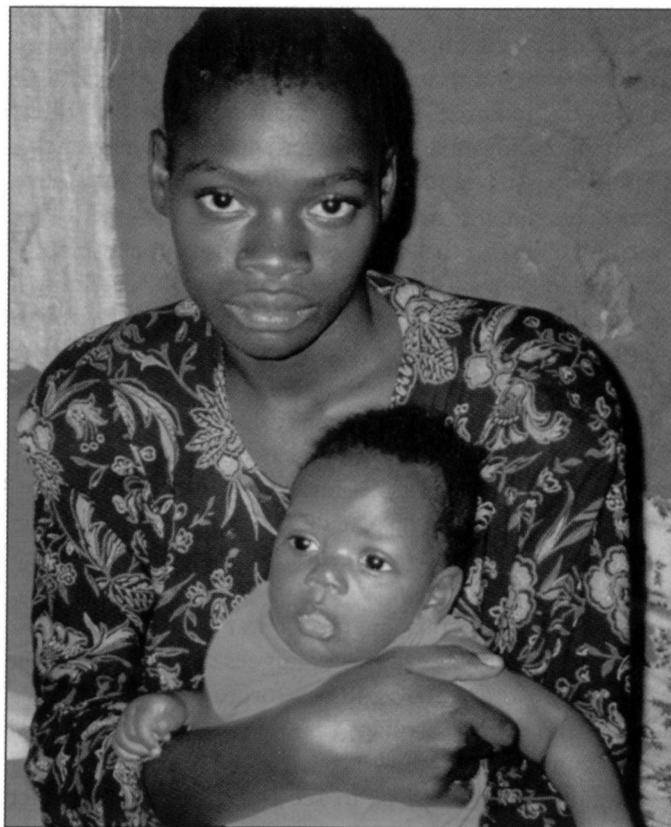
The largest group at Kakuma are Sudanese who are fleeing the civil war in Sudan between the Muslim north and the south, where Christianity and traditional African religions predominate. Other groups include Somalis displaced by conflict among clan warlords, as well as Ethiopians and Eritreans driven from their homes by struggles over independence, ideology and borders. Some are Ugandans trying to protect their sons from abduction as child soldiers and their daughters as sex slaves by the Lord's Resistance Army, an apocalyptic movement based on bizarre interpretations of Christianity and African traditions. Smaller groups from other African countries have been driven to Kakuma by genocide, ethnic conflict and ongoing civil and interstate war linked with exploitation of natural resources.

In early October I visited Kakuma and participated in a workshop on peacebuilding with about 100 refugees who have become co-workers in the pastoral, social service and educational ministries in the camp carried out by the Jesuit Refugee Service. Here are some of the lessons I learned from the refugees about war and peace.

*The material and spiritual sufferings of displaced people are among the gravest evils caused by war today.* The 80,000 people at Kakuma are very poor; indeed, most have virtually nothing. Many children have been separated from their families. The Jesuit Refugee Service maintains a "safe haven" for women who face sexual abuse and rape, since camp life is marked by the breakdown of values that ordinarily govern human relationships. Refugee children will be educated in the camp or not at all, and the possibility of any education

---

**DAVID HOLLENBACH, S.J.**, is the Flatley Professor of Theology at Boston College; during fall 2003 he was a visiting professor at Hekima College of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa in Nairobi, Kenya.



A teenage mother at the Jesuit Refugee Service "safe haven" in the refugee camp in Kakuma, Kenya.

beyond the primary level is slim. J.R.S. seeks to respond to these educational needs, but can help only a small percentage of the young people living there. In such circumstances, the temptation to give up is very real. To be a refugee is to be in dire straits, both materially and spiritually.

The story is, of course, bigger than Kakuma. The United States Refugee Committee estimates that there are 34.8 million uprooted people in the world today, a large proportion of whom are the victims of violent conflicts. These conflicts are increasingly civil or intrastate wars, fought over ethnic or religious identity. Wars between states, however, have not vanished from the scene, as the conflicts between NATO and Serbia and the U.S.-U.K. clash with Saddam Hussein make clear. In both intrastate and interstate wars, civilians increasingly pay the price: loss of their homes, separation of

families, violence to women, stunted educations, injury, even death. Most radically, they suffer the loss of hope. The conditions under which people live at Kakuma speak volumes about the evil of war in our day.

*Judgments about the morality of war must pay much closer attention to harm done to innocent people displaced from their homes than has been common in past ethical assessments.* The just war norm of proportionality calls for the harm done by the use of military force to be no greater than the evil the war seeks to overcome, and the principle of noncombatant immunity requires that civilians not be directly attacked. It is common in ethical discussions to measure proportionality in terms of the number of people killed or wounded. Similarly, noncombatant immunity is often understood to mean immunity from death-dealing attacks. This focus on lives lost and on whether these lives have been taken intentionally is surely important. But it can overlook the harm that comes to refugees who continue to survive, but who do so in severely diminished conditions. In a world where 35 million people live in conditions like those in Kakuma, judgments of proportionality and noncombatant immunity must take their struggles into account. Other damage, besides death, can be seriously disproportionate to any legitimate goal of war. Innocent people should not be turned into refugees.

Today's wars have displaced millions of people. If we listen carefully to their voices, they can teach us to move from accepting forced migration as an unfortunate though necessary consequence of war to a moral vision that regards the suffering of refugees as a fundamental challenge to the use of military force. Human lives are stunted and even destroyed when people are driven into the Kakumas of this world.

Refugees can teach us to see the realities of conflict

with greater sensitivity to the full range of human suffering that wars actually cause. Thus they can also teach us about our duty to find alternatives to war.

*The hopes of refugees for peace are stronger than contemporary religious sources of conflict.* If religious believers listen carefully to refugees, faith communities could become more effective agents of peace. The actions of many of the refugees I met at Kakuma challenge Samuel Huntington's prediction that the 21st century will be marked by a religious struggle of Western Christianity versus Islam. There is little doubt that the civil war in Sudan has a Muslim-versus-Christian dimension, or that versions of Islam have been involved in terror attacks on U.S. and Israeli targets in eastern Africa.

But Islamic terrorists seemed far off as I listened to some of the refugees talk about their hopes for peace, hopes rooted in their faith. Abebe, an Ethiopian who has been in the camp for 12 years, held up a bottle of clear water and spoke eloquently about how all who are part of the conflicts that have created Kakuma—including the refugees themselves—need to clear their hearts of anger so they can become genuine agents of peace. Momba, a Muslim Somali who has worked with J.R.S. for six years, quoted the Koran to show that Muslims and Christians can work together for peace if they learn to listen to each other: "If they incline to peace, you also incline to it, and put your trust in Allah." Kalemi, a Christian Burundian woman of mixed Hutu and Tutsi ancestry, said her experience of ethnic conflict had convinced her that without peace there is no life. So today she works with Halima, a Somali Muslim woman, directing the J.R.S. educational program for young single mothers in the camp.

In short, these people are not living according to the clash-of-civilizations scenario. In Kakuma, religious believers are building peace and advancing human rights across boundaries that in some other places are battle lines. These refugees know that the god of any religion that causes wars and helps create places like Kakuma is not a god worthy of their worship. They have come to know that the true God desires peace and wants believers to become peacemakers.

*The dedication to peace by refugees from all sides of the conflicts represented in the camp shows that peace is achievable if the relevant actors can find the will and creativity to bring it about.* Kakuma is a microcosm of nearly all the conflicts that so



PHOTO COURTESY OF JESUIT REFUGEE SERVICE/EAST AFRICA

A refugee woman feeds ducks as part of the J.R.S. poultry project in Kakuma.

deeply divide Africa today. These conflicts have led some commentators to conclude that the continent is skidding off a cliff from the plateau of humane existence into a swamp of deepening poverty, cultural dysfunction and ethnic strife. In this view, rich countries like the United States should adopt what the Atlantic Monthly writer Robert Kaplan calls a “pagan ethos” of forthright pursuit of national self-interest toward the people at Kakuma and write them off as a lost cause.

But in fact, many in Kakuma are far from lost. Though few could be considered saints, the people are deeply engaged in social service, education and even religious ministries to one another that cut across the differences that often lead to violent conflict in their home countries. Whatever generates these conflicts—be it ethnicity, religion or straightforward lust for money and power—seems not to have the same effect upon some people after they have lived or worked at Kakuma for some time. Some have discovered in the camp a peaceful way to relate to those they were fighting at home.

How has all this happened? Perhaps enlightened self-interest has given them a firmer commitment to peace. This suggests that a wisely defined self-interest and strong engagement in building peace can in fact reinforce each other.

Such a convergence of self-interest and peace-building seems to be guiding the policies of governments in eastern

Africa and also the United States toward Sudan today. The 20-year civil war in Sudan has caused the deaths of over two million people and the forced displacement of another four million. There is hardly a better example of a country with which people leery of nation-building would want to avoid becoming involved. But concern about terrorism in Muslim eastern Africa has heightened the diplomatic and economic commitment of the United States to seeking peace in Sudan.

Contrary to the unilateralist propensities of President Bush’s foreign policy, the United States is now vigorously engaged in multilateral cooperation on Sudan with Kenya, other African nations and the United Nations. (Secretary of State Colin Powell traveled to Nairobi last year to encourage the various factions in their negotiations.) This multilateral initiative has brought about a major breakthrough in negotiations between the Sudanese government and the Sudanese rebels.

The Sudanese refugees at Kakuma spoke repeatedly of their hope that the preliminary agreement will result in lasting peace. Their remarkable courage to continue hoping for peace has much to teach us about war and peace today. Perhaps we can borrow some of this courage to work for a world where war turns fewer people into refugees and where there will be fewer places like the camp at Kakuma. 