

Refugees on the Senegal River

In July 2004, the Justice Initiative and the Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa visited a number of the Mauritanian refugee camps in Senegal (see previous article). The mission interviewed survivors of the 1989 deportations in order to build a coherent picture of the events of the time, which remain poorly understood. A small team collected affidavits and video testimony concerning the expulsions.

Photographs from four refugee camps—the Beylane camp in Thieko, Senegal, the Darousalaam camp at Ourosogui, and camps in Dagana and Ndioum—are reproduced in the following pages. These are accompanied by excerpts from interviews with refugees, capturing some of their experience in 1989 and since.¹ Both the persons quoted and those shown in these photographs remain stripped of their Mauritanian citizenship to this day. In Senegal, most of the refugees have no documentation other than an annually renewable “green card” providing for the “right to be recognized as a refugee.” As such, they are not eligible for government aid, health care or most public services. Public employment is difficult or impossible. The mud, wood, and clay accommodations seen in these camps are the work of the refugees’ own hands, built with the materials found on site. UNHCR support ended in 1994.

The Mauritanian government now officially claims that the refugees—or at least those who can “prove” they are Mauritanian—are welcome to return. Yet no steps have been taken to restore identification documents or to replace or compensate their confiscated and destroyed property and livestock. Almost without exception, the individuals interviewed by the Justice Initiative expressed a desire to return to Mauritania, their home. However, they said, there has been no indication that conditions had changed since their expulsion. They will not return without some assurance that their rights, their property and—primarily—their dignity will be restituted. The refugees’ children, born in Senegal, are eligible to become Senegalese citizens. But few of the refugees wish to take a step which would, in their view, make the deportation permanent, thereby rewarding the Mauritanian state’s action. Today, with their story largely forgotten and international inaction tending to indicate *de facto* acceptance of the official Mauritanian line that there “is no refugee problem,” the temporary conditions in which these individuals live look increasingly permanent.

Notes

1 The Justice Initiative acknowledges the valuable contributions of Aldiouma Cissokho, Samba Guissé, Moustapha Touré, and Mamadou Wann in interpreting and translating during and after the interviews.



At first, the land was used by us. Then white Moors were given the land by the state, and these people could decide what was for cultivation, who could do what, where, and for how long. This used to happen before, but it was only from 1981 that things became really difficult. A canal was built right through my family's land: we could not continue to work it.

Musa Alpha Ow, Darousalaam refugee camp, Oroussogui, Senegal

Among all the groups of blacks, there were no problems. But between the blacks and the Moors, there was discrimination. For example, my younger sister completed four years of secondary school. At the time, this should have been enough for her to get a job. But she couldn't get one. Yet I saw people, white Moors, who I'd never seen in school, getting jobs in dispensaries, or teaching Arabic. I used to think that this situation was only in my hometown, Magama.

Fatimata Bocar Gueye, Darousalaam refugee camp, Oroussogui, Senegal



The white Moors acted like they were kings. They used to bring their camels to graze on the territory belonging to our people. Or they would kill our animals—our sheep and our cows—for food. And if we complained, they'd hit us. We often resisted, and sometimes fights broke out. But there was little else we could do. The state never intervened.

Beya Diaw, Beylane refugee camp, Thieko, Senegal

Life was not easy between the Peuls, Moors and Haratines even before 1989. Fougheleita was the very heart of discrimination. Moors could come and visit you in your room and say, “leave this room, it belongs to my grandfather,” even though you had been living there all your life.

Ibrahima Sy, Darousalaam refugee camp, Oroussogui, Senegal



One day at the beginning of Ramadan in 1989 we saw Senegalese traders who lived in the town being beaten by Moors. We asked, "Why are you attacking the Senegalese?" The Moors told us, "The Senegalese have been killing our relatives in Senegal."

Mamouna Galo Diallo, Ndioum refugee camp, Senegal

In the month of May, on Khorité, the Haratines went looking for Senegalese and started killing them. This was happening in the area of Thiarka, a fisherman's quarter in Noadhibou inhabited mostly by blacks. I saw two Senegalese who were chased in the streets by Haratines and beaten until one of them died. The hospitals were full, and there weren't enough doctors. The doctors refused to attend to the blacks. The rooms were closed but one could see the blood running on the verandas.

Hamath Mamadou, Dagana refugee camp, Senegal



A week later, the next Thursday we returned to Rosso. Things were chaotic. A group of Haratines and white Moors stopped us and told us to get out of the car. Groups of people started putting all sorts of goods into the car, which they had taken from the houses nearby. A Wolof colleague of mine was in the car. The group pulled him out and chased him with sticks, hitting him across the head. He died there in front of me. We all ran and tried to escape. The driver and I went back to the rooms we were renting and locked the doors shut.

Musa Alpha Ow, Darousalaam refugee camp, Oroussogui, Senegal

Gangs started roaming the city, going into every compound. If they saw blacks, they attacked with sticks or bars of iron or machetes or whatever they could find. They beat and even killed people. This happened in every neighborhood in Nouakchott. The security forces—the army, police and gendarmes—were present, but did nothing to stop the violence. They just went around in their vehicles picking up the dead and wounded.

Ndiougou Kane, Dagana refugee camp, Senegal



They collected all of our identity cards and confiscated them. They made a list of all the families in the village. That day they deported a teacher who was in the village although it was not his home. They put him in a car and drove him to the river—he was taken across to Podor in Senegal.

Beya Diaw, Beylane refugee camp, Thieko, Senegal

They asked me for my carte d'identité and ripped it up in front of me and put it in a bucket. The same thing happened to everyone who came into the Commissariat.

Musa Alpha Ow, Darousalaam refugee camp, Oroussogui, Senegal

I participated in other missions to expel people, more than I can count. I was always the interpreter. They would ask families, "Where are your papers?" and if the people didn't understand French, I would translate. I also had to translate the commander saying, "You are going to Senegal. Don't come back."

Mbodj Hamidine Siley, Darousalaam refugee camp, Oroussogui, Senegal



At the end of the eighth day they gathered all the men, and loaded them into trucks. When the men had been taken away, they came back for the women. These were the great big yellow open-air trucks used for carrying animals. People were packed into the trucks like animals, as many as they could fit, even people who were sick or hurt. There were about 100 persons crammed into the truck I was in.

Houleye Alpha Ba, Ndioum refugee camp, Senegal

The next day, a Wednesday in the month of May, we were awakened early by the sound of cars arriving. When we looked out, we saw that the whole village was surrounded by Haratines. Two policemen arrived and national guards entered ten houses, including mine. Everyone else was told to go back to their homes and close the doors. The two gendarmes, armed with rifles, then marched ten families down to the river. My brother and I, and our wives and children, were in the first ten families. I had six children, my brother had four.

Beya Diaw, Beylane refugee camp, Thioko, Senegal



We were brought by the police to the airport from the Commissariat in a black police van, which carries 26 persons. The van was driving non-stop back and forth from the airport bringing black Mauritians and Senegalese.

Hamath Mamadou, Dagana refugee camp, Senegal

Once I was there they made me enter a room and they took everything I still had of any value. My necklaces, and my bracelets, even my protective charms which I wear around my waist. They took whatever we had on us. They undressed people and made people undress in front of their fathers and family. It was extremely humiliating.

Houleye Alpha Ba, Ndioum refugee camp, Senegal

They took the cows, the sheep, the goats, the millet grinder, the cloth in the house. They put some things on a flatbed truck. They drove the animals on foot, in a herd. They were shouting at us, "You're not from here."

Mamouna Galo Diallo, Ndioum refugee camp, Senegal



There were people tortured. Someone living in this very camp, Abdoul Dianga Ndiaye, was beaten until he was paralyzed. I saw everything, but I couldn't do anything, I was under orders. Sometimes I refused to chain people who were being detained. Once I unchained two Senegalese boys who escaped. Sometimes I managed to warn people when I learned they were going to be expelled.

Mbodj Hamidine Siley, Darousalaam refugee camp, Oroussogui, Senegal

On the Senegalese side of the river, we stood there and saw women and children from the village being marched to the river on the far side. As they loaded them into the boats, they ripped off the women's earrings, took their bracelets and their rings. Some of the women's ears were torn in this process. And if they were wearing beautiful cloth, it was stripped off them.

Hamadi Malal, Beylane refugee camp, Thieko, Senegal

I was at the airport until 11 at night. Then my family arrived. We were brought to a military camp in Dakar, a barracks, with thousands of other Mauritians and their families.

Hamath Mamadou, Dagana refugee camp, Senegal



We were taken to Thiès and stayed in grain storage hangars. We were there for about six months. Finally, trucks brought us here to Dagana. When we came, there was nothing here but trees. We tried to construct houses out of straw.

Amiddine Sy, Dagana refugee camp, Senegal

We lived all our lives in the country of our ancestors. Then we lost everything we had. We had to come to a country where we didn't know anyone. We aren't Senegalese. The Senegalese here are in their own country: they can work, they can do whatever they want. But we aren't in our country. I never thought about getting Senegalese citizenship. But we can't continue living like this. I know our children will have problems. The children know they aren't Senegalese. Even the children who were born here are not treated like Senegalese.

Mamouna Galo Diallo, Ndioum refugee camp, Senegal



I can't vote, I can't work. People here in the camp try to cultivate land, to grow rice at the river to survive.

Amiddine Sy, Dagana refugee camp, Senegal

If I am to return I need to have my rights. First, they must recognize our land, and second, they must return to us the possessions which were taken. Everyone has rights, and we need those rights in order to be able to return. The possessions are important, but even more important is our dignity. My dignity means first that I feel safe and free.

Houleye Alpha Ba, Ndioum refugee camp, Senegal



I would like to return to Mauritania. But what I hear from there does not encourage me to. Some people from here went back. But nothing was restored to them, not their animals nor their houses, nor any documents. Some of them came back here.

Musa Alpha Ow, Darousalaam refugee camp, Oroussogui, Senegal

I have never tried to return to Mauritania. I want to. But in fifteen years we have never had a response from the Mauritanian government. A few people have obtained full refugee status, but not many. We say we want to return in an organized way, helped by the UNHCR and the international community. We want to have our citizenship back, and our rights. And we want to be able to return to our work and land with our dignity and security.

Hamath Mamadou, Dagana refugee camp, Senegal



Until things change I will not return. Nothing has changed that I have heard of. If I get back my rights I will return. Not without them. This means first of all my dignity. If I can have that, there is nothing more that I will need.

Beya Diaw, Beylane refugee camp, Thioko, Senegal

In Mauritania, we were happy. We had our animals and our fields. We were in our country. We didn't steal, we didn't kill anyone. How could they expel us? There is no reason we can think of. We still ask ourselves how the government could make such a decision.

Hamadi Malal, Beylane refugee camp, Thioko, Senegal

When you have lost everything that your parents worked for and that you owned and knew, that is really difficult. Someone in this situation has a lot to say—there are others close to me who have lived through this situation and are dead now and can't say anything. Those of us still living speak for them. We want justice to be done, and to return one day to our homes.

Houleye Alpha Ba, Ndioum refugee camp, Senegal