

A woman in a grey headscarf is smiling and looking towards the camera. She is holding a large, full white sack. In the background, several other people are visible, some wearing head coverings, in what appears to be an outdoor setting with a building and trees in the distance.

# No Place Like Home

by Barb Summers

Last night the wind whipped up into a frenzy and the tent where I sleep on the Dadaab staff compound seemed to lift off the ground. The insides alternated between ballooning out and suctioning in as I imagined I was about to be carried away. I clutched my pillow and wondered if this is how Dorothy felt before arriving in Oz. While I haven't landed in a magical kingdom of wizards and witches, I realize I've arrived in a strange new world.

Every day, nearly 1,300 Somali refugees flow into the camps surrounding the small town of Dadaab, Kenya. When program staff took me to the Ifo Extension refugee camp, a dust storm rolled in and we all clutched our notebooks and held our hats until the mini sand blizzard passed. Certainly, this is a dry, dusty place.

When the storm settled, it revealed a desert-like plain dotted with tents and ragged tukuls—the traditional Somali dome-shaped home made of branches and tarps. They are jammed in close together in plots measuring 10×12 metres, stretching out nearly as far as the eye can see over barren, rugged terrain. The few remaining trees have been hacked and butchered down into stubs in order to provide firewood for cooking.

At first glance, you might start to feel as desolate and bleak as the landscape. But let's be clear—this is not a place of despair.

I'm not sure how to begin to describe the refugee camps at Dadaab when I know you've watched the news reports and heard horrific stories of death and trauma. I've now visited the reception centres managed by PWS&D partners, Lutheran World Federation, and I could tell similar tales. People line up at the gates in tattered clothes with sunken eyes, emaciated, malnourished, and exhausted. There are graveyards that line the outskirts; some dedicated exclusively for children, who have died from malnutrition and disease. At the heavily guarded camp boundaries, people stream in with the few belongings they have left. You might think they would be battering at the gates, clamouring to get at the warehouses of food and supplies waiting for distribution inside. You might even think they would be violent, ready to do anything in order to receive attention and food.

It's actually very calm. The camp generator chugs along in the background like a helicopter perpetually flying off in the distance. People inside the camp shuffle through the sand as they move between stations with their ration cards. A baby cries at the vaccination centre. Every now



and then, a voice speaks out from a megaphone as a staff member speaks to new refugees about the process ahead.

It's all very organized and efficient. People arriving are quickly provided with water and high-energy biscuits, then led to a shaded waiting area for processing into a system that will identify family members, address health issues, and distribute clothing and supplies provided by a host of aid agencies. The camp's passionate and dedicated relief workers speak to people, deal with concerns, identify unique vulnerabilities, and treat people with the dignity and respect they deserve.

The grim pictures on the news are true: I have seen children that embody

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what a heartbreak must look like. I have looked into the eyes of people simply too tired to blink or react to the presence of a media crew that zooms in on them and videotapes the scene. I have watched people sit patiently in the sand and wait motionlessly for their turn to come while the blazing African sun scorches down on them.

However, while Somalis crossing into Kenya have made the difficult, but unavoidable decision to leave their homes for the sake of survival, they do not arrive totally empty-handed. They come with a dream of finding food, water, shelter—and ultimately, life.

See, despite all the obstacles before them, people have arrived. They are weary, worn and hungry, but they are here, and now the journey to recovery can begin.

I interviewed a woman today who recently moved into a tent at the new Ifo Extension camp after waiting two

months on the outskirts in a makeshift shelter. Habiba Ahmed told me that she travelled 15 days on foot from Somalia with her six children in order to get to Dadaab. Her children stared up at me, fascinated, with dirty, grubby faces, and runny noses. Habiba said she wished she had more food, more water, and a private latrine. But then she grinned and said, “I am happy here. In Somalia we didn’t have peace or food.” She said she likes the staff, who help her, and she’s incredibly grateful for all the assistance. For now, the camp is home.

There are many hurdles still to be overcome; the camps at Dadaab are temporary solutions to massive problems, but at least we take that first step, reaching out a hand to our brothers and sisters, providing shelter for those seeking a life of dignity with peace and food.

There’s no place like home.



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