

# The Sudanese Population in Egypt

DOREYA AWNY<sup>1</sup>

Egypt and the Sudan enjoy privileged relations at historical, geographic, sociological and strategic levels. Geographically, the Sudan is the prolongation of Egypt; Egyptian Nubia is the northern part of Sudanese Nubia, with the Nile as the obvious link. The Pharaohs unified both countries on several occasions; the Pharaohs from the North occupied the South before the black Pharaohs (the Kingdom of Kush) occupied Egypt in their turn. In fact, Egyptian civilization under the Pharaohs did not stop at Aswan; there are nearly three hundred pyramids in the Sudan, almost more than in Egypt. These relations continued and even deepened with the conquest of the Sudan by Mehemet Ali in 1821, the Turco-Egyptian period until 1881, and the Anglo-Egyptian occupation regime in 1899. These relations have never been broken since independence in 1956. This is partly due to the al-Azhar mosque and the Coptic Church; Sudanese students and intellectuals in Egypt, those at the Egyptian University in Khartoum, and businessmen also play a part.

There has been an intense two-way migration between the two countries for hundreds of years. The Sudanese go to Egypt to buy cereals but also to escape drought. The Egyptians buy wood, incense, gold and ivory from the Sudan. The borders, which were artificially fixed in the nineteenth century (at the 22nd parallel), remain porous, particularly in Wadi Halfa and on the Red Sea. Caravans move freely between the two countries along a 1273-km-long border (the Sudanese littoral on the Red Sea is 853 km long). Christianity and then Islam spread to Nubia and beyond from Egypt.

In 1976, independent Sudan signed the Wadi El Nil (Nile Valley) treaty with Egypt, thus ratifying the established situation: in Egypt, the Sudanese enjoy, if only theoretically, the same rights as the Egyptians. In 1995, relations between Cairo and Khartoum flared up after President Hosni Mubarak was the target of a terrorist attack, believed to have been carried out by Sudanese Islamists. The Wadi El Nil treaty was immediately abrogated but it did not stop hundreds of Sudanese from crossing over the border every day.

As the Sudanese regimes – whether military or Islamist – began a harsh policy of repression against political opponents, migrations increased and thousands of Sudanese were practically forced to leave for Egypt. Most were

Muslims and came from the North. Some were Christians and animists who had already fled to Egypt because of the civil war in the South from 1955 to 1972; the instauration of sharia law in 1983 also contributed to their exile in Egypt. Moreover, war broke out again in January 1983 and lasted twenty-one years, until January 2005: almost four million people were displaced or became homeless and over two million people died.

Before this conflict even ended, another bloody war broke out in Darfur in 2003; it has been raging since then, with tens of thousands of people fleeing the country.

It is believed that between two and five million Sudanese live in Egypt and make up 90 per cent of the refugees there, alongside Palestinians, Ethiopians, Somalians and Eritreans. But not all the Sudanese who live in Egypt are refugees. The word only appeared in 1989 when the Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir came to power.

### **Egypt, a country of emigration, has become a country of immigration and transit**

Asylum seekers who are bound for Western countries go through Cairo, where the Regional Office for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) is located. Its officials may well claim to have resettled the greatest number of refugees ever in the world: they have only resettled a quarter of Sudanese asylum seekers. The United States, Canada, Australia and Finland cooperate with the UNHCR through private sponsoring programmes.

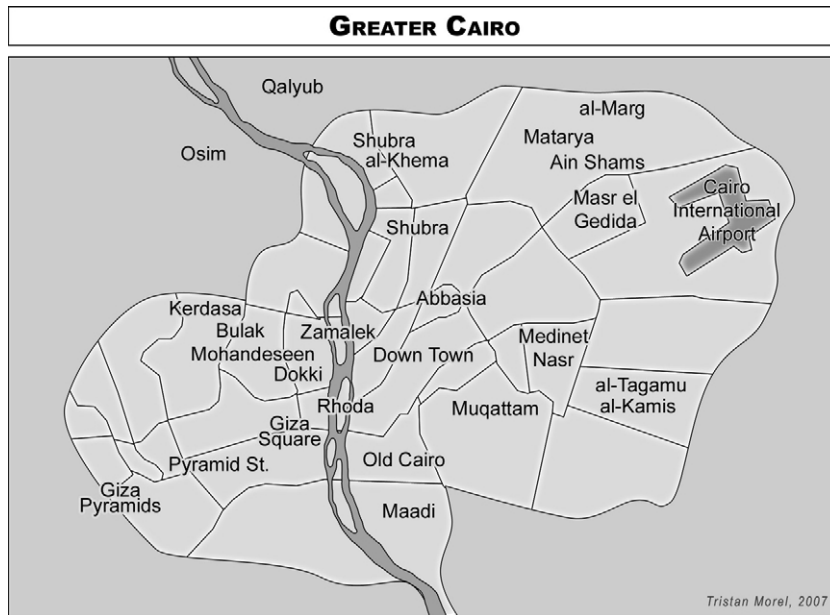
Egypt has signed the 1951 Convention on the status of refugees, the 1967 Protocol on the status of refugees and the 1969 OAU Convention on the specific problems linked to refugees in Africa. Yet the government has sent to the UNHCR a letter listing major restrictions on education, health and employment, even though the situation did improve in some areas. The country's policy remains all the more ambiguous as Cairo did not adopt the dispositions or the laws which would make it possible to implement the international conventions to which it subscribed.

### **Sudanese Statistics in Egypt**

According to the UNHCR, the number of Sudanese asylum seekers who were registered between 1994 and the end of 2005 was 58,535. In December 2005, 31,990 Sudanese obtained political refugee status. Only 16,675 of these were resettled in host countries (315 were not able to reach these countries because their official papers were incomplete); in other terms, 28.48 per cent were

asylum seekers and 52 per cent were blue-card holders, that is, political refugees. This means that 15,000 Sudanese who obtained political refugee status were not resettled. Most of them remained in Egypt, for 'integration on location'. Sixteen thousand Sudanese asylum seekers were rejected and their application files were closed. Over ten thousand were not granted an interview because the UNHCR stopped interviews when a peace agreement was signed in 2004.

The situation in 2005 was as follows: some 71 per cent of Sudanese with political refugee status and who had the right to be resettled in a host country remained in Egypt.



### Who are these Sudanese people?

There are around twenty ethnic groups in the Sudan, the major ones being the Arabs, the Beja in the North, the Nuba in the centre, and the Dinka and Nuer in the South. Several surveys have shown that refugees come from all the ethnic groups and tribes.

The Arab-speaking Sudanese, who are generally educated, integrate better and can benefit from the support of the large diaspora in Egypt. As there is no language barrier, it is easier for them to find work. Many of them are political

refugees who do not want to obtain political refugee status and do not want to abandon their nationality. For others, it all depends on their level of education and the help that the Sudanese diaspora in the West can provide them. Many were teachers and businesspeople who find life in Egypt mediocre; but those who come from camps for displaced populations enjoy their new environment, despite the overcrowded and poor habitation. The Sudanese who attained political refugee status have a better life than those whose files had been closed. Around thirty organizations, churches and centres help them, depending on their vocation.

The Sudanese who have obtained political refugee status (blue card) have the right to work in Egypt. But unemployment affects 25 per cent of the population. Most refugees are virtually unable to satisfy the conditions imposed by the Egyptian authorities – moreover, a Sudanese jobseeker must prove that his qualifications do not put him in competition with an Egyptian. Those Sudanese who do not have political refugee status (yellow card) and those whose files have been closed do not have the right to work.

The situation is all the more unbearable as the UNHCR reduced the help it gives to refugees by around 72 per cent, that is, a monthly stipend of \$55 in 1998 was reduced to \$15.50 in 2002. Over the same period, the cost of living increased substantially and many Sudanese now live below the poverty line.

Before 1995 and the attack on Mubarak, all Sudanese, including asylum seekers, had access to the Egyptian state school system. In 1992, the government in Cairo had overcome its reservations and granted the children of refugees the right to education. Yet schools were already overcrowded and were reluctant. In any case, most of the Sudanese who were thinking of resettling in English-speaking countries (the US, Canada, Australia) would have preferred to send their children to private English schools, if the fees had been lower. The UNHCR established a scholarship foundation, but the refugees are not yet fully aware of its existence. Some of the churches, particularly the Church of England, have opened primary and secondary schools to improve the situation of a few hundred young refugees.

The Egyptian government did not open public hospitals to refugees until 2005. Refugees still cannot be treated for long-term illnesses, receive expensive medical care or have surgery. Many Sudanese complain about the services in public hospitals. There are often clinics in the mosques, the most famous being the one in Mustafa Mahmoud Mosque – precisely where the 2005 events happened. Non-Muslims, who dare not go there, are generally seen to by the clinics of several churches, most of them Church of England.

Sudanese do not have access to low-rent accommodation and most of them find it very difficult to find a place to live. It is virtually an impossible task for those who do not have political refugee status. Generally, the Sudanese are urban refugees and the markets that are managed by their compatriots give

them the possibility to retain their food culture. Similarly, they are attached to their African languages and cultures. They are gathered both in the centre and in the periphery of Cairo. The greatest number of them lives in Arba Wa Nuss, the famous 'four and a half' because it is 4.5 km east of Greater Cairo; it is not a camp but an *Asbwaiya*, a shantytown among the hundreds of similar settlements surrounding Cairo where millions of Egyptians live. The Sudanese, most of them from Darfur, live there in an overcrowded and precarious environment; they meet up with Egyptians but do not really mingle. Other refugees, particularly those who are Christians, live around the churches – mostly Anglican, sometimes Orthodox – in the Sakkakini, Abbassiya, Zeitoun and Ain Shams neighbourhoods in the centre and to the north of Cairo. There are very few Sudanese refugees in Alexandria.

All these frustrations have been increasingly felt over the past two years. The Sudanese have lost all confidence in the UNHCR, which is really the only body they depend on; they had never expected anything from the Egyptian authorities. Such is the situation which led to the sit in and the tragedy after a riot began in August 2004 when the UNHCR considered that the May and June peace agreements put an end to all applications for political refugee status – including applications from Darfur where the war was still raging.

### The Three-Month Sit-In

The sit in began on 29 September 2005 when a dozen or so Sudanese demonstrated in the park that is located opposite the Mustafa Mahmoud Mosque 'in order to attract the attention of the international community and find a solution to the problems of the Sudanese'. The location was a logical choice, as the UNHCR had been interviewing asylum seekers nearby for months on end. The park is big enough for a very large number of protesters, who had access to the water rooms of the mosque. It is in the middle of a very busy neighbourhood, with businesses and clinics, which means the protesters could be heard by many passers-by. The small demonstration thus began, but the number of Sudanese in the park increased rapidly. It is believed that a month later, there were always between 800 and 2,000 people in the park. On average, 1,500–2,000 people remained in the park during the three-month sit-in. According to estimates, there were 3,000–4,000 Sudanese in late December 2005, just before they were evicted: half were young single individuals; the other half were women, children and elderly people. It seems that news spread by word of mouth. A similar proportion of Muslims and Christians were involved; at least sixteen tribes were represented, from all over the Sudan. All the actors in the protest showed full solidarity, independently

from their ethnic group or religion. One must bear in mind that most of the Sudanese in the park had a blue card and were waiting to be resettled in the West.

### *The Media and Civil Society*

'We are the victims of poor management', or 'We refuse to assimilate', or again 'Where is the international community?', or even 'Who will guarantee our rights?' ... these were the slogans on the placards which were on the park gates. Others paid tribute to the Sudanese who were murdered or disappeared in Egypt. Neighbours reacted differently to the protesters: some were hostile, refusing to hear their demands, blamed them for drinking alcohol and 'making love in the open'; others encouraged them and gave them food. A security service for the protesters organized meetings with the media, with lawyers and NGO representatives. The Arab-speaking and English-speaking Egyptian press covered the event; so did the African press and a number of websites. But only one week before the protesters were evicted did the international press begin to seriously focus on the event.

### *The Protesters' Demands*

The protesters demanded:

- the resumption of the interviews which had been stopped in 2004
- no 'racism' and no 'discrimination', no 'ethnic preference' when choosing candidates for an interview
- the re-opening of the application files that had been closed by the HCR
- the end of arbitrary arrests
- the end of pressure put on refugees so that they would go back to the Sudan.

But what the protesters wanted above all was an option that would be final: resettlement in a western country or any other viable solution. The UNHCR then responded with increasingly hostile communiqués, finally representing most asylum seekers as economic or fake refugees. For instance, in the communiqué of 30 October 2005, refugees are accused of being illegal immigrants, their obstinacy the one and only cause of the failure of negotiations, and the sit-in organized on the basis of unfounded rumours. The protesters denied everything as a whole: the demonstration followed as a result of their negative experience with the UNHCR.

*The Egyptian Authorities and the Authorities of the Host Countries*

From September to December, the authorities looked on kindly; their relations with the protesters remained peaceful. According to the protesters themselves, they could not have remained in the park for three months 'without the protection of the Egyptian police'.

*Daily Life During the Sit-In*

Although it was uncomfortable, the park became a shelter. Observers noted that the demonstrators felt safe there. They did not have to pay rent. They were gathered together, and the fact that agents surrounded them strengthened solidarity among them. Over time, the situation improved. Areas were reserved for women and children. Plastic covers replaced sheets to protect them against the wind and the rain. Communal meals were prepared on camping stoves. Neighbours and NGOs provided the protesters with food, clothing and blankets. even a makeshift clinic was set up, which a Sudanese doctor visited regularly – even though seven to eleven people died before the protesters were evicted.

Children were taught in Arabic and English. Conferences were held every day so that refugees could keep informed, be advised and guided. Very quickly, the demonstrators organized themselves administratively speaking and were very proud of it: they elected representatives to negotiate with the UNHCR and formed a public relations committee as well as a security service. Five 'leaders' emerged: requests were passed on to them and the refugees trusted them, at least initially. However, after the beginning of December, these 'leaders' began to lose some of their standing in the community.

*The Agreement of 17 December 2005*

On 17 December, the UNHCR announced that it had come to an agreement with the five 'leaders'. They referred to an 'amicable' settlement, which only concerned the Sudanese whose names were on a final list given by the 'leaders' to the UNHCR. Among some interesting points, were mentioned the possibility that applications would be reopened, that it might be possible for the Darfur Sudanese to obtain a yellow card, and that those who had a yellow card might have their files reviewed.

But there were also threats in the agreement: if applications were rejected, the rejection would be final and the UNHCR would no longer be responsible. No date or place was given for future interviews. Everything was vague. The demonstrators were given a single chance: the sit-in would end and the Sudanese would leave the park in small groups of around

twenty people and meet with the UNHCR representatives; the Darfur refugees would be seen first; once the interviews were over and the status of each person was clear, the Sudanese would go home – if they had a home – or they would get a place thanks to some financial help. But under no circumstances could they go back to the park. This process needed to be completed in four days at most, but the Sudanese found it difficult to imagine that 2,000 interviews could be carried out over such a short period.

#### *Mixed Reactions from the Demonstrators*

On 19 December, the UNHCR representatives went to the park to explain the terms of the agreement. Yet most of the Sudanese did not agree with it, even though their 'leaders' had signed the document. They were not able to reach a consensus. Confusion and uncertainty prevailed and several people declared they would not leave the park before everyone had been interviewed. A *written* guarantee was given as a condition, while the UNHCR considered that the best guarantees for the Sudanese were public opinion and the international press. But the refugees knew that if they left, they would give up their main asset. Even those who were in favour of the agreement refused to leave the park before all of the applications had been reviewed. Contacts between the refugees' representatives and the UNHCR were suspended. On 22 December 22, the UNHCR sent an official letter to the Egyptian Foreign Affairs Minister to inform him that it could do no more; it thus accepted the eviction of the demonstrators if necessary. Confidence was still high among the demonstrators, who were getting organized for the winter.

### **Eviction**

The eviction was a striking event, both politically and emotionally. Witnesses, demonstrators, NGOs, the UNHCR, the authorities and the media were all in agreement on how it happened. In the afternoon and evening of 29 December, many policemen and tanks were deployed all around the park; the police promised the refugees that it was all about protecting them 'in case the Muslim Brotherhood organized a demonstration'. One thing is certain: neither the police nor the Egyptian government gave the demonstrators the slightest indication that the protesters might be evicted.

Around 1 a.m., witnesses saw four thousand anti-gang police, sixty buses, ten tanks and six ambulances move into position around the park. Senior officers and the demonstrators' representatives met. The government promised the latter that they would be transferred to well-equipped camps where they would

be treated humanely, given shelter and fed – it would later be known that they were training camps for the police and the army, which had been set up hastily. If they refused to leave, they would be evicted by force. The Sudanese demanded guarantees that they would be treated well and would be safe; they wanted their representatives to visit the camps first. These requests were rejected. From 2:30 a.m. to 5 a.m., water cannons were used on the protesters. Representatives from the embassy and delegates from the Liberation Movement for the Sudanese People went back and forth, trying to convince the refugees, but to no avail. The anti-riot police began warming up, singing patriotic hymns and running around the park. From 5 to 5:30 a.m., there was an attempt at a last negotiation then the anti-riot police started to evict the refugees: they were pushed inside the buses; women, children and elderly people were trampled; the buses left very quickly towards the camps, some in Cairo, some on the outskirts of the city.

The Egyptian authorities later pretended that the eviction was carried out without violence. On the contrary, it has been proven that the police used disproportionate violence, including tear-gas and electric coshes; officers tried to stop the soldiers who were beating up the Sudanese. As all the exits from the park were blocked, the demonstrators had no chance of dispersing. Witnesses said that the wounded were left unattended and that everyone were forced to cram inside the buses, including wounded children, many of whom died when they reached the camps. In fact, two to ten bodies were seen around the park. The park was deserted but scattered with personal items.

#### *After the Eviction*

On 2 January 2006, the UNHCR called a meeting; nearly seven hundred people had received medical care, the bodies of the dead were not buried until 21 March in Egypt. The illegal immigrants were taken to three prisons; blue-card or yellow-card owners were released in small groups. On 30 January, the Egyptian Embassy in Britain announced – without releasing any figures – that all those who were able to prove they had political refugee status (entry visa, asylum application registered by the UNHCR) had been freed; after many contradictory statements, the spokesman for the Foreign Affairs Minister promised that no refugee would be sent back to their country. On 11 February, all those Sudanese who were still in prison were released and their residence permits were renewed for another six months.

#### *The Role of the Sudanese Embassy*

The position of the Sudanese Embassy was ambiguous. A human rights organization managed to obtain a list, drawn up by the embassy, of the people that the Sudan intended to repatriate.

*The Official Egyptian Reaction*

According to the official position, Egypt had acted as a mediator between the demonstrators and the UNHCR, and the eviction had not been violent. Special relations between the two countries were emphasized. Like Adel Imam, the 'goodwill' ambassador for the UNHCR, the Egyptians underlined the intransigence of the Sudanese demonstrators, who were against any form of compromise.

*Egyptian Opposition and International Opinion*

The Egyptian opposition and civil society condemned the abusive methods of the police in the strongest terms. On 30 December, NGOs published a communiqué against the Interior Minister, 'a criminal who only knows the language of force'; it also criticized the country's media for 'misleading public opinion on the three months of humiliation that the refugees had to endure'. There were calls for the Interior Minister to resign, for concessions from the government and the UNHCR, and for more transparency on the disappearances and deaths. On 5 January 2006, Amnesty International called on the Egyptian government to commission an independent and impartial investigation by international experts, which would strengthen the government's credibility. On 9 January, twelve NGOs wrote to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, to criticize the fact that the UNHCR had voiced no public condemnation. The International Federation for Human Rights even condemned the violence, asked for an investigation into the eviction operation and advised Egypt to adopt a new law to give refugees better protection.

*One Year Later*

There is a consensus among the officials of the refugee aid organizations whom I interviewed (the UNHCR refused to cooperate and referred back to its website): there has been no improvement in the situation of refugees since December 2005. The same uncertainty pervades all levels; in fact, the situation has deteriorated since potential employers will not choose Sudanese for fear of 'trouble'. The UNHCR's policy and mentality have not changed; just under three hundred refugees have been resettled in the West. The Egyptian government has not commissioned any investigation; even the results from the post-sit in autopsies remain secret. But to our knowledge, no one has been repatriated. The Sudanese are generally very reluctant to go back to their country; organizations gave assistance to some five hundred who wanted to go back to Khartoum, but Sudanese still come to Cairo in huge numbers.

## Conclusion

The tragic end of the Cairo sit-in is the result of a series of failures involving: the international community, the UNHCR, the Sudanese regime, the Egyptian authorities, NGOs and finally the 'leaders' of the protesters.

The international community cannot prevent civil or interstate wars and cannot put an end to them either. It is unable to force dictatorships to show a minimum of respect for human rights and people prefer to leave for the unknown and risk their lives rather than carry on living under repressive regimes. Tragic situations become extended and more numerous, particularly on the African continent – and the Sudan is a prime example of this. But Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan have also become victims, because the new international 'order' refuses to look at the roots and the real causes of these problems and prefers to 'manage' conflicts rather than to put an end to them.

The UNHCR office in Cairo bears the greatest responsibility for the events of December 2005. They are in charge of sorting out the true refugees from the economic refugees. One must acknowledge that it becomes an impossible task since their budget is shrinking while the number of refugees increases. The UNHCR never admitted that they alone were responsible for granting political refugee status and laid the blame on the Egyptian authorities. According to several researchers and journalists, they put 'amateurs', not qualified professionals, in charge of interviewing people; the interviews were held in public, in the street, rather than in an office. The UNHCR's blatant hostility against the Sudanese and this besieged fortress mentality means that the Sudanese have lost all confidence in the organization.

The Egyptian authorities also bear a heavy responsibility. For twenty-five years, they had imposed an exception law which forbade all gatherings, but then let a sit-in of 3,000 people last for three months in the very centre of Cairo. The excessive violence that followed remains inexplicable, even if the disproportionate use of force among the Egyptian police is famous.

NGOs, the press, the 'leaders', all had the duty to inform and convince the demonstrators, who could only rely on rumours about possible resettlement in the West.

## Recommendations

The following are recommendations emerging from the aftermath of the 2005 sit-in:

- Considerably increase the means of the UNHCR and the NGOs that deal with displaced people.

- Improve communication between these organizations and refugees.
- Set up pedagogic information websites.
- Redefine clearly the responsibilities and the mandate of international organizations.
- Restore the refugees' confidence at all cost.
- Help poor countries like Egypt that become immigration and transit countries to offer refugees better living conditions.
- Use part of the funds given by the European Union to protect its borders in that sense.
- Urge the Egyptian government to pass the necessary laws to enforce international conventions.
- Demand an investigation into the December 2005 events.
- Prosecute and punish the mafias who 'smuggle' asylum seekers.

Doreya Awny is a journalist for *Agence France Presse*.

## NOTE

- 1 This study is based on the research carried out by various centres such as the *Forced Migration & Refugee Studies Program* (FMRSF) at the American University in Cairo; on news bulletins and articles from the Arab and international press. I went to see the Sudanese and tried to interview them; to no avail, because they refuse to talk. I met with the leaders of the main churches and institutions who look after these refugees; and with actor Adel Imam, a 'goodwill' ambassador for the UNHCR and an official at the Egyptian Foreign Affairs Ministry.