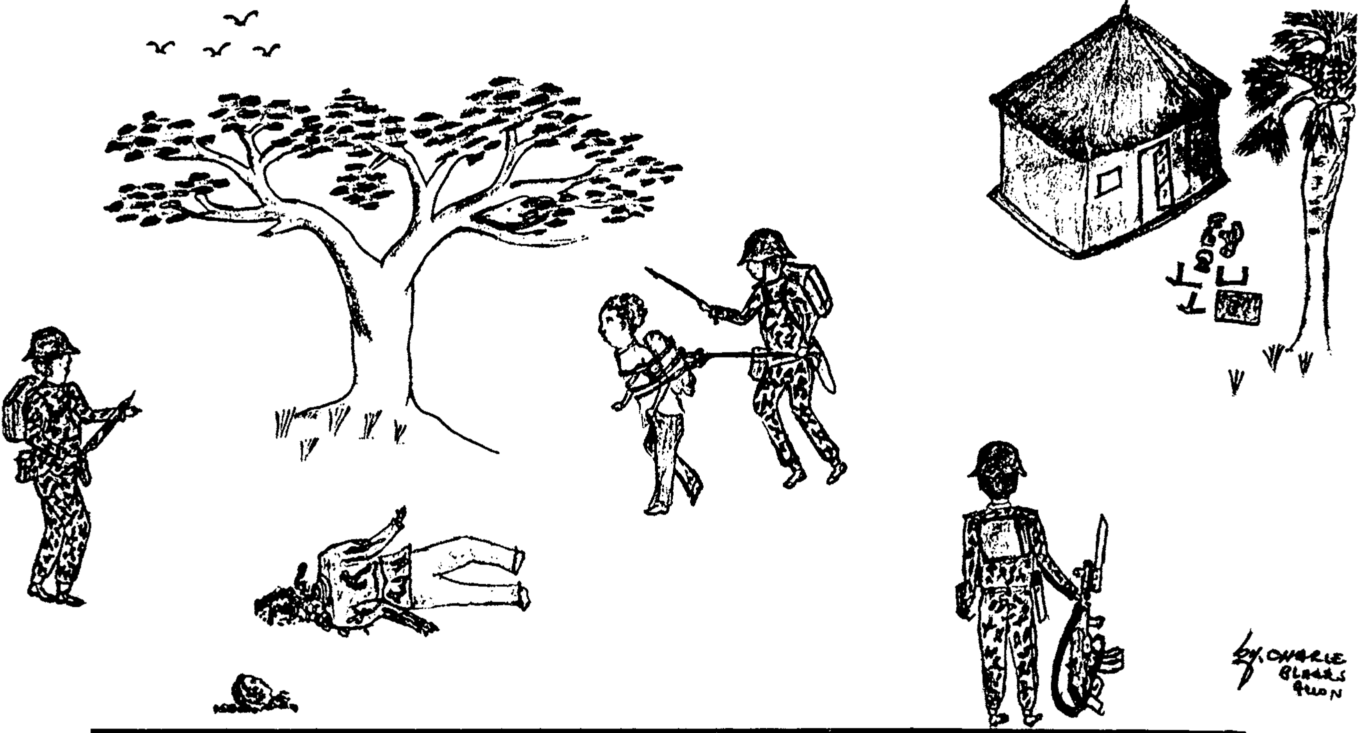
NOT FOR PUBLICATION
WITHOUT WRITER'S CONSENT

CVR-4

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Oxford
England

Dec. 15,1990



Drawing by Charlie Blacks Allon, a Ugandan child refugee.

YOU CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN

by Carol Rose

Kawa doesn't fit your stereotypical image of the "helpless refugee." He enjoys discussing politics, writing Kurdish poetry, and translating books from the four languages in which he is fluent. By looking, you wouldn't know that Kawa is a refugee. What sets him apart from other 31-year-olds living in England is the fact that Kawa cannot go home.

He isn't alone. An estimated 15 million people worldwide are refugees and as many as 50 million more are expected to become refugees by the turn of the century. How the world community will respond to this crisis of forced migration is one of the greatest challenges of the post-Cold War era.

Carol Rose is an ICWA fellow writing on the cultures of South and Central Asia and a visiting fellow at Oxford University's Refugee Studies Programme.

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

ORIGINS OF THE CRISIS

"Forced migration has been a major social phenomenon throughout the 20th Century, due to the rise of nation-states," says Barbara Harrell-Bond, director of the Refugee Studies Programme at the University of Oxford.

Refugees are quite distinct from so-called "economic migrants," who move in search of work. They are people fleeing human rights abuses in their homeland, including imprisonment, torture, and the threat of death.

Nonetheless, the refugee crisis is linked to poverty and economic imbalances in the world. Says Harrell-Bond: "It stems from the marginalization of people in developing countries, which leads to instability, which leads to government repression. Only in that way can you talk about economic problems leading to refugees."

To cope with the massive population shifts in this century, governments have created an international legal system that narrowly defines "refugees" so as to limit the number of people to whom they are obligated to give asylum or assistance. The legal definition of a "refugee" was laid down in a 1951 United Nations convention as a person who flees his or her homeland because of a "well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion."

Yet, the precise meaning of "persecution" has never been defined, says Andrew Shacknove, an international lawyer with the Refugee Studies Programme.

"The United States and its allies routinely reject applications for refugee status from people whose homes and land have been confiscated, or whose children are refused education above primary school," says Shacknove. "Nor does the denial of basic rights -- such as access to places of religious worship or membership in political parties -- constitute a sufficient claim to asylum in most countries."

In addition, escaping war, famine, or natural disaster does not, in itself, qualify a person for asylum as a refugee. The standard used in most of the world thus offers no relief to people fleeing starvation in Ethiopia, floods in Bangladesh, or death squads in El Salvador.

For those who arrive in the West, proving persecution is no easy task. The burden of evidence is extraordinarily high, and it falls upon the refugees themselves to prove their case. Yet, people who flee their homes under duress rarely carry documentation to show they fit within the narrow legal definition of a being a "refugee". Indeed, many lack the language skills even to articulate their life story, much less argue the merits of their claim.

"There is a major misconception about why people become refugees," says Harrell-Bond. "You know, it's not easy for people to leave their homes. And yet there still are people out there who think the refugees have just 'come for the beer'."

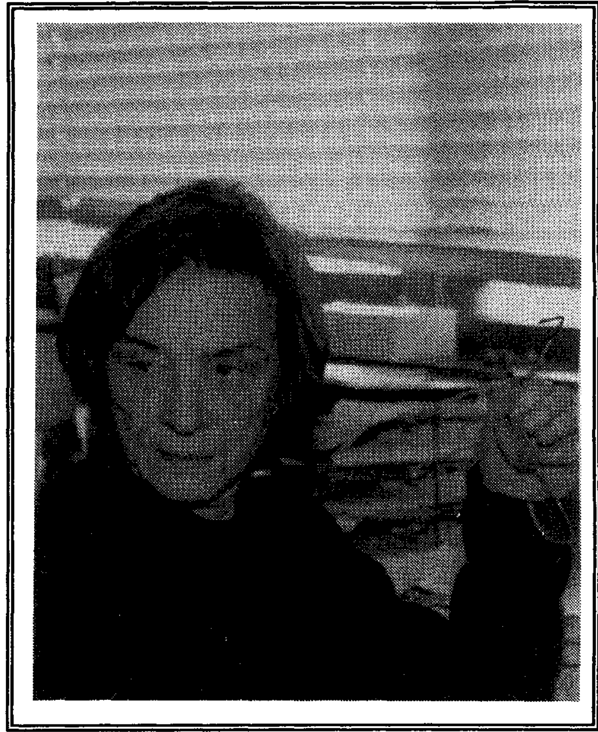
Those rejected for asylum face possible imprisonment, expulsion, or even deportation back to their homelands. Already, an estimated 10,000 people live in European airports as so-called "refugees in orbit," moving from country to country as they are expelled time and again.

For the fortunate few who are granted official protection, especially in the West, the challenge of adjusting to a new country, a strange language, and foreign culture has just begun. "The problems of a refugee don't end by giving them asylum," says Harrell-Bond. "That's when the problems start."

THE GREAT ESCAPE

Kawa fled his home in the Kurdish area of northern Iraq in 1988 after the government of Saddam Hussein dropped mustard gas and cyanide on the Kurdish population, killing and blinding thousands of people and poisoning the once-fertile land.

"I had been imprisoned in 1982 for participating in a peaceful demonstration for an independent Kurdistan," says Kawa, who refused to give his

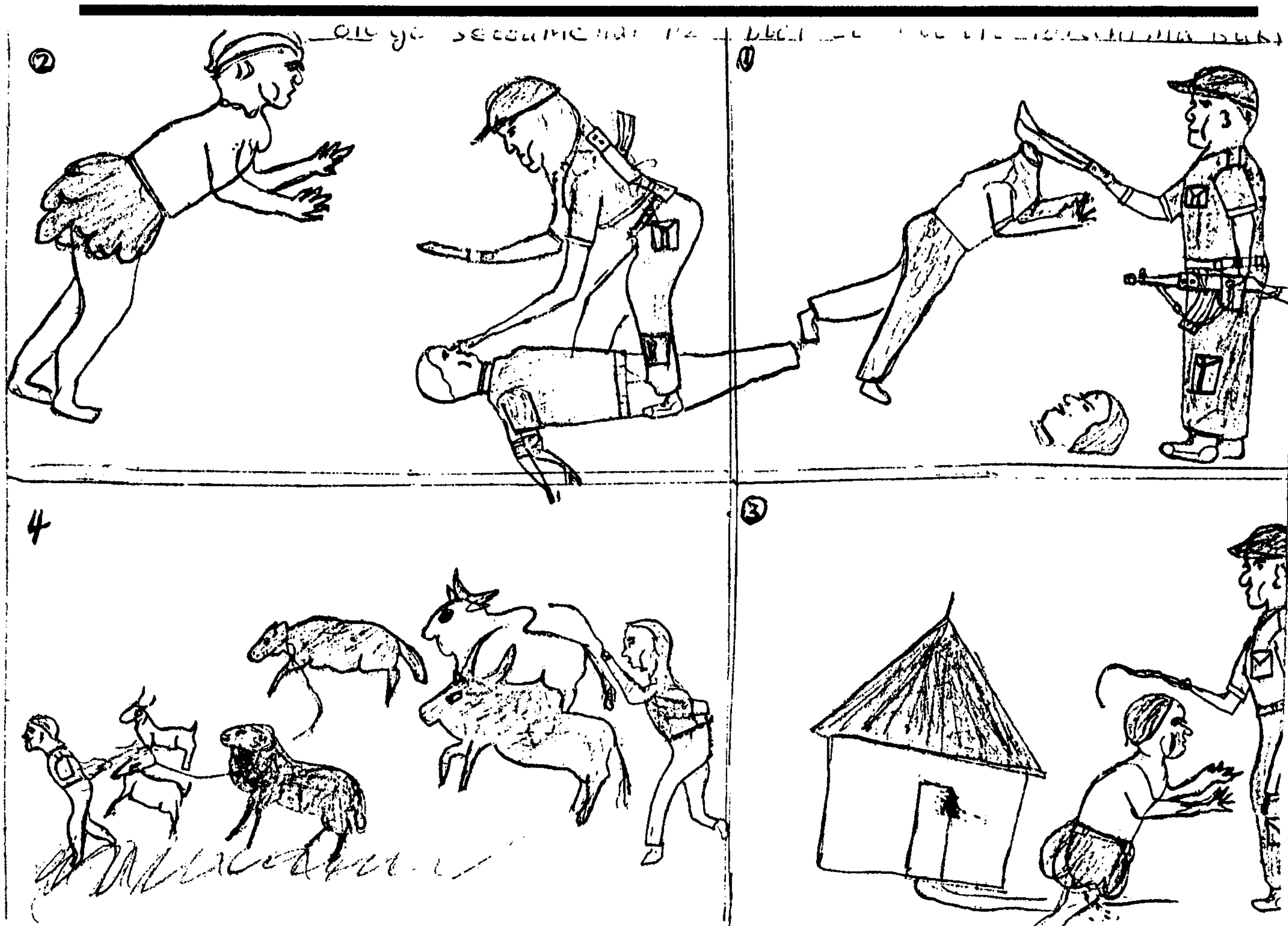


"There are still people out there who think the refugees have just come for the beer," says Dr. Barbara Harrell-Bond, director of the Refugee Studies Programme at the University of Oxford.

surname for fear that it might lead to retaliation against his family back home.

"They broke my hand and beat my head," he says, holding up a bent palm. "But it was only after the chemicals were dropped that I left. We couldn't stay then because everything was poisoned: not a single bird, not a single tree was left."

Kawa walked through snow-covered mountains to the border of Iran, where he requested asylum and was put into a refugee camp. "That was terrible," he says. "The camps were surrounded by the army, and no one could go out or come



Scenes of violence illustrated by a Ugandan refugee child.

CVR-4

inside. Once I was imprisoned for reading a book of Kurdish poetry."

After a year, Kawa met a man who sold him false traveling documents for $2,500, which Kawa used to flee to Britain last year. "Can you imagine how it was when I arrived?" Kawa asked. "I had worn the same underwear and same socks for a year. I hadn't bathed for a year!"

Nora, age 28, escaped from his home in Zaire after his name appeared on a government assassination list.

"Before I left I was studying law in Zaire," says Nora, who also says he is afraid to give his full name lest it endanger his family.

"The country was so rotten and corrupt, so at the end of my third year of law school I wrote an article on the violations of human rights in my country," he says. "They

sacked me from the university. Then, on February 25 of this year, we found the corpse of one of our friends. He had been stabbed in the neck."

The students demanded an explanation from the government. "We suspected the soldiers had done it," says Nora. "They sent soldiers to surround our building. We were stubborn, but when they began firing on us, we ran away."

Nora fled to the border, where he tried to enter the neighboring country of Zambia. Although international law prohibits countries from sending asylum-seekers back to the country from which they are fleeing, Zambian officials returned Nora to the border. After hiding for five days, Nora tried again to cross into Zambia. This time, he managed to escape. But after living in a refugee camp for six months, Nora learned that his name was on a Zaire government hit list. Unable to ensure protection for him in Zambia, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees agreed to let Nora go to Britain.

CAMP LIFE

While their stories are not unusual, the fact that Kawa and Nora are now living in Britain is quite exceptional. Most of the world's refugees do not settle in the West, but stay in refugee camps in neighboring countries.

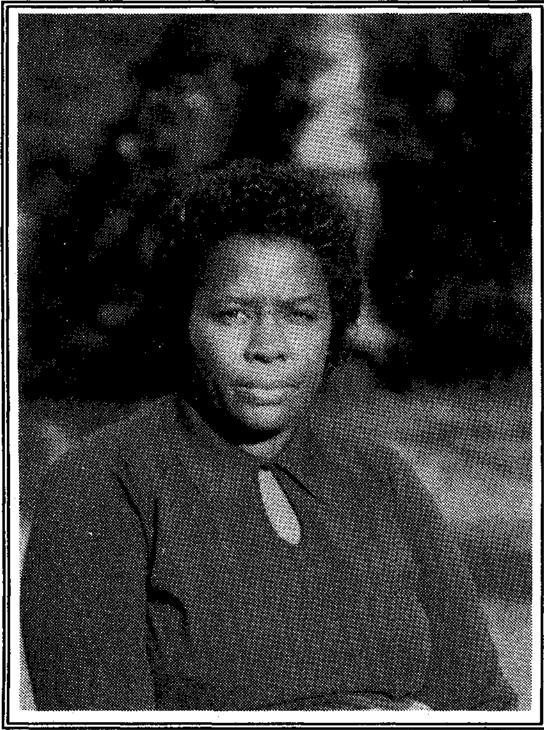
Most refugees lack the money and travel documents to make it to the West. Others choose to remain as near as possible to their homeland, waiting and sometimes fighting for a chance to return. Such is the case with the five million Afghans presently living in Iran and Pakistan, or the Zimbabweans who lived in neighboring Mozambique while fighting for national independence.

"When you call yourself a refugee, the label deprives you of the power of self-propulsion," says Stella Makanya, a lecturer at the School of Social Work at the University of Zimbabwe. "Refugees are seen as little children, holding out a bowl."

Makanya has been studying refugee camps set up in Zimbabwe for people fleeing attacks by the South African-backed "Renamo" bandits in neighboring Mozambique.

"When they first came out of Mozambique in 1983, they were not called refugees because they were not fleeing an oppressive government," says Makanya. "But then pressure came from the aid agencies and the UNHCR [United Nations High Commission for Refugees] to call them refugees and put them into camps."

At present, there are five refugee camps in Zimbabwe, holding around 90,000 people. Each camp is surrounded by barbed wire, and anyone caught trying to escape is returned and punished. Another 200,000 Mozambicans also fled to Zimbabwe, but do not live in camps -- and do not receive



"Refugees are seen as little children, holding out a bowl," says Stella Makanya, a lecturer at the School of Social Work at the University of Zimbabwe.

CVR-4

international assistance.

"Any Mozambican without a Zimbabwean identity card was rounded up and taken to the camps," says Makanya. "These 90,000 people are on display just to get aid. I think the aid community benefits from having refugees, because they keep them at a level where they are dependent. If they didn't, the aid workers would be out of a job."

Says Harrell-Bond: "The fact of labelling someone as a refugee defines them as helpless, and thus excludes them from any decisions about their life. There is a real misconception that refugees are helpless and dependent, that they want to stay on the dole and not take care of themselves, when, in fact, international assistance is often only marginal in their strategies for survival."

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

The vast majority of people seeking asylum do not get refugee status. But for those who are fortunate enough to be granted asylum, the problems of adjustment can be overwhelming.

Initial difficulties are material: food, housing and work, says Lorraine Majka, a research fellow at the Refugee Studies Programme and former official with the Illinois Refugee Consortium.

"Refugees in Britain are thrown into a non-system," says Majka. "First they have to wait for the Home Office to decide whether they get refugee status, during which time they cannot work -- and that might be months or even years. If they get refugee status, then they need help with housing or a job and must go to a refugee committee self-help group."

These groups are financed by local communities, whose resources often are scarce. The British central government gives no money to help resettle refugees.

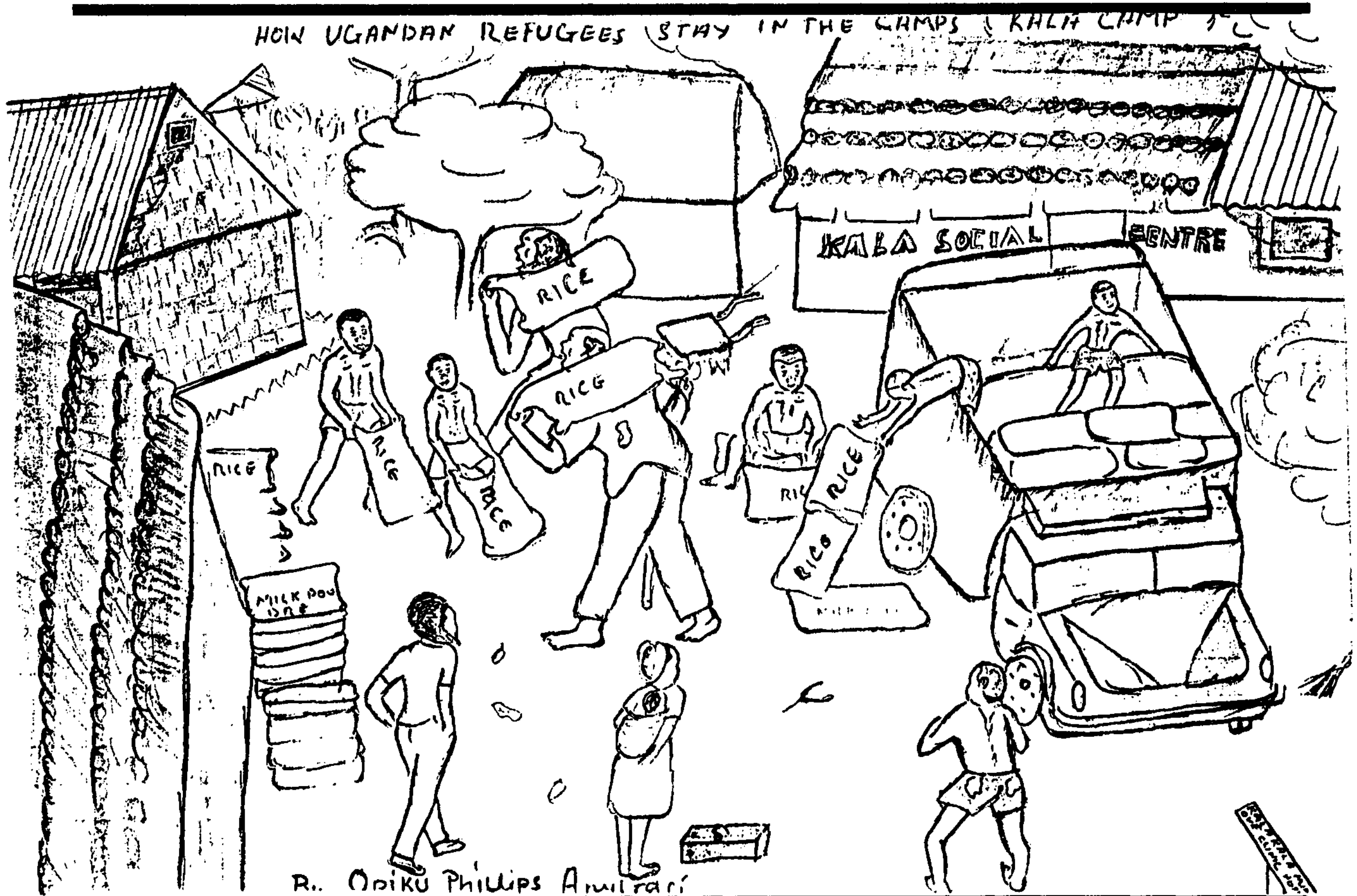
"They have no plan, no support," says Majka. "It is like a maze, and the refugees

don't know where they will end up. They can work after they get refugee status, but even then the employment situation isn't good."

In contrast, the refugee system in the United States is highly organized -- perhaps *too* highly organized, says Majka. "Refugees there are treated like commodities going through the system. The only emphasis is on a job, and not just employment but *early* employment.

"The advantages of the British system aren't many, but it does allow people, both individuals and ethnic groups, to control their own lives and be more creative," says Majka. "The disadvantage is that without funding, all the creativity in the world doesn't help."

For many refugees, the greatest problem of exile is not material but psychological well-being.



"How Ugandan Refugees Stay in the Camps", a drawing by Opiku Phillips Anybrac, a refugee child.

CVR-4

"Statistics show that among any group admitted to a mental home, the proportion of refugees is higher than for the population at large, or for economic migrants," says Zonke Majodina, a clinical child psychologist from South Africa, who now lives in Ghana.

"The most common problem among refugees is depression," says Majodina. "It often stems from the sense of not being in control. An economic migrant knows he can go back home if the situation gets difficult, but for the refugee there is no going back unless something changes back at home.

"There also is a sense of ambivalence: you are torn between two cultures all the time," she adds. "Even when all your physical problems are solved, there still is a feeling of not wanting to identify completely with the new country. People simply cannot cope with the loss of their country, their family, their emotional support and their familiar landmarks."

Many refugees cannot contact their families back home, for fear of putting them in danger.

"Since 1984, I've contacted my family only once," says Kawa. "I know they beat my father and made inquiries. I think of [my family] constantly, and I find it hard to concentrate. If someone would tell me that I could see them in 1995 or even in 2000, I would be very very happy."

Majodina says she often had fears that she would die while in exile from South Africa. "I had constant worries that if I dropped dead, there would be no one to tell my family," she says.

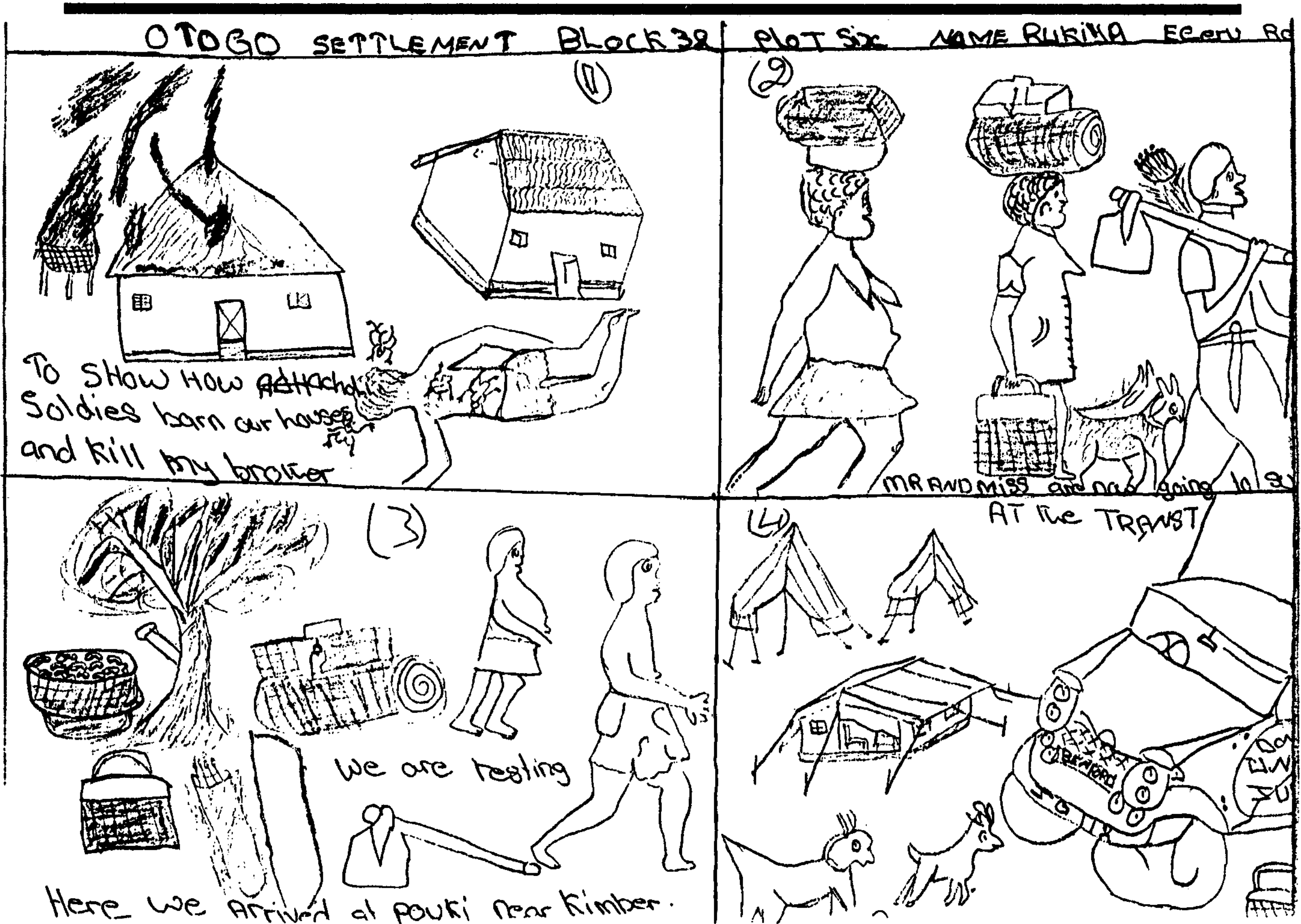
For S.A. Mousavi, a 32-year-old Afghan, adjusting to British society was one of the most difficult things about being a refugee.

"I come from a culture that is honest, open, and friendly," says Mousavi. "In England I found it difficult for a foreigner to make an English friend. You have to make the first move, and you cannot ask them anything about themselves or anything directly. The best thing is to ask them about the weather.

"I also come from a society where you have to be proud: poor or rich doesn't matter," says Mousavi. "But here I realized that the word 'Afghan' doesn't mean anything. They look at the refugee -- who has no clothes or food -- and they see you as they see the beggar in Victoria station. When I realize that my grand-grand-father defeated the British three times, then to come here as a refugee is so painful."

Like most refugees, Mousavi dreams of the day he will return to his homeland.

"An Afghan forced to live his whole life in Britain is like a fish taken from a fresh-water spring in Afghanistan and put into the salty seas of England," he says.



"To show how soldiers burn our houses and kill by brother," a drawing by Rukiha, a Ugandan child refugee.

CVR-4

"I am as proud as the Hindu Kush," he adds. "Only if you could ask the Hindu Kush to change into the hills of Wales could you ask an Afghan to become British."

WHERE DO THE CHILDREN PLAY?

Children are particularly vulnerable to the psychological stress of forced migration. In many cases, they have been victims of violence, or have witnessed atrocities against their friends and family.

"Children, like adults, suffer from a great feeling of loss," says Majodina. "Often, the level of schoolwork shows large-scale underachievement because if you are under stress, your learning potential is lower. Youths often complain about an inability to concentrate. And with younger ones you see behavioral manifestations like extreme

aggressiveness, constant complaints of illness, irritability and an inability to get along."

Refugee children also tend to have heightened fears, even about ordinary aspects of life. Says Majodina: "Often they show more fear of non-consequential things, such as the dentist or snakes, rather than a fear of war or of the police.

Many refugees witness heinous crimes against themselves and their family, as illustrated in this drawing: "The Introduction and Nine Serious Commandments."

"This is because the situation of living in constant fear is so difficult for a child to make sense of that they transfer their fears to less threatening objects in their world, which they can make sense of," she adds. "They cannot relive the days of violence. It is too overwhelming."

Another problem is that education often is interrupted when children are forced to flee their homelands. When they do have an opportunity to study again, often they cannot cope with the stress of examinations and papers.

"I'm 31 years old, and I haven't studied for years," says Kawa. "What kind of a job am I going to be able to get?"

The negative effects of neglecting refugee children will be lasting, adds Majodina. "At this point in our history, it is the young people who need the most attention. They are the ones who have actually confronted the violence; and they are the immediate future, the next potential leaders in society."

TOWARD THE FUTURE

The opening of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and continued instability in Africa, Asia and Latin America, guarantee that there will be more, not fewer, refugees in the coming decade. At the same time, West European governments are

moving to tighten asylum laws to keep out "foreigners" even as they negotiate for open borders within Europe.

"We are in the midst of a major crisis," says Harrell-Bond. "Everyone is so enthusiastic about the winds of change in Europe, but under the rocks are all kinds of cultural nationalisms. Old ideas of a state as homogeneous are thriving once again."

Already, there has been a rise in anti-Semitism, attacks against refugee centers in Scandinavia, and mass expulsion of Mozambicans from Germany. Massive unemployment also is predicted in Europe, putting additional pressure on the social welfare systems of European governments. Three to seven million people have asked for the right to leave the Soviet Union, adding to the brain drain in that country.

"The idea of free movement within Europe is a pure fantasy," says Harrell-Bond. "I don't think they will be able to restrict immigration from the outside world, unless they use armies to keep people out."

Changes also are needed in the approach to assisting refugees.

"Too many of the training programs for refugees are paternalistic, with little effort to find out what the people want for themselves or to make use of traditional skills," says Makanya.

"These people have a great capacity to be self-reliant," she adds. "The greatest challenge for aid workers is to work themselves out of a job."

Says Harrell-Bond: "Refugees should be seen as a development issue, both in terms of response and prevention."

Legal developments might also pave the way for new refugee policies. Already, lawyers in the United States have used domestic tort law to sue government representatives for damages on behalf of individual refugees. In the future, governments hosting refugees might use international law to sue governments whose policies create refugees in order to get financial compensation for victims of torture.

Ultimately, however, any lasting solution to the refugee crisis must be both economic and political in nature. "I think refugees need a political voice," says Harrell-Bond.

"Their situation can be resolved only through political changes, but we have to change the whole approach to aid which at this time tries to de-politicize them," she adds.

"My dream for the future," says Harrell-Bond, "is to see an organization with observer status in the United Nations made up of refugees, scholars and lawyers whose sole purpose would be to act as a political voice for victims of forced migration."

Hope for a peaceful return may be read in this drawing, by Charles Blackson Allon.

CVR-4

Meantime, millions of refugees remain scattered across the globe, awaiting the day when they can return home.

Received in Hanover 12/14/90

*** Special thanks to Barbara Harrell-Bond and the Refugee Studies Programme at the University of Oxford for supplying the artwork for this newsletter.**