

Onderstepoort Refugee Camp is located near Pretoria, South Africa. It has all the trappings of prison except one – these refugees continue to be told that that they are free to leave. And yet, they don't.

This placement is a large camp that only recently received some recognition that it should be managed by some level of government.

The camp has over 1,300 persons living in army style tents. The camp reportedly struggles to accommodate the faiths and religious practices of Christians and Muslims living within one camp. Added to the religious complexities are the cultural diversities of the countries these refugees have escaped or migrated from. On this day, the camp was relatively quiet.

However, (in days past) we were told that this quiet status had often erupted into violence resulting in the camp's governing entity threatening to remove the tents on a near daily basis. The camp is reported to be 50% Muslim, 50% Christian.

Housing these refugees is a daunting task that forces thousands into old green military style tents that

were never designed for long-term housing of families. In recent days, the refugees were told the tents would be removed. In reality, they were being promised that the tents would be replaced with the UNHCR tents which, while equally not a long-term solution, were designed as temporary shelters.

The refugees in the Christian end of the camp have built a Chapel. It is small, and yet, when they

have services, people gather around the open flaps of the tent to share in the fellowship. For nearly half the camp, this is their place of Sunday worship.

Near the Chapel, and outside one of the tents, a group of refugees have created a landscape of stone letting anyone (and everyone) know that "Jesus Is My Lord", and "Africa is my Roots".

There were small groups within the Camp and some were huddled around a local preacher, playing Hymns and worshiping.

Some of the children were playing with home-made wheels, pushing them along the rocks paths with sticks. There were few signs of food being cooked for meals. In fact, the day we arrived, the camp was suffering from a

theft of bread that left the camp to struggle to serve one meal. This meal – soup prepared in concert by



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Governmental, Muslim, NGO, and Christian assistance, with over a thousand sandwiches - some jam, some peanut, that would be the only meal today, and it was finally delivered inside the camp around 12: 30pm.

There was time to listen to the Refugee Camp leaders tell their stories. Many crowded close to share their own personal struggle and ask that we tell their story. This, I informed them, was all I could promise.

One by one, a person would reach into their back pocket, pull out their legal papers and show me that they were allowed to be in South Africa – most to “work and study”. They informed me that even with these papers, they were frequently denied the opportunity to be employed. Even if they were offered work, they were denied a full day’s wages, sub-standard pay, verbal abuse, and if employed at all, they were often forced to work in roles below what they routinely performed in their home country.

One by one, they asked why they should be denied work when they were doing work that many in South Africa were refusing to do.

One by one, they told of physical and verbal abuse by the local working poor blaming them for their status and low pay.

One by one, they asked why the South African Government took so long to process their permanent request for asylum even though they had their papers in their pockets stating that they had been granted a legal right to be in South Africa.

They shared their exit and escape stories from Rwanda, Congo,

Zimbabwe, and other countries with too many of them telling that they were forced to leave wives, children, parents, and their personal belongings behind – just to save their own lives.

We discussed Xenophobia. There was an understanding of the fear others felt towards them. And yet, they did not understand how this fear could be translated into violence, death, threats, and abuse that they felt they had left behind in their home country.

Today it is August 1, 2008. Most, if not all, of the camps remain open. Today, another pre-imposed deadline to re-integrate this seemingly small isolated population within its borders is still a dream for this camp’s refugees.

