**The New York Times vs. Radio Dabanga: What is the truth about returns to Darfur from eastern Chad?**

**31 March 2012**

**By Eric Reeves**

There is strong evidence in a dispatch yesterday evening from Radio Dabanga that the New York Times’ East Africa correspondent, Jeffrey Gettleman, has been the unwitting agent of significant journalistic fraud [ "A Taste of Hope Brings Refugees Back to Darfur"]. On almost any reading of the dispatch below from Radio Dabanga, Gettleman stands accused of having been duped by the Khartoum regime and officials of the UN/African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) into fabricating an untenably positive story about refugees returning to their homes and villages in West Darfur from eastern Chad. The research conducted by Radio Dabanga—drawing as it does from an extremely wide network of Darfuris, on the ground and in the diaspora—is extensive and unambiguous, and would seem to make Gettleman’s central claims untenable.

[ See: "UNAMID official's claim 100,000 refugees returned to Darfur false," Radio Dabanga (http://www.radiodabanga.org/), Eastern Chad (30 Mar 2012); Radio Dabanga text also appears below. ]

In particular, the statements of Darfuri refugee camp leaders in eastern Chad and a senior official of the UN High Commission for Refugees—Jean Bosco, UNHCR Chad representative—are remarkably at odds with the claims in Gettleman’s dispatch. Bosco declared to Radio Dabanga:

“UNHCR denied the return of any Sudanese refugees to Darfur in 2011. ‘There are 282,743 registered [Darfuri refugees] in the camps in Chad. We had heard that some may have spontaneously returned to Darfur, but they were not accompanied by us. Our staff on the ground have not been able to provide any material evidence that they were living in the camps in Chad,’ said Jean Bosco UNHCR Chad representative to Radio Dabanga.”

Gettleman, in the first paragraph of his dispatch, speaks of:

“More than 100,000 people in Darfur have left the sprawling camps where they had taken refuge for nearly a decade and headed home to their villages over the past year, the biggest return of displaced people since the war began in 2003 and a sign that one of the world’s most infamous conflicts may have decisively cooled.”

Gettleman goes on to cite a different UNHCR source:

“François Reybet-Degat, the current head of the United Nations refugee office in Sudan, said that more than 100,000 people returned home to several different areas of Darfur in 2011, far more than in any year before that.”

But Reybet-Degat also offers an extraordinarily and demonstrably inaccurate picture of security in Darfur: “There are still pockets of insecurity [in Darfur], but the general picture is that things are improving.” This characterization, long promoted by a self-serving UNAMID, has no basis in the evidence as represented by Darfuris.

To be sure, one must wonder about the extraordinary discrepancy in the comments of two UNHCR officials. But since Reybet-Degat declares only that “more than 100,000 people returned home to several different areas of Darfur in 2011,” we simply can’t know what these areas or locations are, or how many they are. Certainly there is nothing that supports Gettleman’s clear suggestion that the returnees are primarily from Chad. For their part, the Darfuri refugee camp leaders in eastern Chad make clear they believe that Gettleman’s claim about “the return of 100,000 refugees was ‘misleading’ and if this was the case the camps would be visibly emptier.” [Radio Dabanga will be broadcasting interviews with these camp leaders in coming days.]

In a larger sense, it’s simply impossible to know what Reybet-Degat was claiming: displacements and returns are a continuing process in Darfur, varying significantly from region to region and year to year. Indeed, what neither Reybet-Degat nor Gettleman mentions is the evidence for massive, ongoing human displacement in Darfur (evidence that comes primarily from UNHCR and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). Collectively this evidence suggests that more than 1 million Darfuris have been newly displaced since UNAMID officially took up its mandate on January 1, 2008. Resettlements, such as they are, have not made up for this staggeringly large new human displacement—much of it affecting people already displaced, sometimes two or three times.

Displacement continues to this very day. On March 27, for example, Radio Dabanga alone reported a finding by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO):

“The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN said on Monday [March 26, 2012] that about 3,000 people from the areas of Dar Es Salam and Zam Zam camps in North Darfur have been displaced to Kalimdo and other areas with El Fasher. The FAO said that the displaced people are in need aid, food and medicines.”

Moreover, the statement of Jean Bosco (UNHCR Chad representative) to Radio Dabanga is worth noting again:

“UNHCR denied the return of any Sudanese refugees to Darfur in 2011. ‘There are 282,743 registered [Darfuri refugees] in the camps in Chad. We had heard that some may have spontaneously returned to Darfur, but they were not accompanied by us. Our staff on the ground have not been able to provide any material evidence that they were living in the camps in Chad,’ said Jean Bosco UNHCR Chad representative to Radio Dabanga.”

Finally, in offering this account, Gettleman chose to ignore at least one previous assessment by Radio Dabanga on the fate of returnees in Darfur, though he had been specifically apprised of its significance:

“[Seven] families who came back to the Guldo region [West Darfur] in the framework of the Sudanese Government’s voluntary repatriation initiative were found in an extremely worrying state. Witnesses told Radio Dabanga that they were part of 25 families who left Kalma Camp (South Darfur) as a part of the Voluntary Return program. However, the journey was too dangerous, and 18 families were forced to travel back to their original camp in South Darfur. Furthermore, they reported to Radio Dabanga that the remaining families did not receive any support from the province of West Darfur, even though it organized the deportation. They now call for international action to save these families, who are currently in a critical state.” (Radio Dabanga, July 26, 2011, “Voluntary Repatriation: 7 families found in a critical state”)

For my own part, I offered a lengthy brief on March 2, 2012 that attempted to contextualize the situation for refugees and IDPs that Gettleman tried to represent simply by visiting Nyuru: “The Seen and the Unseen in Darfur: Recent Reporting on violence, insecurity, and resettlement,” Sudan Tribune, March 2, 2012

This was followed by an overview of the epidemic of rape that continues to define all areas of Darfur, and certainly governs possibilities for returns: “RAPE AS A CONTINUING WEAPON OF WAR IN DARFUR: Reports, bibliography of studies, a compendium of incidents,” (March 4, 2012) at www.sudanreeves.org.

[ Radio Dabanga is self-described as:

" … a project of the Radio Darfur Network, a coalition of Sudanese journalists and international (media) development organizations, supported by a consortium of international donors, humanitarian community organizations and local NGOs. Radio Dabanga is conceived, operated and facilitated by Free Press Unlimited in the Netherlands."]