

TANZANIA: Little help for HIV/AIDS orphans in refugee camps



Most of the refugees have fled the violence in their home country.
Credit: IRIN

NGARA, 11 May - Childhood ends early for children orphaned by AIDS. Yassine Nzomwita Kwizera, 14, is one of an estimated 192,000 Burundian refugees living in camps in neighbouring Tanzania, where she is responsible for the welfare of two siblings aged six and nine.

Most of the refugees have fled the prevailing ethnic violence in their home country. Adults find this tough enough, but it is even harder for children forced to take on adult roles.

Yassine has never known her father and lost her mother to AIDS in Tanzania's Ngara camp. "When my mother was still alive, everything was fine. She would cook and take care of the daily chores," Yassine said. "Now we lead a very difficult life. I get these gloomy thoughts most of the time."

When she is not in school, she cooks and cleans and makes all the decisions for her young family. "When my mother died, I had to be strong. I am not the only victim of this scourge - there are many cases here," she said.

"When I have to renew the ration card, it means that I have to skip school for the day," she added. "If I have to take my siblings to the doctor, it means I skip classes again. I then get very bad grades in the end."

During her mother's illness, Yassine took on many responsibilities, and had to drop out of school to care for her. As a result, she is still in the third grade, while most children her age are already in seventh grade.

There are few statistics on the number of HIV-positive refugees in the camps, and few services exist to help people infected or affected by the pandemic.

"As far as I know, only two refugees are accessing ART [antiretroviral therapy] in the camps," said Dr Patterson Njogu, regional HIV/AIDS coordinator for the UN refugee agency, UNHCR. "It is difficult in Tanzania, where ART rollout, even among the host population, has been delayed due to various problems."

Yassine and her siblings face stigma and discrimination by other refugees. "Some are wary of us and suspect us of having AIDS, I try not to let it get me down," she said.

UNHCR's Njogu said HIV/AIDS programmes were ongoing in the camps, with awareness-raising, voluntary counselling and testing, and home-based care programmes being run by several nongovernmental organisations, including the International Rescue Committee and the Tanzania Red Cross. Yassine said lately she had noticed more tolerance towards her and her siblings.

"UNHCR and the Tanzanian government have agreed, with the help of our partners, to scale up ART provision among refugees," Njogu added. "The government intends to scale up ART in all districts by July 2006."

Some help is also available for the orphans in Ngara camp, where the NGO, Norwegian People's Aid (NPA), gives them water, firewood, clothing, buckets and blankets.

"NPA is a great support. There are some things that I could never do alone and they are there to help," Yassine said. "The hospital also gives us food to complement the diet we have, which helps us to meet the next distribution date."

Most people in the camps are preparing to return to Burundi, which is now largely peaceful and held its first democratic elections in over a decade in August 2005. But children like Yassine face an uncertain future.

"I was very young when we fled Burundi, I don't know the place. ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] is trying to trace our relatives back there, but so far [they have had] no success," she said. "I wish to get a resettlement to go a nice country where we can live a danger-free life."