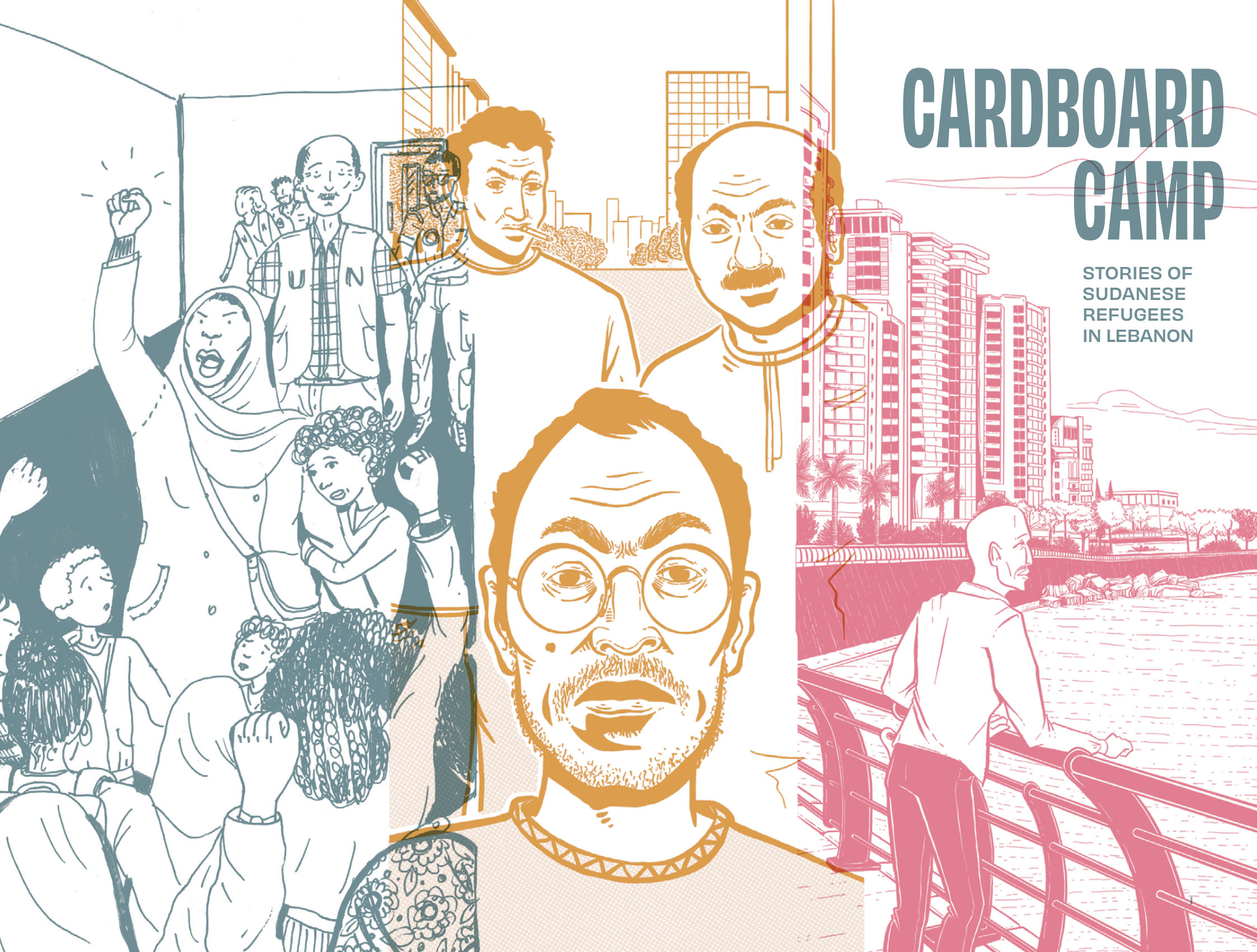


CARDBOARD CAMP

STORIES OF
SUDANESE
REFUGEES
IN LEBANON



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CARDBOARD CAMP

STORIES OF SUDANESE REFUGEES IN LEBANON

foreword

I know about something called human rights. Me, as a person, I have human rights. I will hold on to my rights, I will not waiver. That is the first thing I want to say.

For me, this book is evidence. It is proof our stories exist and a reminder that together we are strong, despite our struggles. I read a lot about refugees, the refugee status, and the Geneva Convention of 1951. I know that we have rights, these rights exist in the UN (United Nations), and that you have to take them. Accordingly, we tried several times to do that – to get our rights in a peaceful way one by one. But the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) refused us, so we resorted to the sit-in. We gathered.

Maybe one day the UNHCR's heart will open for those who were at the sit-in. I still think about how to reach out to the UNHCR, and others, to make them understand. I've been here since 2002. If I'm talking with people back home who are telling me about the situation there, how can I go back? I can't go back, and I have a child and a wife, should I leave them? Should I leave when I don't know where my whole family is? How can I leave?

And why am I staying here in Lebanon? Because I'm already a refugee. I know that there aren't many Sudanese refugees who can go to another country, unlike other refugees in Lebanon. We only want equality and justice. There's no equality, no justice. We wonder why other refugees can leave while we stay and wait for resettlement for many, many years.

People from the UNHCR resettlement unit say: "Resettlement is a solution, not a right." I tell them: "Okay I want the solution. Let's focus on the solution." I tell them: "Let's talk about the solutions, what are the solutions?" Yet, I do not find answers.

Our life in Lebanon is a struggle from morning to night. This book brings color to our struggles. This way, we hope that the people of Lebanon, people of the world, will not forget us. They will understand us. They will understand why we cannot go back to Sudan and why we cannot stay in Lebanon.

K, a Sudanese refugee in Lebanon.

preface

One January afternoon on a sidewalk across from the Beirut office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), I join as a researcher a group of Sudanese protection seekers who have camped there for over seven months. To escape the wind and rain, we huddle close together on sheets of cardboard, a plastic tarp above our heads. We've taken our shoes off to keep the cardboard clean and dry, and we watch videos of the storm that had pummeled their protest camp the previous night. We talk – about the past, present and future, about hopes and dreams.

Lebanon has long been a destination for persecuted Sudanese who seek access to the protection, aid, and resettlement services of UNHCR. Once here, however, they have many reasons for seeking to influence UNHCR's provision of protection and assistance. Their situation has continuously been overshadowed by humanitarian emergency responses targeting refugee groups deemed to have greater political interest. A recent vulnerability assessment by UNHCR itself among others highlighted how Sudanese refugees in Lebanon are among those who are “systematically

worse off [than other refugee groups], and at times significantly so, for virtually all indicators”.¹ Unable to meet the requirements needed to obtain Lebanese residency permits, most reside irregularly in the country and are vulnerable to arbitrary arrest, detention, and deportation to Sudan.

There is a temporality, informality, and fragility of cardboard that bears a resemblance to the opportunities for refugee civic engagement in Beirut. As politically disenfranchised non-citizens, refugees are not expected to be politically vocal during their exile.² Yet, across the globe, refugees and asylum seekers have sought to challenge the power relations embedded within the international refugee regime. Sudanese protection seekers in Lebanon are no different, aspiring to defy ingrained inequalities within the broader humanitarian system – inequalities that, in the Lebanese context, are also aggravated by the longstanding and intertwined dynamics of Arab nationalism, colonial histories, and racism. Sudanese protection seekers in Beirut have not remained “silent objects”³ and have loudly pushed for agendas defined by, and for, themselves.

You are now about to read a story inspired by their perspectives. While the characters and events are fictional, the depictions of life as a refugee protester draw on extensive ethnographic research carried out with Sudanese protection seekers in Beirut between 2015 and 2021. Their needs, aspirations, and concerns are complex and multifaceted, and it is impossible to fully do justice to their experiences. We hope to spotlight some of their daily concerns and struggles, and to remember that such struggles persist alongside and within larger humanitarian governance systems, in Lebanon and beyond.

Maja Janmyr

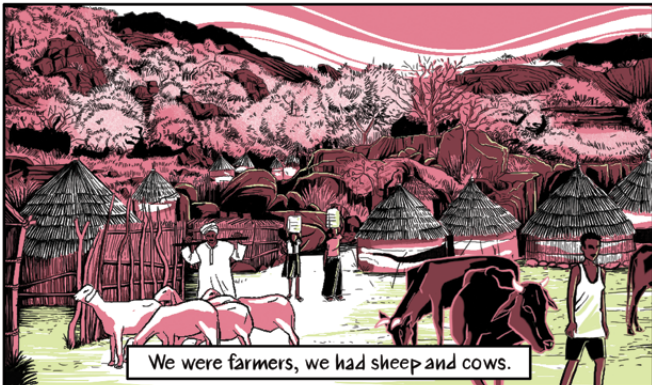
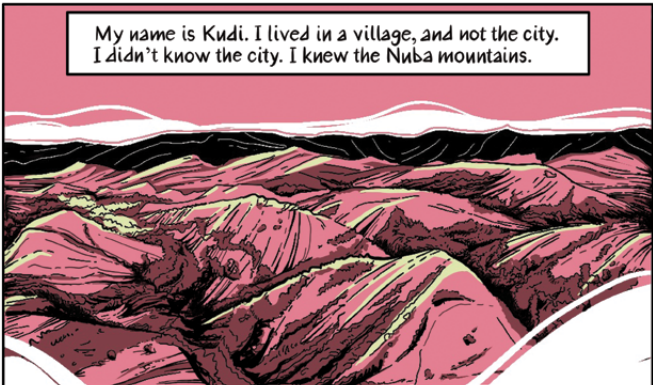
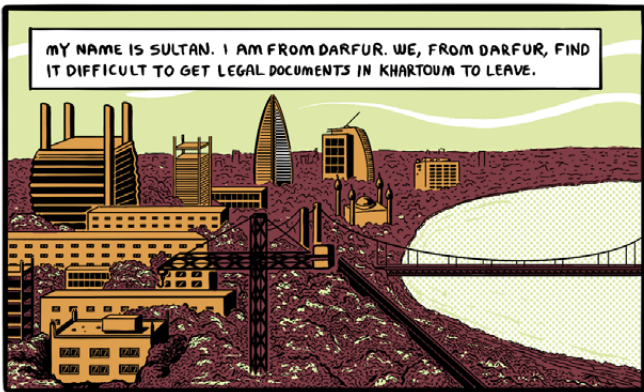
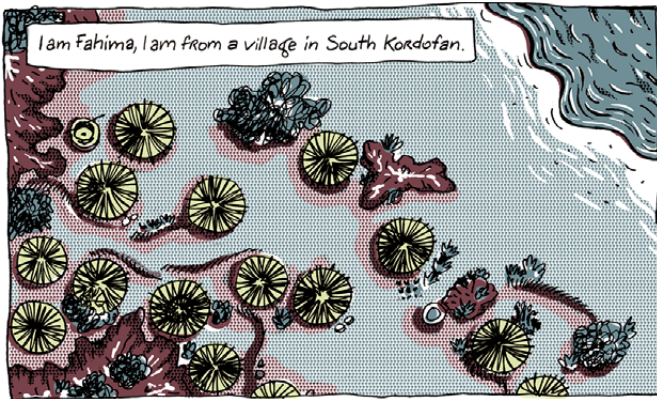
1. UNHCR, *Vulnerability Assessment of Refugees of Other Nationalities in Lebanon* (VARON) 2018, p. 4
2. P. Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2006
3. S. Turner, “Negotiating Authority between UNHCR and ‘the People’”, *Development and Change*, 37(4), 2006, 759–778

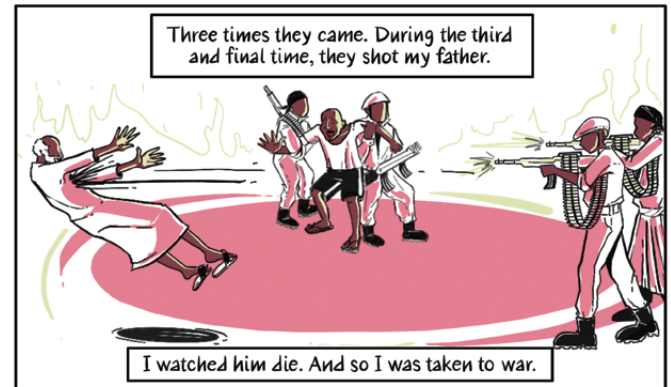
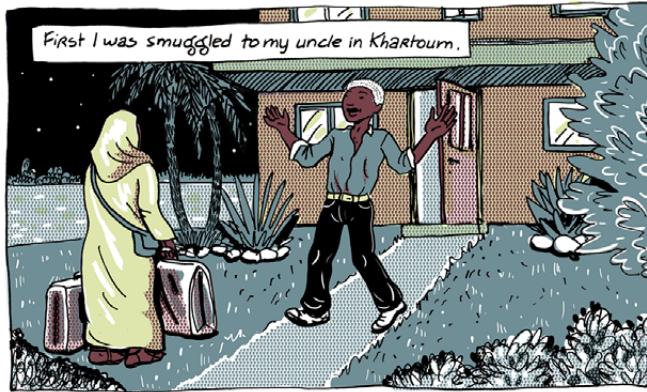
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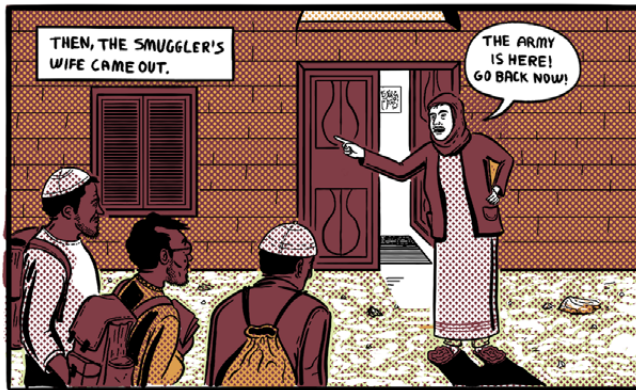
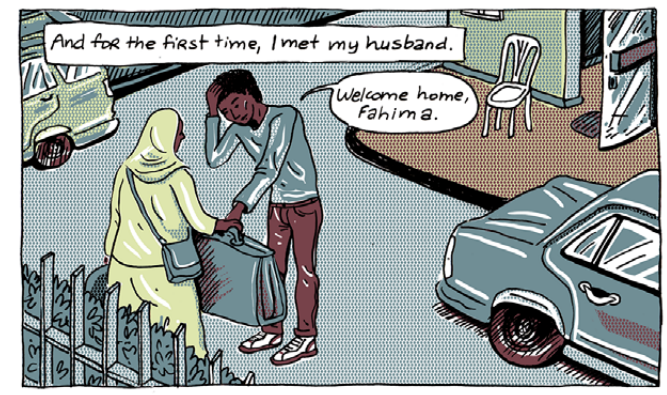
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problems

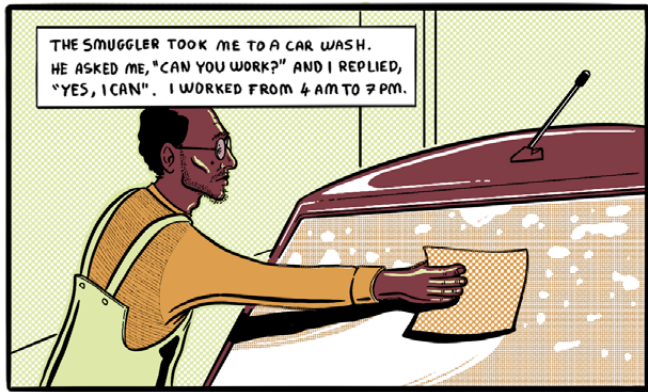


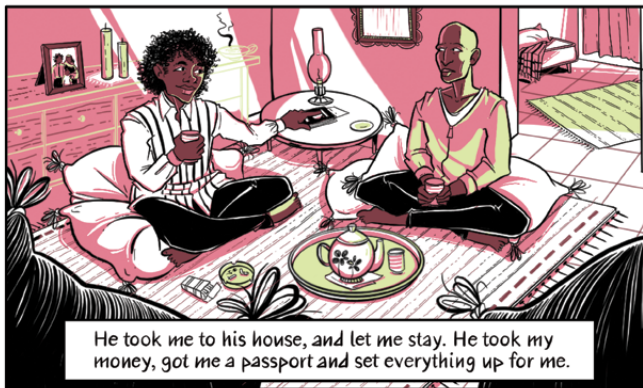


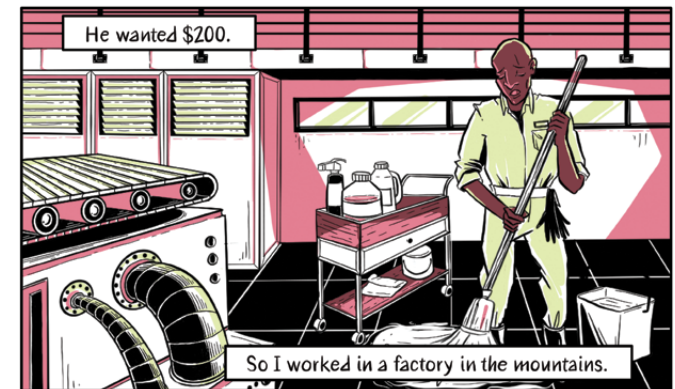
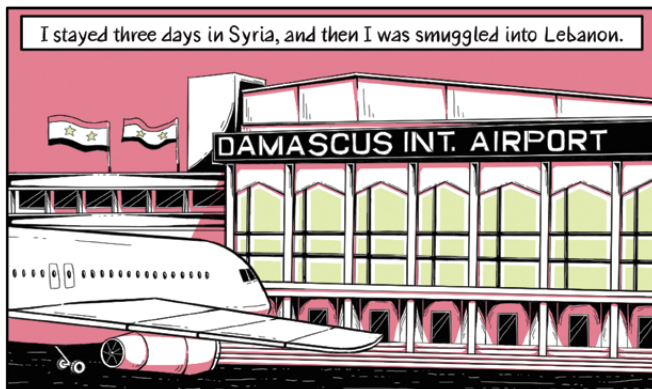
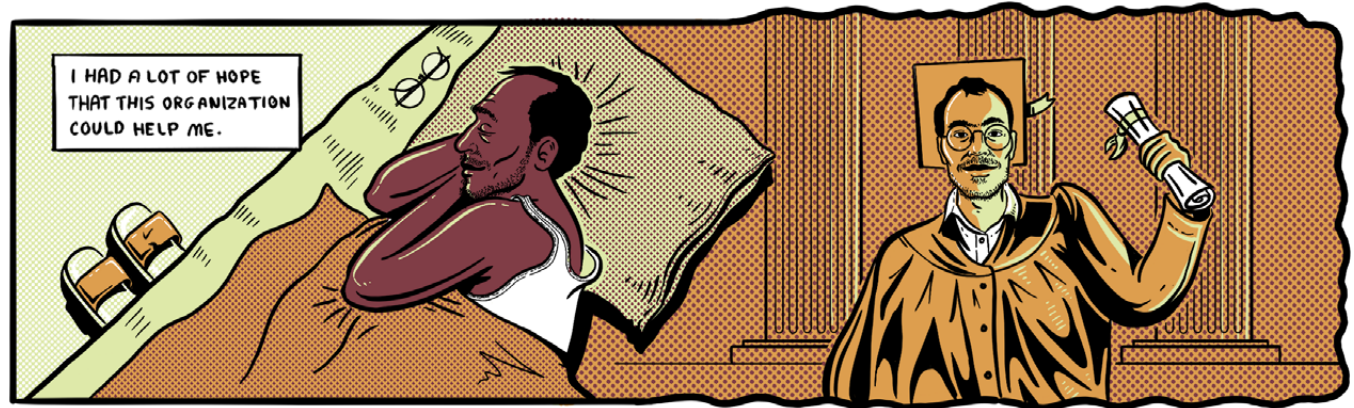
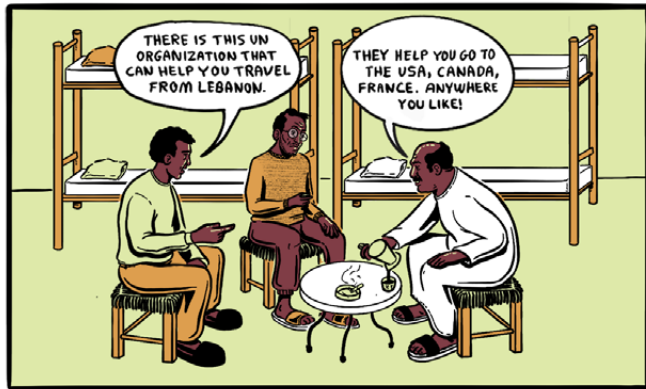
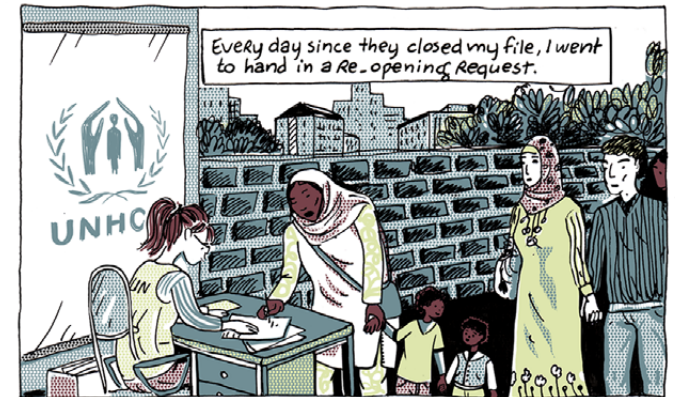


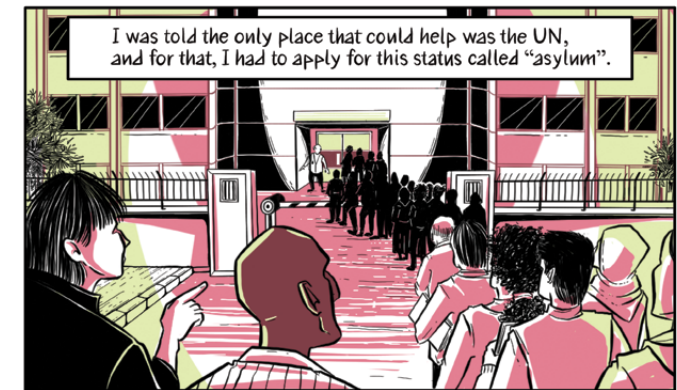
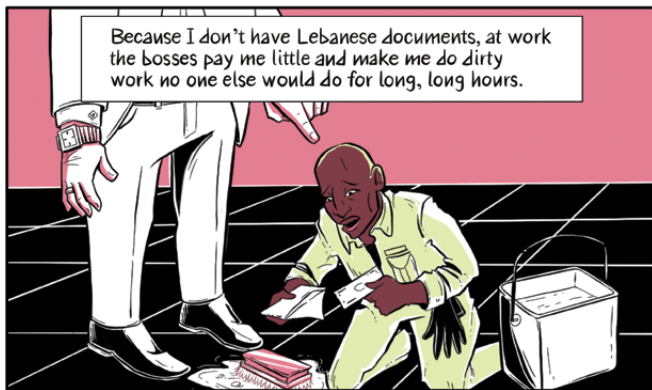
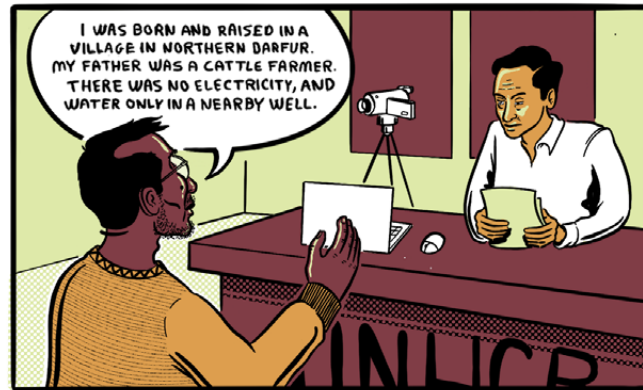
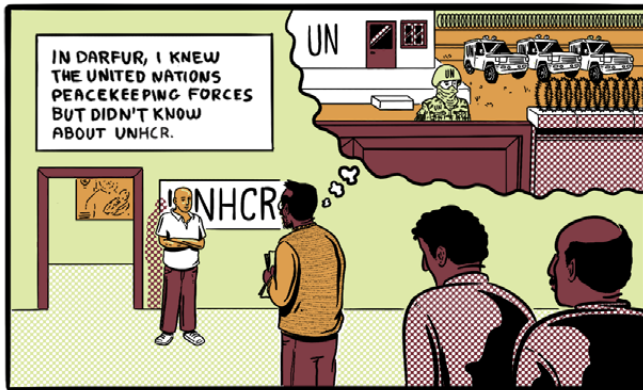
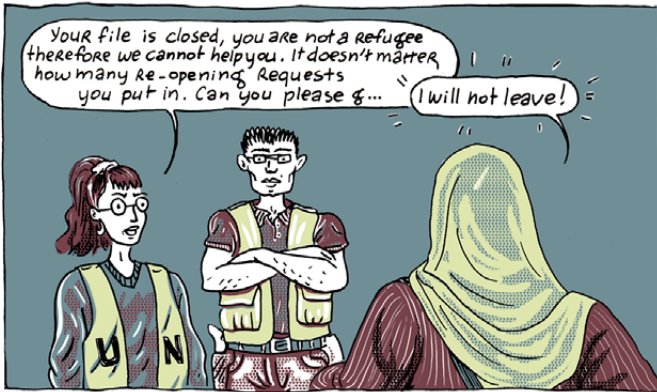




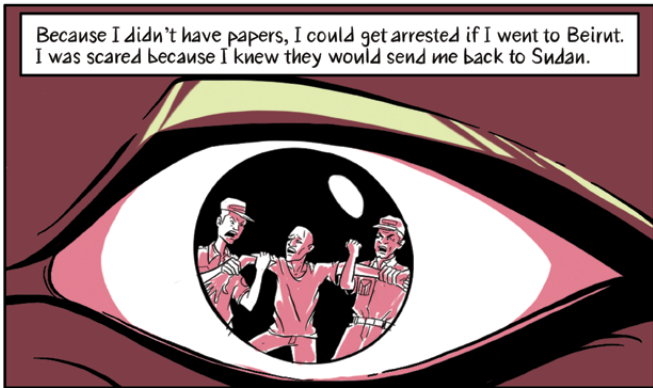
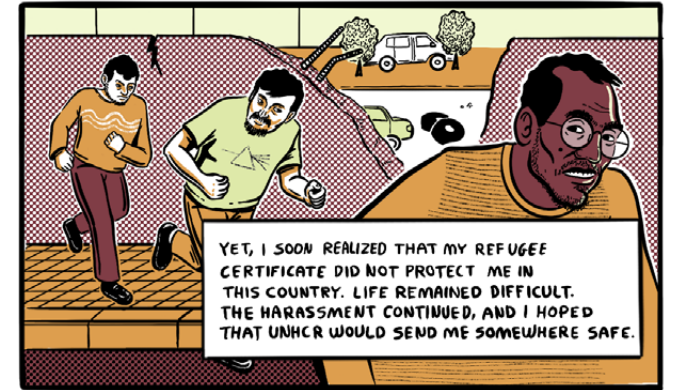
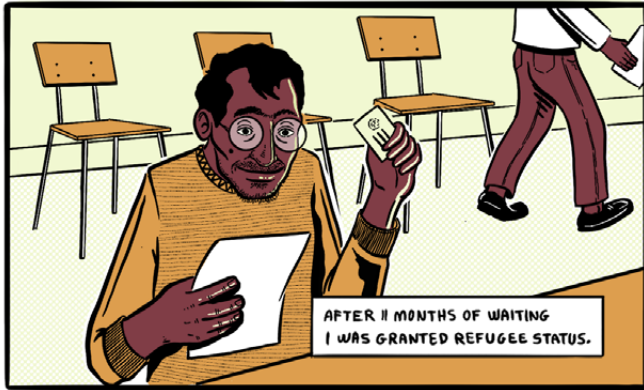


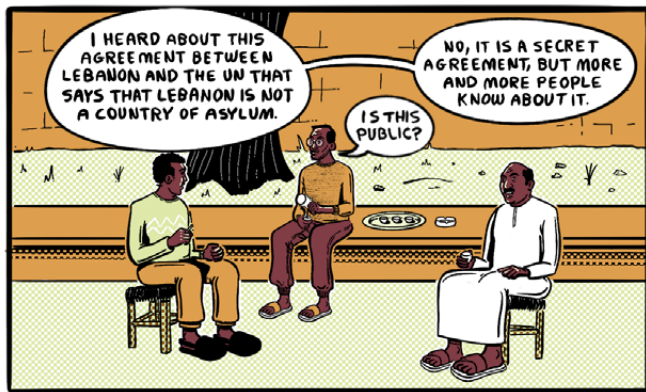
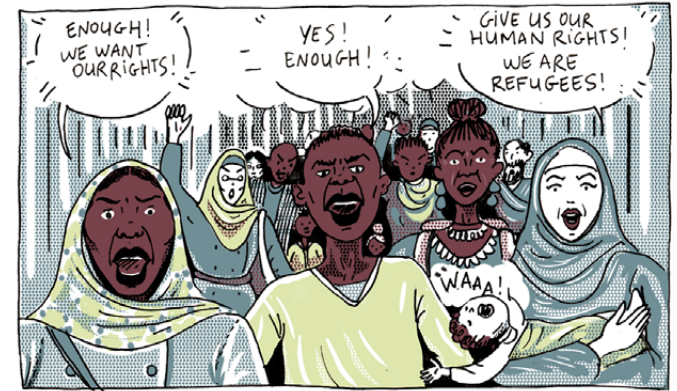


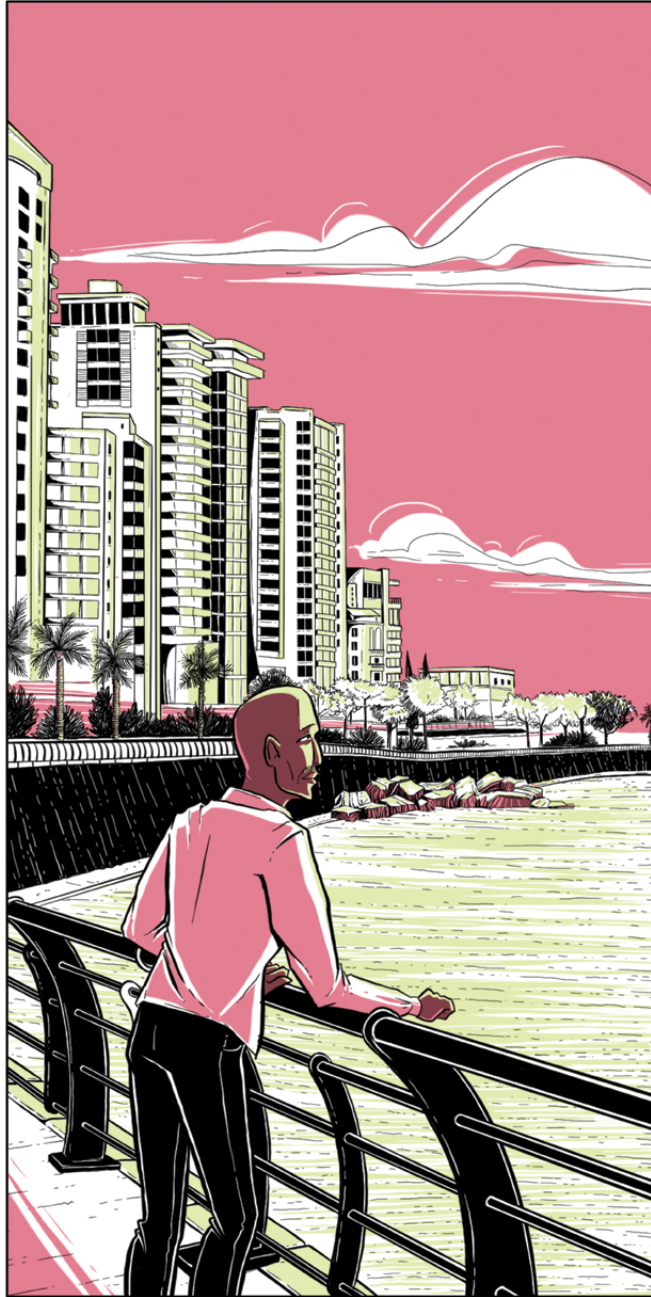












act

02

protests





WE WANT OUR RIGHTS!

Calm down! We are here to help you!

We are human beings, how can you treat us this way?

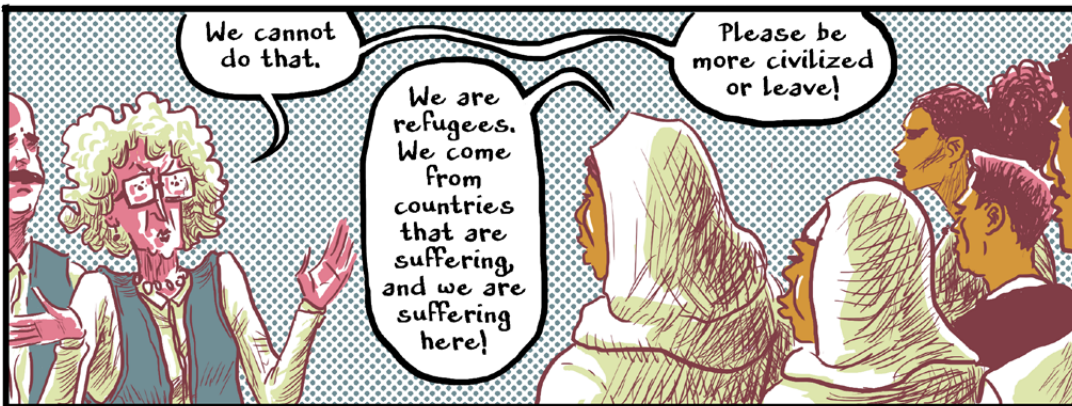


THIS IS NONSENSE! WE ARE DOING OUR BEST! But we can only help recognized refugees. Other people are not our concern.



If we are not your concern, then give us our files back! Our stories do not belong to you!

GIVE US OUR RIGHTS OR GIVE US OUR FILES!



We cannot do that.

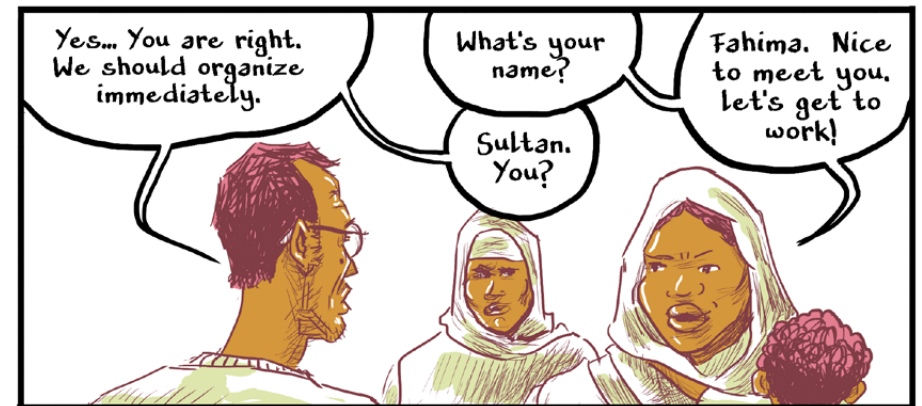
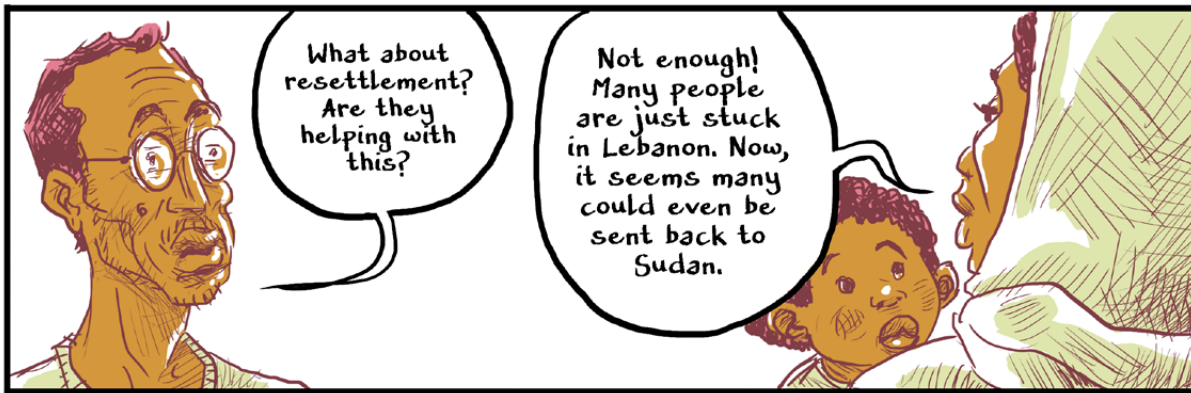
We are refugees. We come from countries that are suffering, and we are suffering here!

Please be more civilized or leave!



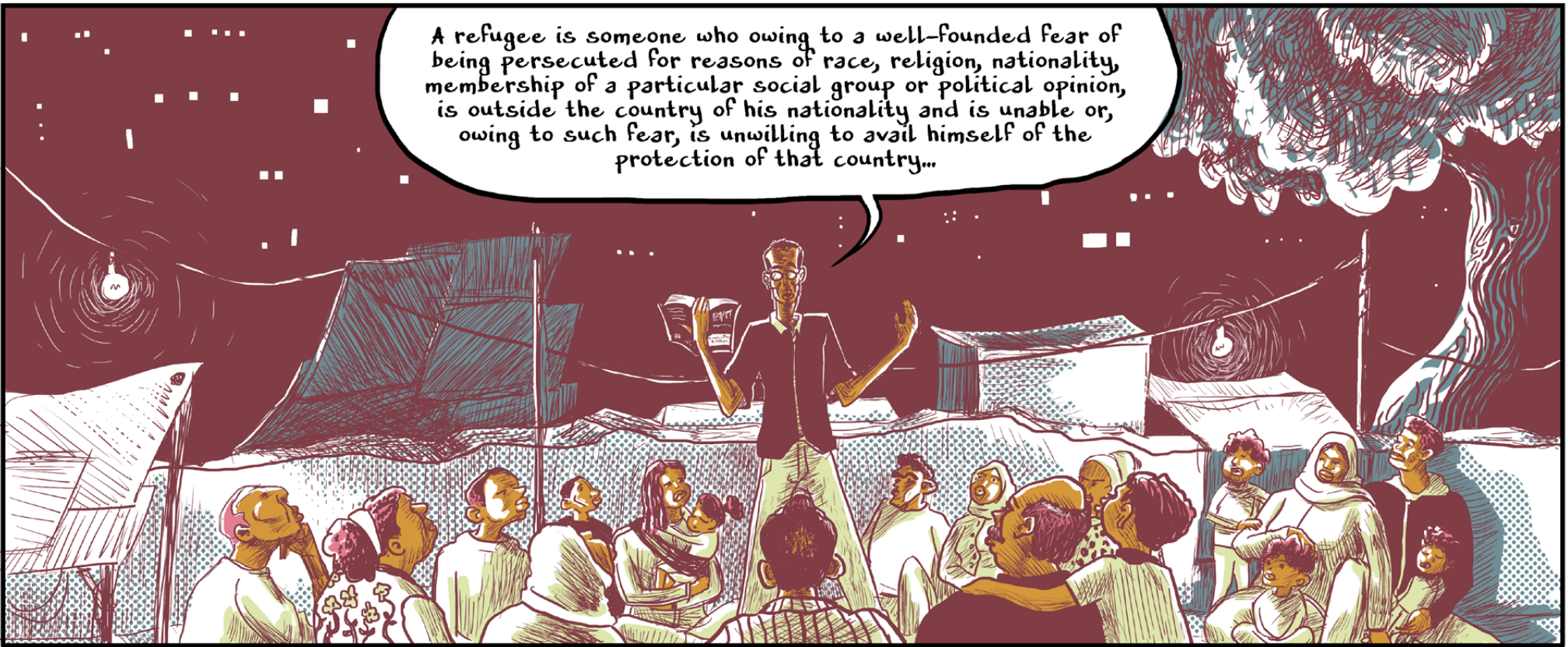
We will not get our rights in this way. Come, let's go.

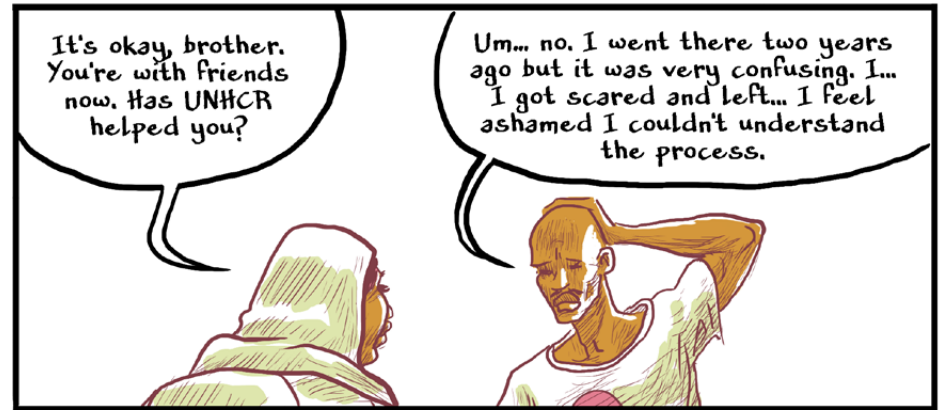


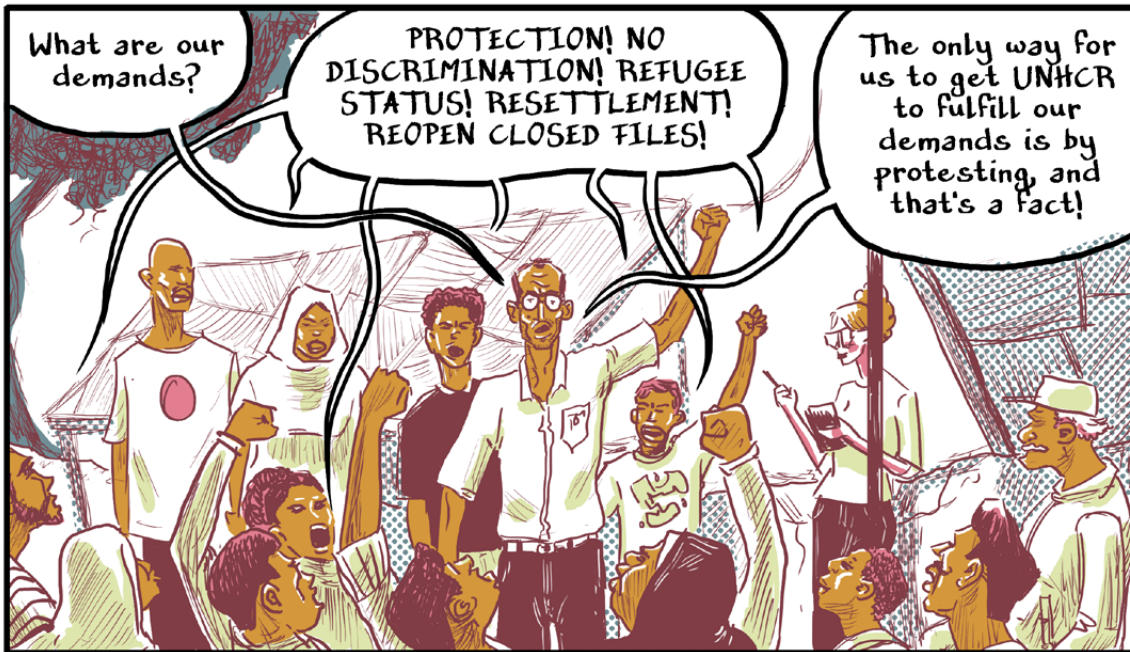




A refugee is someone who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country...







What are our demands?

PROTECTION! NO DISCRIMINATION! REFUGEE STATUS! RESETTLEMENT! REOPEN CLOSED FILES!

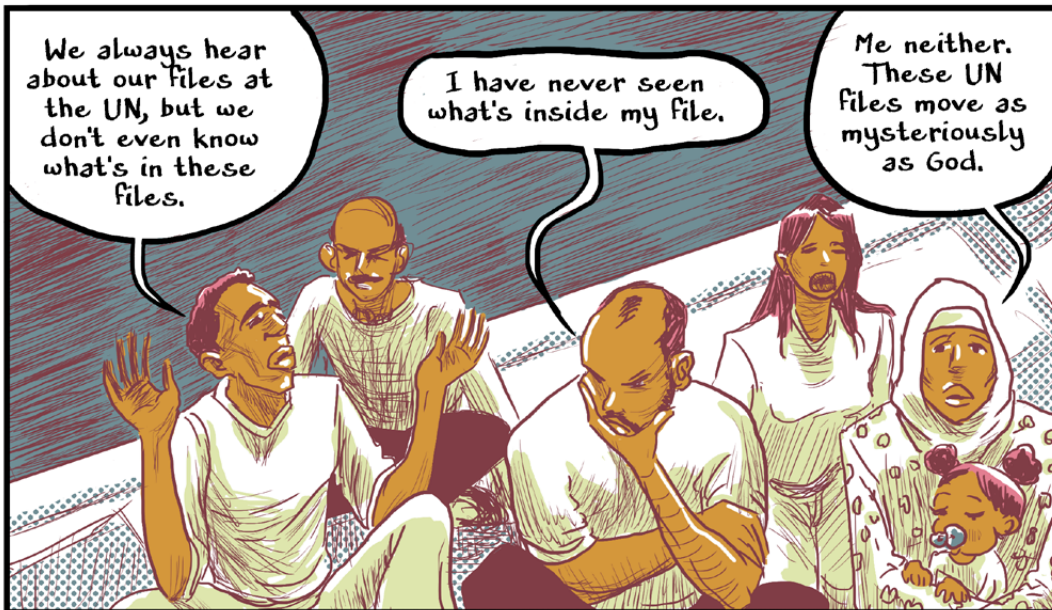
The only way for us to get UNHCR to fulfill our demands is by protesting, and that's a fact!



What unites us is that we are all refugees asking for our rights.

But when I go inside the UN, I go alone. I'm not going with you.

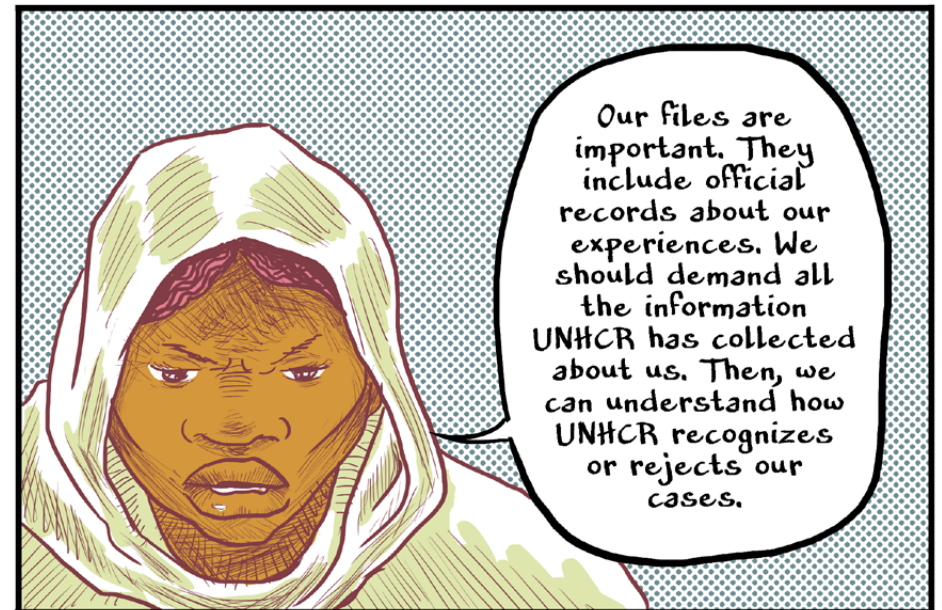
That's true. Outside we are together, inside everyone is alone.



We always hear about our files at the UN, but we don't even know what's in these files.

I have never seen what's inside my file.

Me neither. These UN files move as mysteriously as God.



Our files are important. They include official records about our experiences. We should demand all the information UNHCR has collected about us. Then, we can understand how UNHCR recognizes or rejects our cases.



We should burn down the offices! Then they will have to take us seriously!

We are peaceful people. We must remain so in claiming our rights.



Let's... ahem... let's not give UNHCR any reason to call the police. No violence, no blocking of the entrance doors.



This sit-in will get results. We're not hurting anyone, we're just asking for our rights. Let's do this!



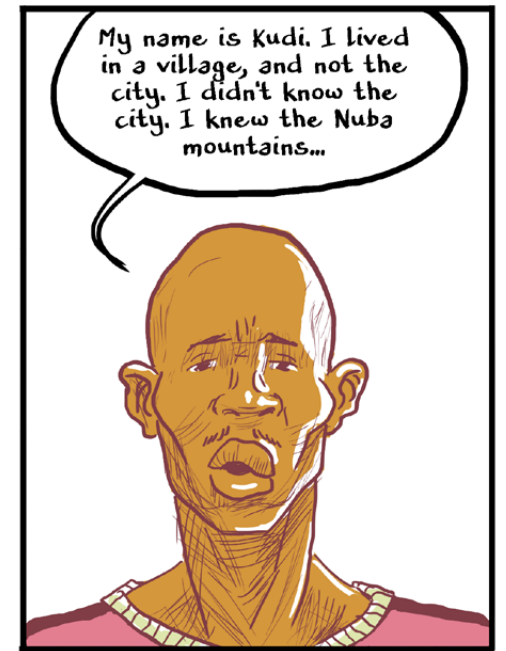
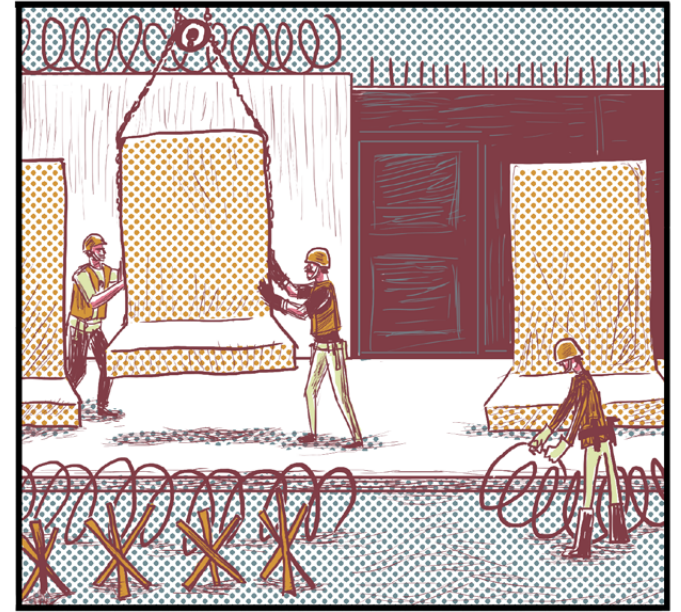
Fahima, love, are you okay?

Don't worry, husband. Just the heat. A good night's rest will make me feel better.

You're from Nuba too?! My name is Kudi!

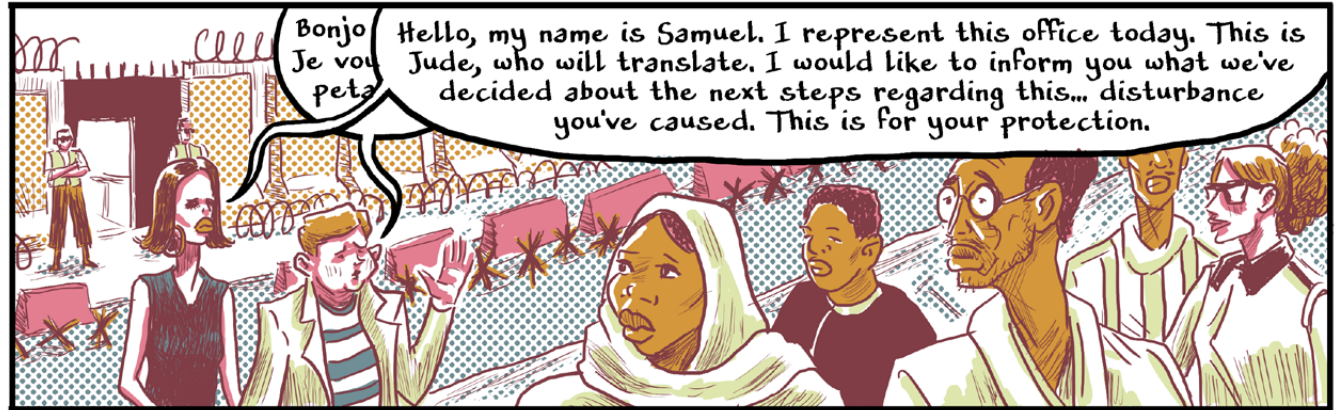
That was a great speech, Sultan!

Thank you, friend.



We were farmers, we had sheep and cows. But we had a lot of problems in the village. There were wars...



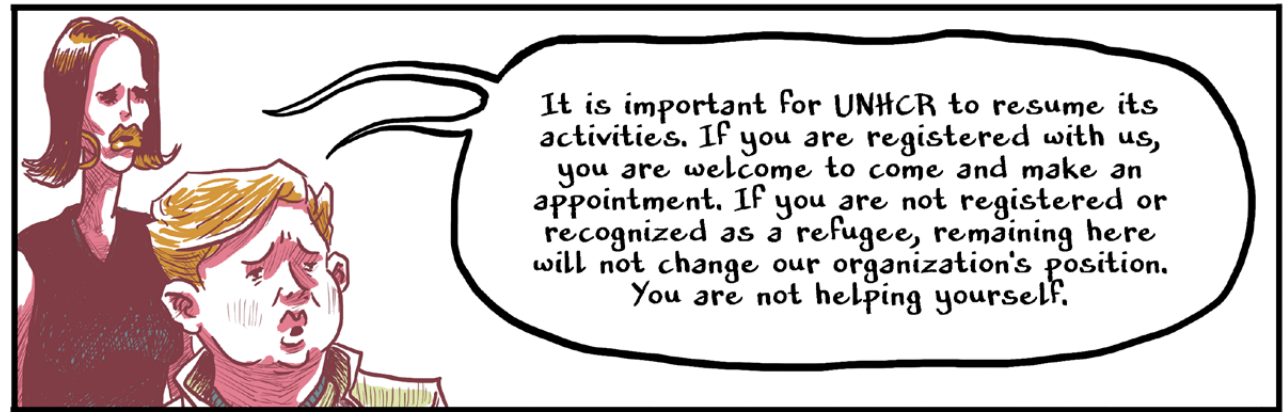


Bonjo
Je vous
peta

Hello, my name is Samuel. I represent this office today. This is Jude, who will translate. I would like to inform you what we've decided about the next steps regarding this... disturbance you've caused. This is for your protection.



The reception area is now only for people who have appointments or valid reasons to meet with our employees. I'm sure you understand that we have to prioritize people who come through regular channels.



It is important for UNHCR to resume its activities. If you are registered with us, you are welcome to come and make an appointment. If you are not registered or recognized as a refugee, remaining here will not change our organization's position. You are not helping yourself.



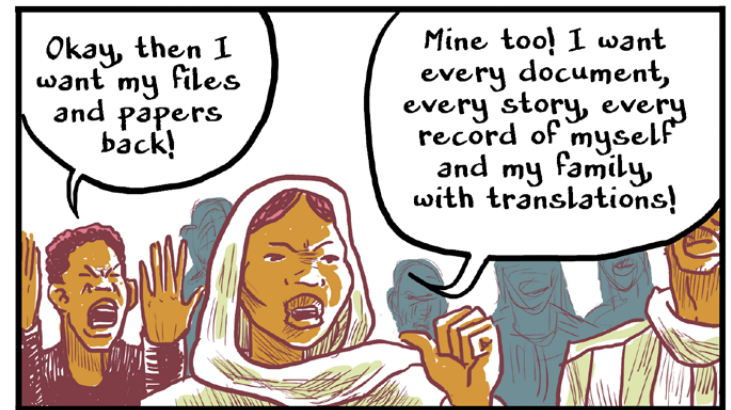
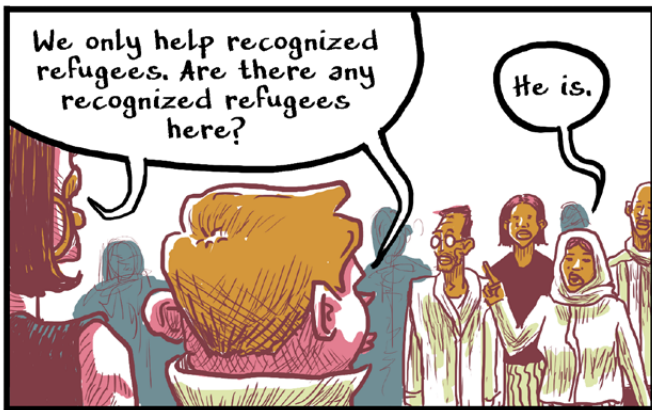
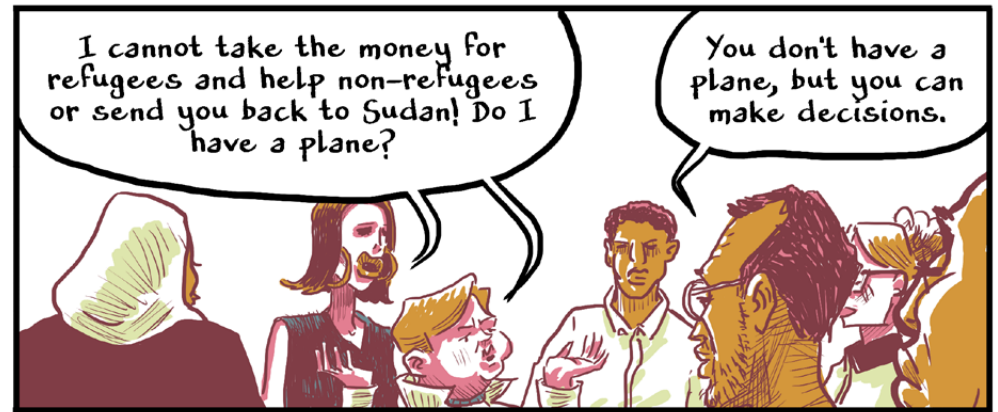
Aha! See that little girl! A scooter could have hit or fallen on top of her! I am concerned for you and your children's security!

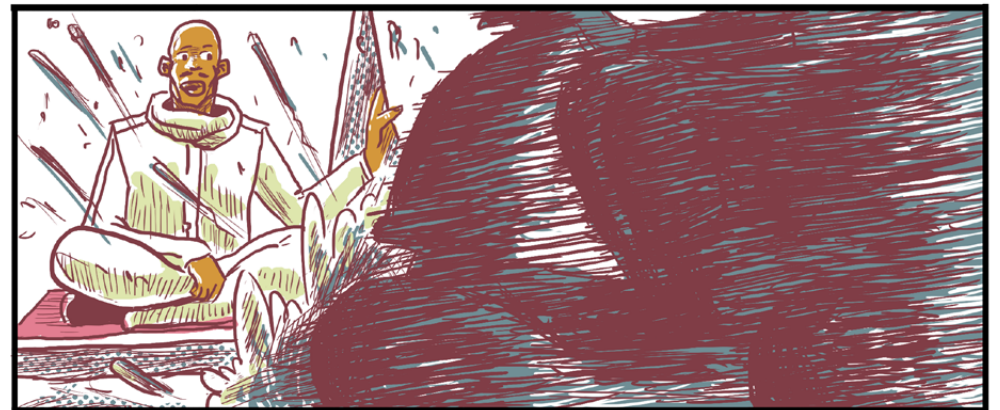
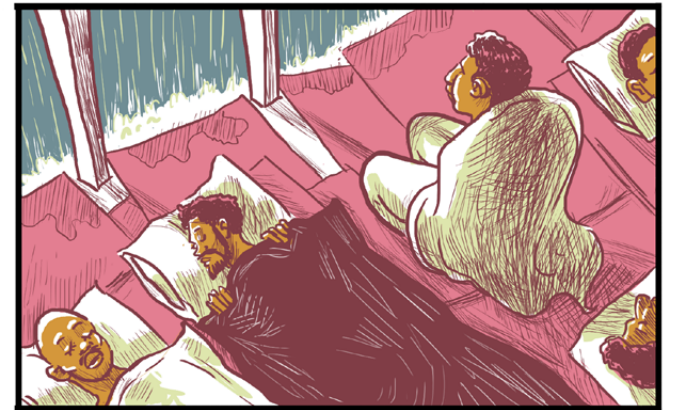
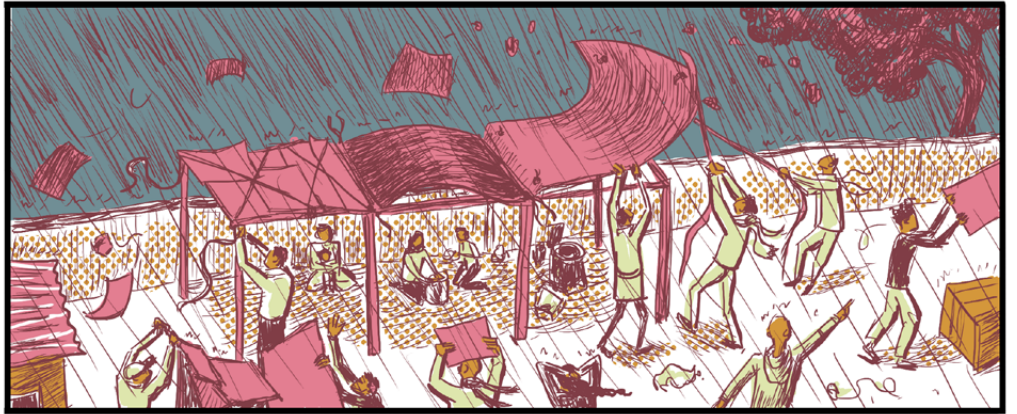
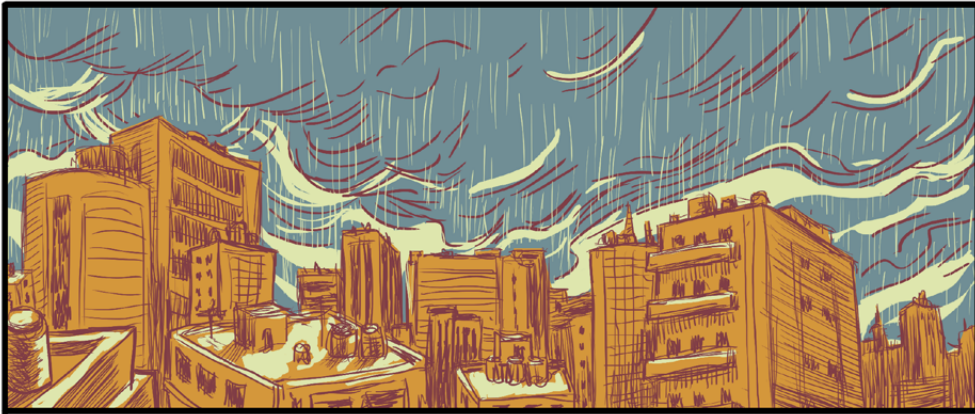


I will be clear: If you disturb the work of our employees, we will not hesitate to call the police.

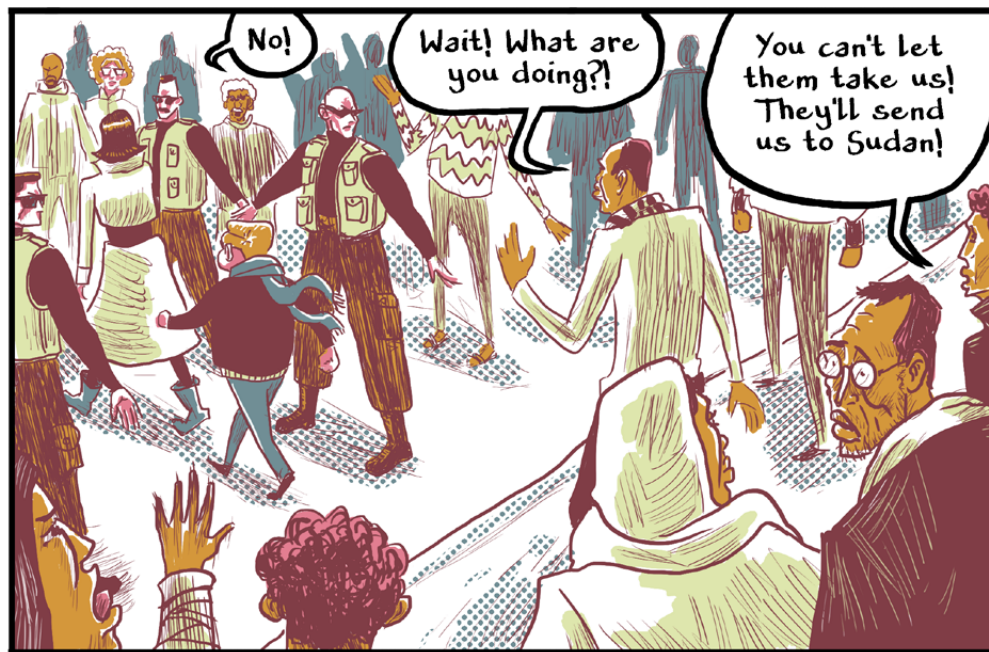
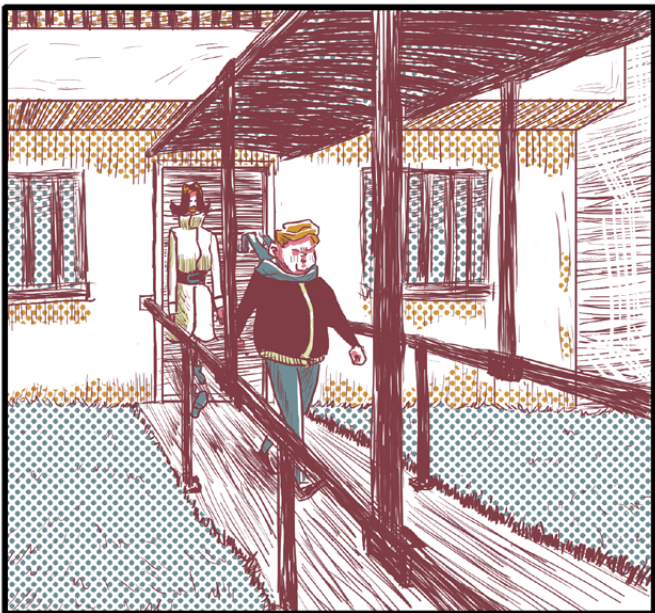


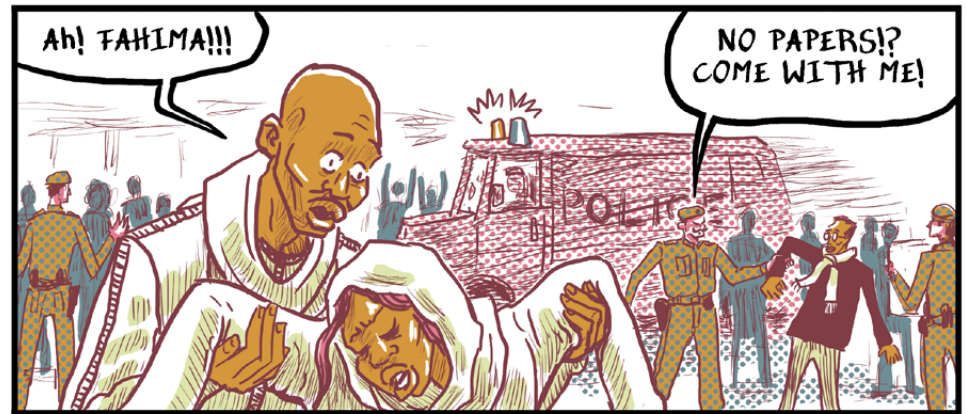
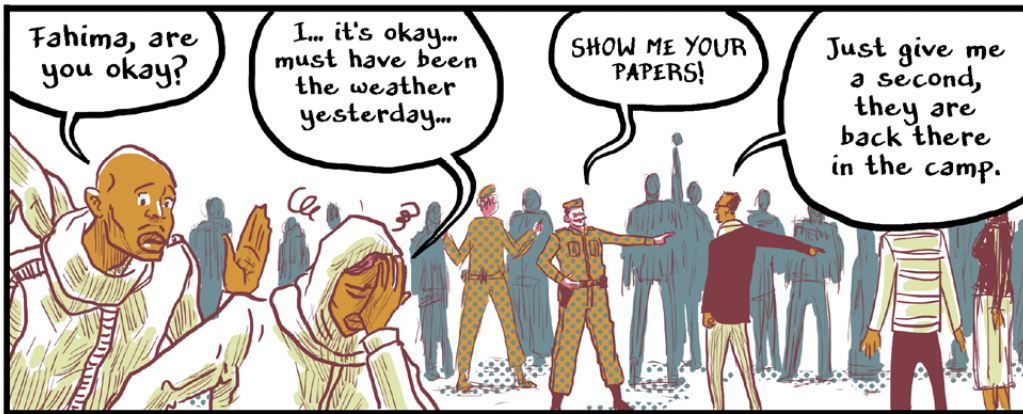
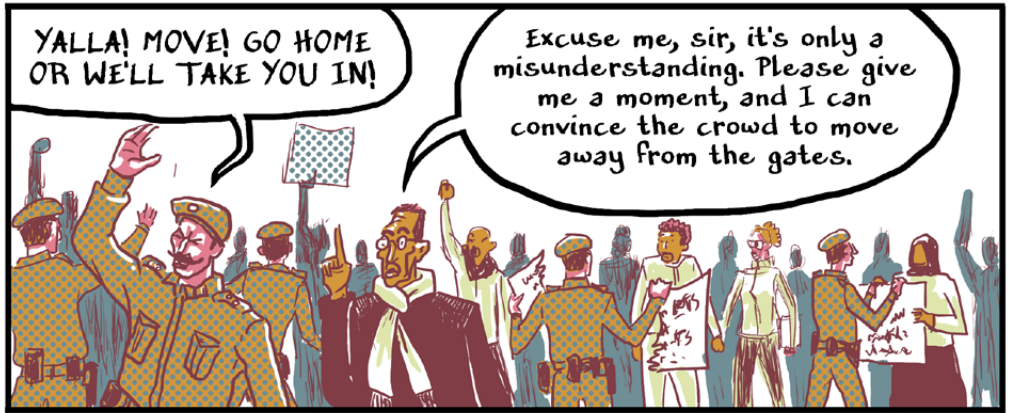
Now, if you want to continue your protest without disturbing our work, you are free to do so. But I assure you, nothing will change in five months or five years if you are not registered or recognized by our organization.

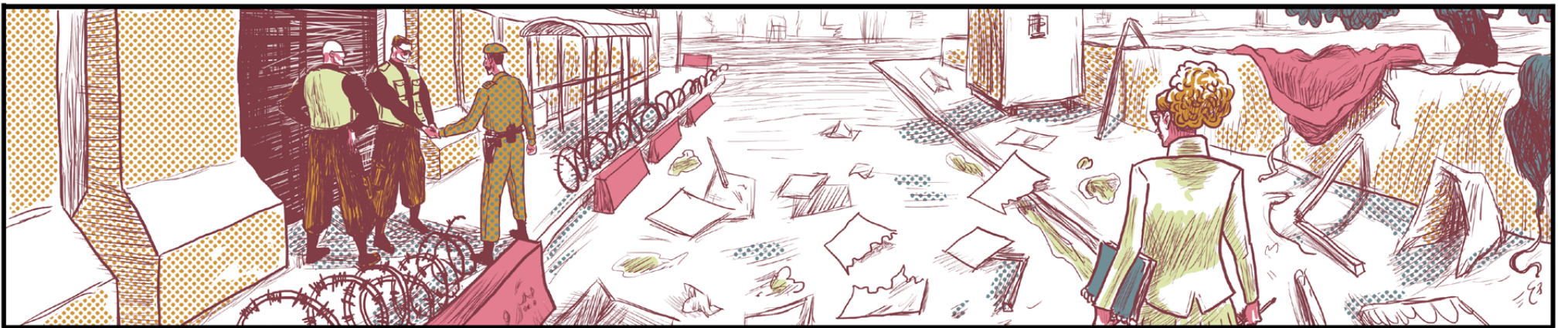
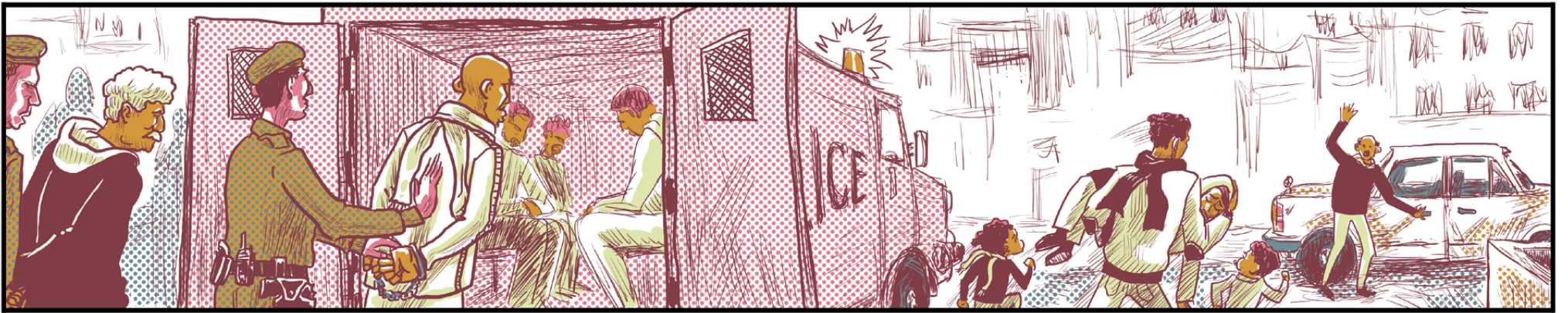












act

03

postscripts

“Few studies spotlight the precarious situation of Sudanese protection seekers...”



UNHCR's refugee status determination process has been criticized for lacking procedural safeguards and having a high risk of error, with asylum seekers who fit the legal criteria for refugee status being denied protection.



In the past, asylum seekers have not had access to most of the evidence in their cases, and rejection letters were not detailed or specific to the individual.

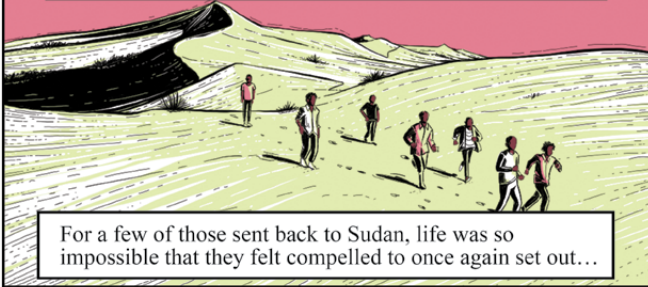


The prohibition of a right to counsel and no independent unit for appeals further exacerbated the situation.

While important steps in recent years remedy some of these concerns, little is known about the fate of those with "closed files", meaning those who have had their asylum applications rejected and their files subsequently shelved.

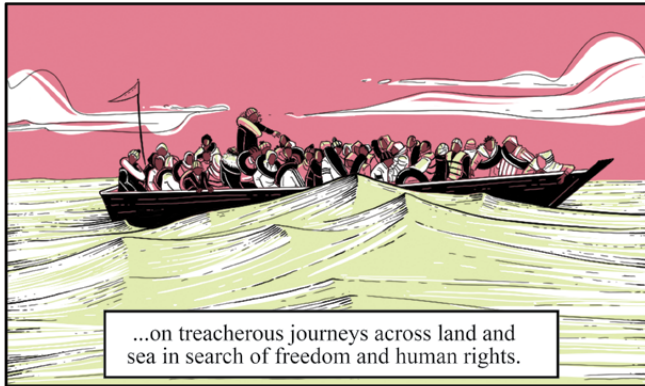


Arbitrary arrest, detention, and deportation have been constant threats for Sudanese protection seekers, many of whom lived without valid residency papers.



For a few of those sent back to Sudan, life was so impossible that they felt compelled to once again set out...

...on treacherous journeys across land and sea in search of freedom and human rights.



Many held rosy dreams of finding peace and safety in Europe.



Those who managed to make it soon had their hopes of a more dignified life shattered when confronted with the reality of a hostile European border regime.



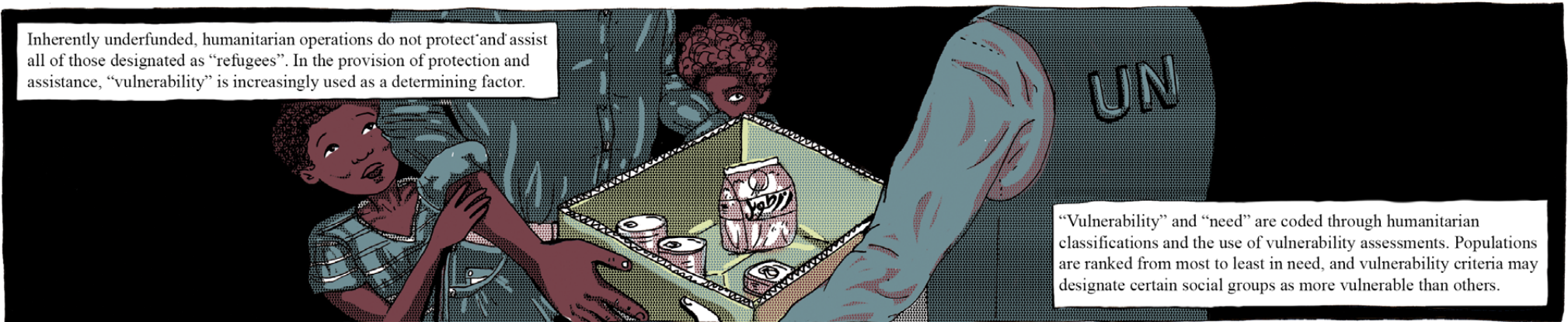
For them, the struggle for rights and dignity continues.

Seeking protection is oftentimes a lottery of life and death. For some, protection may come far too late, or at too high of a cost. In situations where refugee status was given, many were surprised that the status did not always translate into sufficient protection and assistance. Often, other factors came into play.



In 2018, Sudanese refugees amounted to only about 4% of all “persons of concern” to UNHCR in Lebanon. Their plight has long been overshadowed by refugee groups of “greater interest” to donors and policymakers.

Inherently underfunded, humanitarian operations do not protect and assist all of those designated as “refugees”. In the provision of protection and assistance, “vulnerability” is increasingly used as a determining factor.

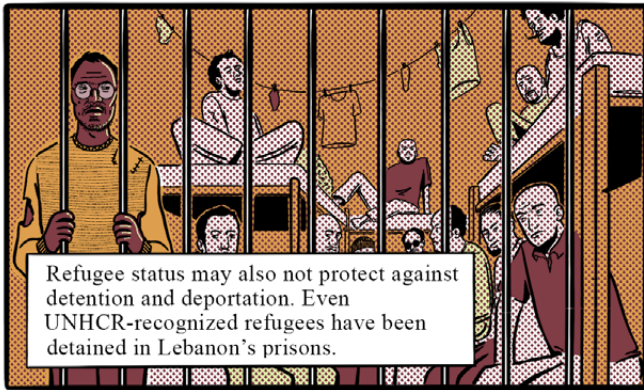


“Vulnerability” and “need” are coded through humanitarian classifications and the use of vulnerability assessments. Populations are ranked from most to least in need, and vulnerability criteria may designate certain social groups as more vulnerable than others.

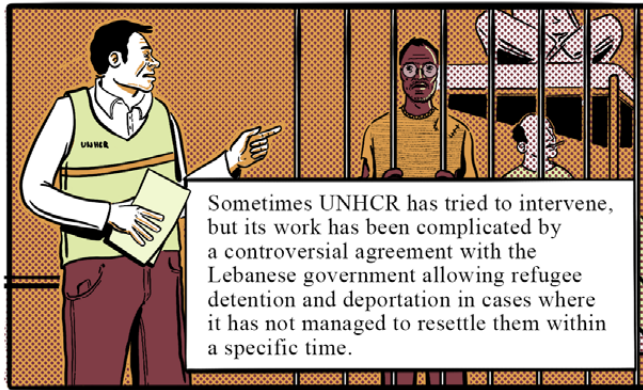
These calculations lack transparency and run a risk of distortion. The process misses the human element underlying everything.



Amid the insecurities of who gets humanitarian aid – and on what grounds – many refugees resort to other modes of coping, as whole communities have stepped in to cover the gaps. Refugees are not merely passive recipients of care. They are active participants in finding solutions to their problems. Every day, everywhere, refugees empower refugees.



Refugee status may also not protect against detention and deportation. Even UNHCR-recognized refugees have been detained in Lebanon's prisons.



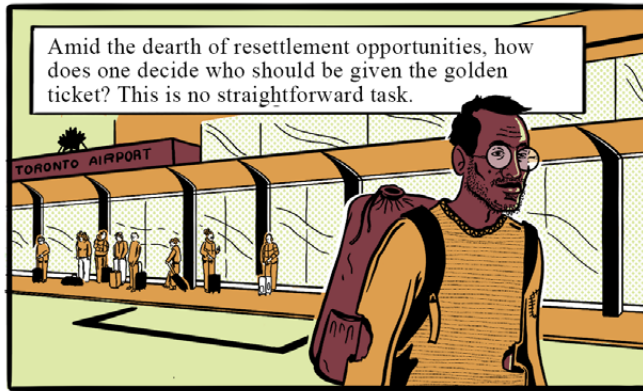
Sometimes UNHCR has tried to intervene, but its work has been complicated by a controversial agreement with the Lebanese government allowing refugee detention and deportation in cases where it has not managed to resettle them within a specific time.



Luckily, several refugee protesters were resettled straight from the detention center. For many on the sidelines, this speedy response was further proof that protesting leads to positive outcomes.



Yet for many other refugees, resettlement remains a distant dream. The divide between the number of refugees in need of resettlement and the number of places available is huge.



Amid the dearth of resettlement opportunities, how does one decide who should be given the golden ticket? This is no straightforward task.



Officially, resettlement targets refugee populations at heightened protection risk in the countries of asylum. Resettlement thus meets an extreme need.



But questions can surely be raised about the principles of equity and non-discrimination in the provision of resettlement. Civil society groups have long pointed out the lack of resettlement places for African refugees in particular.

Yet once resettled, rebuilding a new life in exile can also be a lonely and isolating experience. The struggle seems to always continue, even for those who have found "asylum".

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