

RADAR SCREEN ■ MUGAMBI MUTEGI

Safaricom takes search for lost relatives mobile

As the world commemorated the World Refugee Day yesterday, the nearly half a million refugees in Kenya were offered renewed hope of reuniting with their lost relatives and friends through a new mobile search tool.

The innovation coincided with the release of a new United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) report detailing that refugees number had increased to a 16-year high with majority (four-fifths) of them located in developing countries.

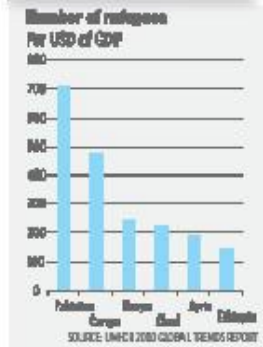
The mobile application comes as a result of a partnership between mobile phone services provider Safaricom, phone maker Ericsson and Refugees United (RU) coming up with a search tool allowing refugees to register themselves onto a secure database through mobile internet or text messages.

Individuals searching for relatives and organisations hosting displaced people can use this anonymous database to rapidly browse for matches. Its proponents have set a 120,000-person registration target by year-end.

"The programme was piloted in Adjumani Refugee settlement in Uganda where Refugees United has confirmed that in the past nine months, more than 41,000 have registered in their search for missing family," Safaricom CEO Bob Collymore said. "A very vulnerable segment of our society now has a real chance of being re-united with their loved ones."

According to UNHCR, the refugee count in the entire East African region has increased by 8 per cent to 1.4 million since September last year with the local camps; Kakuma and Dadaab, hosting the majority - 80,000 and 360,000 respectively.

Partnership with UNHCR gives refugees a mobile phone-based search engine to reunite with loved ones across the world



Another 900,000 internally displaced Kenyans are still living in makeshift camps - two and a half years after the post election violence of 2008.

This use of mobile communica-

Ericsson vice-president for Sub-Saharan Africa and managing director for Kenya Craig Hosken (left), Safaricom CEO Bob Collymore and former Southern Sudan child soldier Emma weillal (centre) launch a mobile phone software yesterday at Safaricom House that, which will enable refugees track their relatives. Inset, 6-year-old Burundi refugee Magillo Zawadi during World Refugee Day celebrations held at University of Nairobi grounds on Monday. PHOTO: MUGAMBI MUTEGI

tions and Internet, unlike the traditional paper-based search systems, is expected to better help those in these two largest camps in the world locate their relatives.

The new tool is connected to RU's mobile site <http://m.reunite.org> - a lighter version of the main internet service found on www.reunite.org.

"Helping refugees locate their loved ones using text messages and mobile Internet is one of the many ways in which technology is changing our world and helping people reconnect while ensuring this is done in a

way that respects the privacy and security of individual refugees," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Mr Antonio Guterres said.

Majority of the local refugees are victims of civil unrest in their countries which have lasted for decades, as well as natural and climate-related disasters in the region.

Somalia, which has been struggling with civil unrest for decades as well as playing host to the infamous terrorist group al-Shabab, has been the main source of local refugees with approximately 350 refugees arriving

daily from the war-torn country.

The UNHCR 2010 Global Trends report released yesterday shows that many of the world's poorest countries are hosting huge refugee populations, both in absolute terms and in relation to the size of their economies.

The report indicates that Afghans form the largest number of refugees (three million), followed by Iraqis (1.6 million) and Somalis (770,000). The Democratic Republic of Congo is fourth, having produced 476,000 displaced persons.

The worldwide refugee population count of 43.7 million represents an increase from the previous 2009 figure of 43.3 million and has taken a toll on the economies of host countries.

In terms of the economic burden, Kenya is ranked third on the list with 247 refugees for each US dollar of its per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Pakistan tops the list with a comparable number of 710 refugees followed by Democratic Republic of the Congo with 476 refugees.

By comparison, Germany, the industrialised country with the largest refugee population (694,000 people), has 17 refugees for each dollar of per capita GDP. The report also brought to the fore a prevailing imbalance in international support towards countries with refugees.

"The world is failing these people, leaving them to wait out the instability back home and put their lives on hold indefinitely. Developing countries cannot continue to bear this burden alone and the industrialized world must address this imbalance," Mr Guterres added.

This year's World Refugee Day was themed 'One refugee without hope is one too many'.

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