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Refugee Situation Awareness: Camps and Beyond

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Abstract

Refugee situations create challenging refugee situation awareness research problems. We examine these research problems through three inter-related questions: (1) How do actors that service refugee camps maintain camp activity awareness?; (2) How do camp-based refugees maintain awareness of their personal situation in the camp and their home country?; (3) How do nationals outside of their country maintain awareness of the situation in their country? We provide starting points to answering these questions via (a) field visits to refugee camps in Rwanda and Jordan and (b) emphasizing refugee GeoICT training to support refugee situation awareness and avenues for education and livelihood.

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1. Introduction

World refugee population numbers continue to grow due to various political, environmental, and conflict situations with world refugee population figure topping 50 million since WWII [1]. Upon leaving their country, many refugees are protected in camp environments of neighboring countries or live within the society of the country they have relocated to from their home country. The duality of camp-based or societal relocation of refugees within another

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country creates challenging research problems centered on refugee situation awareness – or how the various actors that serve refugees and the refugees themselves can maintain awareness of factors related to their own personal well-being as well as the situation in their home country. In this paper, we begin to examine this research problem through three inter-related questions:

1. How do the various actors that service and support refugee camp environments maintain awareness of various camp activities?
2. How do refugees themselves inside of a camp environment maintain awareness both of their personal situation in the camp and that of their home country?
3. How do refugees and other nationals living outside of their country maintain awareness of the situation in their home country?

We illustrate potential starting points to examining these questions using two evidence sources. The first are field visits to two refugee camps in Rwanda during fall of 2014. Rwanda has been the recipient of over 70,000 refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in the past two years [2]. The second are from a January 2105 field visit to the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan and semi-structured interviews conducted with (a) a Syrian national living outside of Syria that provides a unique, ecologically valid perspectives on Syrian refugees both inside and outside of camp environments and (b) a refugee currently living in the Za'atari refugee camp. Although seemingly very different from one another in terms of cultural and political contexts, the Rwanda/DRC and Jordan/Syria cases in fact share many parallels in terms of generalizable refugee situation issues. Furthermore, they provide interesting comparisons with one another due to the size of the overall refugee populations (the Jordan/Syria situation is much larger by comparison with Rwanda/DRC) and attention each situation has gained from the international refugee community (the Jordan/Syria situation has gained much more attention by comparison with Rwanda/DRC).

We explore these two cases closely as they pertain to the three aforementioned research questions. In the following sections, we briefly outline what we mean by situation awareness to situate our discussion of the two cases.

2. Situation Awareness

Situation awareness (SA) is a term that is often associated with the military and has generally become to be viewed as the idea of knowing what is happening during a dynamic situation [3]. For example, a General being aware of where his army is located, what terrain they are engaging in, the status of supplies, and so forth. The term, however, is also very applicable to any type of quickly evolving, dynamic situation. For example, in the disaster management world, maintaining situation awareness is critical for many of the same reasons as in military contexts such as, for example, knowing where disaster victims are located, when relief supplies will arrive, and keeping track of changes in the situation itself such as weather, or even a disaster transitioning from a rapid response to a recovery [4]. The ideas of situation awareness are thus equally applicable in refugee situations. Although the types of situations that may create a refugee crisis can operate on time scales somewhat slower than a natural disaster (weeks/months vs. days/hours), maintaining situation awareness is equally of life-and-death importance.

2.1. Mapping Technology and Situation Awareness

Our research is particularly interested in how maps can serve as the graphical embodiment of SA. As stated previously, SA has a long tradition with the military where maps have played a vital support tool. Modern humanitarian mapping technology advances such as volunteered geographic information, crisis mapping and broader awareness of the importance maps can play in humanitarian situations is creating exciting research opportunities for understanding the relationship between maps and SA [5-7]. However, despite advances, to the best of our knowledge, little, if any, attention has been paid to mapping and SA in refugee contexts. In the following sections, we discuss two case studies that can suggest a research path forward for mapping and SA in refugee contexts.

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