The Forgotten Faces

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LSE Firoz Lalji Institute for Africa

CPAID Centre for Public Authority and International Development

Backstory

This booklet arises from a specific protest within Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya—a moment marked by both courage and tragedy. At its heart are the poems of Peter Kidi, a South Sudanese citizen born and raised in Kakuma, who began to share his poetry publicly for the first time during this period of unrest. He was moved to share his poetry as a visceral response to the violent suppression of the protest he had witnessed. His words offered a powerful and intimate response to the unfolding events, which resonated widely among those who had ever lived in Kakuma.

Charlotte Brown, then a doctoral student, encountered Peter's poetry through a mutual acquaintance who had also lived in Kakuma. Struck by the resonance of his work with refugee experiences she had encountered in Uganda, she reached out to Peter to explore the possibility of sharing his writing more widely. With generous support from the Centre for Public Authority and International Development (CPAID), hosted by the Firoz Lalji Institute for Africa (FLIA) at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), Peter and Charlotte began a collaboration to document the events and emotions surrounding the protests. To complement the poetry and amplify its message, they invited renowned political cartoonist Victor Ndula to contribute visual interpretations that reflect the spirit and urgency of the protests. This collection is the result of months of close collaboration and deep commitment to sharing these stories.

As you turn its pages, we invite you to listen closely, to reflect on what is being asked, and to consider how these voices might inform a broader understanding of displacement, protest, and belonging.

Poetry and Protest in Kakuma

Peter Kidi is a South Sudanese poet living in Kenya. His words capture the humanity of his neighbours, friends, and family, people living with the consequences of bureaucratic decisions. The poems speak not only to the events as they were unfolding in Kakuma at the time but also to the situations facing many of the displaced across the continent. Peter's work has gained international attention, including a recent contribution to Oxfam's *From Poverty to Power* blog. He has several forthcoming publications, including with *The New Humanitarian* and *King's College London*, and is working towards the founding of a *Stories Hub* to bring together like-minded creatives within Kakuma. He continues to write, documenting the many faces of displacement with clarity and urgency.

Connect with Peter Kidi on social media, X - @peterkidi1

Victor Ndula is an internationally recognised political cartoonist. The comic strip contained in this booklet tells the story of what happened in Kakuma in late February and early March 2025. He draws on his own experiences working in Kakuma for around five years, as well as the experiences and accounts of current residents. The development of the artwork was closely informed by the images and videos captured by those who witnessed and participated in these events.

Connect with Victor Ndula on social media, X - @ndula_victor

Charlotte Brown is a researcher who has spent several years in northwestern Uganda tracing refugee experiences of humanitarian infrastructures. She has published on the prioritisation of humanitarian resources in Uganda.

Connect with Charlotte Brown on social media, BlueSky - @charlottelbrown.bsky.social

Not a Line Item: Lives Behind the Cuts

Across East Africa, the lives of millions hang in the balance not due to lack of resources, but because of choices made in distant boardrooms where suffering is tallied like an expense and weighed against political convenience. This is not a crisis of scarcity; it is a crisis of priority. Aid cuts, framed as fiscal necessity, are in fact a violent reckoning borne by the most dispossessed leaving them without access to healthcare, food, and shelter. The scope for political expression is tightening, and hard-won gains in living conditions are being upended.

This booklet centres on a protest that took place in Kakuma refugee camp in early 2025. The protest was a direct response to the withdrawal and restructuring of humanitarian support for those already facing the challenges of life under international protection.

Located in north-western Kenya, Turkana County, Kakuma and Kalobeyei refugee camps host around 300,000 people, mainly from South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Residents of the camp face significant challenges, including a scarcity of arable land, limited access to healthcare, inadequate water and shelter provisions, and minimal opportunities for income generation, making even basic survival a daily struggle. Extreme weather events and recurrent flooding compound these difficulties, and are only likely to get worse as the climate crisis escalates.

Yet, as aid agencies and international institutions scramble to adapt to the new funding environment, the people most affected by these cuts continue to be left out of decision-making processes and denied the most basic tenets of humanitarian protection. The booklet aims to show the lived consequences of aid cuts, oversights and failings. And, importantly, to provoke conversations about what happens when people assert their right to be heard.

This booklet is not just a record of pain; it is a collective act of refusal. The voices within these pages resist erasure. They are the testimony of communities who demand recognition not as passive recipients of dwindling charity, but as people with agency, dignity, and the right to shape their own futures. Their demands, outlined on the placard on the cover of this booklet, are clear: to be heard, to be seen, and to no longer be made to pay the price for a world that calculates their worth in margins and metrics.

The humanitarian system, as it stands, is not fit for purpose. But it is not immutable. The structural conditions of refuge are the result of decisions. And these decisions can be changed.

CRIES IN THE DUST

I. A Cry for Bread

We marched with empty stomachs,
our shadows thinner than our hope,
our feet carving pleas into the dust,
But the wind swallowed our voices whole.

We asked for bread,
but the air turned to smoke,
and the sky rained bullets instead.
Tell me, who knew hunger was a crime?

II. A Thirst Unquenched

Our lips, cracked like the earth beneath,
whispered prayers to a silent God.
Water—just a drop—
yet the well of mercy had run dry.

Ten liters, they say.
For a child, a mother, a father, a dream.
How do you break a fast with dust?
How do you quench a soul with empty hands

NUTRITION CRISIS
TERMS
DATE
ITEMS
NAME
SHEET NO.

III. The Cost of Dignity

We held nothing but our voices,
yet they saw weapons in our words.
They silenced us with fire and gas,
turning protest into a funeral march.

Tell me, when did dignity become treason?
When did asking for life deserve death?
Are we not bones and blood like you?
Or do refugees not bleed red enough?

IV. A Grave Called Refuge

They called this place a safe haven,
but safety does not taste like sorrow.
Protection does not wear boots,
and justice does not pull the trigger.

Now, some of us sleep beneath the soil,
cradled by the very dust we walked upon.
They sought shelter, found silence.
They asked for life, found death.

V. Where is Humanity?

Tell me, world, do you see us now?
Do you hear the echoes of our last breaths?
Or must we die a thousand times
before you whisper our names?

Refuge is not a grave.
A child's hunger is not war.
A mother's tears are not a crime.
But silence—oh, silence is.

REFUGEES ARE HUMAN
WATER IS LIFE
NO TO SHIRIKA PLAN
REFUGEES

The Forgotten Faces

We came in ninety-two, shadows of war,
Feet dragging on soil unknown before.
Guns behind us, hunger ahead,
Yet we built Kakuma—brick by thread.

With bare hands, we raised the tents,
Dug the wells, built the fence.
We sang of hope, we whispered home,
Yet decades later, still we roam.

They promised safety, they spoke of peace,
Yet time has only chained, not freed.
Food grew scarce, water ran dry,
Who listened when our children cried?

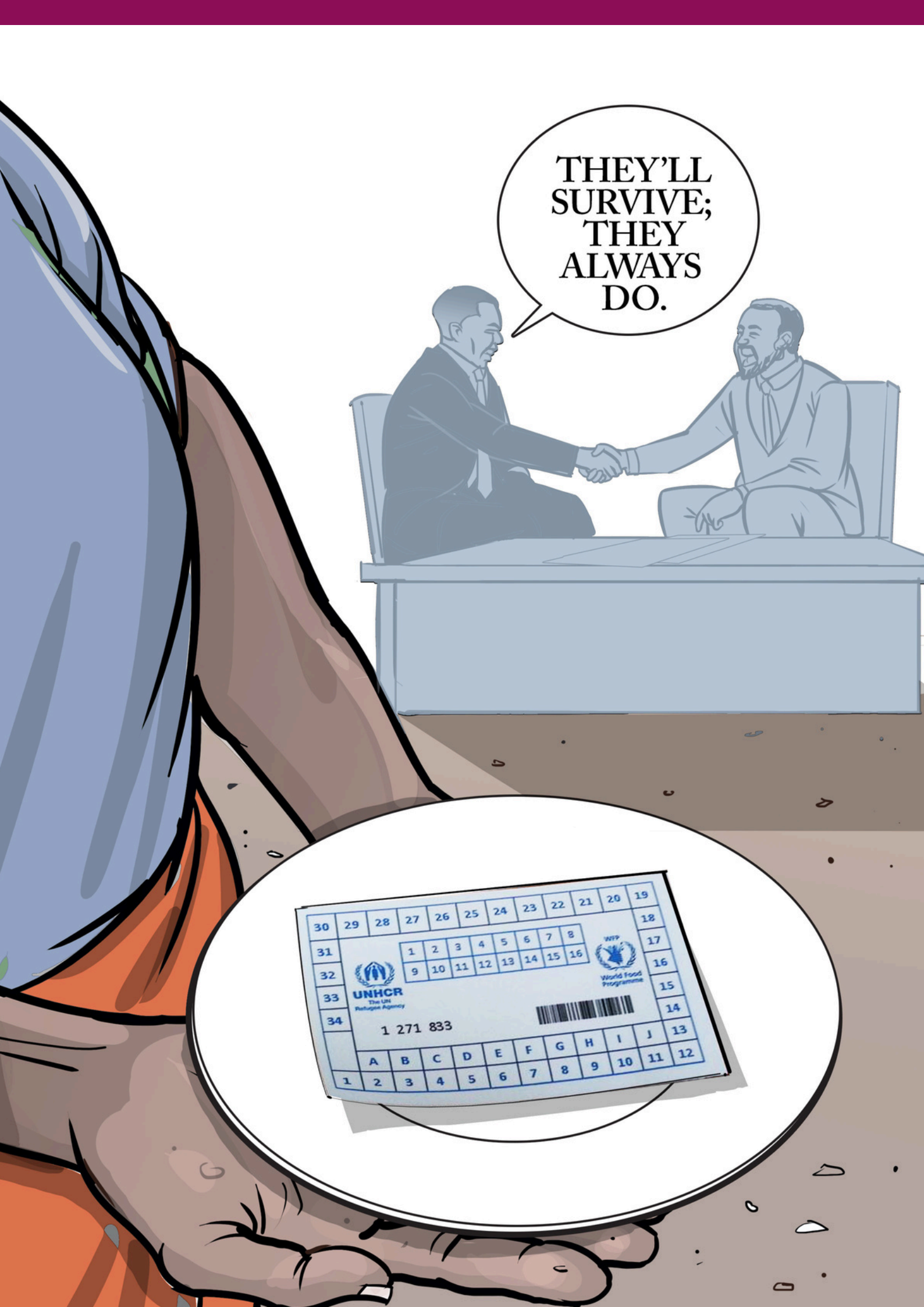
They spoke of integration—a life renewed,
But tell me, how do you erase the roots?
How do you blend when you're always other,
When your tongue is cut, your past smothered?

Some of us tried, we learned their ways,
Yet doors stayed closed, hearts unchanged.
Too foreign to belong, too local to be freed,
Caught between two worlds that never concede.

Aid comes, but never the same,
Some are chosen, some are shamed.
Who decides which child eats tonight?
Who chooses which mother weeps in fright?

And when we march, when we speak,
They break our backs, call us weak.
Teargas burns, bullets fall—
Is this protection? Is this the law?

Tell the world—don't turn away.
We built this place, yet here we stay.
With empty plates and voices drowned,
Still we stand on stolen ground.


THEY'LL SURVIVE; THEY ALWAYS DO.
UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency
WFP
World Food Programme
1 271 833

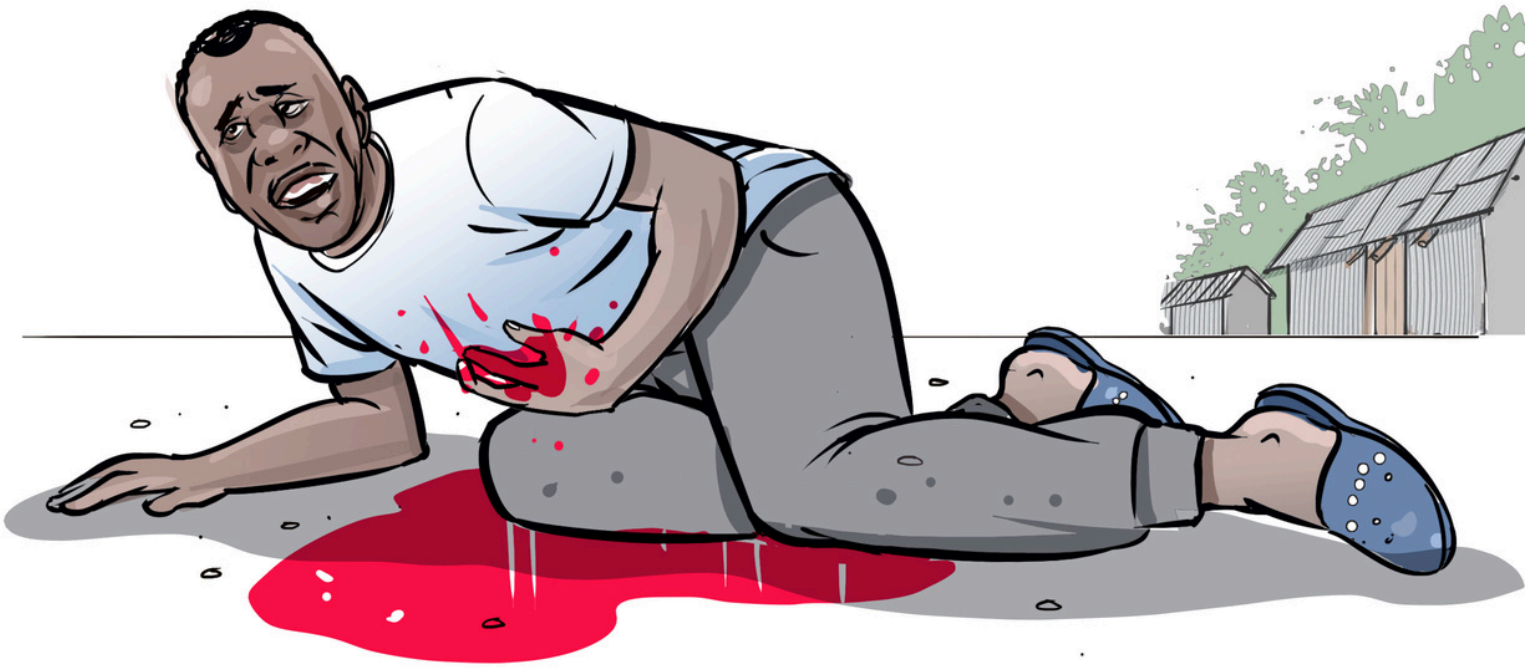
Mother, I Fell Today

Mother, I fell today.
Not from sickness, not from age—
But from a bullet that spoke louder than hunger,
A bullet that answered my cry for food.

I marched with my brothers, my sisters, my people,
Not with weapons, not with war,
But with voices dry from thirst,
With stomachs hollow like the promises they gave us.

You told me to be strong, to endure,
To wait, to hope, to believe.
But tell me, mother—
How long does a man wait when his child is crying?
How long does a woman hope when water is a memory?
How long do we swallow silence before it chokes us?

Father, do not search for me.
Do not run to the camp hospital,
Do not ask the UNHCR,
Do not beg the police who shot me.
They will not answer.
They did not answer when we asked for bread,
They will not answer now.



Mother, I feel the earth pulling me down.
Blood is warm against my skin,
My breath is shallow,
The sky is a blur, the ground is trembling—
Or is that my heartbeat, fighting to stay?

Tell my little sister to be brave,
To keep her voice small, her head down,
For in Kakuma, hunger is not the enemy—
Speaking is.

My brothers, my sisters, my people—
How many must bleed before the world listens?
How many bodies must fall before they see us as human?
We built this place with our hands,
And now, we are buried in it.

I do not know if I will wake tomorrow,
I do not know if I will stand again.
But if I do, I will march once more,
For if hunger does not kill us, bullets should not either.

Mother, I fell today.
But promise me—
Do not let Kakuma forget why.

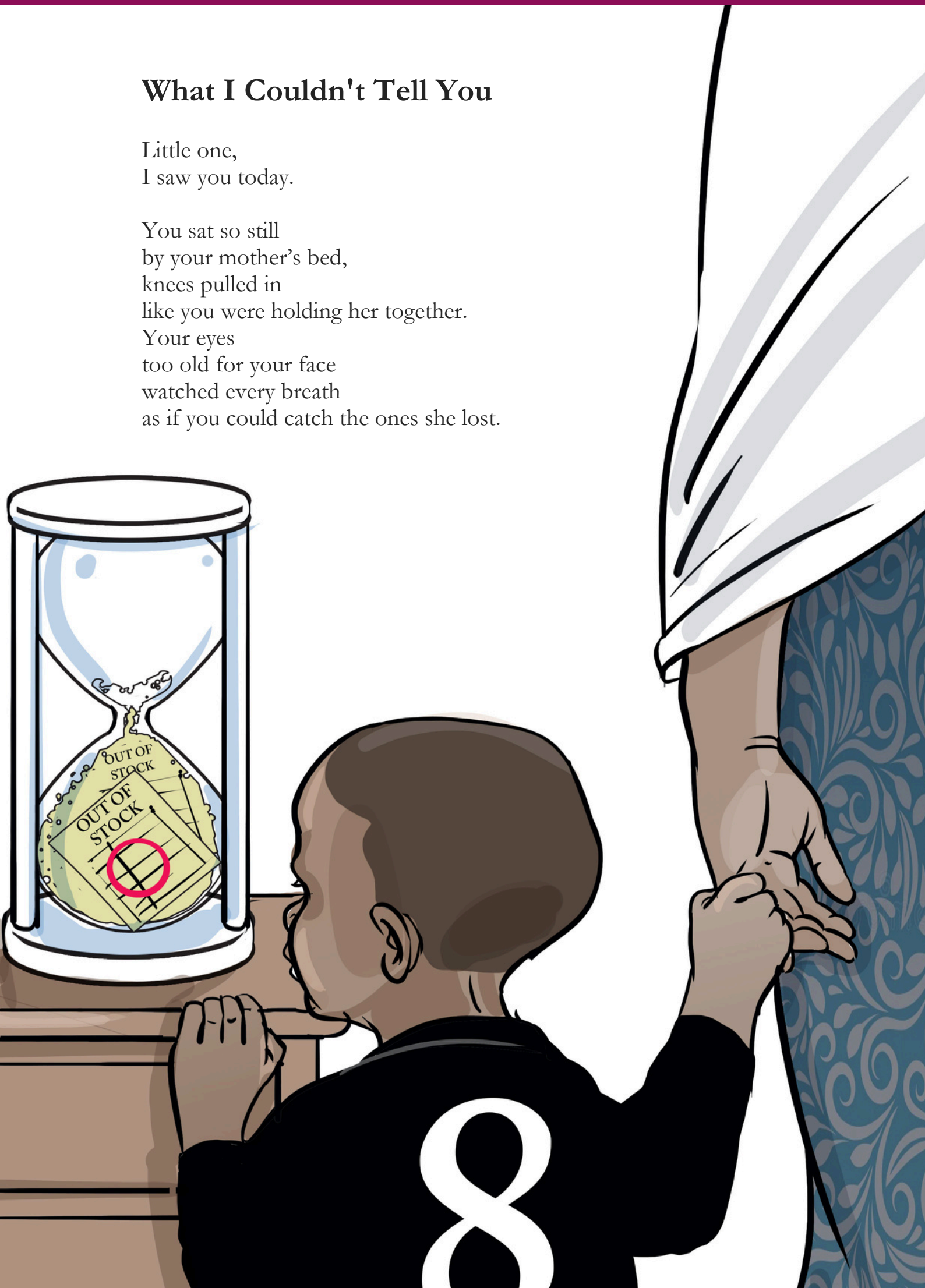
Kakuma: Betrayed from Within

We stand in the sun, dust in our throats,
Shouting for justice, but silence coats.
They cut our food, they dry our wells,
Yet tell us, "Wait, all will be well."
Mothers beg, children starve,
Bellies empty, bodies carved.
Water trickles, barely a sip,
A fight at the tap, blood on the drip.
Meetings, meetings—talk, delay,
Papers stack but rot away.
The protest letter still untouched,
While hunger tightens its deadly clutch.
But worse than them are some of us,
Leaders who traded trust for dust.
They speak of struggle, they chant and shout,
Then whisper, “Go, the food is out.”
Some will march, some will fight,
Some will vanish in the night.
Some will sit at secret tables,
Shaking hands while we fight battles.
Betrayal stings more than hunger’s bite,
Sold for rations, robbed of light.
How can you lead, yet leave us weak?
How do you silence those who speak?
We built this place, yet here we fall,
Pushed aside, denied it all.
We march, we plead, we scream, we cry—
But who will answer before we die?

What I Couldn't Tell You

Little one,
I saw you today.

You sat so still
by your mother's bed,
knees pulled in
like you were holding her together.
Your eyes
too old for your face
watched every breath
as if you could catch the ones she lost.



Log: 22:47

Patient: Female, approx. 32 years.
Gravida 1, Para 1.
Severe respiratory distress.
Malnutrition, postpartum complications.
History: single mother, husband absent.
Raised husbandless herself.
Note: medicine stockouts ongoing since rollout. Requests ignored.

I watched the doctor lean in,
listening to the storm inside her chest
crackles, wheeze,
lungs drowning in air too thin to keep her.
No oxygen. No antibiotics.
We keep writing orders
that vanish into the cracks of "policy."

He didn't tell you she was leaving.
Instead, he told you to keep holding her hand.
And you did
as if your grip could stop time.

Log: 23:02

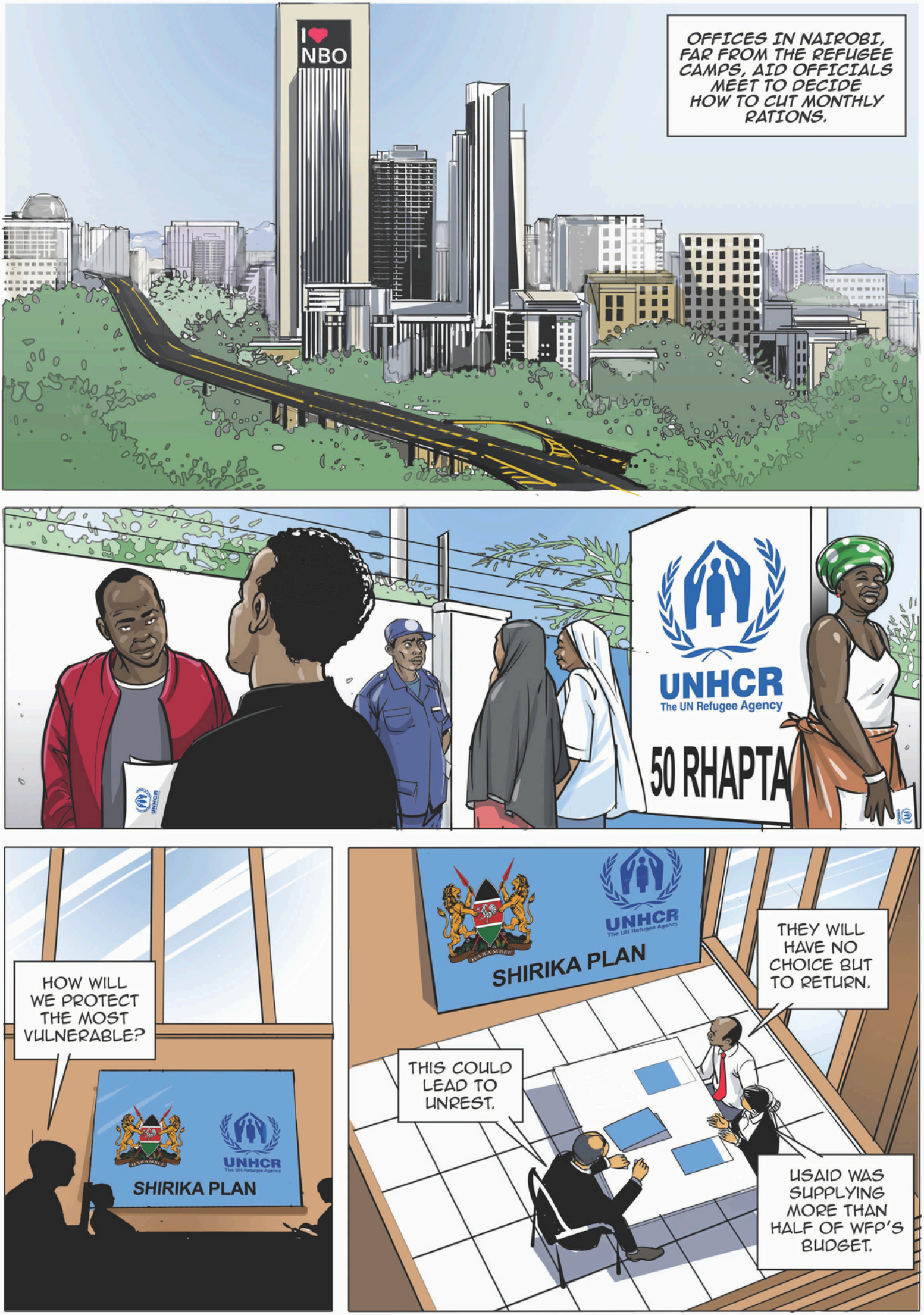
Intervention: oxygen unavailable.
Supportive care only.
Prognosis: grave.
Family: minor daughter present at bedside.
Note: This death will be another statistic filed under "nutrition crisis" instead of "neglect."

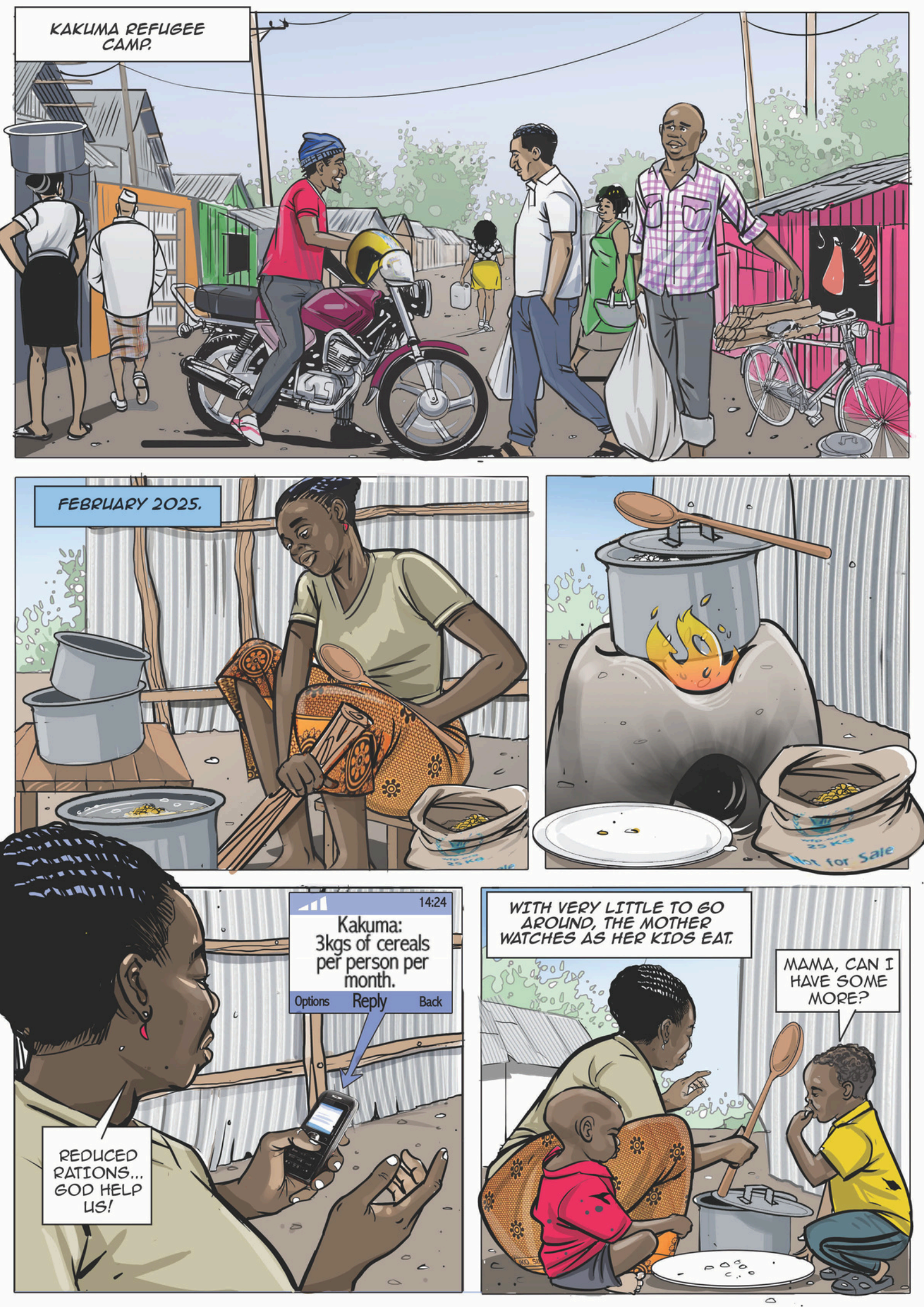
When her breathing stopped,
you didn't cry.
You looked at him
like he was God.
But God here
wears a tired white coat
and serves under a system
that counts the cost of saving lives
in shillings and paperwork.

Log: 23:15

Time of death: 22:58.
Cause: respiratory failure secondary to infection,
complicated by severe malnutrition.
Note: Preventable.

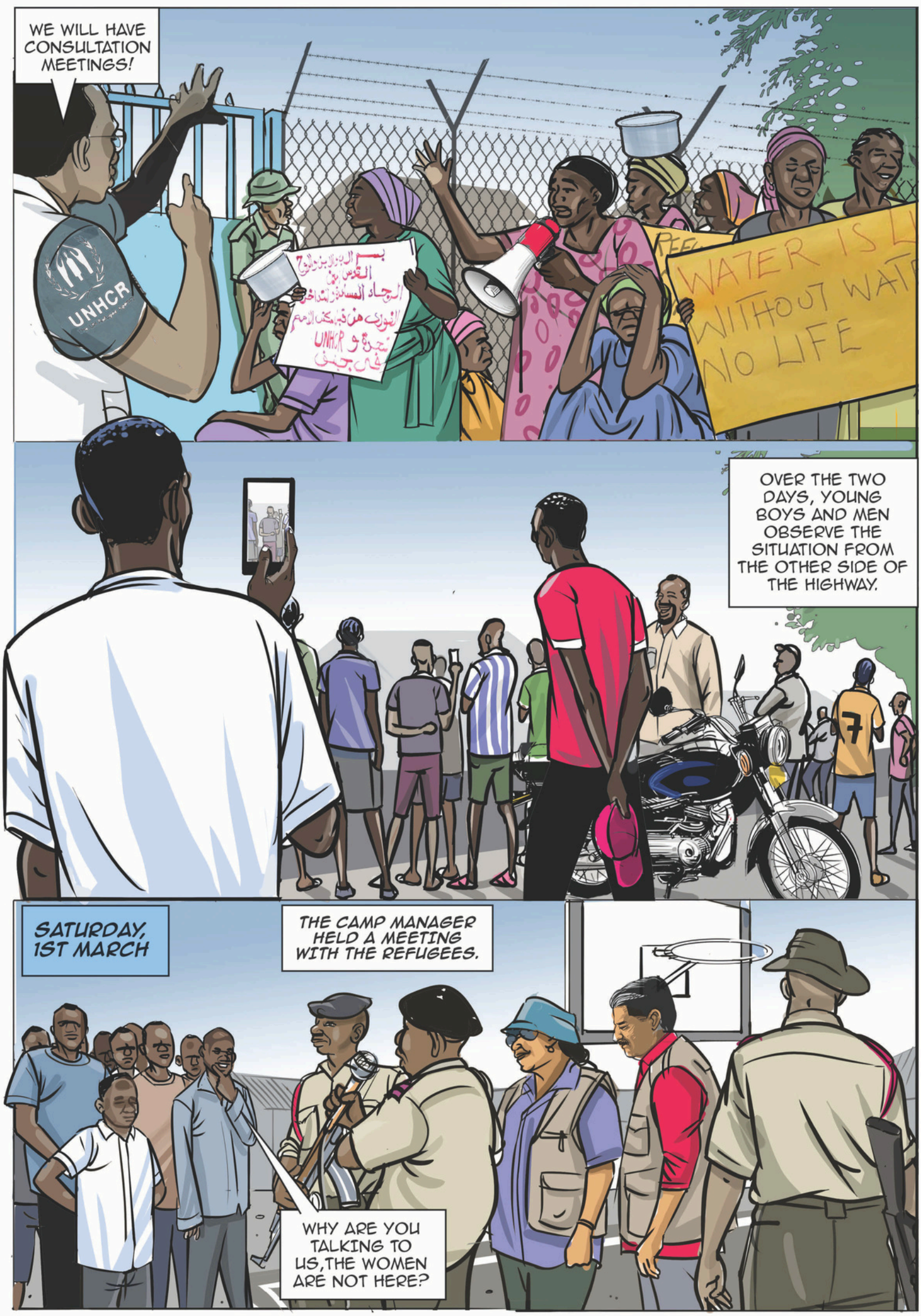
I saw him wash his hands
scrubbing as if grief
was something you could rinse away.
You stayed beside her,
small, trembling,
still holding on
to something none of us could save.


I ♥ NBO
OFFICES IN NAIROBI, FAR FROM THE REFUGEE CAMPS, AID OFFICIALS MEET TO DECIDE HOW TO CUT MONTHLY RATIONS.
UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency
50 RHAPTA
HOW WILL WE PROTECT THE MOST VULNERABLE?
SHIRIKA PLAN
UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency
SHIRIKA PLAN
THIS COULD LEAD TO UNREST.
THEY WILL HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO RETURN.
USAID WAS SUPPLYING MORE THAN HALF OF WFP'S BUDGET.

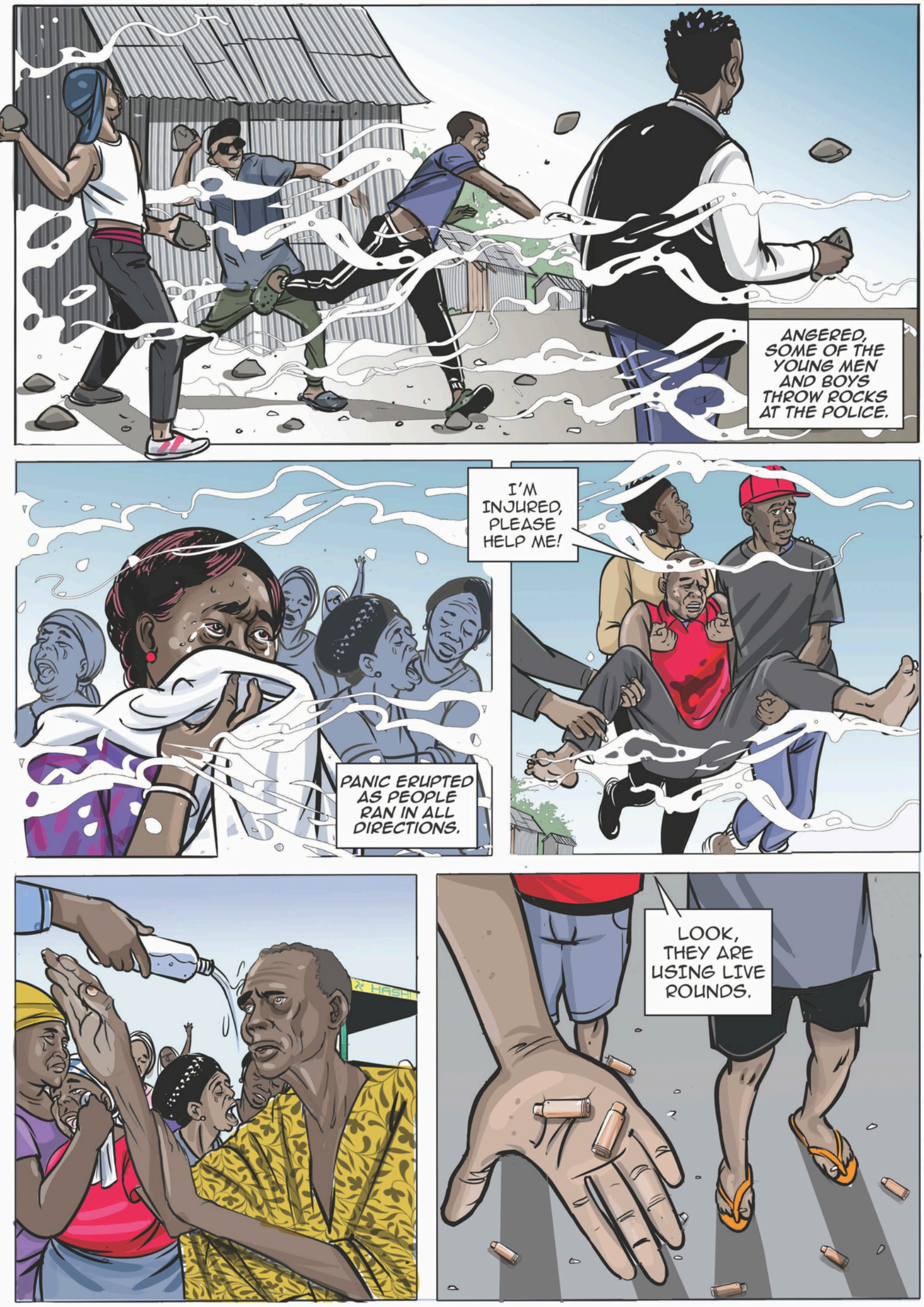

KAKUMA REFUGEE CAMP.
FEBRUARY 2025.
Not for Sale
14:24
Kakuma: 3kgs of cereals per person per month.
Options
Reply
Back
REDUCED RATIONS... GOD HELP US!
WITH VERY LITTLE TO GO AROUND, THE MOTHER WATCHES AS HER KIDS EAT.
MAMA, CAN I HAVE SOME MORE?

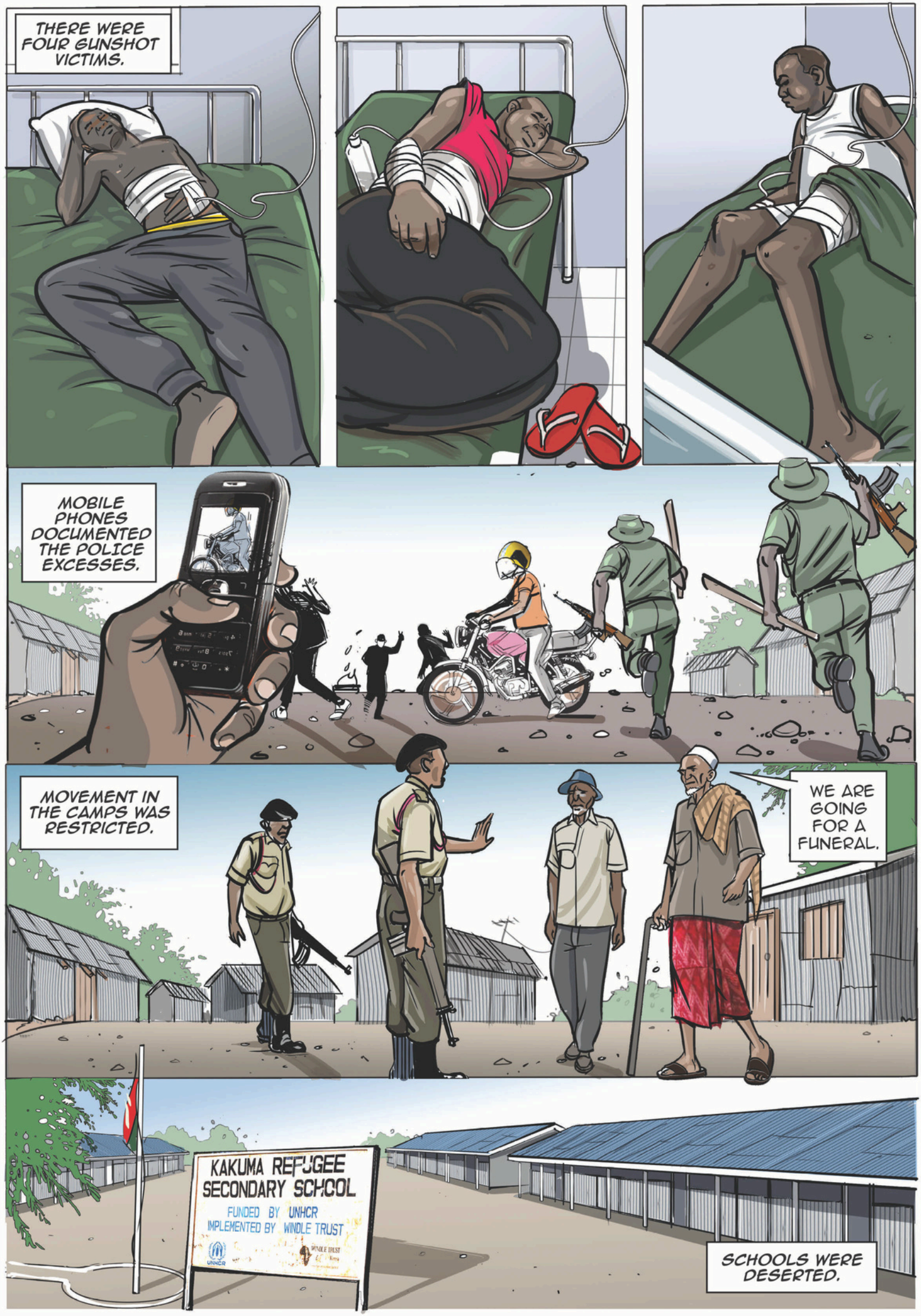
THERE WAS A SERIES OF MEETINGS...
HARDWA
...TO DISCUSS THE FOOD SITUATION.
THEY RESOLVE TO PROTEST.
NO COOKING OIL OR BEANS, HOW SHALL WE ONLY EAT SORGHUM?
COULD WE MAKE THE PROTESTS PEACEFUL?
KENYA IS NOW TIRED OF US!

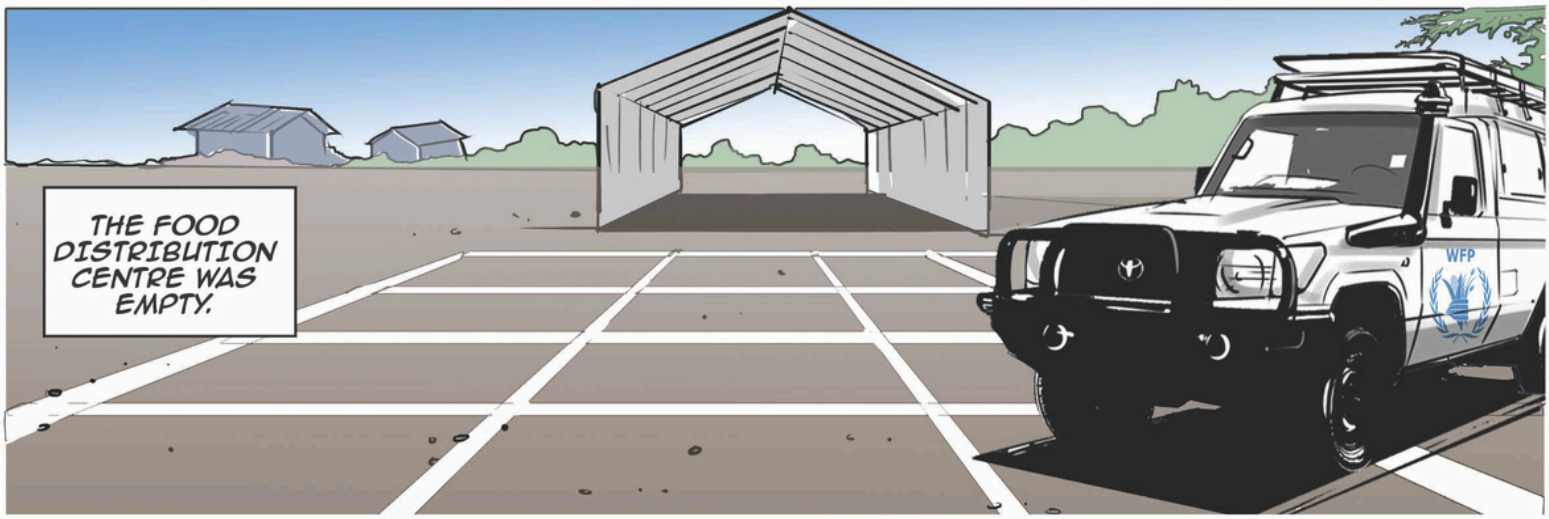
4AM FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 28TH.
OUR LAND, OUR GOD, WE PRAY AND BEGTO HELP US DAY AND NIGHT.
NO TO FORCEFUL SHIRIKA INTEGRATION.
OUR FOOD IS IN THE STORE, ONLY THEY DONT WANT TO RELEASE IT.
IS THIS FOOD ENOUGH FOR YOU? GOD HELP US!
THESE WOMEN ARE BRAVE!
NO INTERGRATION
NO SHERIKA PLAN
PLAN TO LOOT
HUMANITERIAN SERVICES
OUTSIDE THE UN COMPOUND IN ZONE 1.
THEY SING PEACEFULLY.
WE NEED FREE EDUCATION
NO TO SCHOOL FEES
I AM A REFUGEE
I NEED A BETTER LIFE


WE WILL HAVE CONSULTATION MEETINGS!
UNHCR
WATER IS L
WITHOUT WAT
NO LIFE
OVER THE TWO DAYS, YOUNG BOYS AND MEN OBSERVE THE SITUATION FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE HIGHWAY.
SATURDAY, 1ST MARCH
THE CAMP MANAGER HELD A MEETING WITH THE REFUGEES.
WHY ARE YOU TALKING TO US,THE WOMEN ARE NOT HERE?

MONDAY 3RD MARCH.
THE WOMEN HEAD OUT AGAIN AT 4AM.
WATER IS LIFE
BEHIND THE ROADBLOCK, THE WOMEN CONTINUE WITH THE PROTEST AND SIT IN.
UNHCR
GO HOME OR BE DISPERSED!
POLICE
AFTER TWO DAYS OF BACK AND FORTH DISCUSSIONS, THE POLICE TEARGAS THE WOMEN.

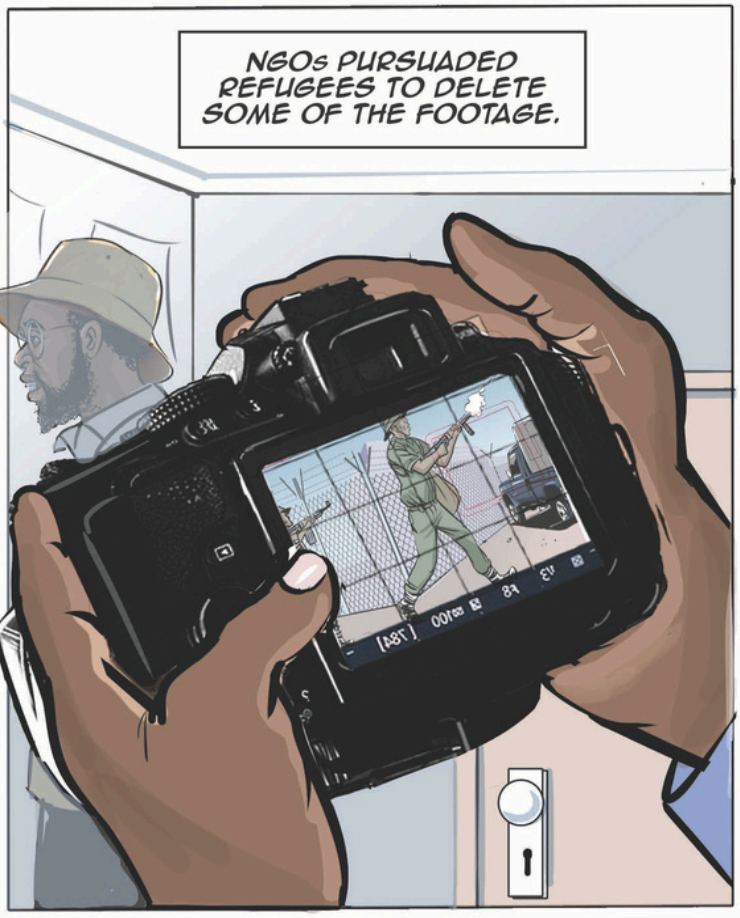

ANGERED, SOME OF THE YOUNG MEN AND BOYS THROW ROCKS AT THE POLICE.
PANIC ERUPTED AS PEOPLE RAN IN ALL DIRECTIONS.
I'M INJURED, PLEASE HELP ME!
LOOK, THEY ARE USING LIVE ROUNDS.

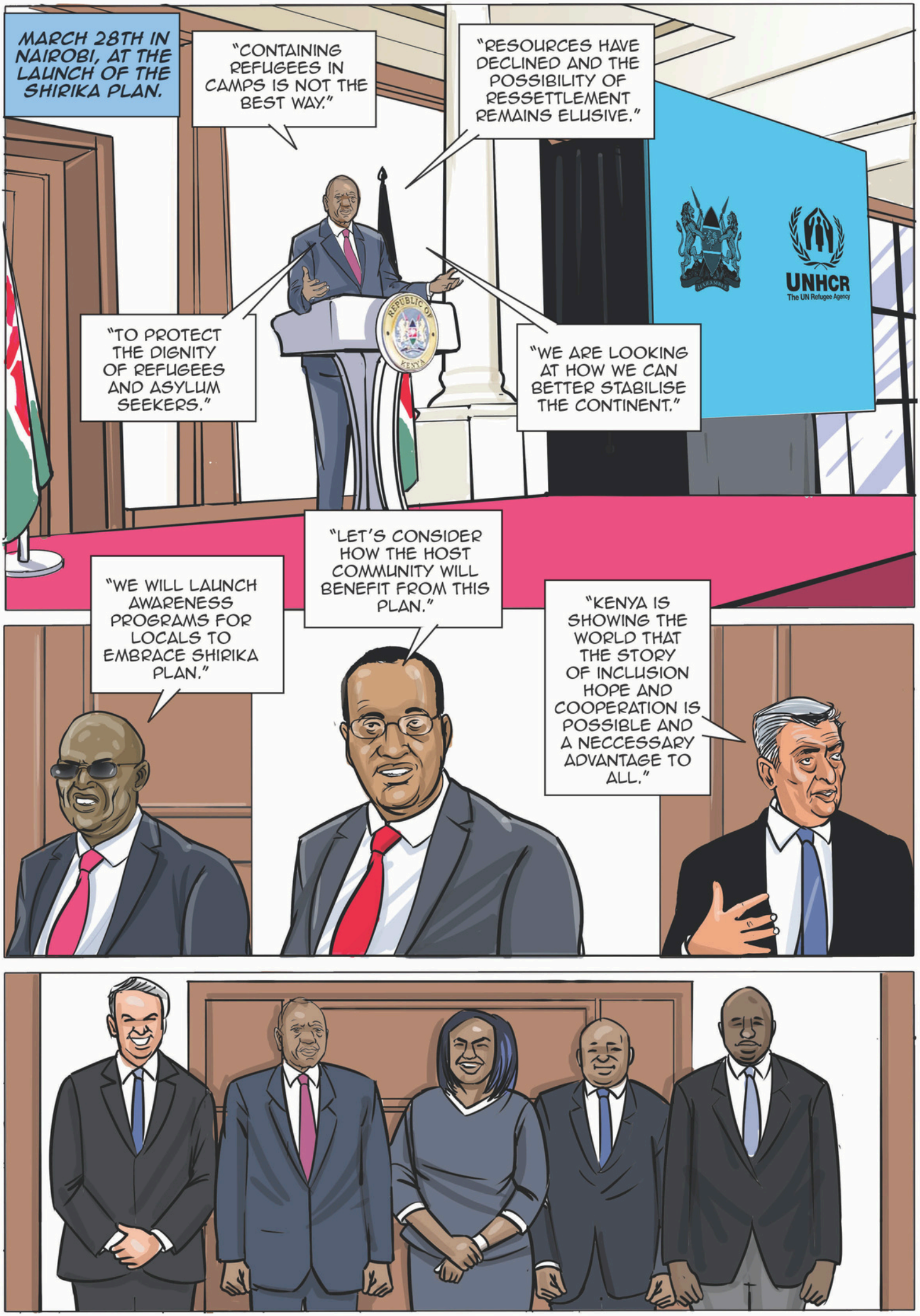

THERE WERE FOUR GUNSHOT VICTIMS.
MOBILE PHONES DOCUMENTED THE POLICE EXCESSES.
MOVEMENT IN THE CAMPS WAS RESTRICTED.
WE ARE GOING FOR A FUNERAL.
KAKUMA REFUGEE SECONDARY SCHOOL
FUNDED BY UNHCR
IMPLEMENTED BY WINDLE TRUST
UNHCR
WINDLE TRUST
SCHOOLS WERE DESERTED.


THE FOOD DISTRIBUTION CENTRE WAS EMPTY.
WFP

THERE WAS A SILENT PUSHBACK, CALLS FROM FRIENDS AND DCI TO DELETE VIDEOS.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO SHARE THESE VIDEOS!


NGOs PURSUADED REFUGEES TO DELETE SOME OF THE FOOTAGE.


MARCH 28TH IN NAIROBI, AT THE LAUNCH OF THE SHIRIKA PLAN.
"CONTAINING REFUGEES IN CAMPS IS NOT THE BEST WAY."
"RESOURCES HAVE DECLINED AND THE POSSIBILITY OF RESSETTLEMENT REMAINS ELUSIVE."
"TO PROTECT THE DIGNITY OF REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS."
"WE ARE LOOKING AT HOW WE CAN BETTER STABILISE THE CONTINENT."
UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency
REPUBLIC OF KENYA
"WE WILL LAUNCH AWARENESS PROGRAMS FOR LOCALS TO EMBRACE SHIRIKA PLAN."
"LET'S CONSIDER HOW THE HOST COMMUNITY WILL BENEFIT FROM THIS PLAN."
"KENYA IS SHOWING THE WORLD THAT THE STORY OF INCLUSION HOPE AND COOPERATION IS POSSIBLE AND A NECCESSARY ADVANTAGE TO ALL."

IF WE ARE LEFT MANAGING THIS PROLONGED SITUATION WE ESSENTIALLY HAVE A POPULATION THAT IS SLOWLY STARVING.
WE CAN'T DIE OF HUNGER HERE IN KAKUMA, THE WORLD HAS CLOSED ALL THE DOORS FOR US.
THE FLOODING HAS DESTROYED MY HOME, THE UN TOLD US TO USE OUR JERRYCANS AS FLOATATION DEVICES.
THERE IS NOTHING WE CAN DO, EVEN OUR STAFF WILL BE RELIEVED IN THE NEXT FEW MONTHS.
SINCE TRUMP BECAME PRESIDENT, NO MEDICATION IN HOSPITALS. IT'S TRUMP. NO SCHOOL FEES, IT'S TRUMP. WE ARE TIRED OF TRUMP.
THE HOSTS DON'T CARE, THEY WERE THE ONES SHOOTING US WITH LIVE BULLETS, GOD HELP US.

Kakuma 2025

The story emerging from Kakuma Refugee Camp in early 2025 first appeared to be a straightforward response to devastating food ration cuts. But conversations with residents, and the circulation of grassroots journalism on social media, soon revealed a far more complex reality.

Since March 2025, tensions have intensified. What is unfolding is not simply a crisis of hunger, but one of political expression, contested belonging, and fractured systems of care.

In Kakuma, many refugees have lived in a prolonged state of limbo where they are legally recognised yet economically excluded. Structural barriers prevent them from working or growing their own food. Recent ration cuts have only deepened this crisis.

Among the most powerful responses this year came from women and girls. In early 2025, they led peaceful but pointed protests, not only against dwindling access to food and water, but also against what many described as forced or top-down integration. Their actions form part of a broader, ongoing struggle in which displaced people are demanding not just the means to survive, but the right to be heard.

This unrest emerged just as the Shirika Plan was launched. This government and donor-backed initiative is aimed at promoting refugee integration. Its shortcomings have not gone unnoticed. Members of the host Turkana community raised concerns, pointing out that the vision of "integration" being promoted does not reflect realities on the ground. Across Kenya, 2.15 million people have faced acute food insecurity in 2025. Many of the worst-affected areas—including those hosting refugee camps—are at emergency levels. In this context, the idea of integration has come to feel more like burden-sharing among the already abandoned.

These decisions and the reactions they provoke cannot be separated from global shortfalls in funding and attention. Though cuts to USAID funding are identified by many in the camps as a major turning point in aid availability, in direct communications (August 2025), UNHCR Kenya noted that a quarter of their top donors have announced reductions in their contributions.

Faced with limited funds and overwhelming need, international institutions have developed models for targeted and differentiated assistance. The idea behind the differentiated assistance framework is to prioritise those deemed most vulnerable. In Kenya, it was jointly developed by UNHCR, WFP, and Kenya's Department of Refugee Services (DRS), in consultation with NGO partners and refugees. However, despite extensive technical support and observations of other country examples, differentiated assistance continues to be marred by a lack of transparency.

In direct communications, UNHCR Kenya noted that the categorisation system 'was based on a combination of rule-based and weighted scoring criteria', yet the criteria used to define vulnerability remain unclear. Similar issues have emerged in Uganda, where differentiated assistance has sometimes deepened divisions rather than alleviated need.

Cuts are amplifying concerns among all stakeholders, including refugees. These are issues which UNHCR and other organisations acknowledge. Ration cuts 'will exacerbate the already worsening nutrition status and increase reliance on negative coping mechanisms, which pose a significant health risk to individuals'.

The inadequate support given to even those identified as most vulnerable is leaving many with the feeling that their host countries and donor agencies have grown tired of their problems. The design of the system also risks overlooking the most at-risk individuals within households and creates tensions around who deserves aid and who must go without.

Differentiated assistance has also amplified tensions among refugees. The registration process used to classify refugees became a particular flashpoint. Those in Categories 1 and 2—eligible for basic rations—were asked to undergo fingerprinting. But the rollout triggered collective resistance. In July, during a community-led meeting with WFP and DRS, many residents agreed to boycott the process in protest. In the face of ration exclusions, families face impossible choices. Some consider refusing food entirely in solidarity with those cut off. Others quietly participate in registration to survive—only to face backlash from their communities.

In Kalobeyei, when a few individuals attended registration despite the boycott, tensions escalated. Accusations of betrayal led to conflict. Police were deployed. As has been documented in Kenya's refugee settlements for years, the response was reportedly heavy-handed—marked by threats and the use of live ammunition, deepening fear and distrust.

Some refugees, seeing no viable future, have made the agonising decision to return to countries they once fled even though their places of origin are still marked by instability and danger. The journey itself is life-threatening. Pushed to breaking point, families share stories of children suffocating as they are smuggled back across the border. Suicide rates in the camps are also increasing. It is worth quoting UNHCR's own guidance here: 'Long stays under adverse conditions in closed camps for refugees and asylum seekers greatly increase the risks for mental health conditions, including self-harm and suicide.'

This booklet stands as a testament to the courage, determination, and difficult choices made by many in their fight to be heard. In the final stages of preparing this publication, the World Food Programme announced an increase in ration distributions across Kakuma and Kalobeyei, including the reinstatement of support for Category 3. Under the revised scheme, instead of USD 8 per person per month, those considered most vulnerable will receive approximately USD 11 a month. While we recognise this as a modest but necessary step forward, these adjustments remain grossly inadequate in addressing the daily realities of camp life. A few extra dollars per person per month may delay starvation, but it does not solve hunger nor bring lasting solutions.

Against this backdrop, camp authorities continue to refer to the biometric verification of refugees as *Proof of Life*. Meanwhile, little has changed in Kakuma or Kalobeyei, where weary households consider whether this concession is enough to deliver 'proof of life'.

After the Protests, a Notice Arrives

They said no to the categories,
their voices cracked in the dust,
their placards raised like empty bowls
to the sky that has no ears.

Bullets answered.
Blood spilled into the red Kakuma soil.
Mothers buried sons,
fathers lowered daughters,
and some, too tired to wait,
tied ropes of despair to the trees.

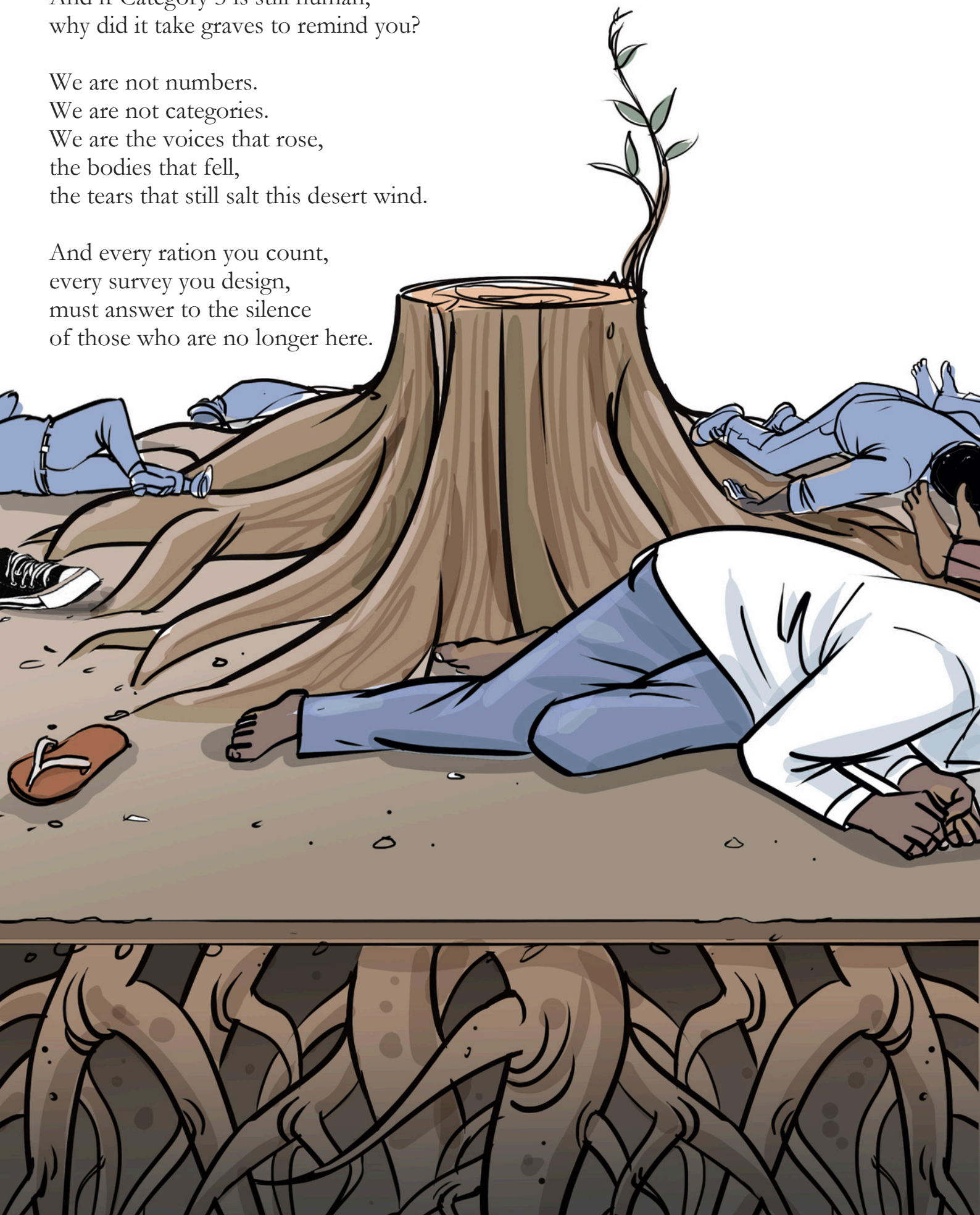
Now
as if nothing ever happened.
a paper arrives.
Bamba is back! It shouts in blue and red,
like a festival, like a gift,
like grief has an expiry date.

Category 1, 55%.
Category 2, 35%.
Category 3-
twenty percent, if you live through verification,
if your finger still presses against their machine.

But where was this order
when people starved in silence?
Where was this urgency
before the suicides, before the gunfire?
Why must the dead always be the price
for ration cards and surveys?

They tell us:
"Come, line up again.
Bring your fingers, bring your patience,
bring your grief and pretend it never happened."
But no paper can erase the wounds.
No chart can measure hunger's betrayal.

If food is a right,
why is it a bargain?
If survival is dignity,
why is it written in percentages?
And if Category 3 is still human,
why did it take graves to remind you?

We are not numbers.
We are not categories.
We are the voices that rose,
the bodies that fell,
the tears that still salt this desert wind.

And every ration you count,
every survey you design,
must answer to the silence
of those who are no longer here.