

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KWC-21

c/o American Express  
15 Sharia Kasr El Nil  
Cairo, Egypt  
5 June 1984

LAND HUNGER IN AN EGYPTIAN VILLAGE

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Where land is terribly scarce, men sometimes have to live by their wits. In Samadoun, a village of 12,000 people located far up the Nile in Upper Egypt, the government tries to prevent people from building houses on agricultural land.

"A man who wants to build a house must work at night so the government can't see him," says Hussein, 29, a peasant who learned some English working part-time at a pharaonic temple. He tells the story of the man who hired a crew of 100 men to help him build a house in one night. When the police came to investigate the next morning, they found a water buffalo munching grass in the yard and the man's wife baking bread. The resourceful builder assured the police that his was "an old house." They let him keep it.

Like so many other Third World countries, Egypt faces relentless population pressure on its limited land resources. Now 47 million, the country's population increases by more than a million a year and should double in 25 years. Every year, 100,000 acres of precious farmland are lost to developers, an ominous statistic for a country that now imports 48 percent of its food.

In the Egyptian countryside, where the average land-holding is now only 2.5 acres, more and more people must compete for less and less land. Thirty-two years ago, the government of Gamel Abdel Nasser attempted to ease the pressure by breaking up large estates and giving small parcels to poor peasants. Between 1952 and 1970, 817,000 acres were distributed among 341,000 families.

In Samadoun, people remember Nasser fondly. His government appropriated a 1,000-acre estate in the village, giving each recipient two acres each.

"Abdel Nasser was a good man; he gave land to the poor," says Hussein, a lean, muscular man with a round face and small black mustache. Walking along a village path, he points to a field where 15 landless laborers are using sickles to harvest wheat for Samadoun's wealthiest landowner.

"President Hosni Mubarak should give one or two acres to each of these men," says Hussein. "If they get sick, they have to stay in the house all day, and then they have no money." As for the man who employs the laborers, paying each one \$2 for four and a

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Village women setting off to fill their water jugs, which they carry on their heads.

half hours of work, "twenty acres is enough for him," he adds.

Actually, this rich landowner has 350 acres. To evade the land reform law, which sets a 50-acre limit for individual holdings, he puts the titles under the names of his relatives. Thirty-two years after the Nasser land reform, it seems that little has really changed in Samadoun. A few men have lots of land, most have little, and some have none at all.

Hussein lives with his wife and infant son in a small, two-room mud-brick house. They can afford to eat meat only a few times a month. But Hussein is better off than most people in Samadoun. His father died five years ago, leaving him six acres. This is enough land for Hussein to grow sugar cane as a cash crop, and wheat, sorghum, vegetables, and animal fodder for his household needs. He has saved enough money in the last few years to purchase a few amenities on installment -- a black and white television set, a ceiling fan, and a washing machine.

Last year, with another child on the way, Hussein looked about for land upon which to build a larger house. He knew he faced great difficulties.

"Twenty years ago, no problem to get land," he says. "You can build anything you want. But the government now does not sleep. If you build anything, they see it."

People in Samadoun are caught in a double bind. On one hand, the government forbids them from building on agricultural land. Hussein understands why. "The government needs more land for farming," he says. "Maybe the government has sugar and the European people not have sugar." In Egypt, the government purchases crops from its farmers at low prices and sells them abroad to earn foreign exchange.



Village girl riding her donkey alongside irrigation canal.

The authorities also prevent Samadoun residents from building at the desert's edge because of the pharaonic antiquities located there. As a result, scarcity bids up prices. Land available for building houses may be worth \$20,000 an acre, twenty times the price for agricultural land.

Hussein had long had his eye on a one-sixth of an acre strip of dirt lying between one of his parcels and a house owned by a man named Khalid. Hussein visited the government land office and discovered that this strip, comprising the wide, gradual slope leading up to Khalid's house, was not claimed by anyone.

In return for some baksheesh, the government agent offered to help Hussein. If he could build something on the land to establish a claim, the agent would give him title to it. Hussein told his fellow villagers that the land was part of his father's inheritance and he now intended to build a house there. Hiring a truck and some laborers, he collected large rocks from the nearby mountains and dumped them in Khalid's front yard, for later use as a foundation for his new house.

Hussein justifies this deception by pointing out that Khalid's father, a poor man, had moved to Samadoun from another village. "They're good people, but they have not been here a long time," he says. "My father and grandfather lived here."

Furious that Hussein was building a house only a



Khalid's house. The two-story structure is his, the other buildings are inhabited by his relatives. Hussein and Khalid are building their new houses where the mud bricks are assembled in the background.

few hundred feet from his own, Khalid complained to the village omda (headman), who called in Hussein. Although he managed to convince the omda that his father had owned the land in question, Hussein worried that Khalid might investigate the matter further at the land office. He then offered Khalid a deal -- they would split the land half and half. Khalid had no claim to the land himself, so he readily accepted.

The two men are now building houses side by side. Hussein is quite pleased with himself. "I think maybe I'm a clever man," he says with a sly smile.

Khalid says the same thing.