Sixteen distraught Asians flew into London from Uganda today and said they had fled in despair from 'a living hell' (Capital Times, September 5, 1972). The Asians... thanked President Amin for the good treatment they were given while in Uganda and said that they were happy to see that not a single Asian was killed (Voice of Uganda, December 9, 1972).

“A LIVING HELL” or “good treatment”: what really happened in Uganda during the 90-day period in 1972 between Idi Amin’s expulsion order and the deadline for the departure of non-citizen Asians? Much has already been written about who the Asians are, about why they were expelled, about the fact that citizens as well as non-citizens left, and about the resettlement process. However, what has been said thus far concerning the expulsion period itself has mainly served propaganda purposes. Britain sought to arouse national sympathy for the arriving refugees by emphasizing their abuse at the hands of Amin and his government. The Ugandan government, on the contrary, wanted to be perceived as more humanitarian than the receiving countries, especially Britain. The facts have simply not been told—of when within the 90-day expulsion period they left, whether family members left together or separately, of what sorts of experiences they had—and the only reasonable source for such information is the Asian expellees themselves. This paper attempts to set the expulsion record straight.

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In 1973, interviews were carried out with 1,250 heads of Asian expellee households in Britain, Canada, and India, the three countries to which ninety per cent of the expellees went. The respondents represent more than thirteen per cent of the households leaving Uganda during that three-month period in late 1972. The interviews included detailed, open-ended accounts of what happened to the respondents, their families and friends, during the emigration process. In addition, the interviewees spoke of the experiences of "people" or "the Asians" in more general terms. We are thus in a position to describe rumours and general perceptions as well as first-hand experiences, which should help in resolving the "living-hell"-"good treatment" dichotomy. The discussion which follows is divided into two major sections: (1) who left when and why? and (2) how were the Asians treated?

Who Left When and Why?

On August 5, 1972, President Idi Amin of Uganda stated that the non-citizen Asians must leave. Three days later he fixed the deadline for their departure as November 8. Later in August he added that the Ugandan-citizen Asians must also leave, but an international uproar caused him to rescind this order. However, it soon became clear to the citizens that, though they might legally remain in Uganda, they would be viewed as unwanted aliens. Thus, of the 50,000+ Asians in Uganda, including more than 15,000 citizens, all but about 2,500 were gone by November 9, 1972. Newspaper reports during August indicated that many Asians did not think Amin was serious, and that they were taking a "wait and see" approach. As the Meladys put it in their book on the expulsion: "in the first few weeks there was little visible sign of activity on the part of the threatened Asian community." However, as the weeks went by it became obvious that they were only postponing the inevitable. According to Nanjira, "the exodus of Asians from Uganda...was accelerated as the November 8, 1972 deadline approached."

Our data show that these assessments of timing were quite correct. In fact, the median date for leaving among our respondents was October 17—only three weeks before the end of the three-month period. Further, only 24 (two per cent) of our 1,299 respondents left by the end of August. Surprisingly, more than twice as many left after the deadline of November 8 as left during August. The majority, some 60 per cent, departed during the month of October.

It has generally been assumed that because the Ugandan-citizen Asians were not forced to leave they left later than the non-citizens. Our data show this to be the case. Only nine per cent of the citizens had left by the end of September, as compared to almost 24 per cent of the non-citizens. As for those leaving after November 1, the per cents are 38 for the citizens and 14 for the British and other passport holders. Thus, the median departure dates for citizens and non-citizens were almost two weeks apart. It is this citizen/non-citizen dichotomy that accounts for the fact that the longer an Asian had lived in Uganda the later he or she left after the expulsion order.