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## NORTHERN UGANDA: INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT FOR SUDANESE REFUGEES STILL REQUIRED

To promote peace and stability in the region, donors should provide increased funding to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) so that Sudanese refugees who wish to return home from Uganda can do so safely, voluntarily, and in dignity. Assistance will also be needed for those who wish to integrate locally. At the same time, the threat of new violence in south Sudan requires ongoing space for refugees to seek asylum in Uganda. This will be enhanced by ensuring that former refugee settlement areas are rehabilitated and handed over to the local authorities in good condition.

### Fund Repatriation and Reintegration

Since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in January 2005, Sudanese refugees who fled to Uganda during more than two decades of conflict between the Government of Sudan and the Sudanese People's Liberation Army/Movement have been returning to south Sudan. Approximately 58,000 refugees from south Sudan remain in northern Uganda. Most of the Sudanese who remain have been living in Uganda for over a decade. Refugees International interviewed many Sudanese refugees in Adjumani district who indicated that it was their intention to return to south Sudan at the beginning of 2009. They were not planning to return earlier than next year for various reasons -- waiting for the harvest in Uganda, wanting their children to finish the school year, and waiting for grasses for the thatching of their huts to be ready in Sudan.

Security concerns were also a factor for some refugees, who cited the presence of rebels from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in southern Sudan as a reason they were not returning now. Many of the refugees living in Adjumani district were impacted by the activities of the LRA during the conflict in northern Uganda, which at one point forced several to flee to different settlements in the district.

### Policy Recommendations

- International donors, particularly the U.S., should urgently fund the UNHCR's appeals, including the \$11.9 million shortfall in funding for its Sudanese refugee repatriation and reintegration operation, as well as appeals for ongoing services for refugees in Uganda, and recovery and rehabilitation of former refugee areas.
- The Government of Uganda should create legal conditions for local integration of those Sudanese refugees who opt to remain. The U.S. and other international donors should provide financial support to create the socio-economic conditions to enable local integration.

Some of the refugees had received information from relatives about conditions in their home areas in south Sudan, but others were relying principally on information received from one of UNHCR's implementing partner agencies. Refugees who wanted to return were aware of some of the problems in their home areas, including poor roads and infrastructure, and a lack of services such as education. They also had some knowledge about recent conflicts within Sudan, such as that which took place in Abyei in May 2008, and about the fragility of the peace agreement. Despite these issues, the majority of Sudanese that Refugees International spoke with said they would return home as soon as conditions allowed. As one refugee told Refugees International, "Sudan is our land and there is peace."

UNHCR has been repatriating Sudanese refugees from the West Nile sub-region since 2006. In April 2008, the total number of Sudanese refugees repatriated from Uganda exceeded 50,000. In June 2008, repatriation was halted because the refugees were less interested in returning home as a result of the rainy season in Sudan, LRA attacks in south Sudan, and their desire to wait until their children finish the school year and they can harvest their crops. In anticipation of the increase in returns which will happen in 2009, UNHCR will require additional funds in order to support the voluntary returns of the remaining Sudanese refugees.

### **Rehabilitate Former Refugee Areas**

The Government of Uganda has been a generous host country for large numbers of refugees from Sudan, as well as refugees from other African countries. In West Nile, public land was made available for the refugees fleeing conflict. Now that most of the refugees in West Nile are returning to south Sudan and vacating the area, UNHCR is committed to rehabilitating the land where the refugee settlements were located.

The presence of refugee settlements has had an environmental impact on land in West Nile, particularly deforestation as a result of Sudanese refugees producing charcoal to sell in south Sudan. Funds are needed to build the capacity of the district to plant new trees in order to build up local forests once again. Infrastructure such as huts and boreholes that were set up for the refugees must be either knocked-down or repaired before the land is handed to the districts. Also, school buildings and health centers need to be rehabilitated before they are turned over. In the Alere refugee settlement, which has now been vacated, funding is needed in order to demolish the abandoned huts and fill in latrines to avoid the spread of disease. UNHCR has started to integrate services into the districts,

officially listing them as government structures. However, the districts will also need assistance in building their own capacity to manage the land and services that have been run by international organizations until now.

### **Assist Those Who Will Stay Behind**

Inevitably after such a long period in exile there are a significant number of Sudanese refugees who will not be returning to their home areas. Many have started local businesses or have married into the local community. There are also some who fear returning to Sudan because of the uncertain peace process or because of the likelihood of persecution there. The Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) must develop local integration as a viable option for those Sudanese refugees who opt to stay. Clear guidelines should be developed by the OPM, with the assistance of UNHCR, in order to inform Sudanese refugees of their rights if they choose not to repatriate.

There is also a need to continue services for Sudanese refugees in Uganda, until all of them have repatriated or are fully integrated locally. This is particularly true for the most vulnerable, such as the elderly and the disabled, and UNHCR needs funding to continue assisting these groups. UNHCR's 2008 annual budget appeal for refugees in Uganda is only 23% funded. UNHCR provides assistance to those refugees who are at risk within their own communities, and provides medical assistance to refugees via an implementing partner. Lack of resources has an impact on these services, particularly when patients are unable to receive lifesaving medical assistance because they are waiting for UNHCR to approve their transfer to a hospital by ambulance.

Most Sudanese refugees live in settlements and cultivate their own food on designated land. However, not all of the designated land is of good quality, and some refugees must rent land in order to cultivate food. In addition, there are vulnerable refugees, particularly the elderly and disabled, who still require World Food Program rations. This assistance must continue until a durable solution is found for them. Refugees International also met with Sudanese refugees from the Dinka tribe who have been living for fourteen years in a "transit" camp without access to land to cultivate. They were still dependent on WFP food rations that had been reduced due to WFP funding difficulties.

*Advocates Camilla Olson and Melanie Teff assessed the humanitarian situation for internally displaced people in northern Uganda in July 2008.*