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Northern Uganda: Camp-based Humanitarian Programs Remain Essential

Despite improvements in security and an unprecedented opportunity to resolve the 20-year conflict in northern Uganda peacefully, the humanitarian situation for over 1.5 million internally displaced people (IDPs) remains difficult.

Optimism about the Juba peace talks has led some in Acholiland to move closer to their original homes and farms, but humanitarian needs are still immense. The government of Uganda must fulfill its obligation to provide basic services to its citizens, while donor governments and aid agencies must ensure that the needs of the displaced are not forgotten in a rush of optimism about possible returns. It is the right time to plan for returns, but it is critical that immediate humanitarian and protection needs remain a top priority.

In the past two years almost 500,000 people in Lango and Teso districts have moved out of IDP camps to return to their homes. However, in Acholiland, the area most impacted by the conflict, where over 90 percent of the population has been displaced, the situation is quite different. While some people are leaving the camps, it is not a full-fledged return process since very few displaced people are returning to their original villages. Most Acholis remain in desperately overcrowded camps with substandard services. Acute problems in the camps include pervasive gender-based violence, fires that damage homes, and poor access to proper water and sanitation services, which resulted in a recent cholera outbreak.

Conditions among the three main districts in Acholiland --- Gulu, Kitgum, and Pader --- vary. In Gulu, humanitarian access is better. "The situation is not bad now," one woman told Refugees International, "But we can't really go home. The peace talks may fail." Another man at one of the new sites in Gulu explained why he had not moved back to his original land: "We used to live further apart but now we are clustering for security." In Kitgum, however, there is much less security and more fear. Kitgum borders southern Sudan and it would likely be impacted first if the peace talks were to fail. One camp

leader told RI, "People are sitting in these sites because there is not yet peace. The camps are still safer than the villages -- we could be killed or abducted there." In Pader, people are spontaneously moving closer to their homes in the southern part of the district, but in the east, where violence by Karamajong cattle raiders is frequent, fewer are doing so.

In general, camp residents are benefiting from increased freedom of movement and the 'no peace, no war' situation that has prevailed since May 2006. Since RI's last visit in February, the security situation has improved dramatically. Cars and buses move freely between the districts and people are traveling on roads during daylight hours. RI documented varying degrees of movement out of the camps in all of the districts with some able-bodied accessing their land from new sites near Ugandan army deployments that are closer to their original homes. As one man told RI, "We are setting the foundations for others to come." But very few are actually spending the nights in the new sites, in part due to lack of basic services such as water, health, and education. People also remain cautious about a permanent solution coming from the peace talks. There have been talks and prolonged periods of improved security that have encouraged people to return to their homes in the past. But as one person told RI, "Even if the paper is signed tomorrow, it will not change anything substantially."

Distrust of the government's intentions is still widespread. The government promised iron sheets for the construction of new homes for all those who return home. However, they have only distributed them to 1,000 of the 70,000 households that have returned. Few of the displaced believe that they will see any assistance from the government at all and instead

pragmatically hedge their bets by maintaining two homes – one in the camps for the vulnerable and one in new sites where they can begin to cultivate their lands to earn a living.

This two-pronged survival strategy presents the humanitarian agencies with a dilemma: should they focus on maintaining and improving services for the camp residents, who tend to be among the most vulnerable, or begin to support returns? There is no easy solution. Logistically, it is certainly easier to support services in a few camps and focus on improving them there. And camp services are far from satisfactory --- witness the Ogili camp in Kitgum, where RI found one health assistant for over 11,000 people. The government of Uganda isn't helping matters, refusing to use its own resources to match the services that it provides throughout the rest of the country, while expecting international agencies to meet the needs of both those in the camps and in the new sites, an impossible logistical feat.

Representatives of humanitarian agencies reported to RI that they had been told by the government to provide services only to the displaced at new sites, raising fears of forced return. In Pader, the government identified 108 areas that it said were safe for return and encouraged the displaced to move to them. However, the government now claims that it has insufficient troops to deploy to these sites and has insinuated that there must be services there before they will provide security. At the very least humanitarian agencies must ensure that the displaced have accurate information and the support that they need to decide whether they should leave the camps. UNICEF has introduced 'population movement committees' in two of the three districts, which include elected IDP representation to assist with community outreach.

Divisions between UN agencies and international NGOs threaten to leave the displaced without sufficient services in either the camps or the new sites. UN agencies have finally expanded their programs to the northern districts. The Cluster Leadership Approach, intended to strengthen coordination among humanitarian actors and ensure that gaps are filled in key sectors, has been slow to get off the ground in Uganda and is not yet making a visible difference in the lives of the displaced. Some NGOs have also been reluctant to adapt to the new cluster response. The outgoing Humanitarian Coordinator did not demonstrate effective leadership in mediating inter-agency turf battles, leading to duplication of efforts and lack of coordination in some clusters, particularly health and water and sanitation. RI welcomes the appointment of Elisabeth Rasmussen, who has a strong background in IDP issues, as the new Humanitarian Coordinator for Uganda and urges her to make effective coordination of humanitarian response an immediate priority.

As the humanitarian agencies bicker, the people living in the camps continue to suffer. In Gulu, disproportionate numbers of vulnerable people, such as elderly, handicapped, women and children, live in camps. There, agencies should focus on providing more protective services, such as gender-based violence and child protection programs, for the extremely vulnerable. In Kitgum, where there is concern that the government is pushing to move people too soon and where there is less movement, basic services in many of the camps should be improved to meet immediate needs and allow camp residents to make informed decisions about moving. In Pader, where there are fewer agencies, the emphasis must be on increasing the capacity of humanitarian agencies to provide an effective protection response. Throughout Acholiland, a number of humanitarian agencies pointed out the need for the UN Development Program (UNDP) to enhance their presence in order to improve its coordination with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on early recovery in areas of return. In addition, there needs to be more planning on how best to coordinate community mobilization, livelihoods promotion, and capacity building programs in the region.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ Donors continue to fund humanitarian activities in the camps. Programming should reflect the particular pattern of movement in each district;
- ❑ UNHCR ensure that its protection strategy keeps pressure on district and central government to respect the rights of all displaced people, including those still in the camps. The population movement committees must be continued and fully supported as UNHCR takes over from UNICEF as the head of the protection cluster;
- ❑ The new Humanitarian Coordinator ensure that protection is a top priority and work with the protection working groups to address problems;
- ❑ The Government of Uganda provide incentives and additional assistance to its employees in northern Uganda to fill key positions such as teachers, health workers, and legal aides in the north;
- ❑ The Government of Uganda increase its contribution to its \$200 million Peace, Development and Reconstruction Plan from the current \$10 million it has pledged; and
- ❑ UNDP rapidly accelerate its programs, particularly focusing in livelihood development, in Acholiland.

Kavita Shukla and Sarah Martin recently returned from a one-month assessment mission to northern Uganda and southern Sudan.