
RI BULLETIN

A POWERFUL VOICE FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTION

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Northern Uganda: Peace Prospects Improve, but Humanitarian Emergency Persists

Despite recent positive developments in the peace discussions between the Government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), the humanitarian situation for the 1.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the north is as dire as ever. Attacks on civilians continue and the displaced live in substandard camps where their basic needs are not being met.

Although the humanitarian crisis in northern Uganda is one of the largest and most severe in the world, it has failed to galvanize the international community. Further, there is a danger that optimism that peace might finally reach northern Uganda could lead donors and the Government of Uganda to focus on developing longer-term return and reintegration programs. While only achieving a political solution to the conflict can bring long-term relief to the population of the north, responding to the immediate needs of the displaced population remains essential.

In the past year, the United Nations and non-governmental organizations have strengthened their response to the crisis, but their actions have not translated into an appreciable improvement in the conditions for IDPs. Due to insecurity and lack of staff, most humanitarian interventions tend to be infrequent and short-lived. According to a UN official, "The camps are substandard and the level of humanitarian assistance, except for food, is disgraceful." Outside of food provision, services in other sectors do not approach Sphere Standards. Access to water and sanitation is one of the biggest gaps that Refugees International identified. In some camps, people have access to only two liters of water per day, while 15 liters a day is considered acceptable. Schools are overcrowded, with the teacher-student ratio averaging 1:150. NGOs are not involved in camp management activities, and community services activities are non-existent. Health services in most of the camps are substandard, and there are shortages of qualified health personnel. There have been confirmed cholera outbreaks in seven camps in the north. Malaria is widespread, but mosquito nets are only provided to pregnant women.

RI is also concerned about the lack of reproductive health services available to women, particularly survivors of rape. Emergency rape kits, which include emergency contraception and post-exposure prophylaxes to prevent the transmission of HIV/AIDS, are unavailable in the IDP camps. Women do not receive sanitary supplies. There are shortages of condoms, and family planning is unavailable in most camps, even though women are requesting these services.

Displaced persons report that camp security has improved, but there are ongoing threats from the LRA when they travel outside the camps. The Government of Uganda has deployed larger numbers of troops

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from the Ugandan People's Defense Forces (UPDF) around the perimeter of IDP camps and security patrols along major roads have increased. In addition, IDPs have been recruited to join local defense units (LDUs) to assist the UPDF, a policy many believe could be problematic in the future when the LDUs are disarmed. The increase in security personnel around the camps has implications for IDP protection.

Access to camps for international personnel, however, remains problematic. Out of 51 camps in Gulu, only 15 can be accessed without escorts. Most NGOs travel with armed escorts to the other camps, and this limits the frequency with which they can assist the displaced population. In many cases, NGOs visit a camp once a month. Thus, there are very few regular interventions in the camps. Action Against Hunger, MSF, and ICRC are the exceptions, traveling regularly to the camps without escorts and in some cases basing international staff in camps. They have reported no problems from the LRA.

Donors should support NGOs whose security policies enable them to travel regularly to IDP camps. Given the massive needs in all sectors, there is plenty of space for new NGOs to start programs in northern Uganda and for existing NGOs to expand their programs.

Donor response has been relatively strong in the past year, and the 2004 United Nations Consolidated Appeal was funded at 73 percent, compared to less than 20 percent in 2002. The problem is that the appeal itself is based more on an estimate of likely response rather than on a realistic assessment of total need. A large portion of funding goes for food, while non-food sectors such as protection, education, water and sanitation are all seriously under-funded.

The Government of Uganda is not fulfilling its responsibility to assist its citizens in the north. Humanitarian assistance is almost all provided by the international community. A UN official explained, "This government is firmly in place. It's not anarchy here. It boggles my mind when I see a camp with 10-15,000 people with only one borehole." According to donors RI interviewed, the displaced do not see district or local officials responding to their needs. This adds to their feeling of alienation from the central government.

In addition, the international community is paying for fuel and allowances for the military convoys that accompany WFP and some NGOs, even after a substantial increase in the defense budget. Although precise figures on total military expenditures are impossible to obtain, some MPs and Ugandan government officials agreed that the amount of money spent on humanitarian assistance was minute in comparison. According to a Ugandan MP, "Donors are definitely doing more than the Government of Uganda. The government can find the money somewhere, and it should be giving more money for humanitarian assistance. Donors should urge the government to give more money."

Local government corruption, as well as lack of capacity, further hinders the provision of humanitarian assistance. For example, while at a camp in Kitgum, RI learned that the names of 300 IDPs had "disappeared" from the WFP food distribution list, which camp leaders generate. After being vetted by district officials, the list is submitted to WFP, which then verifies the caseload. IDPs whose names are excluded from distribution lists have access to an official complaints process, but this process is flawed and it can take several months before complaints are resolved. There is the need for more accountability in IDP camps, with governance structures involving elected, gender-balanced committees, as well as independent and accountable camp leadership.

The lack of government accountability at the district level is a concern shared by many. In response to criticism that districts were unable to meet the needs of internally displaced people, district officials now have 100 percent flexibility to spend money from the central government. Most agree that this new

flexibility is a positive response on the part of the central government, but donors must be especially vigilant in ensuring that funding is actually used for projects and services in the camps.

In August, the Government of Uganda passed the National IDP Policy, which is based on the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and international humanitarian law. The Policy underscores the responsibility of the Government to protect and assist IDPs. The Government response to IDPs has not changed as a result of the policy, however, and the Government has not developed a plan or devoted resources to implement it. UNDP has seconded an advisor to the Office of the Prime Minister to assist in developing an implementation plan. The core of his work will be developing a resettlement and reintegration strategy.

The Government of Uganda's official position is that the UPDF has defeated the LRA and IDPs will return home "by the next planting season." IDPs have started to return home or move to rural camps in Teso and some parts of Lira, but returns in Acholiland are not possible yet. Every IDP in Acholiland who RI interviewed stated that although they want to return to their land in the future, they will not leave their camps until Joseph Kony, the leader of the LRA, surrenders. A UN official explained, "It's awfully premature to talk about people going home. We don't want to start the return process again, like we did in 2000, and then have it all fall apart."

Several donor representatives explained to RI that the Government of Uganda's lack of commitment to providing humanitarian assistance derives from its belief that the war is over. Depending on how the peace discussions develop, there is a danger that donors might fall into this trap as well. While the Government of Uganda and the international community should have a plan for peace and eventual return, the primary focus in the near term should be on providing adequate humanitarian assistance to IDPs living in camps.

Therefore, Refugees International recommends that:

- The Government of Uganda recognize the magnitude of the crisis in northern Uganda and plan to increase humanitarian assistance for IDPs in camps. Return for people in Acholiland is currently not an option.
- The UN continue to expand its presence in northern Uganda and develop a response that is proportionate to the enormity of the humanitarian crisis there.
- Donors recognize that the crisis in northern Uganda is one of the largest and most severe in the world and fund humanitarian assistance accordingly.
- Donors and the Government of Uganda make water and sanitation projects in IDP camps a priority. Donors should encourage NGOs with an expertise in water and sanitation to begin programs in northern Uganda.
- Donors and the Government of Uganda make gender-balanced, accountable camp management structures a priority and fund NGOs with expertise in camp management to take on these responsibilities.
- Donors support NGOs whose security policies enable them to travel regularly to IDP camps.
- Donors, particularly the U.S. government, continue to fund the World Food Program and immediately resource the new PRRO which will be approved by the WFP Board in February and will begin in April. If shipments for the new PRRO do not begin now, there is a danger that the pipeline could break in April and May, the "hunger months" in northern Uganda.
- The UN Fund for Population Activities substantially increase its response in northern Uganda to address the gaps in reproductive health services.

Michelle Brown and Kavita Shukla just returned from a three-week mission to northern Uganda.