



Institute for War & Peace Reporting | International Justice Programme

Special Report **Rebuilding Northern Uganda**



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Investigations into reconstruction, health, education, economics,  
the environment, and gender equality

Written by  
Bill Oketch, Patrick Okino and Caroline Ayugi

Edited by  
Peter Eichstaedt, Yigal Chazan, John MacLeod and Caroline Tosh



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Cover photograph by Peter Eichstaedt, Abella village in northern Uganda

## Foreword

The following stories are part of a special investigative reporting project by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, The Hague, featuring the work of IWPR's team of Ugandan journalists.

With a fragile peace established in 2006 in northern Uganda after 20 years of bloody war between the government and the Lord's Resistance Army, rebuilding the region has become the focus of attention.

The LRA rebels, who fought in northern Uganda from 1986 through 2006, left the region ravaged by war. The LRA currently is based in Garamba Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and has participated in two years of peace talks that have produced no result. A peace deal remains unsigned and reports continue of extensive LRA activity in DRC, the Central African Republic and South Sudan.

The stories reproduced here were published on the IWPR website, [www.iwpr.net](http://www.iwpr.net), as a series in August, September and October 2008. The reporters include Bill Oketch and Patrick Okino, both based in Lira, along with Caroline Ayugi in Gulu. Ayugi was an IWPR intern in The Hague during the spring of 2008.

The investigative reporting project began in June 2008 with a training programme conducted by IWPR's Africa Editor, Peter Eichstaedt, in Lira and Gulu in northern Uganda. The training included one-to-one sessions, group mentoring and editing. Additional editing was provided by Yigal Chazan, John MacLeod and Caroline Tosh in London.

The stories focus on just some of the monumental challenges facing the north, such as education, health, the economy and security.

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## About IWPR Netherlands

Launched in April, IWPR-NL has media development projects in DRC, Uganda, Sudan and the Balkans. It provides intensive hands-on training, extensive reporting and publishing, aimed at building the capacity of local media.

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# Doubts Over Recovery Plan

With tensions easing in the north, government launches redevelopment plan – but will it succeed?

By Patrick Okino in Lira, 12-Aug-08

As two decades of war with the rebel Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, come to a close in northern Uganda, focus is quickly shifting to rebuilding shattered lives and the economy.

To accomplish this, the Ugandan government has formulated a rehabilitation plan that could cost an estimated 900 million US dollars to accomplish, according to official figures.

But few in the north have confidence that the money will flow or that the work will be done. Rather, they claim that only the rich and influential in the country will benefit.

Known as the Peace, Recovery and Development Plan, PRDP, the reconstruction blueprint was ordered by President Yoweri Museveni earlier this year and is expected to span three years.

The PRDP is a broad ranging response to the devastation caused by 20 years of guerrilla war and broadly sets out a reconstruction and redevelopment roadmap that is to be followed by various sectors of government and private partners.

It is intended to provide safe water, revive education, establish security, improve roads, provide emergency relief, fight HIV/AIDS and expand farming with oxen and plough to support food production and incomes across the north.

The security situation in the region has greatly improved following the peace talks between the LRA and the government that began two years ago prompting most of the internal refugees to return to their homes voluntarily.

Despite its lofty goals, many across the north are skeptical of the PRDP, however, in large part because they blame the government for the ills of the region.

This includes not only the war, but also the forced displacement of nearly two million residents who were herded into 200 internal refugee camps, some for more than ten years.

“All the government projects that have been intended to help the poor, ended up in the hands of rich people,” said James Apenyo, 50, a resident of Bol-nyapopiny village in northern Uganda, reflecting the views of many in the region who say they have gained little from current development programmes.

To avoid corruption, many locals interviewed by IWPR suggested that the money be given directly to the people

who need the help, rather than funneling it through contractors and government agencies.

Peter Odongo, 40, a resident of Ogowie village, suggested that, at the very least, those handling the fund and overseeing its implementation should work closely with the beneficiaries to ensure that the money is spent properly and that people benefit.

Although the sources of this massive funding effort are still unclear, PRDP money is expected to be channeled through non-governmental organisations, NGOs, and other agencies operating in Uganda.

Some officials are also sceptical of the plan.

Member of parliament for Pader Samuel Odonga Otto says there's a risk that the development effort may never benefit the people it is intended to help.

“According to my experience, laptop warriors and those who know how to write project proposals are now on standby to eat up the money,” he said, a reference to the international consultants whom some locals believe are overpaid and inefficient.

Otto pointed out that the omens for the PRDP were not good given the problems associated with the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund, NUSAF, which is tasked with the reconstruction of the north.

President Museveni recently ordered an extensive investigation into corruption within NUSAF which has also been plagued by duplication and a complicated bureaucracy yet this agency would be expanded under the PRDP.

“I see no reason why the government is coming up with this project,” said Otto of the PRDP.

But those backing the PRDP insist it will work.

“The PRDP is a commitment by the government to stabilise and recover the north over the next three years through a set of coherent programmes,” said Prime Minister Apollo Nsimbambi.

The programmes will run in 40 districts in the north and northeast where the LRA insurgency inflicted the most damage, and were due to start officially on the July 1, according to the state minister for northern Uganda rehabilitation, David Wakikona.

Wakikona urged local leaders to ensure that local people see benefits of the projects.

“We are very keen that PRDP and other government reconstruction projects in the north are implemented well,” he said.

“Government and humanitarian agencies have spent trillions of shillings in northern Uganda but the impact is not felt.”

He said the government has created a new body, Northern Uganda Data Centre, NUDAC, to record all the activities taking place in the region to avoid duplication and corruption.

Patrick Okino is an IWPR-trained journalist in Uganda.

# Northern Aid Programme Probed

Ten arrested, others flee as corruption inquiry into development projects gathers pace.

By Bill Oketch and Patrick Okino in Lira, 13-Aug-08

The authorities are belatedly cracking down on suspected fraud that has plagued a long-running development programme in the north of the country and raised doubts about the effectiveness of a major new reconstruction project for the region.

In recent weeks, the courts have issued corruption charges against around twenty people linked to work administered by the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund, NUSAF, a government agency tasked with managing projects to rebuild war-torn provinces in the north of the country.

Ten of the suspects were arrested on August 5 and remanded in custody in advance of their trial which is due to begin next week. The remainder reportedly fled to South Sudan.

Northern Uganda is only now beginning to get to grips with the aftermath of 20 years of a rebel war fought by the Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, from 1986 to 2006. The conflict caused the death of an estimated 100,000 people and displaced nearly two million.

The suspects have been charged with various counts of theft, abuse of office, forgery, false accounting, making false statements, embezzlement and causing financial losses, according to court documents.

All of the accused were involved in one of the hundreds of projects, either as community or agency managers.

The five-year community driven programme, largely funded by the World Bank with a budget of 131.30 million dollars, ran from 2002 to the end of last year.

The purpose of the projects is to help the poor in various urban and semi-urban areas, in particular the vulnerable, disadvantaged and displaced persons in the West Nile, Acholi, Lango, Teso and Karamoja regions of northern and eastern Uganda.

According to procedures, redevelopment money flowed from the World Bank through NUSAF offices to local communities who selected local leaders to head the projects.

The communities opened local bank accounts and the Bank of Uganda deposited the money into project accounts.

The local leaders were signatories to the accounts and could withdraw the money as needed.

However, a review and evaluation of the projects last year revealed that the amount of money withdrawn exceeded the cost and value of work that had been done, said officials.

As a result, those involved in the questionable projects were arrested.

The substantial irregularities alleged by the courts cast serious doubts over the government's new reconstruction plans for the region. The Peace, Development and Recovery Plan, PRDP, broadly sets out a development roadmap that is to be followed by various sectors of government and private partners.

It is intended to provide safe water, revive education, establish security, improve roads, provide emergency relief, fight HIV/AIDS and expand farming with oxen and plough to support food production and incomes across the north.

The new programme was to begin on July 1 and make extensive use of NUSAF, which has been the conduit for many redevelopment projects.

One of the highest ranking officials to have been linked to the latest scandal is the Lira district chairman, Franco Ojur, who police said was suspected of being involved in one the cases under investigation.

A team from the police Criminal Investigation Department in Kampala reportedly questioned Ojur regarding his involvement in a NUSAF-funded road rebuilding project.

The investigators, led by Assistant Police Commissioner Haruna Ntambi, also closed the NUSAF offices in Lira and deployed armed policemen to protect documents that may be part of the inquiry.

Ntambi and other investigators questioned Ojur at Lira Central Police Station on August 6, saying he was a potential witness in one of the cases, they told IWPR.

Ojur was interrogated because "his signature was found in one of the documents", said Ntambi.

Ojur had earlier been implicated in a March 30, 2007 report prepared by a special committee of the district council that probed NUSAF activities locally.

The report alleged that Ojur used his son, Joseph Olwa, a student at Makerere University in Kampala, to sign a contract worth about 22,000 US dollars, to construct a road east of Lira.

“The contract was awarded on October 10, 2006, and signed the following day, under the signature of one Joseph Olwa, who signed as director,” said the report.

When contacted by IWPR, Ojur dismissed the report, saying it was neither authentic nor accurate.

“If justice is for all, then all the projects must be investigated because they all have problems,” said Ojur. “I don’t have lists of those community project implicated, [but] there has been a general public outcry.”

Ntambi told IWPR that he has investigated 16 projects and at least ten involved shoddy work, misappropriation of funds, or were non-existent projects.

The investigators said they are looking into projects that were to build grain processing mills, road construction, primary schools and overhaul laboratories, among others.

The NUSAF projects require local participation and are intended to help reduce poverty and promote reconciliation amongst survivors of war with the LRA.

George Adoko, a senior NUSAF official, said agency resources have been allocated to 18 districts in the north.

The Lira district was allocated about ten million dollars, but part of this money was misappropriated and nobody was held accountable, said Adoko.

According to investigators, a total of 915 projects were funded in the district, but few have benefited the community.

“The money was allocated to Lira district to help the communities rebuild their lives and homes after long suffering in the [refugee] camps, but this fund was mismanaged by some few who [preferred] fraud [over] development,” said Ntambi.

Government officials say the funds for each district varied according to the number of projects.

One official, Fredrick Kwihira, told IWPR that although money was disbursed, “people did shoddy work, and part of the money was mismanaged”. This angered President Yoweri Museveni who ordered that NUSAF be investigated, he said.

Museveni “issued a directive to police to have those implicated into the NUSAF saga arrested and dragged to court so as they could face justice”, he said. “We pray that the suspects [are] prosecuted and made to refund the money.”

Kwihira said the problems were caused by conflicts between local communities, contractors, and implementing agencies. As a result, money was withdrawn from accounts despite substandard work or no work at all having been done on some projects.

Some communities have taken legal action against their

own local leaders accused of misusing the money. In one case, a local committee chairman and treasure were sued for the misuse of about 3,000 dollars.

The money was to have purchased four ox-ploughs and two ox-carts to help the community of Okwor parish.

The purchase was never made and the steering committee officials were arrested and charged with embezzlement. But the charge was subsequently reduced to simple theft, complained Joe Omodi, a resident of Ayer village, west of Lira.

“We raised the complaint to the chief magistrate,” said Omodi, “but he advised us to complain to department of public prosecution.”

Gabriel Nyipir, Lira chief magistrate, told IWPR that he was aware of the reduced charges, but explained that was done at the request of the prosecutors, not the court.

Bill Oketch and Patrick Okino are IWPR-trained reporters.



# Northern Ugandans Bear Mental Scars

Experts say more specialist care is needed for psychological trauma caused by war.

By Caroline Ayugi in Gulu and Bill Oketch in Lira, 27-Aug-08

Specialists in northern Uganda are struggling to treat thousands of patients with mental health conditions thought to have been caused by the long-running conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army, LRA.

Experts say that 20 years of war with LRA rebels have devastated the north of Uganda, and left thousands of its residents with mental health problems.

Dr Tom Otim, the medical superintendent at Gulu regional referral hospital, said limited resources and staff shortages at hospitals have left overstretched nurses and doctors struggling to treat large numbers of patients.

"It is very common to get just two nurses attending to a crowded ward in the hospital, because the clients are too many [and] the hospital now serves people from [neighbouring] South Sudan," said Otim.

He added that services were even more limited in rural areas.

"Drugs to treat mental illness are so expensive, yet our target should be to extend services to the villages," he said.

Mental health problems are rife in the war-torn north, to which peace is now returning.

At the mental health unit of the Gulu district hospital, 9,600 cases of mental illness were reported in 2006 and 2007, and more than 4,400 cases were reported in the past four months, according to officials. The conditions include post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD, depression, epilepsy, alcohol abuse, acute psychotic disorders, and chronic psychosis.

According to the New Vision newspaper of Kampala, a recent survey conducted by a team of British and Uganda psychiatrists concluded that the rate of PTSD was higher in northern Uganda than in most other places in the world. For example, out of 1,200 adults assessed by mental health doctors in Amuru and Gulu districts in 2006, 54 per cent were suffering from PTSD. Researchers also found that 67 per cent of the respondents had depression.

At the African Centre for Rehabilitation of Torture Victims in Gulu, 1,507 cases of mental illness were registered in 2007, and 206 cases have been recorded so far in 2008.

According to Kizito Wamala, a clinical psychiatrist at the unit's trauma centre, most patients are scared, suffer from

nightmares, and frequently relive past horrors related to the war. These people tend to avoid socialising, suffer from sleeplessness, and are easily angered.

Dr Thomas Oyok, regional psychiatrist at the Gulu Mental Health Unit, agreed that many of the mental health problems experienced by people in the region have been triggered by the violence committed by LRA rebels.

Post-traumatic stress disorders often develop after experiencing or witnessing life threatening events such as killing, rape and fatal accidents, he said.

Oyok said that the lack of available treatment during the war had compounded the problems. During the insurgency, treatment for physical and mental problems was scarce, and many patients used alternative medicines or went without treatment altogether.

"Few medical staff and limited drugs for the patients made most people resort to other means like traditional herbs, which are not the best alternative for most illnesses," said Oyok.

Oyok said that while PTSD was a treatable condition, many sufferers had tried to rid themselves of symptoms by turning to drugs.

"Most people are resorting to drastic steps, like abusing drugs, to help them to forget, but that only renders temporary therapy," he said. He added that drug abuse had instead increased the rate of mental health cases in the region.

Experts say children in the north have been particularly affected by war-related trauma. Approximately, 50,000 people have been abducted during the war, which began in 1986, and the vast majority of them were children, studies indicate.

According to a report published by the African Journal Psychiatry in November last year, many youngsters abducted during the war have been deeply affected psychologically.

"70.7 per cent of war-abducted children have been affected compared to 45.7 per cent of [children who were not abducted]," according to the report.

School teachers confirmed that their pupils are often very disturbed.

"They recall what they witnessed in the course of the LRA war," said Geoffrey Ocere, a teacher at Abella

primary school about 50 kilometres from Lira. “These memories preoccupy them so much that they cannot perform well in class.”

“I cannot forget about my lost brothers,” said a 13-year-old Leo Bua. “I cry each and every moment I think about them.”

Dr James Okello, a psychiatrist at Gulu University's faculty of medicine, said the current methods of dealing with psychosocial problems and reintegration among war-affected children were inadequate.

“The formal health sector alone is not sufficient to meet [their] needs,” said Okello.

“Mental disorders, for example, developmental disabilities, are risk factors for [poor] learning, underachievement, and school drop-out,” he said.

“Vulnerable children [orphans, former child soldiers and street children] have increased rates of mental illness and educational failure.”

One aid group recently organised a news media visit to a refugee camp, where photographers took pictures of weeping children. Talking to IWPR under condition of anonymity, aid workers said the children were confused by the long-lens cameras and thought they were guns, the source said.

The children thought the photographers were LRA who had come to kill them.

“Photographers had created the very fear they thought they were simply recording,” the source said.

Experts say that nearly all youngsters who have experienced catastrophic situations display symptoms of psychological distress, including flashbacks, nightmares, withdrawal, and inability to concentrate.

While some children bounce back quickly from traumatic experiences, others need treatment

“Most children and adolescents will regain normal functioning once basic survival needs are met, safety and security have returned and development opportunities are restored, within the social, family and community context,” said Joyce Opon Acak of the Lira Women Peace Initiatives group.

“Some children will require more specialised interventions to address their suffering and help restore their flow of development,” she continued.

She said that it can be beneficial for children to talk about painful experiences and feelings, or express them by other means such as physical and artistic expression, particularly if this is facilitated by people the children know and trust.

However, experts say that neither children nor adults in northern Uganda with mental health problems are receiving the specialist help they need.

“There has been understaffing, under-funding and non-prioritisation in the [Ugandan] mental health sector,” said Dr Sheila Ndiamarangi, Uganda's coordinator for mental health.

“Many NGOs flocked to northern Uganda with the agenda of giving solutions to the increasing cases of mental sicknesses, but they ended up giving social support without psycho-social support.”

Emmanuel Ojala, the Ugandan minister of state for health, acknowledged that addressing psychiatric issues had not been a priority while the war was ongoing.

He said it was important to address the problem now by helping people take advantage of treatment on offer.

“[During the conflict] people were traumatised at varying degrees... They should be guided to make good use of the services available at the mental health unit.”

Ojala called for mental health services to be extended throughout rural areas, where he said there is the greatest need for treatment.

“To solve mental problems, there should be a special attention and provision of services, because [it is] not only the [internally displaced who] are affected, but the entire community in the northern region.”

Caroline Ayugi and Bill Oketch are IWPR-trained reporters in Uganda.

# Education in Crisis in Uganda's North

Region struggles to rebuild school system after two decades of war.

By Patrick Okino and Bill Oketch in northern Uganda Lira, 01-Sep-08

**A**lthough Daniel Omara, 17, comes to school early and waits patiently in his classroom each morning, he finds only other students there.

All too often, even by midday few teachers have arrived at the school, at Abella in the Otwal area northwest of the northern Ugandan town of Lira.

Most days end with Omara having learned nothing.

His fellow-pupils frequently fight one another, disrupting those are trying to prepare for their final exams.

“My [classmates] don't know even how to read and write,” Omara told IWPR. “I feel so sorry because at the end of the term, you find that we have grasped nothing.”

But Omara does not blame his teachers; he knows that the complex problems plaguing education in northern Uganda stem from 20 years of war with the Lord's Resistance Army, LRA.

Abella is the same school that was once attended by LRA leader Joseph Kony, who grew up in the nearby community of Odek.

After two decades of war and with warrants for his arrest hanging over his head from the International Criminal Court, ICC, in The Hague, Kony has taken his army to a remote corner of northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC.

Like Abella, schools across north Uganda were abandoned and suffered damage during the war.

School representatives are working with the Ugandan government to provide free primary education for all children as part of the country's Universal Primary Education programme or UPE. This was introduced by the authorities in January 1997 in an attempt to deliver free primary education to four children in each family.

An estimated 7.6 million children are currently enrolled in state schools nationwide.

However, because of the war, at least 30 per cent of school-age children in the north are not in education, according to Dan Okello, a spokesman for the Uganda Peoples Congress party.

“It's a failure of the UPE programme in itself,” said Okello. “How can it be called Universal Primary Education when one third of the population of children of school age are excluded?”

Okello says average test scores in the north are well below those of the rest of the country. The majority of children in the north leave school without basic skills in reading, writing, and arithmetic.

While those who can afford it move their children to private schools, he said, this is not an option for poorer families, he said.

According to Okello, this means that children from rural schools in the north are not given opportunities to pursue careers in engineering, medicine or science, as few are able to compete for a university place.

Teachers complain that the UPE programme aims merely boost the numbers in education without addressing the quality of teaching. It does not, for example, ensure that school curricula are in line with the requirements for examinations.

“The principles on which examinations are used to promote students in the education system are ignored in the UPE programme,” said Joel Peter Onyutha of the Abella school.

Teachers say they do not even get the state salaries they are due, and depend instead on contributions from parents, which can halt the moment there is a disagreement between them. That is one of the reasons why teachers at schools like Abella turn up for work only intermittently.

“I take my time to go to school since I [must] first take my children to the farm, so that the next time parents fail to pay us, I will have something to feed them,” said another teacher, Jasper Odyek. “We cannot depend on parents' contribution alone. It's too meagre.”

Onyutha said teachers in northern Uganda also lack adequate housing, which is traditionally provided by the school.

District Education Officer Quinto Okello said some teachers sleep in one-roomed thatched huts built in the 1970s.

There are fears that some schools could even lose their property, as villagers try to reclaim land they once leased out to them. Some farmers want school buildings demolished so that they can farm the land.

That may not be possible, however, according to Uganda's federal minister of lands, Daniel Omara Atubo, who explained that land donated to build either schools or

churches prior to 1945 now belongs to the government.

“People who think that they are going to [get] back the land that was donated by their ancestors their dreams might not come true,” he said.

While some schools are being helped by the National School Facility Grant programme, which provides money for teachers' housing, the needs are still great, said Okello.

The money provided by this fund is insufficient to provide housing for teachers at all the schools in the district.

“This financial year, we have planned to construct only three teachers' houses,” said Okello.

Overcrowding in schools in the north is having a detrimental effect on children's education.

As peace has settled across the north in recent years, enrolment numbers have surged, putting pressure on classrooms and teachers, according to the district inspector of schools, Liberata Omach.

“Alanyi, which is a primary school in Abako area near Lira, has enrolled 2,015 pupils [but] has only seven classrooms,” said Omach.

She said that while the ideal pupil-to-classroom ratio in Uganda was set at 55 to one, the Alanyi school has 285 students per classroom.

Finding enough space for the pupils is also a problem at Abella. With more than 1,000 enrolled, only 300 children can attend the school at any one time, and even then it is crowded.

“If you want to sit comfortably, you have to reach school at 7 am,” said Polly Adong, an 11-year-old in grade four.

According to Omach, the school system in the north is in crisis, and current solutions are often “desperate measures” that do not address the root cause of the problems.

“The real solutions to the problem are the construction of more physical infrastructure, while the issue of human resources should also be given the attention it deserves,” said Omach.

Omach said her office has turned to aid groups for help such as Light Force International and Save the Children in Uganda.

Julius Peter Odongkara, a top civil servant in the district, said his department was unable to help.

“Our hands are tied because we have limited resources,” he said.

He suggested that the Northern Uganda Rehabilitation Programme, NUREP, could expand its education programme to help address some of the problems.

NUREP is a programme initiated by the Uganda government and funded by the European Union.

Beatrice Arach, a NUREP operation manager based in Gulu, said the organisation was already looking into the problem.

“There are many schools in the north where children are conducting lessons under trees, but we are trying to identify them and look how to assist them with resources,” said Arach.

In the meantime, Okello is concerned that the current problems with the education system in the north will have long-term effects.

He points out that less than 40 per cent of those who take the primary-school final examination here go on to secondary school.

“This also puts the integrity and the standard of universal secondary education, and eventually the universities in Uganda, in complete jeopardy,” said Okello.

In 2007, the Ugandan government started to offer free secondary education to 250,000 students, in an attempt to double the number of children staying on at school.

Okello criticised part of the scheme which envisages that teachers in the larger schools should work double shifts for the same money, warning that this would put even greater stress on already over-stretched staff.

“While government has proposed double shifts for the USE [universal secondary education] programme, it's the same teachers [who are] expected to teach the double shifts for the same remuneration, albeit with increased responsibilities for evening classes,” said Okello.

“Teachers are already disgruntled over low pay even without the introduction of double shifts.”

Omach said that to boost the standard of education in the region, the government should give more incentives to teachers, increase their salaries, and recruit more staff.

Others say that disciplinary action should be taken against teachers who fail to turn up to school.

At the Walela primary school near Abella, seven teachers had their pay withheld because they did not show up to teach, and action is now being taken against them, said officials.

On one recent visit, Ayena said he found only four teachers out of 11 at work at the school. In addition, a total of 43 teachers in the region were found to have forged letters of appointment.

“To discipline teachers who never want to be on duty and to improve the performance, the salary department at the district is forfeiting their payment to compensate time wasted,” said Patrick Ayena, a community leader.

“For all of this term, they have not been on duty,” he said. “That is why we are taking serious steps against them.”

Ayena said that this problem was exacerbated by a lack of inspectors to enforce rules.

“There are only two inspectors to monitor teachers in 218 schools,” he said.

Despite the ongoing struggle to improve education, many say it will be hard to overcome the residual effects of the region's long-running conflict.

According to Ruth Atala Adupa, the resident district commissioner of Dokolo, the problems in education come down to poverty and other problems associated with the prolonged LRA conflict.

Adupa said that rape is a major problem in the district, and that this is mentally and physically debilitating for young girls who lose their motivation to attend school.

“The biggest problem... is defilement,” said Adupa, noting that adults in the same community are generally the culprits.

Many young girls drop out of school and get married, she said.

Denis Moro, 29, said that living in refugee camps had “spoiled” his children.

“One morning I sent my girl to school, but I was shocked when I heard her crying for help in the neighbourhood,” he said. Instead of being in school, the girl had been hurt while playing with other village children, he said.

Moro is afraid that his girls will soon drop out of school.

“Girls are just like boys. [Refugee] camp life has brought [up] children in a silly way,” he said. “They think that life is all about violence.”

Patrick Okino and Bill Oketch are IWPR-trained reporters in Uganda.

# Returnees Reviving Local Economy

Many former refugees, dependent on food handouts for years, are working the land again with some success.

By Patrick Okino in Dokolo, 19-Aug-08

**E**risa Ekong, from Atabu village in Dokolo district, suffered as much as anyone in the war against the Lord's Resistance Army, LRA.

The rebels killed her husband, stole her cows and goats and all of her food and household goods, yet she feels she must now look to the future. "That time has passed and I want to start a new life," she said.

After several years spent living in one of northern Uganda's 200 internal refugee camps near Lira,

Ekong returned to her family lands in 2006 and began to cultivate them.

In the fertile soil, she grew a local grain called sim-sim, beans, peanuts, sorghum, millet, cassava and rice. She kept what she needed, and sold the rest of the valuable crops, before using the profits to replenish the livestock she lost long ago.

"I purchased 12 goats, two [cows], five pigs and still have in stock adequate food stuffs to sustain me for a year," Ekong told IWPR, as she returned from the fields.

Ekong is just one of the many returnees who have successfully made the transition from a refugee camp life dependent on support humanitarian aid from the United Nations and other international agencies to self sufficiency through farming.

As life slowly returns to normal across northern Uganda after two decades of brutal war that left nearly 100,000 dead and displaced about two million, many villagers have eagerly returned to cultivating the land and raising animals a development that is rapidly rebuilding the region's ravaged economy.

Like many across the region, Ekong exudes a deep sense of optimism about the future. Local people are confident they will be able to shake off the abject poverty that resulted from two decades of war one of the continent's longest-running insurgencies.

This confidence persists in spite of the lack of progress with the government's redevelopment plans for the region, which have yielded little.

Many people there are instead taking matters into their own hands.

"We don't want to continue sitting and waiting for the

government or [some] humanitarian agency to tell us what to do, since peace has returned," said Nekemia Obia, a resident of Bata trading centre, 20 kilometres east of Lira.

"We have enough fertile lands for crop production," said Obia. "It's unfair to keep on demanding aid from the government and international humanitarian agencies."

Out of 500 kilogrammes of sim-sim that he harvested last year, Obia managed to make a profit of about 1,400 US dollars enough for him to withdraw his children from public school and send them to a better, more costly school in Lira.

"Our lives have changed totally," he said with pride. "We pray that the peace we have should be sustained so that we catch up with other parts of the country in terms of development."

Humanitarian agencies are supporting this effort by advising people on how to increase agricultural sales and income through improved agricultural production.

Other initiatives are appearing to provide farmers with financial backing. For example, micro-finance company Uganda Microfinance Limited opened a branch office in Lira in July, to supply savings and loan products to people on low incomes.

"We want to ensure that the land in the north is properly utilised by helping people acquire tractors, ox ploughs, oxen, seeds and money for business," said Uganda Microfinance Limited employee Wilson Twamuhabwe.

"The institution has a customer base of 167,000 people across the country and a loan portfolio of valued at about 30 million dollars. We want more people in this region to come on board because they suffered for so long."

However, despite the progress, there have been some setbacks.

The region, which was hit by devastating floods in late 2007, has now suffered a dry spell that has damaged crops.

"We tried our best to plant adequate food this season, but it's been damaged as a result of the drought which has [continued for] two months," said Vincent Awio, a resident of Adyang village.

“There is a serious [fear] that the area will be hit by food shortage [or] famine as a result of this unexpected situation.”

In response to this, much of the north is now focused on growing a cash crop which thrives in drier conditions cotton. The Ugandan government's Cotton Development Organisation, CDO, has distributed 660 metric tonnes of seeds across the north this summer.

“Our focus this year is to increase the cotton production from the 9,000 bales, which we managed last year, to 50,000, and to help farmers increase their income,” said CDO official Ben Byamukama.

“That is why we are distributing the seeds to the farmers rather than waiting for a market-based demand.”

Yet some farmers across the north are disappointed with the government's cotton seed distribution which is less than the 790 tonnes they received last year and will mean less production, they say.

“Cotton has been our major source of income right from the British time, but we are unhappy with the way the government is handling the distribution of seeds,” said James Okello, a veteran cotton farmer.

In addition to cotton seed distribution, the government has also allocated some 60 million dollars to the National Agriculture Advisory Services, NAADS which helps Ugandan farmers to produce enough food for themselves with some left to sell. The programme includes the distribution of farming tools, as well as dissemination of information on modern farming technology and livestock rearing.

Other support has come from the European Union which has provided some 1.5 million dollars to be spent on creating food security and supplementing income generating activities in four areas in the Lira region. The money was channeled through the government's Northern Uganda Rehabilitation Programme, NUREP.

“Under this project we are looking at how to enhance food security and help school dropouts acquire vocational skills,” said Robinah Akullo of the Concerned Parent Association, CPA an NGO that received some of the funding.

Francis Omaramoi, a local leader in Omoro, said that to rebuild the agricultural economy in the north, there is a need for tools such as hoes, as well as seeds for those who have already settled back in their villages. He added that it is also important that extra help is given to vulnerable groups, such as orphans, parentless families, widows and widowers, as well as the elderly and disabled.

While there is much work to do, many farmers in the north are enjoying their success.

Apart from subsistence farming, agricultural production disappeared across most of northern Uganda during the rebel conflict of 1986 to 2006.

Now farmers such as Nelson Opio, who resettled in his home two years ago after living in a refugee camp for many years, are quickly realising the benefits of farming for a profit.

“It's advantageous to us because the more we produce, the more we shall earn,” said Opio with a smile.

Patrick Okino is an IWPR-trained journalist in Uganda.

# AIDS Plagues the North

Government attempts to combat spread of HIV virus, one of the lingering effects of 20 years of war with LRA.

By Bill Oketch in Lira, 09-Sep-08

Thirteen-year-old Leo Bua remembers the day five years ago when Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, fighters raped his two sisters in the village of Omoro, near Lira in north central Uganda.

The teenage girls had lived most of their lives in the Omoro internal refugee camp and were sexually assaulted in front of their mother during an early morning attack on the camp.

"The eldest sister, 15 at the time, subsequently tested negative for the HIV," Leo told IWPR. "But the youngest sister tested positive. She was 13 and later died."

Leo, now a seventh grade student at the Angetta Primary School not far from the former camp, hates and fears the rebels and their leader Joseph Kony in equal measure.

"Kony must be executed," Leo said angrily. "I hear that he has failed to sign a final peace accord, and I fear that he will come back."

Leo's sisters were not the only victims that day. Several teachers and other children were abducted by the LRA and forced to become fighters and sex slaves for rebel commanders.

Some of these abducted children returned and were infected with HIV, say health officials. And, as a result, the disease spread throughout the north's refugee camps.

Today, HIV/AIDS plagues northern Uganda, one of the lingering effects of 20 years of war with the LRA.

Official statistics show the overall infection rate in Uganda is 6.2 per cent of the population, with the figure in northern Uganda standing at nine per cent.

While war and rape may have contributed to the problem, health experts in northern Uganda told IWPR that the spread of the virus has been due largely to the crowded conditions in the 200 refugee camps in the region, many of which have dismantled or abandoned.

When villagers were forced into camps over the past dozen years, there was widespread social breakdown. Traditional lifestyles and values were lost as families and clans were dislocated and often destroyed.

"There was massive cross-generational sex, where younger girls [had relations with] older men in exchange for money to make ends meet," said Dr Vincent Owiny, the Oyam District health officer.

Older men preferred to have unprotected sex, explained Owiny, and thereby spread HIV/AIDS among the camp residents.

Additionally, unborn children were infected by their pregnant mothers, said Owiny.

While rebels have been blamed for raping women in camps, they were not the only ones accused of sexual assaults and spreading the virus.

Some children were infected after being raped by the Ugandan army, according to some residents. But Lira resident district commissioner, Joan Pacoto, disagrees.

He said that the extreme poverty of camp life and dependency on international food aid resulted in parents selling their children into prostitution.

"Many parents started sending their children to the streets to bring them money for survival," said Pacoto. "This makes it very [difficult] to believe that they were raped by the army."

Omoror assistant community development officer, Betty Ajalo, said that some villages have been hit hard by the disease. In Oculukori, a dozen youngsters and 18 adults have been tested positive for HIV, she said.

"Women are more vulnerable and they are at a risk of contracting the disease," continued Ajalo, because "many have turned to [the] sex trade to make ends meet. Their husbands cannot provide [for them]".

Despite efforts to educate people in the north about how HIV/AIDS is spread, she said many women remain ignorant, "Women lag behind when it comes to understanding the epidemic. They [do] not take care of themselves. We want the community to be educated on the danger of HIV."

Owiny told IWPR that the infection rate among children in his district appears to have overtaken that of adults among those who voluntarily come to his clinic for testing and counselling.

"Children account for ten per cent [of the cases] compared to seven per cent of adults who go for voluntary counselling and testing for HIV annually," said the doctor.



Of the pregnant women who agree to be tested and counselled, seven per cent have been found to be HIV positive, he said.

But some 90 per cent of these pregnant women who tested positive will transmit the disease to their babies, continued Owiny.

Also contributing to the high rate of the disease among children, he added, is that the vast majority of pregnant women do not get tested, “The rate of infection in children is high because expectant mothers run away from the test. We intend to begin testing every pregnant mother who comes for health services to reduce the risk of infecting their unborn babies.”

Lira medical superintendent Dr Jane Aceng Ocerro said many who are HIV positive are dying in remote villages because they don't have access to trained carers.

In the Lira area, medical practitioners are working to attract HIV positive children to clinics.

“We are going to paint [clinics] that will be used to provide HIV services to children to make them child-friendly,” said Ocerro. This she hopes will “attract many infected children to come for treatment”.

These efforts may be late in coming, said Charles Angiru Gutomoi, a member of parliament from northern Uganda.

He estimates that at least five people die each day from AIDS or other diseases.

Many are children or elderly people who have left the former refugee camps and now live in their old villages.

“There is high death rate [among] children and elderly people,” said Gutomoi. “I'm burying people almost five times a day. It's a serious matter.”

While HIV/AIDS is a problem, so is typhoid, cholera, hepatitis, and malaria, which some people mistakenly attribute to the HIV virus, he said.

The MP said he has asked the government to move quickly to improve health in the north, but worries help is slow in coming.

“We want the government to construct health centres,” he added. “We need referral hospitals in every sub-county for easily accessibility to AIDS drugs.”

To address the HIV/AIDS problem, Uganda has channeled 25 million US dollars to treat and educate HIV positive Ugandan children via the Baylor College of Medicine Children's Foundation-Uganda. The organisation will coordinate HIV/AIDS treatment of children in all government hospitals and health centres.

“BCMC-U will use the funds to expand HIV services for 140,000 children living with the virus,” said Dr Wilfred Ochan Lokol.

“The programme will cover 32 districts in the first phase of the project implementation.

“Out of 140,000 infected children in the country, 50,000 are in need of HIV treatment, but cannot access [it] because of the few sites that provide AIDS services to children.”

Bill Oketch is an IWPR-trained reporter.

# New Corruption Claims Investigated

Reconstruction efforts in northern Uganda rocked by further accusations of embezzlement.

By Patrick Okino in Lira, 21-Aug-08

Just a week after ten suspects were charged with defrauding a development programme in northern Uganda, an investigation has been launched into further allegations of misappropriated funds in the region.

Lira district council is looking into claims that 13 million US dollars which were given to the council by the government in 2004 and 2005, and slated for redevelopment was instead spent on local officials' election campaigns.

The council which has executive powers to explore allegations of corruption and financial abuse launched its inquiry following accusations that little in the way of redevelopment has been accomplished, despite the fact that the government funds were disbursed at least three years ago.

On August 13, district vice chairman Tony Ogwang Adwari was singled out and censured by councillors, who accused him of incompetence. Among other things, the council accuses Adwari of failure to disclose the mismanagement of the district funds.

The government money was earmarked to pay for outstanding teachers' salaries, capacity building, and finance and administration for the northern region struggling to recover from 20 years of war.

The funds were made available at the height of the conflict when the regional economy was paralysed and the vast majority of the region's residents were forced into congested camps for the displaced.

Although the money was released in 2004 and 2005, the Ugandan parliament's Public Account Committee, PAC, two months ago cited irregularities with its disbursement.

District official Martin Alengo told IWPR that the money was not used for its designated purpose, but apparently for political campaigns conducted by a bevy of local officials seeking election or re-election in 2006.

Alengo claims the council has evidence of corruption which it intends to hand over to the Inspector General of Government, IGG, a government agency that fights corruption and abuse of office.

According to the official, the council is angry that the money was distributed without the council's knowledge, thus undermining its authority.

In an interview with IWPR, Adwari said his censure was unlawful because it has no proof of its allegations.

"The petitioners have not discharged their evidential burden of proof on the cause of financial loss, making the petition [invalid]," he said.

The council's actions have provoked the ire of at least one high-level official in Kampala.

Local government minister Major General Khinda Otafire, who advised the councillors against censuring Adwari, has ordered the Lira vice chairman to stay in office.

Otafire has also dispatched a team of inspectors from Kampala to investigate the incident and report back to him. He warned councillors that if Adwari was not allowed to remain in office and was eventually found to be innocent, they could be held personally liable.

The major general has made it clear he believes Adwari's version of events.

According to media reports, Adwari has said that the censure is a result of a personal vendetta by some councillors, and alleges the authority did not follow the rules in handling the issue.

"My initial observation is that if what transpired is true, as alleged by Adwari, it constitutes gross abuse of office by the council," Otafire told IWPR.

The latest accusations have again raised concerns over the efficacy of the government's efforts to reconstruct the region.

On August 13, IWPR reported that the authorities had issued corruption charges against some 20 people involved in work administered by the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund, NUSAF an official agency set up to manage projects to rebuild the north of the country.

Meanwhile, some local leaders told IWPR that the Lira district authorities have failed to send tax revenue amounting to about 150,000 dollars to the local government for the past two years.

"Business in our subcounties [is] being paralysed because of the district's failure to send this money," said local government official Bernard Angol.

However, deputy chief administrative officer of the district Fredrick Kwihira Rwabuhoro told IWPR that this money was diverted to clear debt.

“These local leaders know the problems the district [has gone] through,” he said. “So they should not complain.”

Joan Pacoto, a representative of President Museveni in the region, said the government is eager to ferret out corruption.

She urged citizens to report official misconduct.

“President Yoweri Museveni gives a lot of money to Lira district, but when it comes to election time, they [criticise] him and say he has done nothing. Yet, people in leadership positions have continued to [embezzle] the money,” said Pacoto.

“If you have any clue about corruption in NUSAF or NAADS [National Agricultural Advisory Services] inform us. Even if it's about me, just go and tell the police.”

Patrick Okino is an IWPR-trained journalist in northern Uganda.

# Corruption Probe Leads to Further Arrests

More suspects wanted on fraud charges relating to a development fund are detained in northern Uganda.

By Patrick Okino in Lira, 27-Aug-08

Police in Uganda have detained 11 more people as part of the ongoing criminal investigation into the misuse of funds earmarked for the redevelopment of the war-ravaged north.

The latest arrests were made in the Kitgum area by officers from Uganda's Criminal Investigation Directorate, CID. They bring to at least 21 the number arrested in connection with the alleged misuse of millions of US dollars worth of reconstruction projects handled by the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund, NUSAF a government agency tasked with managing the regeneration of the region.

In recent weeks, Ugandan courts have charged more than 20 people as a result of the criminal investigation into the suspected fraud.

The accused are all either community or agency managers of projects administered by NUSAF. According to court documents, they face charges including embezzlement, causing financial loss and fraud.

As reported by IWPR in Northern Aid Programme Probed by Bill Oketch and Patrick Okino ten people connected with work administered by NUSAF were arrested earlier this month and remain in custody. (See New Corruption Claims Investigated, AR No. 183, 21-Aug-08.)

The fraud allegations have damaged the NUSAF programme and called into question the effectiveness of plans to rebuild the region following 20 years of rebel insurgency by the Lord's Resistance Army, LRA.

Since 2006, the region has enjoyed relative peace after LRA leader Joseph Kony took his army to northeast Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC, from where he has been engaged on and off in peace talks with the Ugandan government.

Although Kony and the other top commanders wanted by the International Criminal Court remain at large, a fragile peace has prevailed, and nearly two million north Ugandans have been attempting to rebuild their lives.

A five-year community driven programme, which was largely funded by the World Bank with a budget of 131.30 million dollars was set up to help them do this. Administered by NUSAF, it ran from 2002 to the end of last year.

The purpose of its various projects was to help the poorest and most vulnerable people in the region. Redevelopment funds were released by the World Bank, and were sent through NUSAF to local communities where locally elected leaders led projects.

However, an official review from 2007 showed that money withdrawn from specially set-up bank accounts by local leaders exceeded the value of the work completed.

In the Kitgum district, the equivalent of about 1.2 million US dollars has not been accounted for properly, say officials the largest sum to be called into question so far.

According to the charges, the accused have either failed to account for the money spent, or nothing has been done on the ground to show how the grant money was used.

Kitgum district official John Komach Ogwok said widespread corruption has severely damaged efforts to rebuild the region after two decades of war. However, those responsible would be held to account, he said.

"In Kitgum district, we [are continuing to fight] corruption, and more people who swindled funds meant for recovery programmes will definitely pay the price," Ogwok told IWPR. Those taken into custody recently include project executives and others authorised to withdraw money from community bank accounts meant to pay for key construction projects, such as building schools and roads.

Embezzlement in Uganda carries a penalty of seven years in jail and the charges are prosecuted by the nation's high court, said Lira senior police officer Julius Onguu. While the first phase of the 113 million dollar NUSAF project a World Bank and Ugandan government-funded programme was to end in March 2008, this has been now been extended to March 2009 to enable completion of all the projects and expenditure of the total funds.

Despite the ongoing probe into the misuse of funds, the second phase of the NUSAF project will continue, said project specialist Martin Okumu.

He said he could not comment on how the investigation might affect existing uncompleted projects.

Files and documents associated with some projects under investigation have reportedly vanished, sending police on fast-moving searches for the people involved, investigators told IWPR.

“A number of these people have fled, but their case files are ready,” said Aldo Olado, an investigator who recently arrested two suspects in a remote village in northern Uganda. The suspects were apprehended at night and appeared in Lira magistrate court last week on charges of embezzlement in connection with funds meant for an animal husbandry project valued at about 25,000 dollars.

According to Evelyn Akullo, one of the suspect's relatives, the man in question has been “very stubborn” about providing information since receiving project money.

“We asked him many times to clarify whether he had given the money to the members, but he only told us that everything was OK. But I was again shocked to hear that they have arrested him,” she said. Martin Ocaya, resident of the Bazzar village in northern Uganda and brother of one of the accused, was irked by the arrests. “How can you bring a project for eradicating poverty [to northern Uganda] and later resort to jailing the beneficiaries who suffered for 20 years in the hands of the Lord's Resistance Army?” asked Ocaya.

He said his sister whom he declined to name was very sick.

“I think if they continue disturbing her, she will die,” said Ocaya. Meanwhile, senior government ministers have warned those local community leaders entrusted with the projects to resist the temptation to misuse NUSAF funds, despite the extreme deprivation endured by those in the north. The poverty rate across Uganda averages is 31 per cent, while in the north of the country it exceeds 60 per cent, according to northern member of parliament Daniel Omara Atubo.

“If leaders don't sensitise the population against mishandling this fund, the region will not recover,” said Atubo.

He also suggested that the government fight poverty by “educating the masses on how to utilise their land for crop production”, rather than relying on aid programmes. The problems uncovered in NUSAF should not affect the government's other reconstruction programme the Peace Recovery and Development Plan, PRDP said the minister in charge of reconstruction in northern Uganda, David Wakikona.

“The problem we experienced in NUSAF, we don't expect it to happen in PRDP or in the second phase of the project,” said Wakikona.

Yet, despite the assurances of officials, many people in the north are frustrated with the NUSAF project's results to date.

Akwar Mark, a resident of Olilim Trading Centre and the secretary for a pig-farming project which received about 4,000 dollars from the fund, said the project had not helped the community.

All of the project's 27 pigs had died, he said, but project staff had done nothing to help.

When the group approached officials about the livestock deaths, they told its members to write a report about the loss of the animals and took no other action, said Akwar.

“We called the veterinary doctor [who] treated them, but they died all the same.”

Patrick Okino is an IWPR-trained journalist in Uganda.

# Project Funds Stalled Amid Fraud Concerns

World Bank withholds further funding for development in northern Uganda as corruption investigation continues.

By Bill Oketch in northern Uganda, 25-Sep-08

**I**nternational redevelopment funds for northern Uganda could be cut depending on the outcome of a wide-ranging investigation into suspected fraud and misappropriation, said officials.

Earlier this year, a fraud investigation began into projects linked to the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund, NUSAF a government agency tasked with managing projects to rebuild war-torn provinces in the north of the country.

World Bank officials now say that the second phase of the redevelopment project NUSAF II is on hold in northern Uganda until the fraud allegations have been addressed.

“What I know is that the World Bank will not channel money to NUSAF II until the issue of financial accountability is solved,” said Emmanuel Olaro, a World Bank official in Uganda.

“The position of the World Bank is that the money, which is being given to fight poverty in the north, is utilised well and should be backed up with convincing accountability. We don't want paper accountability, but tangible accountability of work done on the ground.”

NUSAF distributed World Bank money to fund a 131 million dollar, five-year community development programme that ended last year. The funds were intended to pay for hundreds of projects in local communities that requested support and selected their own local project leaders.

Communities opened local bank accounts into which the Bank of Uganda deposited funds, authorising local leaders to withdraw sums as needed.

The money was intended to help poor Ugandans in the north of the country, which was the battleground for Uganda's 20-year war with the Lords Resistance Army, LRA.

However, a review of the projects last year revealed that the amount of funds withdrawn exceeded the cost and value of work that had been done, said officials.

Following the launch of a fraud investigation this year, Ugandan courts issued corruption charges against around 20 people linked to work administered by NUSAF. Ten of the suspects were arrested on August 5 and remanded in custody in advance of their trial, while the rest are thought to have fled to South Sudan.

However, some observers in the region say the corruption probe has now been stalled by venal officials.

“The investigators are accepting bribes to free suspected fraudsters,” said Lira Resident District Commissioner Joan Pacoto, who said that 22 arrested suspects had been released on police bond.

She is calling for any officials suspected of corruption to be investigated as part of the ongoing probe, “The government should issue arrest warrants for the fellows so that justice can prevail for all.”

While Pacoto declined to say why she suspected that bribes had been taken, she said she had delivered her concerns to the office of Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni.

But Raymond Otim, the Lira district police commander, denied that investigators had accepted bribes to stall the inquiry.

“For someone to say corruption has weighed down our investigation is a total lie,” Otim told IWPR. “Nobody is getting any money from the suspected fraudsters to kill cases.”

Some private aid groups have reportedly donated 8,500 dollars to the police in Gulu to investigate alleged NUSAF fraud throughout the north, IWPR has learned.

“Luck is running out for those who have mismanaged NUSAF,” said a security officer who preferred to remain anonymous.

“We have been directed by the president's office to arrest all those who are involved in the mismanagement of reconstruction projects.”

While funds for northern Uganda may be in jeopardy, NUSAF II cash for the ethnic Teso region of eastern Uganda, which also suffered several years of fighting with the LRA, is likely to flow, World Bank official Vildan Verbeek-Demiraydin told IWPR.

“We might recommend the people of Teso for NUSAF II,” he said, explaining that an assessment of the first stage of the project showed that they had performed very well, qualifying them for the second phase.

Ismael Orot, a senior official in the town of Kumi, said, “Here in Teso, leaders were committed to delivering

services to the people, unlike some other NUSAF beneficiary districts in the country, where even a [district] chairman has been accused of embezzling NUSAF money.”

As the fraud controversy rumbles on, some say that allegations of mismanagement of NUSAF funds have been exaggerated.

“Those who did not benefit from the fund thought the whole project was mismanaged, which is very wrong,” said Patrick Odongo, a farmer from Lira.

According to Odongo, the World Bank money was not enough to meet people's needs.

“When the World Bank gave us money, the poor communities thought it was big enough to enable them rebuild their lives,” he said. “But when the fund was disbursed to the beneficiary groups, it was just too little. In fact, it was just like a drop in the ocean.”

While Odongo feels that some of the corruption claims have been overstated, he nonetheless believes there should be greater oversight of development work.

“During the implementation of the projects, [not enough officials] were involved in the procurement processes. This alone was enough for some to mismanage the funds.”

Meanwhile, farmer Charles Omara said he and others working in agriculture would much prefer to receive farming equipment than money.

“In our village, people do not know how to budget money,” said Omara.

“We are used to [relying on] farming for survival and development. If there is a rebuilding programme, we want farm tools and seeds.”

Bill Oketch is an IWPR-trained reporter.

# Refugee Communities Damage Wetlands

Internal refugees farming in and around northern swamps are blamed for the disappearance of these protected areas.

By Caroline Ayugi in Gulu, 4-Nov-08

Carla Lamunu survives on the living she ekes out from toiling in the gardens of her neighbour, knowing that if she doesn't work, she probably won't eat that day.

She longs for the life she had a decade ago, when she operated a lively business selling papyrus sleeping mats, which were used by everyone in the area at the time.

Making mats was a low-cost enterprise that only required the purchase of sisal threads to sew the mats together, said Lamunu. For just 100 Ugandan schillings, the equivalent of about five US cents, she could stitch together three mats.

Like other mat makers, Lamunu used to get up early in the morning and walk a half kilometre to a nearby swamp to find the papyrus reeds she needed.

A family's wealth could be guessed by the piles of papyrus neatly stacked by the verandas, and the amount spread out to dry.

But that's no longer the case, said Lamunu.

In recent years, the nearby wetlands where she used to pick papyrus have been all but destroyed, leaving her with no reeds with which to make her mats.

Her Kolo Quarters neighbourhood in the Gulu district, once known as the best place to buy quality sleeping mats, is now crowded with mud and thatch huts, home to people displaced by the war between the government and the Lord's Resistance Army, LRA.

The loss of her livelihood began years ago as people streamed into Gulu and the camps that surrounded it, fleeing the ravages of the conflict.

Many of the newcomers began to make and sell the popular mats, creating competition and causing the papyrus supply to become depleted.

Lamunu said that some of the internal refugees also began to farm at the edges of the swamp, and soon many started to cut down the papyrus to make way for crops.

Nothing was done to stop what was happening, she said, because the swamp lands were unclaimed and also because it gave families a means of survival.

Lamunu was not the only one affected.

George Okello, who is also a former dealer in papyrus mats, is frail and suffers from tuberculosis. He's no longer able to make the money he needs to buy food, because the papyrus which used to grow in the area is gone.

"My wife now looks for odd jobs where she is paid after work, but the money is very little," said Okello. "She tills people's land where she gets enough money for food, but not many people have money to give to people like her to clear their land."

Okello mourned the loss of his business, which once was a highly dependable source of income. The only way to lose was through laziness or carelessness, he said.

Now vast areas of the swamps have been destroyed, he said, and only the able-bodied can trek the long distances one must travel to find fresh reeds.

Christine Auma, a divorced mother of two, is among those who dug a garden for herself in a swamp that was originally a forest of papyrus used only for mats.

With her one-year-old baby tied behind her back, she slowly pulled up the papyrus roots, leaving behind a clear field.

Auma and her mother, who escaped abduction by the LRA in 2000, said she developed the swamp because it was land for the taking.

"Everyone else is doing it," she said. "No leader has told me that it's bad to farm in a wetland." The extent of the farming around her is obvious as large areas of the former papyrus swamp are now covered with sugar cane and yam plantations.

According to the 1995 constitution of Uganda, private ownership of wetlands is prohibited. Anyone operating in a wetland is legally required to have a permit, which is granted by the National Environmental Management Authority, NEMA, after an assessment is done to determine whether the proposed activity would damage the environment.

Permitted activities in and around wetlands must take place 30 metres away from them and not release toxic pollutants.

However, while these laws exist in theory, they are not enforced in practice in the north of the country.



The government's environmental officer for the Gulu district, Samuel Okello, said that when internally displaced people like Auma came to the area, officials sympathised with their plight.

So many people were displaced during the 20-year rebel war in the north that they often had nowhere else to farm, other than on the swamps.

Local leaders therefore failed to enforce existing land laws, which opened the door to extensive exploitation of the wetlands.

“We couldn't chase the few who had nowhere else to plant their crops,” said Okello.

“But many other people who were not displaced also took advantage of the situation, which led to massive invasion of our wetlands.”

Okello said that some local leaders also turned a blind eye to the use of the wetlands because there was money to be made.

Many of the swamp lands have become home to car-washing bays, which are taxed by local authorities.

“The...authorities in town have seen this as an opportunity to generate more revenue, and with this, washing bays are being opened in swamps to provide employment and revenue,” said Okello.

He accused local authorities of working with local business leaders to develop the wetlands around the town, making the illegal practice even harder to fight.

Moses Abonga, an official with NEMA, acknowledged that the local government receives income by taxing the proprietors of the car-washing bays.

He said that the car washers appeared to have contracts with those “landowners” or people laying claim to those particular parts of land to carry out their business.

Abonga blamed the district land boards for allowing people to take over the land.

He questioned why titles to land encompassing parts of the wetlands were being granted by district authorities without the knowledge of environmental officials, such as himself.

But Gulu surveyor Connie Ouma denied that the authorities were issuing land titles to wetlands.

“After the environmental law [of 1995] came into existence...no wetlands have been allocated to developers knowingly,” said Ouma.

Instead, Ouma blamed NEMA for lax enforcement of the environmental statute since it came into place more than a decade ago.

We cannot have a situation where there are redundant laws, and those responsible for enforcing the laws just sit, watching the massive encroachment of the wetlands, he said.

Meanwhile, observers warn that long-term damage is being inflicted on the landscape.

For example, in one Gulu neighbourhood, a nearby wetland is used as a dumping ground for all sorts of waste, including human effluent.

Okello pointed out that fish populations are disappearing as a result of the wetlands being drained, depleting a source of food for locals.

Environmentalists also say that the reclamation of the swamp land was affecting the area's water supply.

Environment minister Maria Mutagamba said that at the rate the wetlands were being destroyed, the government's plans to provide safe and clean water for all by 2015 were also being undermined.

Caroline Ayugi is an IWPR-trained reporter. James Eriku from Gulu also contributed to this report.

# Former Rebel Captives Struggle

Women held by rebels for years get little help as they try to rebuild their lives.

By Caroline Ayugi and Patrick Okino in Gulu, northern Uganda, 3-Nov-08

**P**roscovia Acayo, who gave birth to four children during her nine years of captivity with the rebel Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, today lives in a small mud and thatch hut in a village near Gulu.

Abducted in 1995 when LRA rebels attacked her village, Acayo eventually escaped the LRA in 2004, returning to Gulu with her four children from the bush.

Her homecoming was heartbreaking, however, when she learned that her parents had been killed by the LRA and her five younger brothers and sisters were stranded at Lacekocot internal refugee camp in Pader district north of Gulu.

Acayo and her family of nine survive on the two US dollars a day she earns selling charcoal in the neighborhoods of Gulu. But it is far less than she needs to feed, clothe and educate her family.

On the day IWPR spoke with Acayo, no fire burned in her crowded little hut, signaling that her family was going without lunch.

"I am requesting any person, organisation or even the government to help me with these children especially their education, health, feeding and house rent, because the business I am doing gives me very little money," she said.

Acayo is among thousands of men and women who have returned from LRA captivity to communities across northern Uganda, only to find themselves in the midst of crushing poverty and with little hope for the future.

Many of the former abductees, especially women, are demanding help from the government in the form of resettlement packages made available to former rebels through the Uganda Amnesty Commission.

The women complain that they have not received reintegration assistance meant for both men and women which includes a foam mattress, plastic containers, cooking pans, a blanket and Ugandan currency worth about 115 US dollars.

Amnesty Commission chairman Justice Peter Onega said the total number of ex-LRA members to be supported through the project could be as high as 29,000, including those still in the ranks of the LRA.

He says 22,000 have already received assistance; 1,800 are waiting for help; and a further 5,000 could be eligible

for it when and if the LRA, which is now operating in the Democratic Republic of Congo, demobilises.

"If the comprehensive peace agreement between the LRA and the government of Uganda is signed, we expect the LRA to leave Congo and Sudan and come back to Uganda," said Onega. "We will give them reintegration packages."

But Acayo, who says her suffering continues despite her freedom, says she never received aid from the government.

After she was kidnapped, Acayo says she was handed over to a man named Ayo, a commander under Okot Odhiambo, who among others in the LRA has been indicted by the International Criminal Court, ICC, for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Ayo, only 13 at this time, says she was then handed to another commander, Okwera Aginya, becoming his fourth wife. She had her four children with him.

After Aginya died in 2003 at Owiny-Kibul in South Sudan during a shootout between the LRA and South Sudanese forces, Acayo escaped with her four children, ending up at reintegration centre in Gulu.

Acayo was then given a small amount of money from the Concerned Parents Association, a group of parents whose children have been abducted by the LRA. She used it to start her charcoal business.

Sarah Achora, 18, a former wife of a rebel named Pope Nyeko, who she said was killed in 2004, has also not received commission support.

"I have never got any assistance from the government since I returned in 2005 after nine years in the bush," Achora told IWPR. "I don't expect any miracle to happen. If only they could pay for my two children to go school, I would be grateful."

Achora survives by selling cut and dried cassava. "I have been selling the chips for three years," she said. "[It] is enough for me to get a meal a day and pay my monthly rent."

Sunday Aryemo, 20, another of Odhiambo former wives, told IWPR, "Since I came out from the bush two years ago, the only assistance I got was a mattress, two jerry cans and a saucepan from [independent aid group] World Vision".

Aryemo was abducted from her village east of Gulu, and lived with the rebels for seven years.

"I deal in fresh cassava, so [with] that I raise money to take care of my four children," she told IWPR. "My mother died of tuberculosis, so I am also taking care of my younger [siblings]. I am overwhelmed."

While many former female abductees have not received support from the amnesty commission, some like Proscovia Acayo have been given vocational training.

Acayo attended a clothing design course, but it did little to improve her situation because she lacks the capital to buy materials and chemicals to start a business.

Vincent Ocen, an official at the education department in Gulu, has been critical of vocational training given to the former rebels.

"The duration of the training is as short as three weeks, and doesn't enable them to compete in the job market," he said.

"There should be proper certification and links to job opportunities."

Onega said the reason why so many former LRA returnees have yet to receive resettlement packages is because the commission was only provided funds in 2005, by which time many of the ex-rebels and their captives had settled back in their old villages some in far flung parts of the north and were difficult to trace.

But Onega said new funds were now available to provide for those who were overlooked in the first phase of the assistance project, which appears to have focused on demobilised fighters.

Now, he says, special attention will be given to mothers; the disabled; and women and child soldiers. "These are the people we are targeting," he said. "We will be gender sensitive."

Caroline Ayugi and Patrick Okino are IWPR-trained journalists.

## Reporting Impact

# International Justice/ICC: August '08

IWPR probe into alleged misappropriation of donor funds puts implicated official under pressure.

By IWPR staff in Lira and The Hague, 26-Sep-08

An investigation by IWPR journalists into suspected corruption relating to a long-running reconstruction project in war-torn northern Uganda sparked a recent demonstration in the town of Lira.

Over 200 demonstrators from the Lira, Dokolo and Oyam districts gathered on August 23 to protest the alleged misappropriation of money from the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund, NUSAF a government agency responsible for managing projects to rebuild the north which has been the focus of a criminal investigation into fraud allegations and was the subject of the IWPR story.

The demonstrators who included members of the ruling National Resistance Movement, NRM, and the opposition Forum for Democratic Change, FDC called for the sacking of Franco Ojur, the Lira district chairman, who police suspect of being involved in one the cases under investigation.

Joe Erem Oyie, the Lira district information officer, said the demonstrators were tipped off by relatives who had read IWPR's stories including Northern Aid Programme Probed which was written by Bill Oketch and Patrick Okino.

"Demonstrators felt the reports published on IWPR website on rebuilding the war-ravaged region of northern Uganda were factual and accurate," said Oyie.

The Lira resident district commissioner Joan Pacoto recently congratulated Okino for the corruption series. "She told me that our stories helped them in their investigation," said Okino.

Twenty four suspected fraudsters have been arrested in Lira district including Ojur, who was later released and five others were netted in Gulu. Ojur denies the allegations leveled against him.

The latest official to be grilled is the Lira mayor Peter Owiny who is accused of misappropriating donor funds. Owiny rejects the charge.

The money was meant to rehabilitate over 200 abducted youngsters and street children who were orphaned in the course of the fighting between the army and the rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army, LRA.

On September 18, a Lira municipal council meeting turned chaotic when Owiny defied a council order to explain what he knew about the alleged mismanagement

of the funds. The council alleges that money earmarked for the children disappeared while in the custody of the mayor.

IWPR's Uganda stories also garnered recent praise from members of the international press.

An AFP journalist who covers international justice issues said the stories are useful for finding out what is going on the ground in countries like Uganda where the International Criminal Court, ICC, has issued arrests warrants against LRA leaders.

"Your stories are useful in following the peace negotiations with the LRA since that could have consequences for the ICC but are difficult to follow and understand from The Hague," said the reporter.

## Reporting Impact

# International Justice/ICC: October '08

Expose of psychological suffering endured by LRA victims assists efforts to raise money for trauma centres.

By Bill Oketch and Patrick Okino in Lira, 19-Nov-08

A story by IWPR-trained reporters about psychological trauma caused by the rebel Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, has helped to generate funding for new trauma treatment centres in northern Uganda.

The 1.6 million US dollars project will establish new psychological treatment and learning centres in the Teso, Lango, Acholi and West Nile regions of northern Uganda, according to project officials.

The project is being implemented by the Christian Youth Alert Uganda, CYAU, a Ugandan non-governmental organisation.

Project chairman Felix Okabo said he received a printed version of the article – Northern Ugandans Bear Mental Scars, August 27, by Bill Oketch and Caroline Ayugi – from Lira-based Fountainhead Institute of Management and Technology, FIMT, and then used it to lobby for project funds from World Vision, a global aid organisation that has worked extensively in northern Uganda.

“Many [articles] have been [published] on trauma caused by the LRA, but the IWPR article made it easier for us to convince our donor,” said Okabo. “When I read the story I realised that such information is very important in rebuilding northern Uganda.

“We are going to construct eight rehabilitation centres in all the four sub-regions affected by the LRA war. In these centres we plan to put up youth learning centres.”

Health professionals will also counsel those in the north who are infected with the HIV virus, he said. Meanwhile, another IWPR article written by IWPR-trained reporters Patrick Okino – Ex-combatants Blamed for Crime Wave, October 7 – prompted local police to beef up patrols in a remote region particularly affected by lawlessness.

After the IWPR story was broadcast on Radio Rhino 96.1 FM, a station in Lira, local police said they tightened security in and around five villages.

The area had been plagued by armed men, some of whom were said to have been former members of the Amuka militia, which fought the LRA, and kept their weapons rather than turn them in to the authorities as required. “The report gave us [good information], and as security agencies we should strengthen our security such that people are protected,” said Raymond Otim, the Lira district police chief.

In another story produced by IWPR, Seriano Errib, leader of Sudanese students in Uganda, said Oketch's article titled Schools Open Doors to Sudanese LRA Victims, October 20, has prompted the Kampala and Sudanese governments to consider funding Sudanese students studying in Uganda.

“I'm happy that both governments have considered funding us,” he said. “This has come along as a result of IWPR work. We the students are very much cheerful with IWPR story.”

The story, said Errib, also brought the plight of Sudanese students to the attention of Ugandan news media, “This story is an eye-opener to the national media that they also have a lot to do to help Sudanese students studying in Uganda.

“We shall live to remember your work when we go back to Sudan.”

In addition, a school official in Lira recently posted a copy of a commentary by Bill Oketch – Northern Ugandans Deserve A Break, July 16 – for students to read. The comment dealt with public frustration with the failure of the LRA to sign a peace agreement with the government.

“When I read [the] comment...I realised that such information is very important,” said Andreas Kizito, an FIMT lecturer.

“Based on my personal understanding and prediction, when Kony demanded peace talks he was looking for a resting phase.”

Bill Oketch and Patrick Okino are IWPR-trained journalists.

