

Northern Uganda: Humanitarian Response to Crisis Still a Failure

Despite improvements in the past year, the humanitarian response in northern Uganda is failing. The crisis is one of the most severe in the world, and almost 1,000 people a week are dying primarily from a lack of basic services including water, sanitation facilities and health care.

Roughly 1.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) live in miserable camps with limited access to these services. In the past year, UN agencies have deployed additional staff and NGOs have expanded programs. These efforts have not noticeably improved living conditions for the displaced because insecurity limits the ability of agencies to travel to camps to implement programs.

The displaced feel abandoned by the government and humanitarian agencies. One woman told Refugees International that “NGOs and the UN should come more often,” a sentiment expressed throughout the north, especially in Pader, “the epicenter of the crisis” and the most neglected district.

The Government of Uganda’s response to the crisis is weak. The Government has the primary responsibility to protect and meet the basic needs of its citizens and has been widely lauded as one of the few countries to pass a National IDP Policy, but implementation has not moved beyond the establishment of coordination mechanisms.

Given the enormity of the needs, the central government must dramatically increase spending on basic services and encourage qualified personnel to work in northern Uganda. Government structures in the north lack both financial and human resources. There is little accountability for government staff who do not fulfill their responsibilities, and on a recent assessment mission Refugees International heard countless complaints about government officials, teachers and health staff who did not report to work. According to a UN official, “Uganda is a functioning state. There are structures in place, but they are ineffective in the case of the north. Working through these existing, dysfunctional structures makes it more difficult for humanitarian agencies to provide services.”

Insecurity prevents the agencies from providing adequate services in the camps. The Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA)

killed several aid workers at the end of last year, resulting in a suspension of many activities for several months. Though NGOs have resumed activities, security remains unpredictable, so most NGOs are understandably cautious in their movements and travel to camps with armed escorts from ten in the morning until four in the afternoon. Even though LRA attacks occur primarily outside camps, NGOs are reluctant to establish a presence in them. With the exception of staff of a few agencies who spend nights in the camps, NGO personnel usually spend only a few hours there, and sometimes visit a camp only once a month. Lack of presence severely limits the programs that NGOs are able to implement, and programs that go beyond meeting the most basic needs of the displaced are rare.

In the past year, the UN Country Team has expanded its presence in northern Uganda. However, NGO staff told RI that the UN Country Team did not “flex its muscles” in its dealings with the government and has not been vocal in calling attention to the Government’s lack of response to the crisis. In the words of one NGO worker, “Where is the UN’s leadership around the IDP Policy? Where’s the denunciation? The UN here, although they are focusing more on the emergency, is still very development-minded and therefore wary of offending the Government.” A strong Resident Coordinator could play an important advocacy role, but the position has been vacant for over a year.

Coordination is another area of weakness in the overall humanitarian response. Particularly in the more remote camps, there are very few agencies implementing programs, while in some camps, several agencies work to provide one service. According to one NGO worker, “Everyone is doing everything everywhere, but at the end of the day there is nothing to show for it because agencies are often spread too thin.” NGOs also mentioned that donor inflexibility tied them to implementing certain projects in certain camps rather than responding to the needs.

Uganda is one of the test cases for the UN's cluster response to internal displacement, an effort to improve accountability and coordination by designating certain UN agencies as responsible for specific sectors. Most aid workers interviewed by RI have no idea how this approach will be implemented, although they are supportive of the concept. Considering the current coordination problems, it is critical that donors and Government are integrated into cluster coordination mechanisms. In Uganda protection is viewed as the most challenging cluster, and agencies expressed concern about how the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the protection cluster lead, can take on this gargantuan task, particularly given their current lack of presence in the north. The UN is in the process of revising its Consolidated Appeal (CAP) to reflect the increased funding needs in light of the cluster response. A well-funded cluster response system has the potential to improve the humanitarian response.

The Government's weak response to the crisis is apparent in the consistently low-quality education in the IDP camps. Despite the Government's policy of universal education throughout Uganda, large numbers of children in the north either do not attend school or attend classes where one teacher instructs 150 students. According to a teacher, "It is impossible for us to keep discipline in the classes. Our students cannot learn in this environment, and they are leaving our classes and they do not know anything." Teachers are often absent from schools and are poorly paid.

Few students continue their studies beyond primary school because of the high cost of secondary school fees and the need for students to work to help their families. Since there are not many secondary schools in Acholiland, students must pay for accommodation far from their families. For those who do continue, the drop out rate is high. There are few training or employment opportunities, so youth in the camps are idle, frustrated and hopeless. Emergency education, which focuses on basic literacy, numeracy and life skills, and catch-up programs for those who missed years of schooling, is desperately needed. In addition, donors and the government should sponsor youth to go to secondary school and higher education.

As RI highlighted 15 months ago, the lack of reproductive health services is a serious problem. There are no emergency obstetric services in camps and limited family planning services. Though the HIV/AIDS rate across the north is unknown, limited studies have shown the prevalence to be much higher than that in the south. Women do not readily have access to drugs for the prevention of mother to child transmission of HIV/AIDS. Voluntary counseling and testing, and the provision of anti-retroviral drugs are limited. Condom availability is reportedly not as wide-

spread as it used to be, and more sensitization is required for people to use them. The majority of rape survivors in camps have no access to medical services, such as emergency contraception or post-exposure prophylaxes to prevent HIV transmission, and counseling is not widely available. The effects of rape and the lack of reproductive health care will have effects long after the conflict has ended.

In the past several months, the Government has encouraged the displaced to move closer to their areas of origin. The Ugandan military, the UPDF, played a major role in identifying new sites, often basing their selection on military strategy rather than social infrastructure. In some cases, water points are outside the camp and there are no schools. Often, the UPDF will deploy a contingent to the site, and the displaced will follow spontaneously. Agencies follow the population and begin services in the new camps, but limited resources will complicate the delivery of services to more sites. There have been questions about the Government's motivation for encouraging people to move to new camps, and concern about security for the population if the UPDF changes locations.

The UN is focusing on the principle of freedom of movement; indeed, those who want to return home should be allowed to do so. There are plans to begin a return process in Lango and Teso; however, most of the displaced in Acholiland that RI interviewed want to remain in camps until the conflict ends. The international aid community and the Government of Uganda must address this reality by substantially increasing the provision of assistance and protection in the camps, and expanding their efforts to reach a peaceful solution to the conflict.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ The Government of Uganda fulfill its responsibilities under its National IDP Policy and devote additional resources to providing basic services for displaced persons, as well as support for a voluntary return process in areas where security permits.
- ❑ The Government of Uganda provide incentives, such as hardship pay, for government workers in the north, and ensure that those employed by the government are delivering services.
- ❑ The Government of Uganda quickly approve the United Nation's candidate for the Resident Coordinator, so he can engage with the Government, the UN and NGOs to effect a dramatic improvement in the response to the displacement crisis.
- ❑ The UN, especially OCHA, as well as donors and the NGOs continue to work to improve the coordination of programs.

- ❑ Donors continue to fund humanitarian assistance, taking into consideration the need for better coordination and the additional funding requirements resulting from the new cluster approach.
- ❑ Donors support NGOs whose security policies enable them to travel regularly to IDP camps.
- ❑ Donors support emergency education programs and sponsorship for secondary and university education.
- ❑ Donors fund UNHCR's budget so that it can fulfill its roles in the cluster response.
- ❑ The UNHCR develop a plan to fulfill its role in camp management and protection.
- ❑ The UN Population Fund work with partners to expand programs in all IDP camps and substantially increase its response in northern Uganda.

Advocates Michelle Brown and Sayre Nyce, accompanied by Board Member Jan Weil, just returned from a two-week visit to northern Uganda.