
RI BULLETIN

A POWERFUL VOICE FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTION

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Inadequate Response to Protection Crisis in Northern Uganda

Despite improvements in camp security and the ceasefire between the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan People's Defense Forces (UPDF), internally displaced persons (IDPs) in camps in northern Uganda are experiencing widespread human rights violations perpetrated by fighting forces and fellow displaced persons. Violations include sexual exploitation, gender-based violence, denial of basic services, and intimidation, as well as attacks and abductions by the LRA.

The Government of Uganda has the primary responsibility for protecting its citizens. Only the military provides protection, which leaves IDPs vulnerable to abuses by security forces. In most camps, there are no police or civilian personnel tasked with IDP protection. Civilian protection-related activities, which inform people of their rights and allow them recourse if their rights are abused, are under-developed or non-existent. District Protection Working Groups have been formed, but because NGOs are not traveling regularly to all camps in northern Uganda, there is little monitoring and reporting of human rights abuses. Ensuring an adequate and appropriate protection response must be a much higher priority for the Government of Uganda and the international community.

The UPDF has recruited local defense units (LDUs) from the IDP communities to assist in the provision of security. During a recent mission to Uganda, Refugees International heard reports of members of the LDUs misusing their power and harassing displaced people. NGOs are also concerned about the presence of children in both the UPDF and the LDUs, as well as incidents of forcible recruitment and forced labor. RI visited a camp in Kitgum one day after the UPDF had forcibly recruited a group of 52 IDPs, whom the UPDF said were deserters. Camp leaders verified that few were in fact deserters, and one of the recruits was confirmed to be under 18. IDPs not willing to join the LDUs voluntarily may be considered collaborators with the LRA. Arrest and mistreatment of "collaborators," in some cases people opposing government policy, is a disturbing trend.

Although there are no statistics, gender-based violence and sexual exploitation, as a result of the dire poverty in the camps, is assumed to be widespread, leading to concerns about the spread of HIV/AIDS. The displaced reported that UPDF soldiers were offering women and girls cash in exchange for sex. "Defilement," or sex with underage girls, is a serious crime in Uganda, but soldiers are rarely prosecuted.

Rapes perpetrated by UPDF, particularly by mobile units, are also assumed to be widespread. Most women and girls, out of fear of stigmatization and fear of retribution, do not come forward to accuse their rapists. There are no gender-based violence sensitization programs, which raise awareness among men and women about the issue of rape. Survivors of rape must first contact the police, who are not present in most camps, or the local leadership, often perceived to be in league with the UPDF. In some cases, the woman will have to pay a “fee” for her case to be referred to medical personnel, who are themselves rarely present in IDP camps. Further, health units lack post-rape kits. In some cases, the victim will also have to go to the barracks to identify the rapist. These factors all combine to create serious disincentives for women and girls to report rapes. Although the UPDF maintains that it takes sexual violence seriously, survivors of rape have little recourse and perpetrators of rape are rarely punished.

Domestic violence in the camps is also a problem. Acholi cultural leaders explained to RI that displacement has led to an increase in alcohol abuse for men. Brewing alcohol is one of the only income generating opportunities for women. Idleness, a sense of powerlessness, and high rates of alcohol consumption have all contributed to increased rates of domestic violence.

UNICEF, the lead agency on protection, has deployed two child protection officers to Gulu and Kitgum. By all accounts, these protection officers are doing a good job. UNICEF is planning to deploy a general protection officer to the north, and OCHA will deploy a protection advisor within the next few months. UNICEF is waiting to receive funding for two additional protection officers. Nonetheless, this complement of protection officers is clearly inadequate. It is impossible for six individuals to ensure the protection of 1.6 million internally displaced persons, especially given the lack of sustained NGO presence and human rights networks inside the camps.

The Ugandan Human Rights Commission (UHRC) has a critical role to play in IDP protection. The UHRC is remarkably independent and is able to say things that non-governmental organizations are unable to say for fear of retribution by the Ugandan Government. At present the UHRC has a regional office in Gulu. This office has jurisdiction over Kitgum and Pader as well, but due to lack of capacity and funding, the UHRC is not heavily involved in protection activities there. It is important that the UHRC’s role be encouraged, and donors should support the expansion of the UHRC to Kitgum and Pader.

Although the threat of abduction by the LRA has diminished, child protection remains a concern. The number of night commuters traveling to town each night to seek shelter has gone down from previous levels; however, tens of thousands of children still continue to travel several kilometers to the shelters each night, often at great risk to their safety. Some of the shelters have supervisors and are orderly, but others are makeshift and have no adult supervision, no electricity and very few latrines.

There are few opportunities or activities available to children and youth, leading to increased rates of sexual exploitation and early sexual activity. There are also large numbers of orphans and child-headed households. There are extremely few child-friendly spaces, and children are often left alone when their parents go to the fields to work. Support for recreational activities is almost non-existent. The government pursues a policy of universal primary education in Uganda, but school facilities in the IDP camps are inadequate. Often families are unable to afford school uniforms or school supplies for their children. In some cases, older children must assist their families in earning money and are unable to attend school.

Acholi cultural and religious leaders explained that idle youth were their biggest concern. Large numbers of young girls are becoming pregnant, gangs of youth have formed and are committing petty crimes, and alcohol abuse is on the increase. Improved secondary school opportunities would be beneficial for youth, who have few opportunities to earn a living in the camps.

Refugees International, therefore, recommends that:

- Donors make IDP protection a priority, and fund the deployment of adequate numbers of UN and NGO protection officers. The plan to place six protection officers in the north is inadequate.
- UNDP work with the Government of Uganda to train police officers to be deployed to IDP camps. These police officers should receive training in dealing with the protection of women and children.
- Under the new Fifth Pillar of the Poverty Eradication Action Plan, which deals with security and conflict resolution, support to civilian protection structures be made a priority.
- UN and NGOs expand their presence in the IDP camps. Sustained presence in the camps would alleviate some human rights violations.
- The Government of Uganda investigate all allegations of rape and sexual exploitation and ensure that perpetrators are punished.
- UN agencies, particularly UNICEF and UNFPA, train district health staff in how to provide appropriate medical care, as well as psychosocial care, to survivors of rape.
- District officials and NGOs implement psychosocial programs for survivors of rape and other forms of violence.
- Community services programs, particularly sensitization programs which inform IDPs of their rights, should also be expanded. Programs benefiting vulnerable groups should be made a priority.
- The Government of Uganda and donors support the expansion of the Ugandan Human Rights Commission to Kitgum and Pader.
- District officials and NGOs implement community safety initiatives, including community policing in the camps. These initiatives could be helpful in making it safer for night commuters to travel into the towns each night.

Senior Advocate Michelle Brown and Advocate Kavita Shukla recently returned from a three-week assessment mission to northern Uganda.