

IDPS IN UGANDA A SPECIAL REPORT

Greater Pressure from International Community is Needed for Uganda...

By Joy Miller

In northern Uganda, the 20-year conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the government has uprooted nearly two million people – Africa's largest crisis of internal displacement after Sudan. Nearly 90 percent of the north's residents have been displaced to squalid camps, where large numbers have remained for more than 10 years. These internally displaced persons (IDPs) have experienced brutal attacks and mutilations at the hands of the LRA, insufficient access to food, clean water, health facilities and sanitation, as well as abuse by members of the Ugandan military tasked with their protection. "In few other places on Earth has so much suffering been inflicted on a civilian population," observed Jan Egeland, the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator¹.

The peace process that began in July 2006 brings hope that the conflict with the LRA may soon be resolved. And if peace is within reach, so too is the possibility that these uprooted, men, women and children may be able to return to their home areas. Establishing safe and sustainable conditions for the return of such a large number of people will create formidable challenges for the Ugandan government.

To guide the process, the government should draw upon its National Policy for Internally Displaced Persons. Uganda is one of just a few African countries to have adopted such a policy, and the international community should now strongly encourage the government to implement it and fulfill its national responsibility to protect and assist its displaced citizens.

Uganda's 2004 National Policy for IDPs is one of the best in the world. It seeks to protect Ugandans forcibly uprooted by the LRA, government counter-insurgency operations and armed Karamojong cattle rustlers. The policy has been called "comprehensive and rich in substance"² by the former Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons, Francis Deng. It commits the government to protecting its citizens against arbitrary displacement, ensuring the security of IDPs when in camps, and facilitating the return and reintegration of the displaced by clearing landmines and preventing armed attacks. The policy also requires the government to provide IDPs with food, shelter, clothing, education and health care. To carry out the policy, machinery at the national and local levels is to be set up.

But there is a major problem. The government has not yet fully implemented the policy. The result is that

IDPs in Uganda continue to face grave security threats, limited access to humanitarian assistance and difficulties in returning home.

To identify the obstacles inhibiting government implementation of the policy and encourage the government to overcome them, the Representative of the UN Secretary-General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, Walter Kälin, together with the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, convened a workshop in Kampala in July 2006. The Ugandan government agreed to serve as host. The workshop brought together national and local government officials from north and south, military and police as well as representatives of IDP communities, NGOs, UN agencies and the donor community³.

Workshop participants found that the major constraints to the implementation of the policy included lack of coordination between national and local authorities, an ineffective system for providing resources to local governments, little communication with IDPs themselves and lack of political will. They expressed concern that the task of protecting IDPs had fallen to the military instead of the police and observed that insufficient attention had been devoted to resolving potential conflicts about land ownership, particularly when it comes to women and children.

The major recommendations emanating from the workshop focused on increasing security for IDPs and ensuring that key government ministries assume more active roles in carrying out the provisions of the policy. Participants called for expanding police presence in the north so that responsibility for civilian protection would rest with a trained police force instead of the military. They also urged more efficient financial mechanisms for channeling resources to local officials for implementing the policy as well as wider dissemination and training of officials in the policy's provisions. Participants recommended strengthening the judicial system (so that it would investigate violations of IDP rights and prosecute offenders); expanding IDPs' access to education and health facilities; and putting into place mechanisms to deal with disputes over land ownership.

¹Jan Egeland, *Briefing to journalists, 11 October 2006.*

<http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/EVOD-6UGJV8?OpenDocument>

²UN Doc E/CN.4/2004/77/Add.1, *Report of the Representative of the Secretary-General on internally displaced persons, Francis M. Deng, Profiles in displacement: Mission to Uganda, March 2004.*

³For *Workshop report on the Implementation of Uganda's National Policy for IDPs*, see: http://www.brookings.edu/fp/projects/idp/conferences/Uganda_Workshop2006_rpt.pdf

...To Implement National IDP Policy, According to Workshop Participants

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In closing the workshop, the Minister for Relief and Disaster Preparedness, Tarsis Kabwegyere, promised that “next year will find a different situation.” And since the meeting, there have been some positive developments. The government approved a 10 million dollar budget to support the police, strengthen local government and the judiciary, provide resettlement packages for IDPs and improve roads to access IDP camps. The Cessation of Hostilities agreement signed by the government and the LRA at the end of August has led to improved security, which has allowed hundreds of thousands of IDPs to return to their former homes and fields. The number of “night commuters” – the children and others who travel to larger towns at night to seek protection from LRA attacks and recruitment– has decreased dramatically.

But significant challenges remain. For a population that has lived without access to land, education or a working justice system for a generation, “post-conflict challenges are going to be heavier than the war itself,” observed Uganda’s Minister of State for Disaster Preparedness, Francis Musa Ecweru⁴. Conflicts over land will surely arise, as many IDPs do not have written titles to their land and the passage of time may have erased traditional demarcations. Building roads and schools, attracting teachers and medical professionals, establishing courts and law enforcement mechanisms – in short, making areas of return secure and sustainable – will be a monumental task, to say nothing of the national reconciliation effort that will be necessary to address the root causes of the conflict.

Moreover, the prospect of large-scale return should not be allowed to excuse the government from improving conditions in the camps today. Without a peace agreement in place between the LRA and the government, there are no assurances that violent conflict will not resume as it has in the past. Planning for returns does not justify continued neglect of the more than one million IDPs remaining in camps – particularly those without possibilities of imminent return, such as IDPs displaced not by the LRA but by Karamojong cattle rustlers.

Yet rather than focusing its efforts on expeditiously carrying out the provisions of its existing IDP policy, the government has moved to develop new plans and initiatives: the Joint Monitoring Committee (JMC) – comprised of government, donors, UN and selected civil society partners – which is charged with implementing a six-month Emergency Action Plan for Humanitarian Intervention; and the Peace, Recovery and Development Plan (PRDP), which will be directed toward the north over the next three years and require \$336 million dollars of donor support.

While these new plans if implemented should contribute to improving conditions for IDPs in northern Uganda and help the north recover from decades of civil conflict,

*resolute action is needed now on the part of the government
to protect the millions displaced.*

Ensuring that the government assists its internally displaced population and promotes safe and sustainable return will require the international community to step up its political engagement. The US Senate took an important step in this direction by passing Resolution 573 in September. It calls upon the government of Uganda to develop “the legal, political, and security infrastructure necessary to facilitate the freedom of movement of civilians to their homes, land, and areas within and around camps,” and calls upon the U.S. government and international community to provide diplomatic, technical and financial assistance to support Uganda’s peace process and transition out of conflict.

The United States and other donor governments, together with the UN, must follow through with such expressions of support; they should urge the Museveni government to implement its IDP policy as well as its subsequent humanitarian and development plans and do so in full consultation with the displaced. That this is in Uganda’s interest should be underscored. Governments that invest in helping their displaced populations are more likely to attract international funding – a sensitive issue in Uganda, where concerns about governance led to recent cuts in financial support from the United Kingdom and other governments.

As the Representative of the UN Secretary-General observed in Kampala, “International organizations, donors and civil society, all have a role to play” in reinforcing and assisting the fulfillment of Uganda’s national responsibilities to its internally displaced. Policies and plans must not stop at their adoption. The international community can play a key role in ensuring that they do not.

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⁴IRIN News, “UGANDA: Daunting post-conflict challenges in the north,” 31 August 2006.