

September 2013

UNHCR in Uganda: better than its reputation suggests

Will Jones

Mistrust and fear abound among Rwandan refugees in Uganda. The dearth of information available about cessation urgently needs to be addressed by UNHCR.

Nakivale Refugee Settlement on Uganda's border with Rwanda is one of Africa's oldest refugee camps. Rwandans first fled there following the 'Hutu Revolution' of 1957 and it now contains roughly 60,000 Rwandans, Congolese and Somalis along with many other nationalities (some of its residents like to say they live in the real Organisation of African Unity). This is not the choked ghetto usually evoked by media representations. Nakivale is a confederation of villages and contains enough farming and animal husbandry to feed itself and still produce surplus to export further afield. And though Nakivale is in the middle of nowhere, it is anything but isolated from cultural, social and economic activity; there are markets, several cinemas and plenty of smartphones in evidence taking advantage of the new mobile phone mast erected in the centre of the settlement.

Successive upheavals, pogroms and – of course – the genocide of 1994 and its aftermath have contributed to successive waves of Rwandans to Uganda. After the genocide and the coming to power of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, most of the old caseload of Rwandans returned and were gradually replaced by a new cadre of disgruntled military officers, human rights activists, journalists who had fallen foul of stringent new media regulations, and those who had simply fallen foul of the politics of land in post-genocide Rwanda, where the abrupt return of the old caseload created many vicious conflicts over who owned what, with the losers of those disputes often having to leave the country in a hurry.

Cessation

The current Rwandan government maintains that contemporary Rwanda is peaceful, that the refugees of Nakivale can return safely, and that the only Rwandans with anything to fear are perpetrators of the genocide who

must return to face the justice of the courts. It has made a sufficiently persuasive argument that the government of Uganda and UNHCR have agreed to invoke the Cessation Clause which states, broadly, that if the reasons why refugee status were originally granted no longer apply, a refugee "can no longer... continue to refuse to avail himself of the protection of the country of his nationality".

The Rwandans in the camps themselves have fiercely resisted the clause. They have argued that the Rwandan government remains, among other things, dictatorial and intolerant of views which diverge from its own. They have been trying for the best part of the last decade to convince international agencies, governments, NGOs and just about anyone else that they should not be forced to go home. They believe they now face forced deportation, arbitrary violence, extrajudicial assassination and worse.

In interviews with these Rwandans, I found a giant gap between what UNHCR staff had told me in Kampala and Mbarara (the regional capital) and what these refugees believed. UNHCR staff had patiently explained to me that the process had been delayed until capacity was in place to screen individuals to prevent mistakes, that safeguards were in place and that the government of Uganda had no interest in a politically embarrassing series of forced deportations. But Rwandans in the camp had no idea what UNHCR had done on their behalf, had secured for them, or was trying to do, despite their smartphones and internet access. Around the settlement you will encounter plenty of signs encouraging you to use a condom or a malaria net but you won't find much by way of public service announcements regarding the current advocacy or inter-governmental work of UNHCR. There is a UNHCR compound

behind barbed wire and concrete walls but even if you did get in, the staff who could give an informed answer are in Kampala or Mbarara. On the UNHCR website, information for the refugees in Nakivale is non-existent.

Consequences of silence

There are four problems with this. First, the information black hole left by UNHCR is fertile ground for rumour, misinformation and distortion of the facts. For example, it was repeated to me in my interviews that UNHCR had been bribed by the Government of Rwanda to delay the resettlement of at-risk refugees to safe countries or just not resettle them at all. The true part of this is that it does take longer to resettle a Rwandan refugee, because many states require that the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in Arusha (set up to prosecute the organisers of the genocide) clear anyone they might resettle as not on the list of suspects. This takes a while. But any Rwandan living in the camps trying to find a clear and authoritative source explaining why her Congolese neighbours are being resettled to the West when she is not will look in vain. Instead, this vacuum is filled with conspiracy forums, fear, suspicion and paranoia.

Second, this silence materially harms the interests of legitimate refugees who merit resettlement outside Uganda. The process, which includes identifying a case for resettlement, verifying the facts and assisting the individuals or family through the often idiosyncratic procedures of specific countries, is an extremely long and stressful procedure. Many of the problems with the process are not unique to Rwandans; repeatedly interviewing trauma victims about the details of their abuse that occurred more than a decade earlier and using any inconsistency as grounds for rejection has more than a few obvious problems. But in this instance, with no reason to trust UNHCR, Rwandan refugees often omit details from their interviews with UNHCR which they are subsequently willing to discuss in their interviews with putative host governments. This means that there are disparities between

the initial UNHCR resettlement interviews and the later interviews with governments. In consequence legitimate cases fall apart due to inconsistencies in refugees' stories.

Thirdly, this makes it harder for UNHCR itself. The ability of UNHCR to act effectively, and to help the people it wishes to help, is increased hugely when the communities it works with understand and trust it and are willing to work with it. Indeed, communication is a first step to moving beyond thinking of sides and instead thinking of a set of problems about which UNHCR and refugees can collaborate in finding solutions.

Finally, and most simply, if individuals feel deprived of the most basic information about their fate this feeds into a deep and pervasive sense of hopelessness, abandonment and marginalisation. Many articulate and intelligent individuals had written letters, petitions and testimonies to UNHCR, to Amnesty and to Human Rights Watch. Nobody ever replied to them. Often these are individuals hanging on with their fingernails to a sense of themselves as more than a human cargo. To keep people informed about their futures is about more than utility; it is about dignity and respect.

Simple steps to improve communications

Overcoming the caustic legacy of mistrust which now pervades Nakivale will be difficult but UNHCR could make some simple moves in the right direction.

Nakivale is online. People who have internet access print out articles for those that do not. News can and does move round the settlement quite quickly. UNHCR could overcome several of the huge information deficits in Nakivale very quickly if it supported a simple, clear and authoritative news platform in the languages that people in the camps speak, giving them basic information about what is going on; even if it was only in English or French, translation would get it round the camps pretty quickly, albeit sometimes unreliably. For example: How does cessation work? Who is exempted? If they believe they are exempted, how

September 2013

should they go about demonstrating that? What rights are they currently guaranteed in Uganda? Who should they talk to for what? If they believe they are going to be forcibly deported illegally, whom should they call?

Refugees themselves possess much communications infrastructure. There are radio stations in the camps set up and owned by refugees. Such outlets could and should be used to promote UNHCR's message inside the camps.

And finally, a lot of the necessary infrastructure already exists. Local partner organisations, such as the Refugee Law Project, have excellent relationships with many refugee communities and could be a simple and effective conduit for information using many of the resources they already possess.

Will Jones william.jones@qeh.ox.ac.uk is a research officer at the Refugee Studies Centre. www.rsc.ox.ac.uk