

B The Brookings-SAIS Project on Internal Displacement



Internally Displaced Persons in Uganda – a forgotten crisis

by Francis M Deng

Uganda is currently facing an internal displacement crisis of catastrophic proportions but one that is little known to the outside world. The most recent estimates suggest that approximately 1.3 million people are displaced inside the country. In August 2003, I travelled to Uganda to assess the situation and, through discussions with the government, UN agencies, NGOs and the donor community, to identify appropriate responses to the crisis.

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By far the largest displacement situation is in the northeastern part of the country. For the last few years, the 'Lord's Resistance Army' (LRA) has been engaged in a vicious and violent opposition to the government. The LRA has been targetting civilians and abducting children to act as child soldiers, porters or sex slaves. The conflict has recently increased in intensity following a government offensive in March 2002, code-named Operation Iron Fist, resulting in a deepening of the humanitarian crisis.

The millions of IDPs affected by this conflict are accommodated in a number of camps established by the government where they are in dire need of humanitarian assistance and protection. Food stocks are scarce, water supply is severely insufficient, sanitation is very poor and the provision of health and education services is minimal. Fear of the LRA stops people from farming, the economic mainstay of livelihoods in the area. The IDPs living in camps receive practically no physical protection. Normally, only a handful of government soldiers are assigned to protect a camp hosting approximately 20,000

IDPs. Insecurity along the roads has rendered many of the camps inaccessible for delivery of vital food and other humanitarian assistance, except with heavy military escort.¹

The phenomenon of the so-called night-commuters is a particularly tragic aspect of this conflict. In order to protect their children from abduction by the LRA, parents in the northern districts send their children to spend the nights in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader towns.

During the past seven months, an estimated 25,000 persons – most of them children – have commuted distances of up to 5 km each way between the towns and villages during the late afternoon hours and early morning hours of the next day. During my visit to Gulu town, I was profoundly saddened to witness the desperate situation of these children.

All actors – national and international – have so far been slow in responding to the crisis. A more concerted and consistent effort is needed to address the situation. In September, following my visit, I made this point when I briefed the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Working Group on my findings and emphasised the need for urgent response. It now seems that both the international community and the national authorities are beginning to respond to the crisis. Jan Egeland, the newly-appointed UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, travelled to the country and has devoted much of his time to galvanising the international response and strengthening the international presence in northern Uganda. A positive development at the national level has been the process of drafting a national policy on internal displacement (based on the Guiding

Principles on Internal Displacement). The policy is rich and comprehensive, and the Government expects it to be adopted by the Cabinet in the next few months. It is absolutely critical that every effort be made to adopt the policy and implement its provisions.

Donor countries have a key role to play – in terms of both financial and political support. The recently released 2004 Humanitarian Appeal for Uganda asks for \$128 million to address the most immediate humanitarian needs. Donor support will be absolutely essential to avoid a humanitarian disaster. At the political level, the international community can play an important role in finding a resolution to the conflict in the north. Given its regional dimension and links to the conflict in the Sudan, the anticipated achievement of peace in the Sudan might have a positive impact on the Ugandan situation.

The international community and the Government of Uganda jointly have the responsibility and the capacity to address this crisis. It is my hope that the encouraging moves recently taken towards a more comprehensive response, the development of a national policy and increased international presence in the North will provide a basis for an effective remedy to the situation.

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See the Global IDP Project's case study on Uganda: www.db.idpproject.org/Sites/idpSurvey.nsf/wCountries/Uganda

1. See FMR 18 pp25-27.