

# A refugee at my door: training for police in Uganda

by Pamela Reynell

Police officers are often the first point of contact for asylum seekers; frequently, however, they receive little or no training in refugee issues. In various countries in East Africa, organizations are attempting to address this problem.

Uganda currently hosts over 200,000 refugees. Recent conflicts in neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, as well as the long-standing civil war in southern Sudan, continue to generate a steady flow of displaced people. In many cases the first point of contact between an asylum seeker and the Ugandan government is a police officer. Under Ugandan law an asylum seeker must register with an 'entry point official', in the majority of cases either a police or immigration officer. In many cases asylum seekers enter Uganda with no documents or with false identity documents, often resulting in unnecessary convictions, custodial sentences and, ultimately, deportation.

A three-year socio-legal research programme, focusing on human rights and refugees, first identified the need to offer the Ugandan Police Force specialist training in the field of refugee law. This research programme, based at the Makerere Institute of Social Research in Kampala conducted a survey of 100 police officers to ascertain their level of knowledge and understanding of the complex issues involved. Based

on the results of the survey, the research programme conducted two intensive courses in refugee and human rights law at Makerere University which were attended by police officers. The response from those attending was overwhelmingly positive and culminated in a request by the Head of Training in the Police for a formalized training programme to be conducted in refugee law throughout the police ranks, with a view to institutionalizing the training at Makerere University. This led to the establishment of the Refugee Law Project, now part of the University's Faculty of Law.

## The training course

The Refugee Law Project's first two-week intensive course in February 2000 involved 41 officers from 15 refugee-hosting districts. The course was residential, held at the Kibuli Police Training School in Kampala. Because of the many facets of the refugee experience, and in order to represent the multidisciplinary nature of the field, the scope of the subjects addressed was as broad as possible within the specific needs of the Police Force. The facilitators included academics, judiciary and government officials, and professionals active in the field. UNHCR and the Office of the Prime Minister also participated. In the evenings, participants heard first-hand accounts by Ugandan returnees and refugees currently living in Uganda.

In addition to covering the legal frameworks, procedures and problems faced by asylum seekers, the teaching was specifically designed to encourage participation by the police officers. The group contributed their own experiences



*Sudanese refugees at transit centre, Uganda*

UNHCR/IM Gardisliker

in dealing with refugees and developed a series of recommendations, consolidated into a paper entitled 'A refugee at my door: vetting and categorizing procedures'. Participants were divided into four groups, according to geographical location, and all identified common difficulties. Lack of police resources and appropriate training, staffing levels in general, and logistical and communications equipment are hampering the execution of their duties. As far as asylum seekers are concerned, the uncertainty faced during the period between arrival and status determination is exacerbated by the lack of formal reception centres and therefore limited access to food, shelter, emergency medical treatment and interpreters. Finally, there was concern over inadequate preparedness, and the lack of coordination and pooling of resources between the various government departments, implementing agencies and NGOs.

All participants received extensive reading materials and sat an exam at the end of the course.

Comments received from individual participants and the group as a whole revealed that the course made a significant impression in terms of raising awareness of the human rights dimension of the refugee experience. In addition to furnishing the participants with the legal knowledge and printed matter pertaining to asylum seekers, it is hoped that the establishment of lines of communication, and to some extent personal relationships, with police officers active in refugee-hosting areas will enable the Refugee Law Project to further promote refugee rights in Uganda. At the same time, 'A refugee at my door: vetting and categorizing procedures' identified the key difficulties faced by asylum seekers and the authorities at entry points, providing a useful insight into what is required to improve the fluidity of procedure, and a further basis for dialogue between the Refugee Law Project and the Government of Uganda.

### Recommendations and the way forward

Aside from obvious recommendations to directly overcome the above-mentioned difficulties identified in the report (ie greater access to funding and resources), a number of other recommendations were put forward. These included the training or sensitization not only of police officers and other government

agents but also of local authorities such as local councillors and, ideally, refugee hosting communities in general. This, it was suggested, could be achieved through printed materials and perhaps even radio broadcasts. (Materials should be produced in different languages, particularly in the languages of the border areas, and made available to all people in both host and refugee-producing countries.) It was further recommended that all entry point police posts include a dedicated refugee desk, staffed by a police officer trained in refugee law. In addition, the concept of a 'refugee management team', to consist of senior police, immigration, district internal security, military intelligence and NGO staff, to be chaired by the Resident District Commissioner, was proposed. To this end, it was recommended that all interested parties be encouraged to attend workshops on refugee law and rights, preferably to be held in the refugee-hosting districts.

Judging from the participants' feedback, it appears that much can be done to integrate the different government bodies involved with refugees at district level. At present there seems to be only minimal interaction between police,

immigration, NGOs and the Resident District Commissioners. The Refugee Law Project is currently studying the possibility of carrying out district-level courses or workshops with a view to establishing greater communication between these players. In terms of creating a pool of officials aware of refugee rights at the district level, as well as the legal and social problems faced by refugees, the Refugee Law Project believes that the impact of training would be substantially increased if each course included participants from a variety of professional backgrounds and government departments. An added benefit is that district-level courses would enable the Refugee Law Project to establish a far clearer picture of the problems faced not only by refugees but also by the government's representatives whose job it is to work with them.

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## Refugee Consortium Kenya

The Refugee Consortium Kenya (RCK) was set up in 1998 and cooperates with other local and international NGOs focusing on refugee issues in Kenya and the region.

The most significant problem faced in refugee assistance in Kenya is the lack of a clear refugee law governing procedures and policies relating to this group of people. This lack of a legal framework in which refugee issues can be addressed effectively means that refugees continue to be caught in a policy vacuum. It is not even clear who is responsible for refugees: the government, UNHCR or humanitarian/rights organizations. Refugees are unable to lay claim to any rights in Kenya under the current legal regime and there is therefore no effective redress for denial of rights of refugees.

At present, there is a training programme for law enforcement agents on domestic violence, coordinated by the Federation of Women's Lawyers (FIDA), but no training as yet on refugee law. Given the success that FIDA has had with its programme for the police, RCK is exploring the possibility of running a joint programme on refugee and international law for the police, focusing on human rights law and the international instruments that govern refugee protection. The course is intended for inclusion in the police college curriculum to improve graduating police officers' knowledge and awareness of refugee situations and the issues facing them. Future plans include the establishment of a refugee desk in police stations in key communities with high refugee populations in order a) to ensure that refugee issues and concerns receive due attention and b) to create more refugee-friendly police stations.

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