



## Uganda's Urban IDPs Risk Being Left Out Of Government's Return Plans

Expectations for peace are high in northern Uganda with positive news coming out of the Juba peace talks and thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) have already left the protected camps for their homes. But many IDPs wishing to go home could slip through the cracks in the government's return and intervention policies because they have settled in towns and cities.

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), a half million people in the north have returned to their homes—mainly in the Lango and Teso regions—and at least another 1.2 million people remain in rural IDP camps, while an unknown number are still in Uganda's urban centres, and quite possibly will be unable to return without assistance.

The conflict in the north created one of the biggest humanitarian situations in the world and at least two million Ugandans were forcefully displaced at its peak. Over the years, a steady stream of people have fled to urban centres in northern Uganda, as well as to more distant places like Masindi, Kampala, Jinja and Entebbe rather than live in notoriously unsafe and inhumane IDP camps in their home areas.

The exclusion of urban IDPs from government and NGO assistance programmes stems from their low visibility. They scatter throughout urban areas and often blend into slums. Officials may conclude that they have integrated into the local communities and are no longer need help. Contrary to what one may think, urban IDPs often enjoy a lower standard of basic services such as healthcare and schooling than their counterparts in the camps since they are seldom targeted by humanitarian campaigns.

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Hon. Musa Ecweru, Minister of State for Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees, meets quarry workers at 'Acholi Quarters' IDP site in Kampala

## Relief Minister Tours 'Acholi Quarters' IDP Site

The Ugandan Minister of Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees, Musa Ecweru, toured the IDP site nicknamed 'Acholi Quarters' in Kireka-Banda on the eastern edge of Kampala on February 29 and met with local leaders—an experience he later referred to as “eye-opening”. He had vowed to visit the site after he attended an RLP-hosted seminar on urban IDPs at Makerere University in January.

'Acholi Quarters' is one of the most well known IDP sites in Kampala and gets its name from its predominately Acholi population, who have been steadily migrating to this place since conflict and forced displacement began in northern Uganda in the mid 1980s. Many claim they were given this land on a hillside by the *Kabaka* of Buganda. Today, this IDP site is seen as a slum.

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‘Acholi Quarters’ IDP site in Kireka-Banda, Kampala

**‘Urban IDPs’ cont’d from page 1**

To some, urban IDPs are sometimes grouped with ‘economic’ migrants—those that have willingly left their homes in hopes of better opportunities in the cities. In fact, they have taken refuge in towns and cities for a variety of reasons, including: lack of security in the camps, reluctance to be dependant of food rations, inability to establish new livelihoods or a wish to reunite with family members.

The main obstacle to assisting IDPs who live outside protected camps is that they are not officially registered in the ordinary fashion. Rural IDPs are often issued food-ration cards which indicate their residence in IDP camps. Urban IDPs have no such documents to signify their displacement.

Regardless of where they live, IDPs are entitled to the same legal rights. In 2004, Uganda became one of the first countries in the world to establish a national policy for IDPs in line with the United Nation’s Guiding Principles on International Displacement.

The Ugandan Government further proposed a Peace, Recovery and Development Plan (PRDP) for rebuilding northern Uganda, which was eventually launched in late 2007.

Both the IDP policy and the PRDP guarantee a number of protections to IDPs, including freedom of movement, throughout all phases of displacement.

However, both the national IDP policy and PRDP were primarily geared towards rural IDPs by their drafters. The PRDP clearly states that the objective of its return programme is “to facilitate

the voluntary return of IDPs *from camps* to their places of origin and/or any other location of their preference as peace returns.”

Many IDPs in long-established sites around Kampala and Jinja that the Refugee Law Project has researched have expressed desires to return to the north. Their need for assistance, however, is substantial, especially for payment of transportation costs and other expenses.

The challenges that have come up in distinguishing urban IDPs from other urban migrants appear to have resulted in their exclusion from formal support. In practice, IDPs have been defined as those people who were displaced into rural IDP camps, a definition that undermines the protection and assistance they all need.

**Recommendations on Urban IDPs**

**To the Government:**

- Make explicit the inclusion of urban IDPs in Uganda’s related polices and interventions
- Address the gap between policy and practice regarding urban IDPs
- Involve urban IDP community groups in developing assistance and return or resettlement programmes

**To Humanitarian Agencies:**

- Conduct IDP profiling in urban areas such as Kampala, Jinja and Entebbe in addition to urban centres in northern Uganda to assess numbers, living conditions and aspirations
- Introduce the issues of urban IDPs to all clusters
- Create assistance programmes that are sensitive to the relationship between ‘hosts’ and IDPs in urban areas





An alcohol distillery in the Mpumudde IDP site near Jinja

### 'Acholi Quarters' cont'd from page 1

One of the main livelihoods found in 'Acholi Quarters' is selling crushed rock from a local quarry. Women and children sit in the sun throughout the day pulverizing rock with small hammers. A jerry can full of crushed rock can expect to bring in 100 Uganda Shillings.

Ecweru, upon meeting some of the women and children working in the quarry that day, pulled a 50,000-Shilling note from his pocket and presented it to a woman, requesting that they

divide the money as a group and rest for the day.

Later, Ecweru addressed an assembly of IDPs and media that had gathered in an open area in 'Acholi Quarters'.

"We all know that home is a lot better than this place," Ecweru said to the crowd of mainly women and small children.

"You can be assured that I will be your voice in the government," he said.

Ecweru further promised 50 bags of maize flour for the residents and advised representatives from 'Acholi Quarters', as well as those that had come from IDP sites in Naguru, Luzira and Jinja, to organize teams of elders to travel to northern Uganda and begin planning for return.

Ecweru explained in interviews with the media that resettlement to northern Uganda would be strictly voluntary and he maintained that the government would facilitate the urban IDPs in their move.

Since the minister's visit, IDP representatives around Kampala have been swift to organize themselves, confirming a collective identity of displacement in IDP sites in and around Kampala. Many young people born in the IDP sites that the Refugee Law Project has spoken with have even expressed a desire to return to the homeland they have never known.

## Refugee Law Project Takes On Urban IDP Research

The low visibility of urban IDPs in Uganda has not only made them vulnerable to neglect by government and humanitarian intervention efforts, but it has also made urban IDPs as a group difficult to research.

Hilde Refstie, a research associate with the Refugee Law Project, recounts walking the streets of Kampala talking randomly with people she suspected of being IDPs from northern Uganda.

"We also started interviewing some organizations and officials. When it came to identifying urban IDPs, we did not get much help," Refstie said. "Most of the organizations and officials we interviewed did not know much about this group, neither

could they refer to any studies or profiling on urban IDPs."

The Refugee Law Project initially put out a working paper in 2005 titled, *'A Drop in the Ocean': Assistance and Protection for Forced Migrants in Kampala*, which examined the social, economic and political situation of urban refugees in Kampala. But research specifically into urban IDPs did not come until later.

"Urban displacement is something that we've been keenly aware of for a long time," said Moses Chrispus Okello, head of research and advocacy at the Refugee Law Project.

While carrying out its initial research, the



A boy plays in the Mpumudde IDP site near Jinja

### 'Refugee Law Project' cont'd from page 3

Refugee Law Project was contacted in September 2007 by representatives from IDP settlements in Jinja and Kampala. In their letters they raised concerns about how urban IDPs fit into the government's IDP framework.

"When faced with the dire need to go back home to the districts from which we came, we decided to advocate for our rights as forgotten IDPs," the letter states. "In order to realise our goals, we organised ourselves into committees which regularly visited areas inhabited by war-affected people."

In late 2007, to address the issue, the Refugee Law Project released the briefing

paper *'What About Us?' The Exclusion of Urban IDPs from Uganda's IDP Related Policies and Interventions*. The paper spurred substantial interest in the plight of urban IDPs from the media and different agencies.

In January, the briefing paper was presented at a seminar at Makerere University that included speakers such as Minister of Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees Musa Ewero, Deputy Representative for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Bayisa Wakwaya, a representative of urban IDPs Nelson Odong and Refugee Law Project Director Dr Chris Dolan.

Established in 1999 as an autonomous national project under Faculty of Law of Makerere University in Uganda, the **Refugee Law Project** (RLP) has since been a critical and independent voice on the rights of displaced people. RLP consists of three departments: legal aid, education and training, and research and advocacy.

To speak about matters relating to urban IDPs, contact Refugee Law Project Director **Dr Chris Dolan**

[dir@refugeelawproject.org](mailto:dir@refugeelawproject.org)

For research and advocacy, contact Head of Research and Advocacy **Moses Chrispus Okello**

[research@refugeelawproject.org](mailto:research@refugeelawproject.org)

For education and training, contact Senior Education and Training Officer **Winifred Agabo**

[training@refugeelawproject.org](mailto:training@refugeelawproject.org)

For legal matters, contact Senior Legal Officer **Salima Namusobya**

[lac@refugeelawproject.org](mailto:lac@refugeelawproject.org)

Plot 9 Perryman Gardens, P.O. Box 33903, Old Kampala, Uganda, +256 0 414 343 556