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Uganda: government fails to protect IDPs in the north, as international presence remains inadequate

The ongoing peace talks between the government and the rebel group, Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), have revived cautious hopes that the plight of the internally displaced people (IDPs) in northern Uganda may finally be eased. While the official number of IDPs has decreased slightly from 1.6 million in June 2004 to around 1.4 million in February 2005, the real number could be more than 2 million as hundreds of thousands of IDPs live with relatives or in camps not yet fully recognised by the government. IDPs living outside official camps have not been registered and do not benefit from UN food assistance.

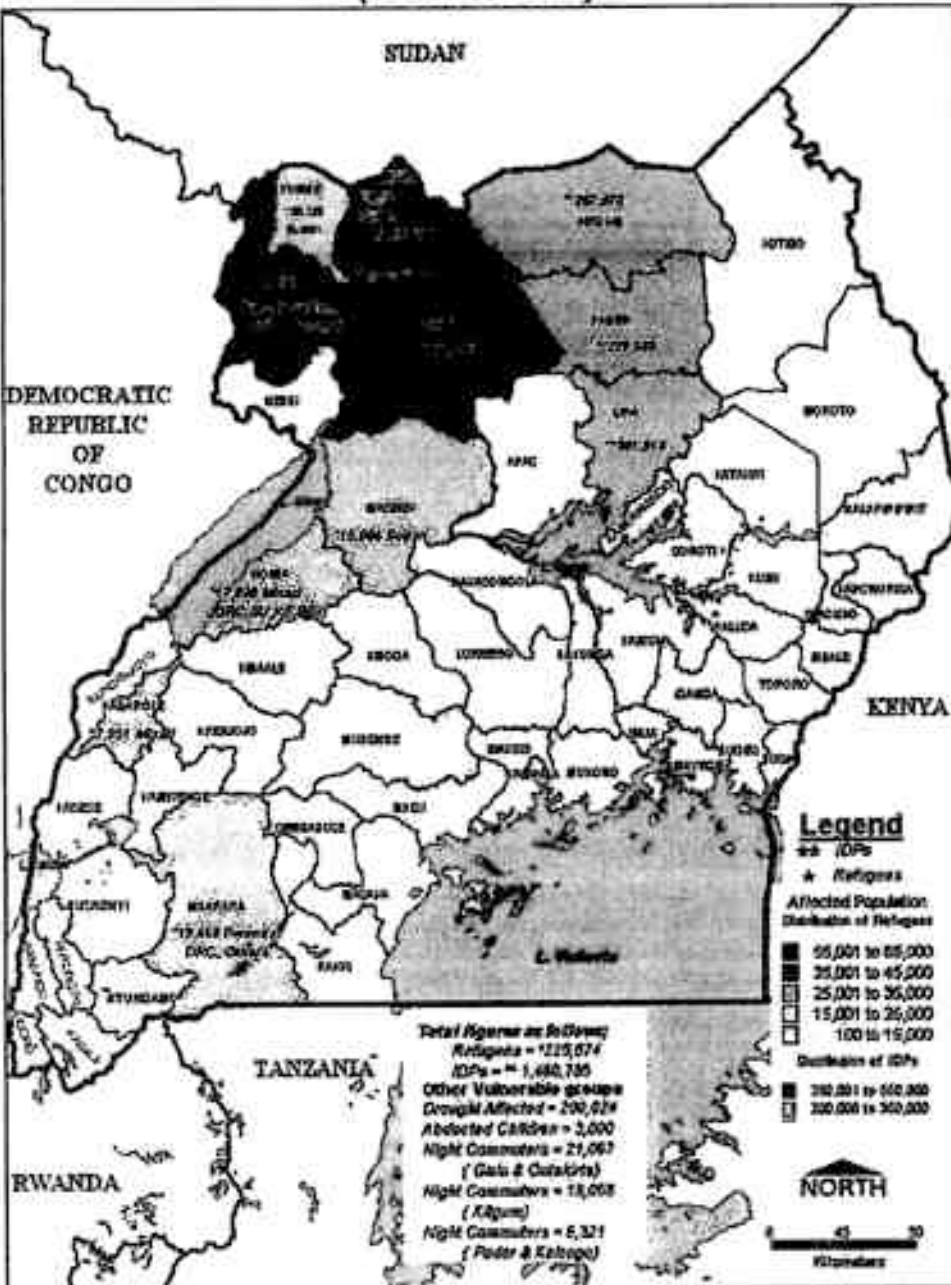
The intensity and frequency of LRA attacks have reduced considerably in the second half of 2004 and some NGOs reach far-away camps without armed escort. Nonetheless, insecurity prevails and many humanitarian organisations prefer to access the camps protected by the Ugandan army. Living conditions in the camps are appalling, with a widespread lack of infrastructure and basic services, including schools, health care, and water and sanitation facilities. IDPs living in unrecognised camps have not received any food assistance. Abductions, killings and looting by the LRA continue to impede any large-scale return movements.

Increased military and international political pressure has led to a weakening of the LRA and seems to have removed whatever it might have had of a political agenda. This appears to have resulted in the LRA oscillating between the willingness to engage in peace talks and a violent struggle for mere survival. To fill their ranks, the LRA has resorted to the abduction of children. An estimated 20,000 children have been abducted by the rebels during the 19-year conflict, nearly half of them reportedly in the two years up to May 2004. Tens of thousands of children, so-called night commuters, come into some of the major towns every night to sleep on the streets or in public buildings for fear of being abducted or killed.

The visit to Uganda of the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, Jan Egeland at the end of 2003 and a number of follow-up visits by the strengthened UN Inter-Agency Internal Displacement Division, which made Uganda one of its priority countries in 2004, were positive steps taken by the UN increasing international focus on the critical IDP situation in northern Uganda. Although this has led to strengthened UN coordination mechanisms and operational capacity, the international presence in northern Uganda continued to be far from adequate considering the scale of the crisis.

The record of failed peace talks between the warring parties is long and there is reason to be cautious about their intentions to end the conflict peacefully and create the conditions for the effective protection and subsequent return movements. The dilemma of how to respond to the urgent needs of assistance and protection of almost two million largely inaccessible IDPs in northern Uganda may therefore still confront the humanitarian community in the near future.

**Affected Populations by District
Refugees and Internally Displaced
(October 2004)**



The boundaries and names shown on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Prepared by: CCRA Regional Support Office - CEA, Nairobi

Source: OCHA, October 2004

Background and main causes of displacement

The conflict in Acholiland in northern Uganda has dragged on for 19 years and caused the internal displacement of as many as two million people, out of whom around 1.4 million receive food assistance from the UN (OCHA, 11 November, 2004, p.6, 17 February 2005). The majority of the displaced have fled within Kitgum, Pader and Gulu districts in the north, where more than 90 per cent of the population live in overcrowded camps or urban centres. The conflict, which was initially limited to these three districts, spread further east in 2003 causing the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. A relative calm in these eastern districts in the second half of 2004 has encouraged some return movements, particularly in the Teso sub-region, where IDPs move progressively closer to home. Camp populations range from 60,000 to fewer than 2,000 in the smallest sites, which include churches, public buildings and hospitals. An unspecified number of displaced are staying with relatives and in camps which are in the process of being recognised by the government and included in the official IDP figures (CSOPNU, 10 December 2004, p.63; OCHA, 15 June 2004; USAID-FEWS, 24 May 2004; USAID, 5 May 2004; OPM, 11 November 2003).

The conflict escalated in the mid-1990s when the LRA started to receive support from the Sudanese government in retaliation for the Ugandan government's support for the Sudanese rebel group, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM).

As a response to the increased rebel activities, the government embarked on a policy of forcing the population in some of the northern districts into camps to separate them from the rebels. This forced displacement has been an important factor in the division of the Acholi community. Most of the rebels and their victims are Acholis, who since the colonial period have had a long antagonistic relationship with the southern-based elites which dominated the country before independence in 1962. When the government started forcing people into camps in the mid-1990s, the rebels, suspecting the inhabitants of tacitly supporting the government, reacted with attacks on these camps in an apparent attempt to dismantle them and force people back to their scattered homesteads.

The LRA originated mainly from members of the previous national army, the Uganda National Liberation Army, which was defeated by Museveni's National Resistance Army in 1988. The majority of the defeated troops were Acholis from the northern districts of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader (LIU, 30 October 2003, p.33).

With the consent of the Sudanese government and in the framework of the Sudanese peace agreement, the Ugandan army has launched several large-scale military offensives against the LRA's rear bases in southern Sudan since March 2002. The deployment of a large part of the army in pursuit of the LRA in Sudan left the Acholi population in camps without adequate protection against the rebels (OCHA, 15 June 2004; USAID, 5 May 2004; IRIN, 5 April 2002). This had disastrous consequences: in response to the increased military pressure in Sudan, LRA forces returned to Uganda and initi-

ated a spate of attacks and massacres in IDP camps (OCHA, 31 May 2004; USAID, 5 May 2004). Although the intensity and frequency of the attacks has fallen considerably in the second half of 2004, the rebels are as of February 2005 still engaged in atrocities and attacks on the IDPs, and the security situation is unpredictable in most of the affected districts (OCHA, 17 February 2005; NRC, 12 February 2005).

Current peace efforts

Various recent ceasefires and the ongoing peace efforts supported by the governments of Britain, the Netherlands and Norway, must be seen in the light of previous half-hearted attempts by the Ugandan government – mostly under international pressure – to open dialogue with the LRA. The Ugandan government has in the past responded ambiguously to the possibilities of a peaceful solution to the conflict and in most cases chosen to confront the problem in the north by military means, often at the expense of humanitarian protection (CSOPNU, 10 December 2004, p.101). The rebels, on the other hand, have opted for a seemingly blind and extremely brutal struggle which has made it extremely difficult to identify any counterparts for peace talks, also considering that the Ugandan government has filed a case against the LRA with the International Criminal Court.

The endemic violence and repeated failed attempts to engage in peace talks have caused a deep-seated mutual mistrust between the parties who are now again trying to establish some kind of dialogue. Despite some set-backs and continued violence – mostly outside the

recently-established ceasefire zones – the current peace process initiated in 2004 and mediated by a former Ugandan minister has reportedly remained on track. The second half of 2004 also saw an increased number of LRA defections which may be the result of the Amnesty Act of January 2000, as well as increased military pressure, both from government forces and the SPLM in southern Sudan (IRIN, 31 January 2005, 18 August 2004; CSO, 16 June 2004, ICG, 14 April 2004, p. 25; HURIPED, 30 October 2003, p.121, pp.144-145).

LRA attacks fewer and weaker, but protection concerns remain

Despite the relative improvement of the security situation, there are as of February 2005 still reports of killings and abductions of IDPs and other serious human rights abuses in and around the camps. The intensity and frequency of the violations vary greatly between and even within the districts. There were, for example, hardly any attacks or abductions in Gulu district in the last two months of 2004 and the beginning of 2005. Further east, in Lira, there were several attacks by LRA rebels which included abductions of IDPs, mainly to carry looted food, as well as random killings in January 2005. In the same month the rebels also attacked an IDP camp in Kitgum, but were repelled by the Ugandan army. The same district also saw violent clashes between the Ugandan army and the rebels, coinciding with the peace-mediators' attempts to open a dialogue between the warring parties (OCHA, 29 December 2004, 17 February 2005). In the most vicious attack in nine years, more than 300 people were massacred in Barlonya camp in Lira

district in February 2004, prompting massive displacement. A steady stream of smaller attacks and massacres followed, mainly in Pader, Kitgum and Gulu districts (CSO, 16 June 2004, OCHA, 1 March 2004; BBC, 22 February 2004). Other human rights violations, not necessarily inflicted by the rebels, are widespread. Insufficient food distribution leads women to prostitute themselves for money or food. Ugandan army soldiers are frequently reported as perpetrators of rape, torture and illegal detention, without redress for the victims. Extreme poverty causes early marriages or unwanted sexual relations and child prostitution, and recruitment of child soldiers to the ranks of the national army is widespread (CSOPNU, 10 December 2004; RI, 14 December 2004; ARLPI/Justice & Peace, July 2001, p.13).

Almost 90 per cent of the LRA's soldiers reportedly consist of abducted children, many of whom have been converted in the most brutal ways into extremely violent fighters. The rebels force abducted children to kill and watch beatings, rape and the slaughtering of friends and relatives. Disobedience is likely to result in the children falling victim to the same fate. Since the beginning of the conflict in the 1980s, an estimated 20,000 children have been abducted, around 12,000 of them reportedly taken between June 2002 and May 2004. However, most of the abductees are either released or escape and estimates of remaining LRA rebels vary from some hundreds up to several thousands as of February 2005 (NRC, 16 February 2005, E-mail; OCHA, telephone conversation, 17 February; UNICEF, 23 December 2004; World Vision, 25 September 2004, p.30;

Tearfund, 17 June 2004; HRW, 15 July 2003, p.21).

The relative lull in LRA attacks is also reflected in a considerable decrease in the number of so-called night commuters – down from around 40,000 in Gulu and Kitgum in May 2004 to an estimated 25,000 in January 2005 (OCHA, 17 February 2005). These are mostly children who regularly move from insecure areas into safer town centres to spend the night on verandas and the streets or in public buildings. Sexual and gender-based violence against girls and women by gangs of young men are wide-spread, particularly in Kitgum, where the local authorities have failed to respond adequately to their protection needs (Women's Commission, 1 February 2005; OCHA, 11 November, 2004, p.1, 15 June 2004, p.6).

Appalling humanitarian conditions

Despite some improvements in the humanitarian response throughout 2004, a majority of the camps do not receive adequate provision, with devastating humanitarian consequences for the IDPs. Most of them are completely dependent on handouts from the World Food Programme (WFP) for their very survival. This dependency is the result of years of displacements and the extremely volatile security situation which have severely impeded access to farmland for the majority of the IDPs and therefore significantly reduced food security in the affected areas. WFP food rations only cover about 75 per cent of the recommended daily food intake and there are accounts of IDP households in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader districts with deficits of between 10 and 19 per cent of the mini-

imum Recommended Daily Allowance (2,100 kilocalories/person/day). In some camps in Lira malnutrition has affected between 9 and 15 per cent of the children (FEWS, 17 June 2004, 8 January 2005; OCHA, 29 December 2004).

The health system in most of the rural camps has collapsed, health workers have moved to safer areas, and expectant mothers are not attended adequately. Diseases like cholera, malaria, diarrhoea and acute respiratory infections proliferate (OCHA, 29 December 2004, 31 March 2004; AAH, 30 October 2003, p. 6). Lack of water and sanitation facilities in the camps is another major cause of concern. In IDP camps in Gulu, there is an average of 2,700 persons per water point, and 85 per cent of the displaced have no access to public latrines (CRS, 31 January 2004). The congestion in the camps combined with an acute shortage of latrines increases the risk of faecal contamination of ground water and ensuing cholera outbreaks (OCHA, 31 March 2004; UHRC, 31 March 2004).

Difficulties in introducing free primary education in Uganda under the Universal Primary Education policy (UPE) have been compounded by the problems of displacement. Firstly school infrastructures were generally not designed to cope with the influx of displaced pupils. Secondly, because of the displacements of teachers and students, funds allocated under the UPE scheme do not reach approved destinations. The result is that an estimated 23 per cent of school-age children are not attending school in the IDP affected districts. Moreover there is widespread lack of teaching materials and an acute shortage of teachers. This is why the pupil-to-classroom ratio rose to as

much as 234:1 in some schools (OCHA, 15 June 2004, 19 November 2003; OPM, 11 November 2003).

The almost complete break-down of social structures and social support systems has been accompanied by the collapse of basic public services, access to food and livelihood opportunities. Despair, apathy, feelings of dependency and uselessness, lack of privacy and humiliations have followed displacement; crime and abuse of alcohol and drugs erode coping mechanisms (RLP, 28 February 2004, pp.26-27; AAH, 1 November 2003).

Humanitarian access

Access to the camps has improved in most districts in the second half of 2004 and beginning of 2005, though with local variations. In Teso sub-region, for example, no escort has been required since April 2004. In Gulu, Kitgum, Pader, Lira and Apac districts, however, the UN requires armed escorts to access all the camps. Despite the ongoing peace-efforts and the reduction in number of LRA attacks, reports of security incidents continued trickling in as of February 2005 (OCHA, 2, 17 February 2005). UNICEF has provided some armoured vehicles which were key in the early efforts by the peace mediators to contact the LRA. WFP offers places in their heavily-armed convoys to non-governmental organisations. However, this offer is not always accepted. Some organisations refuse to go with armed escorts as a matter of principle; others argue that they would not be able to carry out their activities in the midst of hectic food distributions (OCHA, 29 December 2004, p.5, 11 November 2004, p.7, 31 May 2004).

National response

On a positive note, the government decided in August 2004 to remove the distinction between "official" camps and "unofficial" sites that were set up spontaneously without government approval. The vast majority of unofficial camps have not had access to humanitarian assistance, and in case of attack, the army and district authorities have ignored their responsibility to protect them. With this change of policy, the Ugandan army will have to provide security for around 200,000 more IDPs; and WFP is expected to include these IDPs on its list of beneficiaries. The government has also formally approved a national IDP policy which outlines areas of responsibilities and response guidelines to national and international actors through all the phases of displacement. However, the financial implications of the policy and how the funding requirements would be covered remained unclear as of February 2005. Also, government funding does not allow war-affected districts to redirect resources from development to relief operations. Some districts have therefore had to return large sums to the Treasury in Kampala which could otherwise have been spent on the IDPs (CSOPNU, 10 December, p.63; OCHA, 3 September; E-mail, 31 August 2004).

Return prospects and international response

The UN – with the exception of the World Food Programme – has been widely criticised for not addressing the crisis adequately. However, the visit to Uganda of the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, Jan Egeland at the end of 2003

and a number of follow-up visits by the strengthened UN Inter-Agency Internal Displacement Division, which made Uganda one of its priority countries in 2004, were positive steps taken by the UN that increased international focus on the critical IDP situation in northern Uganda. These efforts have resulted in strengthened UN coordination mechanisms and operational capacity. UNOCHA, UNICEF, FAO, WHO and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights have all deployed staff to the north, but their presence continued to be far from adequate considering the scale of the crisis. Moreover, UNHCR, one of the UN agencies with a strong protection expertise, has remained largely inactive on issues of internal displacement. On the political side, the UN, in particular the Security Council, has failed to condemn the government's policy of almost solely focusing on military means to end the conflict and its failure to protect and assist IDPs.

The record of failed peace talks between the warring parties is long and there is reason to be cautious about their intentions to end the conflict peacefully and create the conditions for the effective protection and subsequent return movements. The dilemma of how to respond to the urgent needs of assistance and protection of almost two million displaced people who are exposed to frequent and extremely violent attacks by the rebels in northern Uganda may therefore still confront the humanitarian community in the near future.

Note: This is a summary of the Global IDP Project's country profile of the situation of internal displacement in Uganda. The full country profile is available online [here](#).

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Note: All documents used in this profile summary are directly accessible on the Uganda List of Sources page of our website.

About the Global IDP Project

The Global IDP Project, established by the Norwegian Refugee Council in 1996, is the leading international body monitoring internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Geneva-based Project contributes to protecting and assisting the 25 million people around the globe, who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Global IDP Project runs an online database providing comprehensive and frequently updated information and analysis on internal displacement in over 50 countries.

It also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In addition, the Project actively advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

For more information, visit the Global IDP Project website and the database at www.idpproject.org.

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