Uganda: Mass displacement to unprotected camps

Described by a senior UN official as the “world’s biggest neglected humanitarian crisis”, the conflict in northern Uganda has now dragged on for more than 17 years. The number of internally displaced people (IDPs) has more than doubled from about 650,000 in July 2002 to 1.4 million as of December 2003. The escalation of the conflict since June 2003 meant hundreds of thousands of people have poured into camps after fleeing direct attacks by the rebel Lord’s Resistance Army and regular fighting between the warring parties.

There is little evident will on either side to end the conflict peacefully. The government appears to be encouraged in its strategy to pursue a military solution by considerable assistance from the United States, provided in exchange for Ugandese support for the fight against international terrorism. It is widely believed that the government army is unable or – worse – unwilling to protect the IDP camps, which are frequently attacked by the LRA. Because of the insecurity, few humanitarian actors assist the heavily congested camps where conditions are appalling with a widespread breakdown of schools, health care, and water and sanitation facilities.

In order to bring an end to this humanitarian catastrophe and the suffering of the victims of this bloody conflict, the country’s major donors should use their influence to urge the Ugandan government to effectively protect IDP camps against rebel attacks. Also, existing regional mechanisms under the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) should be used to encourage the government to fulfil its obligation to protect its citizens.
Background and main causes of displacements

The majority of the reported 1.4 million displaced people are concentrated in about 180 sites throughout nine northern and eastern districts (OPM, 11 November 2003; UN OCHA, 30 November 2003). The largest camps are located in Gulu. Camp populations generally range from more than 50,000 to less than 2,000 in the smallest sites, which include churches, public buildings, and hospitals. The average camp population is 12,000. An unspecified number of displaced is hosted by relatives.

It is widely recognised that the violence perpetrated by the rebel group, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) is the main trigger for displacements in northern Uganda. The LRA is headed by members of the previous national army that was defeated by the Museveni-led National Resistance Army in 1988. The majority of these troops were Acholi people who live in the northern districts of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader. There is a long history of antagonism, dating back to colonial rule, between the Acholis and the southern-based elites who dominated the country before independence in 1962, and again since President Museveni’s accession to power in 1986 (LIU, 30 October 2003, p 33).

Although the LRA’s wider political agenda is unclear, its immediate objectives seem to be the overthrow of the current government and the dismantling of the IDP camps. The LRA appears to view the people in these camps as tacitly supporting the current government. Moreover, the camps make it more difficult for them to successfully hide from government forces in a deserted countryside. Therefore, by forcing people out of the camps and back to their homesteads, the rebels would find themselves better protected and have easier access to logistical support.

The LRA reportedly consists of more than 80 per cent abducted children, many of whom have been converted in the most brutal ways to become 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 1986, a total of more than 20,000 children have been abducted. Some 4,500 were reportedly fighting for the LRA as of July 2003 (HRW, 15 July 2003, p 21).

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 to the Sudanese rebel group, Sudan’s People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM). The rebels forced about three-quarters of the population to flee their homes in the Gulu and Kitgum/Pader districts of the north. A relative calm in the area during 1999 and part of 2000 allowed for some return movements, but escalated LRA attacks since the beginning of 2000 have forced an increasing number of people to seek refuge in IDP camps, or in the towns of Gulu and Kitgum. After a period of some stability, the LRA intensified its raids during the first months of 2002.

In March 2002, with the consent of the Sudanese government, the Ugandan army launched a large-scale military offensive called “Operation Iron Fist” against the LRA’s rear bases in southern
Sudan (IRIN, 5 April 2002). This huge military operation aggravated an already complex conflict. The deployment of a large part of army troops in pursuit of the LRA in Sudan left the Acholi displaced population without adequate protection against the rebels. This lack of physical protection is directly reflected in the number of recently abducted children who reached more than 8,000 only between June 2002 and July 2003 (HRW, 15 July 2003). To avoid direct confrontation with the army, the LRA returned to northern Uganda from their rear bases in southern Sudan, split into smaller groups and initiated some of the worst atrocities in the history of the war. The suffering inflicted by the rebels is further exacerbated by it being committed by the victims’ own ethnic group and, in many cases, their own relatives.

In spite of various half-hearted attempts, mostly under international pressure, to open dialogue with the LRA for a negotiated peace, the Ugandan government has chosen to confront the problem in the north by military means. Any attempt at a peace process is further complicated by an apparent lack of will on the part of the rebels to engage in serious talks, as well as mutual mistrust on both sides (HURIPEC, 30 October 2003, p. 121; IRIN, 22 April 2003). Following the repeated failures to settle the conflict locally, domestic non-governmental organisations have called for urgent international mediation (HURIPEC, 30 October 2003, pp 144-145).

Background and main causes of displacements in the west
The other main area of displacement in Uganda has been the Rwenzori mountains in the Bundibugyo District on Uganda’s western border with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This region has suffered violent attacks by the rebel group Allied Democratic Front (ADF) since November 1996. The ADF violence intensified between 1998 and 2000 and included the abduction of school children as well as attacks on IDP camps. After early 2001, the situation improved as a result of a weakening of the ADF by the Ugandan Army that led to the return of most IDPs. In May 2002 an international team of experts declared the western area safe and free from rebel infiltrators. Government figures make no reference to IDPs in this area anymore (OPM, 11 November 2003).

However, according to some local observers a considerable number of the IDPs in the Bundibugyo District sold their land in desperation at unreasonable low prices during their displacement and are now unable to reintegrate. Without access to land in their places of origin or job opportunities in the urban centres they fled to, many of the 87,000 people displaced during the conflict have become impoverished urban squatters. Thus, even though officially there are no recognised IDPs in the District, a considerable number of those who were recognised as such will most likely have to face the consequences of the displacements the rest of their lives unless compensation schemes are initiated.

Background and main causes of displacements in the east
In eastern Uganda, internal displacement has been triggered by the violent raiding of villages by Karamojong pastoralists and warriors. There has been a significant increase in violent raids following
the beginning in 2000 of a multi-year draught. During the raids, the perpetrators maim, loot, rape, kill and burn down huts.

As a result of the intensified violence in the area, which has been aggravated by an incursion of LRA rebels in June 2003, the number IDPs in the east rose from about 50,000 in May 2003 to almost 500,000 in October 2003. The conditions in the camps have deteriorated considerably with poor water and sanitation, spread of measles, malaria, diarrhoea and pneumonia, education facilities destroyed and malnutrition. The camps are largely out of bounds to humanitarian actors (ACT, 30 October 2003).

The Karamojong who have been the main perpetrators of violence in the district, have suffered from a history of colonial and post-colonial repressive policies, which has fuelled their distrust of formal government initiatives. The creation of the Kidepo National Park by the Obote government in the 1960s, for example, destroyed their access to grazing and watering points during the dry seasons (Minority Rights Group International, 12 March 2001, pp. 6, 14, 19). Moreover, the proliferation of small automatic arms has contributed to the disintegration of traditional clan structures in which elders are able to exercise control over the younger generation. The introduction of automatic weapons has created new dynamics of violence, which evidently goes beyond the search for water and pasture during the dry season. Automatic weapons have given younger men the means and incentive to establish a reputation as brave warriors and build their own herds through mounting raids on other pastoral groups and neighbouring populations (UN OCHA, 30 November 2003).

**Continued large-scale displacement to unprotected camps**

The intensified violence has triggered massive displacements to largely unprotected camps, which are in fact regular targets for LRA attacks. The camp leaders in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader who attended an NRC workshop on the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement in November 2003 said the soldiers usually tried to avoid confrontations with the rebels when the camps come under attack. According to the camp leaders this non-interventionist ‘policy’ is because of their fear of being outnumbered and suffering losses rather than a military strategy, as the soldiers reportedly claim.

The combination of poor physical protection and the rebels’ tactic of deliberately attacking the camps have caused the security situation within the IDP camps to deteriorate dramatically. The insecurity in Gulu, for example, was on the rise in early December 2003 following a relative lull earlier in the autumn. This increase in violence was followed by a considerable rise in rebel activities in other northern and eastern districts as well, which included reports of massacres in villages outside Lira town and thousands of displacements into Lira town itself (UN OCHA 30 November 2003). Despite public statements by the government and the army that they are firmly committed to fight the LRA, the rebels’ violence against the displaced people is relentless with killings, abductions, looting and road ambushes occurring almost on a daily basis.
Thousands of children, the so-called night commuters, regularly move from insecure areas into safer town centres to spend the night on verandas and the streets. There are reports of 15,000 night commuters coming to Kitgum, and unspecified numbers to Soroti and Lira. In Gulu, the children were relocated to nearby school buildings (UN OCHA, 30 November 2003, 5 November 2003, 13-14 October). An additional source of concern is the number of unrecognized camps which in Gulu amount to more than 13 in addition to the 33 recognised. Unrecognised camps do not receive WFP rations or other officially endorsed assistance.

**Appalling humanitarian conditions**

The displacements and volatile security situation have severely impeded the majority of the IDPs’ access to farmland and hence reduced significantly the general food security situation. This further exacerbates the appalling humanitarian conditions in the camps.

Nutrition surveys indicate that malnutrition is more prevalent among displaced children than among the underage population at large. Malnutrition rates increase significantly when WFP reduces rations to the camps because of shortages of food deliveries (ACT, October 2003, WFP, 12 November 2003).

A large number of public health units have been closed down, health workers have moved to safer areas, and expectant mothers are not attended to adequately. Diseases like malaria and acute respiratory infections proliferate (AAH, 30 October 2003, p 6).

In the congested camps in Gulu, each person receives an average of three litres of safe water as opposed to the recommended 20 litres. The congestion in the camps in combination with an acute shortage in latrines - there is one latrine for every 145 people in some camps - increases the possibility of faecal contamination of ground water.

Difficulties in introducing free primary education in Uganda under the Universal Primary Education policy (UPE) have been compounded by the problems of displacement. Firstly, few, if any, of the school infrastructures were designed to cope with the influx of displaced pupils. Secondly, because of the displacements of teachers, students and schools, funds allocated under the UPE scheme do not reach approved destinations. The result is a recurrent lack of school materials, an acute shortage of teachers, and an increase in pupil-to-classroom ratio of 112:1 to 234:1 in some schools (OPM 11 November: UN OCHA 19 November 2003).

The poor health among the displaced population has been aggravated by the congested camps and a breakdown of social structures (Oxfam, 8 February 2002). On the whole, conflict and displacement in Uganda have undermined community support systems, and there has been an increase in crime, and alcohol and drug abuse since the 1990s.

**Humanitarian access**

The intensified rebel activity has hampered the provision of humanitarian assistance to most of the camps in northern and eastern Uganda, with the exception of WFP monthly food deliveries and occasional visits by some NGOs. Although WFP offers non-governmental organis-
tions places in their heavily escorted convoys, these are often not accepted. Some organisations refuse the offer 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.

**Return opportunities**

The hopes for return movements in the Acholi districts in the north have been dashed following the launch of the Ugandan army’s Operation Iron Fist in March 2002 and the intensified rebel activity since June 2003. The frequent attacks, lootings, killings, rapes and abductions make any return movements in the near future highly unlikely. Nevertheless, in Soroti, a district recently affected by rebel activity, IDPs have reportedly tended gardens and farmland during the day whenever the security has allowed and returned to town at night (UN OCHA, 30 November 2003).

The poor prospects for return, especially in Kitgum, Pader and Gulu where the conflict has lasted the longest, should not prevent return preparations. One element of these preparations could be to investigate the impact of the Land Act of 1998, which opened up the way for the privatisation of land. If large-scale sale of land takes place during displacement, this might constitute a significant obstacle to return and reintegration.

**International humanitarian response faces dilemma**

Since June 2003 the escalation of the conflict beyond the Acholi districts of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader has added hundreds of thousands of beneficiaries to WFP’s lists of recipients. In Kitgum, WFP has commenced food distributions to ten new camps in the east of the district. In Pader, food rations cover around 50 per cent of the nutritional requirements. In the eastern districts of Soroti, Katakwi, Kaberamaido and Kumi, WFP distributes food to more than 400,000 IDPs (WFP, 8 December 2003).

Nevertheless, following emergency food needs assessments conducted in September and October 2003, WFP has reduced the general rations in Gulu and to the old camps in Kitgum from 86 % to 65 % of the daily minimum nutritional requirement (WFP, 3 December 2003). The reduction is mainly because of increased access to farmland for IDPs during the months of August and September in 2003 following improved security in these months, reliable rainfall, and subsequently a better harvest (WFP 8 December 2003).

However, the international humanitarian response to the displaced in northern Uganda might be hampered because of the government’s strategy to pursue a military solution to the conflict. This strategy is backed up by the United States, which provides considerable military assistance in exchange for Ugandese support for the fight against international terrorism. The government’s decision to increase the defence budget at the expense of other sectors has angered several donors, which in response have threatened to cut humanitarian assistance to the country (LIU, 1 February 2003).

The recent visits of the UN Representative on Internally Displaced People, Dr. Francis Deng in August and the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, Jan Egeland in November 2003 succeeded in drawing much-needed international attention to the conflicts in Uganda.
The visit of Dr. Deng in August 2003 highlighted the need to adopt and implement the draft national policy on internal displacement, which was developed by the government on the basis of the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and in consultation with the UN Unit on Internal Displacement. The policy will reportedly not imply any financial commitments on the part of the government. Even though return plans, which make up an important part of the policy, are currently obsolete in the face of the on-going crisis, a national policy on internal displacement is still needed to coordinate protection and assistance to the affected population.

Mr. Egeland’s well-publicised visit contributed to raise awareness of the humanitarian emergencies in northern Uganda. Moreover, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs started opening offices in Kitgum, Lira and Soroti. This initiative is expected to strengthen the UN coordination efforts, which have been strongly criticised.

(Updated December 2003)
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About the Global IDP Project

The Global IDP Project, established by the Norwegian Refugee Council at the request of the United Nations, 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.

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 at [www.idpproject.org](http://www.idpproject.org)

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