

Arrested Development

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Officials in the north ask where funds earmarked for development of region have gone. Norman Oduny, 11, and his fourth grade class at Laminadera primary school near Gulu would like a real classroom.

Instead, they will continue to meet under a mango tree, as they've done for more than a year.

"We have been studying under the tree since we moved back to our village from the [internal refugee] camp," Oduny told IWPR.

"On rainy days we don't come to school. And when it's shining, we have to keep changing position and [move] the portable blackboard, depending on the tree shade."

Oduny's school has only one permanent building that serves as the school administration office.

The Laminadera school is among those that Gulu district officials had wanted to build and equip using funds from the Ugandan government's touted 600 million US dollar Peace, Recovery and Development Plan, PRDP.

Due to begin in July 2008 after being announced by President Yoweri Museveni in October 2007, the programme was created to rebuild war-torn northern Uganda's schools, hospitals and roads, improve security, promote agriculture, and resettle the north's internally displaced people.

But as the start date for the programme came and went, officials across the north began asking what happened to the PRDP money.

They discovered that the 600 million dollars was not going directly to proposed PRDP projects in the north - as they imagined it would - but to government agencies who would determine how the money was to be spent in the region.

This angered northern officials and their protests appear to have prompted a government U-turn. It has pledged that from July - the start of the financial year - the PRDP will have a separate budget.

This, however, have done little to reassure people in the north who say they have seen little evidence of the PRDP funds.

In Lira, district chairman for the Uganda People's Congress, UPC, Dan Okello said he suspects the 600 million dollars meant for the north may have been diverted to the Ugandan military for the on-going campaign against Joseph Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army, LRA.

Kony and the LRA fought the Ugandan government for 20 years before decamping to the northeastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC. Since a December 14 attack on the LRA camps by the Ugandan army and its allies, the rebels have killed more than 600 people in DRC.

“If [the PRDP money] has not been diverted for other purposes, like the ongoing military offensive against the LRA rebels, then where is it?” said Okello. “Suddenly [the money is] nowhere. How did it disappear? I demand an explanation.”

Norbert Mao, Gulu district chairman, said the government redevelopment of the north lacked a clear strategy and wasn't sufficiently accountable.

“The PRDP is a set of pledges, a special diet for northern Uganda, but with no clearly defined mechanisms of implementation,” he said. “It was [wrong] for the government to draw up a programme as enormous as the PRDP, and fail to allocate a separate budget for it.

“This is intent to commit fraud. How can anyone explain this? For the government to say it is increasing funding to northern Uganda, and yet go on to suggest the money for [PRDP] be channeled through already running programmes, is to evade audit.

“How can government expect anyone to believe it is serious? How do you carry out accountability and monitoring without having a separate budget line restricted to PRDP?”

Richard Todowng, Museveni's adviser for northern Uganda, said any suggestions of government impropriety were “total nonsense”.

The confusion around the programme, he insisted, was not about the money, but “the implementation strategy”.

But he said the government would now set up an independent body to oversee the disbursement of PRDP funds.

“Hopefully when [PRDP] resumes next financial year, that problem of PRDP not having a separate budget line would have been rectified,” Todowng said.

While PRDP funding issues appear to have been resolved, people in the north are frustrated that they have seen no benefits from the programme.

“Already, our children cannot compete favourably with others elsewhere, who have adequate scholastic materials in a good environment,” said Norman Oduny's father Severino.

“We expected to benefit from the PRDP, but at this rate, an entire generation is doomed unless we initiate ways to help ourselves overcome our problems. It looks the government does not care about us.”

Okello, meanwhile, accused the government of having a hidden agenda to ensure the north continues to suffer.

“There is a north versus south disparity, which will cause conflict if not addressed fast,” Okello warned. “The north is always promised heaven on earth, but ends up with nothing.”

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