

## **Crippled and Destitute Stranded in Camps**

**Author:** [Caroline Ayugi](#)

With nowhere to go and no-one to look after them, they face an uncertain future.

Dorine Ajok's fingers are gnarled, the result of leprosy, she says, and her legs are paralysed from polio.

Yet, she manages to push her wheel chair around the largely abandoned camp which she still calls home.

Ajok, 34, lives in the internal refugee camp of Anaka, near Gulu, and is among those who can't leave because they are physically unable to do so or have nowhere else to go.

Ajok told IWPR that her ancestral home is only ten kilometres from the camp, but she won't go there because she can't build a hut to live in. Otherwise, she would, she said.

"I am taking care of my two children who are too young to build a hut," she explained. "Their father died three years ago. There is no way I can get out of the camp, unless a sympathiser or some organisation volunteers to build a hut for me."

Ajok's situation is typical of those who have not abandoned the 200 refugee camps across northern Uganda that were once home to an estimated two million people who fled the rebel Lord's Resistance Army, LRA.

Most people have left the camps to try to rebuild their lives, only those considered extremely vulnerable individuals, or EVIs, remain behind.

In 2006, when the government urged people to leave the camps, saying they all will be closed by March 2009, most able-bodied heeded the call.

But the elderly, physically handicapped, orphaned, and child-headed families are unable to move back to their villages. Such people are either too weak to build new huts in their home villages or have nowhere to go.

Among those unable to leave is 65-year-old Marcelina Akot, whose fragile hut is covered with torn tarpaulin sheets donated by a relief agency.

Akot cares for her three grandchildren whose parents were killed by LRA rebels in 2004. She survives by collecting coarse grass she uses to make brooms, which she then sells.

"I only have the energy to [make] these brooms and sell [them] to get a meal a day," Akot told IWPR, as she spread out her brooms to dry in the sun.

In equally desperate conditions are two teenage girls at Bobi camp, about 20 km south of Gulu on the Gulu-Kampala highway.

Vicky Aciro, 15, and Mercy Akello, 13, lost their parents. Their father was abducted by the rebels in 1997 when he went to their home village of Opit to collect food. Their mother died of AIDS in 2006.

Following the death of their mother two years ago, the two girls survived on the equivalent of ten US dollars per month that Aciro earned as house help for a family in Gulu.

But Aciro lost her job six months ago when her employer relocated to Kampala.

Since the World Food Programme, WFP, and other relief agencies have drastically reduced food distributions to the former camps, Aciro and Akello now survive on handouts from local people.

"Some days we sleep hungry because food is so scarce," Aciro said. "Sometimes our neighbours give us a little food. But that is only after we are really badly off."

While many former internal refugees are now farming again, there are children still in the camps such as Aciro and Akello who don't know where their lands are.

"We found ourselves growing up in the camp," Aciro explained. "To go back home is close to impossible, although our late mother told us that our land is in Opit." Opit is about 40 km southeast of Gulu.

"I am sure that land has already been grabbed," said Grace Apiyo, who also lives in the camp.

Apiyo said the children's land had probably been taken illegally because many former refugees have failed to reclaim traditional family parcels. Orphans and the elderly are often the victims.

"There are relatives who have even denied children access to their land, simply because they don't have a voice," Apiyo complained.

Colonel Francis Acoka, the Ugandan army officer charged with monitoring the return of refugees, said vulnerable people once had the safety net of a family before the war. But such support is now rare because of conflict-related social breakdown.

"We still have the social obligation to help the EVIs, but we need financial backing before we can assist (them)," Acoka said.

An official with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, UNHCR, in Gulu, who asked not to be named, agreed, saying that international donors would have to get involved as the problem was too big for the authorities.

“It is true there are some EVIs who don't have anywhere else to go. But no single [local] agency can solve the problem,” he said.

Caroline Ayugi is an IWPR-trained reporter.

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