

Killings Worry Refugees

Author: [IWPR ICC](#)

Violent murders in the north thought to be consequence of ethnic tension.

The recent bloody murders of two members of the Langi tribe in northern Uganda have marred the return of war-weary refugees to their former homes.

The fresh outbreak of violence, similar to the murders of eight Langi men more than a decade ago, has been enough to dissuade some Ugandans from returning home to their villages following an 18-month ceasefire in the region's 21-year conflict.

"I would rather die in the camp than risk going back home," said Bonny Ogwal, whose brother was killed just a week ago. If he returned, he feared, "they [will] kill me like my brother".

Ogwal is a member of the Langi tribe in the Lira region of northern Uganda and is one of the 1.8 million displaced people who have been living in 200 internal refugee camps scattered across the north. The Langi are among those who fled to the camps more than a decade ago to escape attacks by the rebel Lord's Resistance Army, LRA.

The Acholi form the core of the LRA, which has been fighting a bloody war against the government for more than 20 years and has sustained its ranks by kidnapping children and turning them into soldiers.

Although the LRA and Kampala have been engaged in peace talks for the past 18 months, there are fears that a new brand of tribal violence is emerging as land disputes emerge between displaced villagers returning to reclaim their lost lands.

David Livingstone Okwir, a 70-year-old elder of the Ojwii village in the heart of the contested region, told IWPR that the Langi were killed by arrows, machetes and axes.

He said the the victims were peasant farmers on business in an area now occupied by Acholi, which includes the village of Odek, home to rebel leader Joseph Kony, and the neighboring town of Awere.

The elder said the deaths were the most recent round in a series of revenge killings that began in 1994 when Langi tribal members murdered some Acholi who had come to them to buy millet grain.

The scene for the violence was set when the state minister for disaster preparedness and refugees, Musa Ecweru, said that people in the Acholi and Langi region had to leave the camps and return to their villages if they wanted further aid.

It is unclear who was behind the recent murders, which occurred in villages in a vast triangle of land, marked by Lira in the south, Gulu in the west and Pader in the north.

While the villages in this triangle have been considered a form of border between the two ethnic groups, in reality they have been cultivated by both the Langi and the Acholi.

Members of both tribes are now laying claim to the land which was abandoned some 15 to 20 years ago when the LRA began attacking and looting villagers.

"Camp residents of Dino [a village near Odek] claim that the [disputed] land belongs to their [Langi] ancestors," said district official Charles Engola Okello.

"This land, I'm told, was occupied by the Langi before even the LRA conflict."

Binoni Abwango, a Langi elder at the Dino refugee camp, blamed the controversy over land on the LRA.

"It is the LRA that has brought all these [problems]," Abwango told IWPR. "We used to share everything and the problem of land was not an issue."

Abwango said those claiming the deserted land were born after it was vacated and do not know who lived on it.

"Instead of fighting for this small piece of land, why don't they go and occupy the land we left in Bolo in Awere or Atiak in Gulu?" he asked.

Minister of Land, Housing Urban Development Daniel Omara told IWPR that the government may be forced to intervene to resolve the dispute.

Although efforts have been made to seek government help in the crisis, there has been little response.

Okello said that while he invited top leaders in the region to a meeting last week at Ojwii village, none attended.

Frustrated, Okello said, "We have just recovered from war; we don't want any other war again."

Local official Odonga Otto said that although some have appealed to Uganda president Yoweri Museveni to become involved, he was unsure when or if anything would be done.

Dila Benson, a local official in the Oyam district, which is the focus on the conflict, said he thought the killings were carried out by former LRA fighters who left the bush and accepted amnesty.

"You cannot convince me that somebody who has been [part of] a revolt will ever [understand] the psyche of development," said Benson. "They will always desire to cause perplexity, plunder and destroy villages,

and to see that we not recover from the LRA."

But Jennet Adong, a resident of Akuki village, some 57 kilometres northwest of Lira, who was returning home as a result of the ongoing ceasefire, did not agree.

"We have to begin building our lives and homes again from scratch," she said. "Many of us have begun moving out of the camp, which has been our home for more than 15 years."

She complained that the victims of past LRA brutality had now turned to killing each other.

This makes it hard to blame only the LRA for the atrocities committed in northern Uganda, she said.

"For one to say it is only the LRA that is killing people is wrong," said Adong. "Tribal conflict seems to have broken out [and now] the Acholi and the Langi are engaged in murder."

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