

Land Claim Tensions Spark Violence

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Five people die in an incident linked to rival land claims, as parliament debates a reform bill that landowners say will favour returning refugees.

At least five people have died - four of them last week - in clashes over land as more than a million refugees in northern Uganda begin their return to long-abandoned villages.

The bloodshed has disrupted the general calm across the north as the country waits anxiously for the Ugandan government and Joseph Kony, leader of the rebel Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, to sign the peace deal they reached late last month in Juba, South Sudan.

Despite the imminent prospect of lasting peace, bringing a close to a 20-year conflict that has taken nearly 100,000 lives, the growing tensions over the land claims made by returning refugees are a worrying trend.

The Ugandan authorities have mobilised forces to find a man they believe killed a local leader and three women in the village of Nginyangiya, north of Lira. The man, who has fled the area, is also accused of killing a woman in the same village in November.

In last week's violence, eight granaries and ten tons of foodstuffs were set alight, according to local resident Joseph Olweny. Police said the accused also set about 30 huts on fire and killed eight cows.

Andrew Ogwang, a local leader in Lira, compared the latest incident to past acts of violence committed by Kony's rebel movement, saying, "This killing is more [damaging] than the LRA, because only one person [was able to] burn 30 huts with items worth millions of shillings."

A woman and a three-year-old child were injured, and were being treated in Lira Regional Hospital.

The suspect is said to be a resident of Nginyangiya who had deserted from the Ugandan military.

Ugandan police did not advance any motive for the killings, but observers are linking the incident to rising tensions over land, as people displaced by the conflict start returning home and laying claim to a plot of their own.

The violence came as the Ugandan government debated a controversial reform to land legislation. Under an amendment to the 1998 Land Act, anyone claiming an interest in land held under what is known as "customary tenure" can only be evicted from it by a court order.

Customary tenure is a traditional form of ownership in northern Uganda under which land is held in trust by clan leaders and distributed to individual families with each succeeding generation.

The bill would make it a crime to attempt to evict someone who claims an interest in such a piece of land,

unless a court has ordered the eviction. The offence would carry a prison term of up to seven years.

The bill is widely disliked by incumbent landowners across the north, who insist it gives a clear advantage to people moving back from refugee camps and then making fraudulent claims to land that is already occupied.

"This is an evil bill with evil intention," said Joel Okao, a farmer from Amach, also in the Lira district. "Where do you expect us to go if we lose our land? We shall use spear and any available means to kill any person who trespasses in our lands."

In the Nginyangiya incident, some of those who died are said to have been returning refugees who wanted to lay claim to land in the area and believed the reform bill would help them do so. Their claims had reportedly created some hostility among local landowners.

Landowners in the area say they face a growing threat from attempts to grab land illegally, and argue that the new bill will only encourage such activity further. They say many of the old boundaries have been lost or forgotten in the chaos of war, and the incomers are simply trying to acquire land wherever they can, rather than in areas that were once theirs.

The proposed reform has heated emotions to a point where some are even talking of bloodshed in the event that the law is enacted.

"Any [action] against the people of northern Uganda means war," said Lira district chairman Franco Ojur. "Our people are sick and they can only get helped if they engage in agricultural activities. Where do you expect them to go if our land is grabbed?"

"We are going to start fighting the government if it suppresses us."

Opio Ongel, an elder in Lira district, drew parallels with British rule prior to 1962, when he said local people employed protests and violence to stop the colonial power seizing their land. Now, he said, the only way to resolve a territorial dispute was to kill the person claiming a stake in one's land.

The Ugandan government has been scrambling to explain that the law does not favour landless incomers.

According to Daniel Omara Atubo, the state minister for land, housing and urban development, the reform bill is in fact designed to protect people who possess lawful customary tenure from being pushed out by those making illegal claims.

"The objective of this bill is to ... enhance the security of occupancy of the lawful and bona fide occupants on registered land," he said.

Presidential advisor Levi Macpio said that the reform bill was not bad, but had been misinterpreted.

Amid the heated arguments, Jimmy Adena, a member of the Ugandan parliament who represents Lira, urged all sides to work for a solution.

"Situation might be too rough today, but we must find a way of addressing it," Akena said recently.

But few of the angry residents are listening.

"The intention of this bill is evil. Its consequences can also be evil," said an official from Lira who spoke to IWPR on condition of anonymity.

He added that the Lango ethnic group which lives in this part of the north "doesn't deal with evil, because we don't want evil".

The paramount chief of the Lango people, Mzee Yosam Odur, told IWPR that land needed to be treated like a mother.

"Nobody can joke around with your mother. You rather die in the battle," he said.

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