

Northern Ugandans Left in Limbo

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Northern Uganda has seen a return to peace in recent years following a 2006 ceasefire agreement signed between the Ugandan government and the rebel Lord's Resistance Army, LRA.

But as **IWPR's Simon Jennings** explains, in spite of the agreement that people desperately hope to mean the end of hostilities in the north, the region's inhabitants are a long way from being able to put the brutal war behind them.

To what extent have those who were uprooted by the conflict now been able to return home?

Around 90 per cent of the 1.8 million people displaced by the 20-year LRA conflict have now gone back home to their villages to rebuild their homes and get on with their lives. The majority of displacement took place in the districts of Gulu, Pader, Amuru and Kitgum where residents headed for more than 200 internal refugee camps across the northern region. All the camps have now officially closed, however the United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, estimates nearly 140,000 are still living in them and transit sites.

What is preventing those who remain in the camps from returning home?

There are several factors preventing those who have not yet returned from doing so. The main obstacle has been inadequate social services in the villages people are heading back to. Returnees struggle to have their basic needs met, such as clean drinking water, sanitation, health services and education. Meanwhile, the recent sale of land for commercial purposes has led to conflicts over ownership that have prevented people from returning to plots they lived on before they were uprooted.

Nearly 10,000 of the internally displaced, IDPs, remaining in camps are vulnerable groups such as widows and the elderly or those with HIV/AIDS who face serious obstacles to returning home. They are unable to rebuild their homes, farm crops and would struggle to access crucial services, such as healthcare, in their villages. These are the people that have suffered most during the resettlement process, particularly women who suffer gender-based violence and negative stereotyping that has prevented them gaining the necessary support from family members to return.

Other factors preventing return include the ongoing demining process and people's fear to go back to places where unexploded ordnance may still remain from the conflict. Meanwhile, many of those who come from areas neighbouring the north east's Karamoja region are reluctant to return because of frequent raids by pastoralists.

What kind of support is targeted at those that have not been able to return?

The Ugandan government has promoted the rights of all those who were uprooted, recognising in its official IDP policy their right to make informed and voluntary choices on whether to remain in camps, return home or settle in other parts of the country. However, as the government has been able to regenerate only certain areas of the north many of those who were displaced have not had a broad choice over where to return to.

Provision for IDPs and the reconstruction of the north is the responsibility of the Ugandan government which has received support from international NGOs and various UN agencies. Over the last three years, as the focus has switched from emergency assistance to one of longer term development and recovery, international aid to camps has been stopped as NGOs' emergency remits come to an end. This has left a gap in assistance for those who remain in camps and transit sites as the government focuses on sustaining the majority who have returned. The government have sought to facilitate return while not encouraging a dependency culture among those who are yet to do so.

UN agencies have also stopped their emergency operations in favour of long term plans in areas of return with a focus on improved agriculture, health, peace-building and development of the rule of law. Meanwhile, UNHCR continues to focus on resettling the elderly and vulnerable by providing shelter and basic services for them to return to. The UN's World Food Programme also still provides some food for the most vulnerable who remain in the camps.

How is life for those who have managed to return?

Those who have left the camps still face a number of challenges. The redevelopment of the north has lagged way behind the pace of return with residents returning to their villages facing a lack of access to basic facilities, particularly clean drinking water and health services. Youths who were born or largely grew up in camps have resettled without the necessary skills to survive in the countryside. Many have lost their parents in the conflict or to HIV/AIDS leaving them to struggle on their own, or even to bring up young children. According to the UN, the current situation "cannot be characterised either as an end of displacement or the achievement of durable solutions".

People also struggle to establish ownership of land that belonged to them or their family before they were uprooted, while many have to trek long distances to get drinking water or medication. Some have reportedly gone back to camps to access the basics. Meanwhile, cash-strapped police forces and weak judicial structures in the rural north have undermined the establishment of the rule of law. A prevalence of small arms in the aftermath of the conflict has also led to outbreaks of violent crime. It is thought that up to 70 per cent of crimes currently tried before the courts in parts of the north stem from disputes over land ownership.

Land rights pose a significant problem for those that have returned. The loss of what official documentation existed and previously established boundary markers have led to a dramatic rise in the number of disputes taken to court. Many elders who knew the customary boundaries died during the conflict, leaving behind little sure knowledge or records of ownership. While customary land ownership continues to be recognised by the Ugandan Land Act, returning IDPs have struggled to assert their ownership and can ill afford legal assistance to help them do so. When it comes to settling the disputes, previously specified land tribunals have been closed while the local courts which now hear the cases are saddled with a large backlog and ongoing corruption.

What is the government doing to improve the situation in northern Uganda?

There have been a number of government-led programmes for redevelopment in the region, however the authorities are struggling to fill the gap left by many NGOs that have now pulled out. Government efforts have been blighted by poor management and corruption meaning that relatively few funds have filtered through to the communities they were meant for. Dozens of arrests have been made over the misuse of money targeted for projects under the government agency the National Agricultural Advisory Services, NAADS, the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund, NUSAF, as well as other rebuilding programmes.

The government's latest initiative is its Peace, Recovery and Development Plan, PRDP, which began in 2009, a year later than planned, following confusion over funding and a resounding need for effective oversight. Through the plan, which is part government, part donor-funded, the government hopes to strengthen the economy, reconcile former warring parties and establish a long term peace, and affirm the state's authority in the north.

However, the programme has come in for criticism for its sluggish start and a lack of understanding among northern Ugandans about its objectives. While the PRDP has helped streamline what had become a mishmash of development programmes in the north, the anticipated, economic benefit is yet to be felt on the ground. As envisaged, the government provides 30 per cent of PRDP funds, however donors have been slow to make up the other 70 per cent - many of those who funded emergency programmes during and immediately after the conflict have now pulled out meaning far less money than is required is going into the redevelopment process.

What are the other concerns of residents after so many years of conflict?

After the 20-year LRA conflict, the people of the north just want to live in peace. While they are cautiously optimistic that the LRA will not return to Uganda, the rebels remain a serious threat in the wider region. Since 2008, they have killed more than 2,000 people in the Central African Republic, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Recent plans from Washington to track and flush out the LRA have been widely criticised in the north, particularly after previous international efforts resulted in a violent backlash from the rebels. Many favour peaceful negotiation over military efforts to quash the LRA. There is also widespread scepticism of justice

processes such as intervention from the International Criminal Court which people fear could prolong the conflict and keep LRA leader, Joseph Kony, away from the negotiating table. The court has charged the LRA's leaders, including Kony, with war crimes and crimes against humanity. The war crimes division of the High Court in Kampala looks set to begin its first case of another LRA commander, Thomas Kwoyello, in the coming months.

Meanwhile, local justice mechanisms continue to be touted as a means of accountability for the war's atrocities as well as a way to move forward towards a peaceful future. People are also seeking compensation from the government for their suffering, in line with justice measures prevalent in East Africa such as the payment of blood money to a victim or their family for their loss. Reparations are part of the Juba Peace Agreement between the Ugandan government and the LRA, but the government is yet to establish any sort of legal framework to compensate victims. This has prompted several regional victims groups to file civil cases demanding financial payouts from the state. The government says it is waiting for all those who were uprooted to return before it addresses these issues and develops a reparations programme.

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