

## **Refugees in West Stranded**

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Many who fled fighting in the north still waiting for resettlement aid.

Tens of thousands of internal refugees who fled fighting in northern Uganda more than ten years ago say they want to return, but can't due to lack of government help.

These refugees have been living in 22 camps built for the north's displaced near the town of Masindi in Uganda's western region, due south of Uganda's popular Murchison Falls Park, part of the country which escaped the ravages of Lords Resistance Army, LRA, insurgency.

The main problem is that development/resettlement funds - with the exception of United Nations assistance - have only been earmarked for war-ravaged areas of the country, which are principally in the north. But while many of those in the Masindi camps are from this region, and therefore entitled to help, few have registered for it.

Since leaving northern Uganda, the LRA has been engaged in peace talks which have apparently collapsed since rebel leader Joseph Kony has refused to sign a negotiated peace deal. Additionally, his army recently engaged in attacks on villages in DRC, kidnapping as many as 90 children and forcing thousands to flee.

Although Kony and his top commanders have been indicted by the International Criminal Court, ICC, for war crimes and crimes against humanity, they remain at large.

Despite that, many of those uprooted by the conflict have abandoned most of the 200 refugee camps in the north and returned home.

But those now in Masindi - estimated to be around 66,000 - have not. Many prefer to remain in camps rather than return to their former villages, claiming they've been left out of government development plans throughout northern Uganda.

"Our people feel frustrated because they have never benefited from any government rebuilding programmes, such as the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF), and the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS)," said Otada Owor Amoti, a member of parliament for the north.

"We have been urging [refugees] to register [with the government] so as to benefit from the belated rebuilding programme."

But officials say getting people to register has been difficult.

"We have only managed to register 1,578 heads [of households] against the more than 50,000 heads of households still living in the camps in the area," said Raymond Acelam, a refugee official in Masindi.

Amoti said a major factor for the refugee frustration is NUSAF excluding programmes in Masindi, even though many living there were from northern regions and eligible for the funds.

Elsewhere, NUSAF, which concluded in December, has also been hit with widespread accusations of corruption and misuse of some 131 million US dollars in World Bank funds. Some NUSAF officials are currently under investigation and a number have already appeared in court.

The Masindi refugees say that what aid they have received has been wasted, claiming that much of a 1.2 million dollar UN programme was misappropriated by officials.

“We ended up losing our money,” said Justine Odong, an Acholi tribal organiser. “I don’t want any help again from the government. They should know that we are traumatised by the LRA war.”

But some officials say that the UN money was put to good use, even though many people don’t realise it. “The money was used to build primary schools, purchase metallic desks and to construct a market in Bweyale,” said Amoti.

According to Amoti, there is hope for the northern refugees, since Masindi will be included in the second phase of NUSAF, which began in January. “When President Yoweri Museveni visited Masindi district in April, he pledged.. rebuilding projects for Masindi,” he said.

Amoti said he also lobbied with smaller development groups for a comprehensive programme called the Peace Recovery and Development Plan, PRDP, to take in areas like Masindi, which although not targeted by the LRA, were nonetheless affected by the rebels’ action.

Stephen Birija, a Masindi district chairman, told IWPR that many people looked forward to the second phase of NUSAF, even though they were overlooked in the first phase. “Since the district will benefit from NUSAF II, we hope that the livelihood of our people will improve,” said Birija.

But there’s little sign of a willingness to return to their former homes. With no resettlement assistance, they say they haven’t the means to return - but they’re also concerned about the conditions they may face.

“We are also fearful of going back home because of hepatitis [outbreaks] which we hear has claimed lives of 146 people,” said Oyo.

Questioned why Masindi refugees hadn’t received assistance, the deputy resident district commissioner of Lira, Godfrey Aluma, who represents the president, insisted that large numbers weren’t entitled to it because they had moved there before the war. “They went and settled there and many now own land in Masindi town,” he said.

He acknowledged, though, that substantial numbers were from war-ravaged areas of the north, but said their failure to register disqualified them.

“For one to benefit from the resettlement packages, one has to register and show interest,” he said. “But for those who are in Masindi never followed the guidelines.”

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