

Returning Urban Refugees Denied Aid

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Those who fled war for safety of southern towns and cities begin to head back – but finding it tough. "Keep quiet," Grace Akwero called out to her crying child as she sold mangoes at the taxi park in the Ugandan capital Kampala.

Akwero is among the thousands of ethnic Acholi who fled two decades of war in northern Uganda for the security of the country's largest city.

But since arriving in the Kampala nearly ten years ago, life has not been what she had hoped. She survives by selling seasonal fruit to taxi patrons departing or arriving in the capital.

"It has always been very hard to meet the basic necessities of life," she confessed. Akwero earns just enough to rent a house and provide for her child.

Originally from the town of Pader, in the heart of what once was rebel country in the north, Akwero was brought to Kampala by her aunt in 1999, when she was 12 years old.

At the age of 16, Akwero's aunt threw her out after she became pregnant and told her to find the father of her child. But the man disappeared when he learned she was going to have his baby.

Like many others, Akwero longs to return to Pader, now that the rebel Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, has been gone from the region for the past two years.

But returning is more difficult than it seems, since Akwero's family in Pader is no longer there and other relatives still live in the remaining refugee camps in the north.

And, what little government assistance that exists does not extend to urban refugees.

"When I was brought [to Kampala], my widowed mother was already ailing, and she died two years after," said Akwero. "I can't get enough money to take me back home. Even so, my mother is already dead, and I can't go back to relatives who are suffering in the [refugee] camps."

Akwero lives in Kivulu, one of Kampala's shanty slums that are home to some of the city's poorest residents.

"I buy these mangoes and resell them, but the profit is very small and not much can be saved," she explained. "Many are selling fruits, because it requires little capital to start, but the customers are few."

Christine Akello, 39, is another of Uganda's urban refugees. She fled northern Uganda after almost being burned to death in her hut in northern town of Kitgum – a fate suffered by some of her former neighbours.

She brought her family from Kitgum at the height of the LRA war, and rented a small store at Mulago, another Kampala suburb, which is home to Uganda's famous national hospital.

But tragedy struck in 2006 when her three-year-old son was severely burned in a household accident.

"I was cooking beans which I had placed in the doorway as it was raining," she said. "But my son came running and knocked the food off the charcoal stove." He was burned badly on his chest and head.

"When I think of my son's future, I feel like transferring his pain on me," she said.

Akello wishes she could leave Kampala for her home near Pader, "This house is very small. It is our kitchen, bedroom and living room."

But her husband Ocitti is against the move because their son requires treatment to retard the growth of scar tissue. "My son can't sleep at night because his scars itch a lot," Ocitti told IWPR.

Because the burns went deep, explained Akello, doctors have said that surgery is impossible. Treatment must continue and the family struggles to pay for it since Ocitti works only odd jobs to survive.

Pamela Ajok, 35, also an urban refugee from the north, lives in the Katanga neighborhood, an area bordering Makerere University in the capital.

While she is able to feed her four children, she can't afford a proper shelter, clothes or school fees for them. Ajok rents a small piece of land where she put up a shelter of old, flattened tin that is in the shadow of university dormitories.

Ajok wakes up at 3 am each day to fry cassava chips that she sells to university students.

"My children have to remain at home to help me prepare the chips, otherwise we won't be able to eat and rent a piece of land next month," said Ajok.

Life is not much better even for those former urban refugees who have returned to the north seeking to reestablish their lives.

Jacob Odongo, 25, who lived in the western Ugandan town of Masindi to escape the war, is now back home in Amuru district, east of Gulu.

Odong complained that while other victims of the war were being given seeds that would allow them to start farming again, that help was being denied returning urban refugees.

"Many of us who have just returned are missing such aid," said Odongo.

According to Patrick Okello Oryema, the vice chairman of the Amuru district council, the government provided about 40,000 US dollars for the district to purchase seeds for victims of last year's floods.

But that assistance was only for those whose crops were destroyed by floods, and not returning refugees.

"Even some [refugees] who were here during the war are not getting the seeds, because the programme is for only a few," explained Oryema.

Catherine Adong, 30, returned to Alero north of Gulu after having lived south of the Nile River in Karuma at the peak of the war.

"While others line up to get relief items, we look on," she complained.

Caroline Ayugi is an IWPR-trained reporter.

Location: Uganda

Topic: Uganda

Focus: ICC - International Criminal Court

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/returning-urban-refugees-denied-aid>