

Refugee Camps in Northern Uganda: Sanctuaries or Battlegrounds?

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1. Introduction:

On Monday, 5 August 2002, about 200 rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), an armed rebel group that has been fighting since 1986 to end President Yoweri Museveni's rule and replace it with a system founded on the Biblical Ten Commandments, raided Achol-Pii refugee camp in northern Uganda. Reportedly, the "rebels took control of a Ugandan army tank which they turned on refugees and government troops."¹ The Ugandan army later repulsed the rebels. More than 60 people were killed and some 24,000 Sudanese refugees were again forced into flight. Although one of the most devastating, this was not the first nor the last rebel carnage. In fact, Achol-Pii camp was attacked in July 1996 by the LRA, leaving over 100 people dead, and again in July of this year.

The rebel attacks also affected refugees in other camps in northern Uganda. On Monday, 9 September 2002, Maaji camp suffered one of several attacks by the same rebels, whose one-week ultimatum to aid workers issued on Thursday, 8 August to evacuate northern Uganda and southern Sudan or face more attacks had passed unheeded. To give credence to their threat, the rebels attacked a World Food Programme aid convoy on Saturday, 14 September, prompting a suspension of humanitarian assistance to two districts of northern Uganda. The escalation of rebel assaults on refugees confined to camps in insecure parts of the country draws attention to the dangers posed to refugees by rebel groups and armed gangs. It also raises important questions about the policy of confining

refugees in camps, particularly in zones of insecurity where their fundamental rights and their physical safety are easily flouted.

Rebel assaults like those perpetrated by the LRA have caused refugees to flee camps. In response to this displacement, the UNHCR has begun relocating these refugees in flight away from the volatile border regions to more secure locations deeper inside the country. However, one wonders why the international agency charged with protecting refugees has ignored repeated atrocities and imminent dangers until this time, only acting when many refugees have been killed or forced into flight. The security crisis in northern Uganda, where most of the 176,800² registered Sudanese refugees in the country live, did not develop overnight. Yet, until now there have been no serious efforts to find a viable solution, such as relocating refugees to safer regions.

While conducting research in Adjumani in 1997, I was told by an official of the UNHCR's Sub-office at Pakelle that it was too costly to move large numbers of refugees away from the border regions. It is true the UNHCR faces financial problems in implementing its programs in Africa, in part because of its reliance on donations from Western nations which are less supportive of refugees in Africa compared to those in Europe.³ However, it should have done more to secure the physical safety of refugees in this region according to its protection mandate.

This paper is based on information gathered during two trips to northern Uganda. In 1997, I spent one month talking to refugees, aid workers and local government officials in Adjumani and Moyo districts while collecting information for a research project based at the American University in Cairo.⁴ During this visit, I spent a number of days in several camps and learned much about the fears of refugees. I entered Sudan from the south in territory controlled by Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), the predominantly southern-based rebels fighting Sudan's Islamist government. I interviewed IDPs, SPLA officials and aid workers in Kajokeji and Yei counties. At that time, these areas had been recently captured by the SPLA from the Sudanese government army and allied Ugandan rebel groups, and I learned about the massive suffering of the civilian

population. In 2001, I visited Adjumani and Moyo districts for the second time to distribute our research reports to interested parties, acquaint myself with recent developments, and visit my ailing mother in one of the camps. Unlike the previous trip in 1997, in which I flew to Adjumani, on this trip I traveled by bus from Kampala, the national capital, to Adjumani via the principle northern town of Gulu. Although frightening, the overland trip enabled me to witness the danger and fear that people in the north have been forced to endure. I saw several reminders of rebel atrocities along the road, including the “protected camps” for displaced Ugandans and wreckages of vehicles burned in ambushes. On one stretch of the Gulu-Adjumani road, movement is only possible by convoys escorted by soldiers. Even then security is not guaranteed. A few days after my trip, on 27 August 2001, the veteran commandant of camps in Adjumani, Charles Opio, and several civilians were killed when their bus was destroyed in a rebel ambush.⁵

The refugees in the northern districts of Adjumani, Pader and Kitgum are the most affected by the operations of the LRA rebels, who recruit, mainly by force, among the largest ethnic group in the north, the Acholi. The LRA is notorious for gruesome killings, abductions of children and rape. The Sudanese government has supported the LRA in revenge for Ugandan government support for the SPLA. However in March 2002, the Sudanese regime allowed over 10,000 Ugandan troops to enter southern Sudan to eliminate the LRA rebels, who fled to inaccessible parts of southern Sudan and northern Uganda. Small bands of the group that entered northern Uganda are responsible for the escalation of violence against refugees and Ugandan civilians since June of this year. A statement issued by the LRA said that the attack on Achol-Pii camp refugees was retaliation for killings of their supporters in southern Sudan by the Uganda army in collaboration with Sudanese soldiers and SPLA rebels.⁶ Hence, similar to many other insurgencies in Africa, local conflicts have regional and international dimensions. My focus will be the security of refugees in camps in Adjumani, with which I am most acquainted, and its linkages within the wider political picture. I will first provide a brief historical background on the situations giving rise to the presence of refugees in Adjumani and will then relate this to broader regional context.

2. Camps for Sudanese refugees in Adjumani district:

Since a year before independence in 1956, and except for a 10-year period of relative calm from 1972 to 1983, Sudan has been entrenched in war. The first civil war, from 1955 to 1972, forced many Sudanese to seek refuge in Uganda. The refugee flight peaked in 1965 when between 100,000 and 150,000 people crossed the border. Most of the refugees repatriated following the signing of the 1972 Addis Ababa Peace Agreement between the southern-based rebels, the Anyanya, and the Sudanese government. However, fighting resumed in 1983 when the central government reneged on the peace agreement and decreed Islamic law.

The current rebellion against the Sudanese state is spearheaded by the SPLA under the leadership of Dr. John Garang de Mabior, who was a rebel officer in the first civil war. The losses of the ongoing war are monumental; an estimated 2 million people have been killed, some 4 million internally displaced, and tens of thousands forced to flee to other countries. Again, Uganda has absorbed the majority of Sudanese refugees, most of whom have been settled in camps close to the border. Adjumani district alone accommodates some 80,000 refugees in 36 camps, according to the Jesuit Refugee Service.⁷ These refugees, some of whom are settling in the area for the second time, represent almost half of the total registered Sudanese refugees in Uganda. Of course, many refugees are self-settled and not reflected in official statistics.

The massive influxes of Sudanese into Adjumani followed escalations of fighting in southern Sudan. In 1989, the SPLA attacked Nimule, a Sudanese border town, forcing members of the Madi ethnic group to flee to Adjumani. About 2,000 to 3,000 refugees, mainly of Acholi and Lotuko ethnicity, who had crossed into Kitgum district were flown to Adjumani. The number of refugees continued to grow in the early 1990s as the SPLA lost ground in the south following the overthrow of its main supporter, President Mengistu of Ethiopia, by rebels backed by the Sudanese government. Adjumani

received some 63,000 people from Yei district and 36,000 from Kajokeji when the SPLA forces continued to withdraw in defeat. By 1995, the refugee population in Adjumani had soared to 160,000.

Uganda signed the UN and OAU Refugee Conventions and applied group recognition to waves of asylum seekers. Upon crossing the border, Sudanese were recognized as *prima facie* refugees and were accommodated in transit camps while their relocation to permanent camps was being processed. The main transit camp in Adjumani, Ogujebe, was located on the eastern banks of the Nile. Also, a small transit was established at Mireiyi on land owned by the Church of Uganda to host refugees from Dinka and Nuer ethnic groups who had been rejected by the host community.

Refugees in transit camps relied on humanitarian assistance provided by the UNHCR and partner NGOs. The UNHCR was keen to move refugees away to permanent camps where they could grow their own food and be self-sufficient. According to its 2001 report for Uganda, the UNHCR's policy is to "promote the integration of services for refugees into existing national structures and continue to promote the self-reliance strategy..."⁸ However, some refugees were hurriedly moved to permanent camps with poor soil that could not support crops for large numbers of people. As a result, in some situations, the UNHCR was compelled to temporarily reinstate humanitarian assistance to camps supposedly self-reliant to avoid mass starvation of refugees. For example, the UNHCR arranged for the supply of relief items to some of the old camps, including Nyumanzi II, in 2001. During my trip in 2001, I also learned from refugees in Nyumazi II that the UNHCR was willing to relocate some of the people in the most desolate camps to more fertile ones. Based on my discussions with refugees, I got the impression that the local people were initially reluctant to allow refugees to settle in fertile areas but relented when they realized the benefits that came with hosting refugees. The refugees have better schools and medical centers, which also benefit locals. New camps, such as Mongula and Maaji, are situated in more fertile areas and are better planned and served. Unfortunately, the 'affluence' of these camps apparently attracted the rebels, who have threatened the

self-sufficiency of the camps and jeopardize the UNHCR policy of promoting refugee self-reliance.

3. Rebels target refugees:

In the second half of the 1990s, during which time the tide of fighting in southern Sudan turned against the government, the SPLA regained the territory it lost, such as Kajokeji, and captured new areas, including Yei in 1997. Many refugees in Uganda spontaneously returned to their original home areas in Yei, now controlled by the SPLA, due to severe repression by rebels from the West Nile Bank Front (WNBF) or *Gorogoro*.⁹ Almost all of these refugees were later compelled to return to camps in Uganda due to starvation. The WNBF was organized by the former dictator Idi Amin Dada's Foreign Minister, Juma Oris, with the support of the Sudanese government. Armed by the Sudanese army, these rebels, mostly from Kakwa and Aringa ethnic groups, terrorized refugees on the western side of the Nile in northeast Uganda. Many huts in Palorinya camps on the west banks of the Nile were set ablaze, and some of their occupants were reportedly burnt alive. The survivors fled to Ogujebe transit on the east banks of the Nile and were later resettled in permanent camps in Adjumani.

However, the threat posed by the WNBF rebels receded because of their mounting losses in Uganda during fights with the government army and in southern Sudan in engagements with the SPLA. The SPLA killed many WNBF rebels as well as Sudanese soldiers during the fighting in Yei county. Remaining rebels withdrew from the border along with their Sudanese supporters. Except for sporadic attacks, refugees on the western side of the Nile felt more secure. The recent decision of the Sudanese government to cease supporting Ugandan rebels will lead to improvement of refugee security. In mid-April, the Ugandan National Rescue Front II, a group that broke away from the WNBF in 1996, along with 2,500 fighters and family members returned home from southern Sudan and indicated that they had abandoned the struggle and wished to reach a peace agreement with the government.¹⁰ The peace agreement was signed in June.

The SPLA defeat of Ugandan rebel groups angered groups in Uganda who were related to them by ethnic ties. In particular, members of the Aringa ethnic group were incensed by the deaths of WNBF rebels and reportedly targeted Dinka refugees for harassment in revenge. Moreover, the Aringa losses rekindled memories of the SPLA violations of the human rights of Ugandan refugees in southern Sudan in the 1980s. The SPLA is often regarded as a Dinka movement because its leader and many of his lieutenants are Dinka. By the same logic, the WNBF is considered an Aringa movement because its leader, Juma Oris, and many of his entourage are Aringa. Similarly, the LRA is regarded as an Acholi group because its leader, Joseph Kony, and most of his followers are Acholi. This politicization of ethnicity has fueled attacks on many innocent people.

The most feared rebel group by refugees is the LRA or *Tongtong*,¹¹ members of which have looted food items, medicines and other property, and abducted refugees to carry the loot. Mogula and Maaji camps have been assaulted on a number of occasions. In one raid on Mongula, in early July 1997 while I was in Adjumani, the rebels abducted 34 refugees who were later rescued by the Ugandan army or released by the rebels. I met one of the boys rescued by the army and interviewed a girl injured while fleeing Mogula. These two people were instrumental in providing me with information about how the attacks were carried out. Refugees in Mogula told me that the rebels usually released their captives unarmed and that casualties most often occurred during fights with the army. In July 2001, Maaji was attacked by the LRA resulting in the death of 1 soldier and 6 refugees. A number of refugees were abducted and made to carry looted property. According to a report published by the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “On their release, the rebels gave them a warning letter to deliver to the UPDA commander, that, they do not want refugees in the settlement any longer and adding that, they would return to the settlement after two weeks.”¹² In September of 2002, the same camp came under attack by the LRA, causing 6,000 refugees to flee. In October, the LRA returned to the camp and killed 6 soldiers, burnt 65 huts and displaced thousands of refugees. These raids on camps are expected to rise since the rebels have lost the support of the Sudanese government and looting will be their only source of sustenance.

The UNHCR Sub-Office at Pakelle mobilized emergency assistance to refugees displaced by the rebel activities. It provided “plastic sheeting, cups, plates, blankets and soap to the families whose houses were burnt and food comprising of cereal and pulses to the refugees...”.¹³ In addition, it made temporary sanitary arrangements for refugees who had sought refuge in more secure sites of the Maaji, and arranged for students to join schools wherever they were. However, these remedial measures are prone to disruptions by future rebel activities. The case of Maaji illustrates the fact that UNHCR policies of promoting self-reliance among refugees are useless as long as refugees are placed in insecure zones where they are vulnerable to rebel attacks.

Refugees have little faith in the security provided by the Ugandan army. While conducting interviewees in 1997 at Keyo II camp, I talked to a refugee employed by the UNHCR as a driver who said that the army is located far from the camps and only report to the scene of an attack to assess damage inflicted by the rebels. However, more recently, it has become clear that soldiers are being stationed in or close to the most vulnerable camps, putting the refugees in the line of fire, as happened in Acholi-Pii. The failure of the army to deal with the small and unpopular LRA is embarrassing to the government. The rebels are kept alive by their tenacity, the inadequacy of the Uganda Popular Defense Forces to defeat them, and, until recently, through the support of the Sudanese government.¹⁴ The fortunes of this rebel group, like others in Africa, and subsequent atrocities inflicted on civilians, including refugees, are partly influenced by machinations of regional and global actors.

4. Influence of regional and global forces:

Although the security of the refugees in Adjumani is contingent upon the actions of local actors, such as rebels groups, government soldiers, local politicians and bureaucrats, the strategic relationships between Sudanese and Ugandan leaders, which are influenced by regional and global forces, also play a role. The recent escalation of violations of the

human rights of refugees and local people in northern Uganda is related to the Sudanese government's relations to the United States and its war on terrorism.

The United States has accused the Sudanese government of supporting terrorism and destabilizing neighboring countries. Sudan was implicated in the failed assassination of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Ethiopia in 1995. It was placed on the US State Department list of sponsors of terrorism in 1996. In 1998, the US bombed Al Shefa factory in Khartoum based on allegations that it was linked to Osama bin Laden and manufactured chemical weapons. The US also boosted support to countries bordering Sudan, including Uganda and Eritrea, and Sudanese opposition groups. Moreover, the US became increasingly critical of the Sudanese government's conduct during its war against opponents and its use of newly found oil wealth to fund arms purchases.

However, the 11 September attack on the US was a watershed for Sudan, which feared, particularly after the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the wrath of the US government. Osama bin Laden, the key suspect in the attack on the US, lived in Sudan from 1994 to 1996 and invested huge sums of money in various projects while organizing the Al Qaeda terrorist network. In an attempt to forestall US retaliation, Sudan cooperated with the US war on terrorism, took steps to resume peace talks with opposition groups, and sought to restore peaceful relations with neighboring countries. Thus, the Sudanese government decided to sever links with Ugandan proxies and allow Ugandan troops on its territory to hunt the LRA rebels. Since March, Ugandan troops have operated on Sudanese territory against the LRA rebels, who have been forced on the run.

Driven out of their bases in southern Sudan and cut off from Sudanese government support, the LRA now has limited resources. As result, LRA rebels furiously attacked and looted refugee camps and Ugandan civilians in revenge for their losses. The rebels have broken up into small bands to cause maximum damage and avoid government offensives to end their activities, something that has long eluded Museveni's government. Over half a million Ugandans have been displaced to "protected camps" by the LRA rebels. The rebels rely on resources generated by this population. Hence, it is not surprising that the

LRA would like the UN agencies and NGOs to leave, thereby enabling freer access to these people. If the IDPs and refugees, already cowed by suffering, come under rebel control, they could generate badly-needed resources for the LRA. On the contrary, the government has intensified its policy of gathering people in ‘protected camps’ in order to deny rebels access to these civilians. In October, the Ugandan army ordered internally displaced persons who returned to their original villages to return to ‘protected camps’ within 48 hours.¹⁵

Thus, national, regional and global politics have affected the lives of refugees in a peripheral and insecure part of the Uganda. The UNHCR’s protection role and policy of promoting refugee self-reliance have been compromised by continuing rebel attacks on refugees. Its recent response to this rebel-induced refugee displacement has been to relocate refugees and mobilize humanitarian assistance in safer regions away from border areas. This is a policy that should have been implemented long ago, since the threat that rebel groups pose to refugees in camps has existed since the start of the rebellion in northern Uganda.

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¹ “Uganda army retakes refugee camp” BBC News, Tuesday, 6 August 2002, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa.2175106.stm>.

² UNHCR Global Report 2001, available at <http://www.unhcr.ch>.

³ African refugees are often malnourished. On the contrary, refugees from Kosovo, for instance, mainly suffered from obesity, yet massive and high-cost food items continued to flow in. A relevant question asked by a nutritionist in an article in the *New Statesman* was the following: How can we justify providing high-cost food items to Europeans who were not undernourished when, in most African crises, we cannot even provide undernourished populations with basic survival ration?” Jaspars, Susanne. “Don’t let them eat cake” *New Statesman*, 05/15/200, Vol. 129, Issue 4486, p20, 7/8p.

⁴ The project was called the Sudan Cultural Digest Project and comprised a team of 6 researchers. The research report is titled: “Coping with dynamics of culture and change: Sudanese refugees in East Africa and internally displaced persons in southern Sudan.” Office of African Studies, American University in Cairo.

⁵ “A Tribute to Charles Opio”, available at <http://www.jesref.org/inf/alert/uga-trib.htm>.

⁶ “Race against time for Uganda refugees” BBC News, Friday, 9 August, 2002, available at <http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/21833.stm>.

⁷ “Our Projects in Uganda”, Jesuit Refugee Service, available at <http://www.jesref.org/material/uga/jrsproj.htm>.

⁸ UNHCR Global Report 2001, available at <http://www.unhcr.ch>.

⁹ *Gorogoro* is the term refugees use for the West Nile Bank Front (WNBF) and is a Swahili word referring to an empty tin container that has been converted for use at home or market. The guerrillas often waylaid people and demanded ‘*gorogoro*,’ or goods destined for the market. Thus it became their name.

¹⁰ “Government, West Nile rebels seal deal” *The Monitor* (Kampala), June 18, 2002.

¹¹ The refugees call the LRA rebels *Tongtong*, which refers to an insect that has a painful sting. However, in Acholi the word *otong-tong* means ‘one who chops victims to pieces’. It was the name given to Severino Lukoya, the father of Alice Lakwena, who unsuccessfully tried to revitalize the struggle of the Acholi following the collapse of Lakwena’s Holy Spirit Movement. Doom, Ruddy and Vlassenroot, Koen “Kony’s Message: A new Koine? The lord’s Resistance Army in northern Uganda”, *African Affairs* (1999), 98, 5-36.

¹² “Refugee News”, *Humanitarian Update- Uganda*, July/August 2002, Volume IV, Issue VII/VIII, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Kampala, Uganda.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ “Museveni’s backyard: Sweeping changes in the region have not ended the rebellions against Kampala” *Africa Confidential*, Vol 38, No. 16, 1 August 1997.

¹⁵ “Uganda: Acholi ordered back to ‘protected camps’”. *IRIN*, Nairobi, 4 October 2002.