



Inactivity is Perpetration

A Press Statement on the World Refugee Day

20 June 2020

Introduction: As a refugee serving organisation with 20 years of unstinting support to forced migrants and 20 years of continuous advocacy on issues of forced migration, we warmly welcome the theme of this year's World Refugee Day: *"Every Action Counts"*.

We join the Uganda Government through Office of the Prime Minister and UNHCR, in sharing successes realised in the protection and promotion of rights of forced migrants, and in renewing our commitment to work together to tackle the barriers impeding refugees and asylum seekers from leading dignified lives.

In digesting this year's theme #EveryActionCounts, we look back at where we have come from as a refugee-hosting country, reflect on current contexts, and ponder on necessary future actions for refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda and elsewhere.

Looking back: Uganda's post-colonial refugee regime has made commendable progress in the welcome of and protection of refugees. Through proactive legislation on refugees including but not limited to The Refugees Act (2006) and The Refugees Regulations (2010), numerous policy frameworks including the Settlement Transformative Agenda, and involvement in rolling out the global Comprehensive Refugee Response Frameworks (CRRF), Uganda is globally lauded for its progressive policies on refugee welcome and protection. These successes could not have been realised without progressive political support. In this regard, undeniably, Uganda has been and continues to take necessary actions on the protection of refugees.

Current Context: The above liberal approach is however not without technical, infrastructural, and policy implementation challenges. The refugee leadership in Uganda grapples with a series of influxes that impact on limited financial and natural resources. This can be seen in the very recent reduction in food rations, growing pressure on natural resources, and challenges in providing quality education and medical services to people in and around refugee-hosting areas. These challenges, made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic, are testing Uganda's generous generosity to forced migrants.

In March 2020, the Government of Uganda halted registration of asylum seekers due to COVID-19. However, this has had little impact on the utilisation of Uganda's porous borders – the human desire to survive and thrive goes beyond pandemics. Notwithstanding the official halt, the monthly statistics for refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda continue to rise. As of April, there were 1,395,830 refugees and asylum seekers. By 31 May 2020, the official statistics show that the number increased to 1,424,373. Where did the additional 28,543 come from - and who registered them amidst the 'halt'?

While under nation-wide lockdown;

1. Clashes among refugees dragged claimed lives and saw property destroyed. Adjumani and Kiryandongo documented deaths resulting from inter-ethnic clashes within refugee populations
2. Relief food was reduced from 12kg to 8kg per person per month, and further purchasing power weakened further as financial support was also reduced from 32,000 UGX to 22,000 UGX
3. Cases of domestic-related violence spiked as refugees and hosts grappled with the 'new norm' of #StayAtHome – a situation that further destabilised already fragile relationships in many homes.

Futuristic perspective: With the geopolitical fragility that characterises the Great Lakes region, Refugees who are with us now are not about to return to their home countries anytime soon (the average time in exile is between 10-20 years). At the same time, resettlement to third countries such as the US is not about to re-open. As such, local integration, though not legally permitted, is the only option left for refugees in Uganda.

This narrowing of durable solutions poses worrisome threats and is likely to prove a test to Ugandans' sense of generosity towards asylum seekers and refugees. However, it is our belief that progressive partnerships with all actors - including but not limited to government agencies, donors, private sector, academia, refugee and host communities, media, technical and political leaders, UN Agencies, Civil Society Organisations, and international communities – can generate remarkable powers and solutions with which to leap over the current hurdles.

Recommendations

The proposed progressive partnerships can take the forms of actions;

1. Accelerating conversation on the silencing of guns as intimated by the African Union, and domesticate such commitments for SMART ways of ending all wars
2. Denouncing boldly any xenophobic attacks and discrimination in service provision in the wake of COVID-19 as that only worsens the already wanting situations of many vulnerable refugees
3. Promoting peaceful co-existence among refugees, and with hosts communities by addressing key concerns and discomforts of both communities
4. Rethinking livelihood options for vulnerable refugees trapped in poverty and caught between reductions in relief items on the one hand, and the impossibility of sustaining their families from the 30 x 30 meters of land provides in refugee settlements
5. Supporting virtual education for refugee children, especially those in gazetted refugee settlements across the country.

Indeed, Every Action Counts. Inactivity is Perpetration.

Nice Commemorations! Email: info@refugeelawproject.org