



Refugee Law Project

A SPECIAL BULLETIN ON URBAN IDPs

October 2008

Gov't Stalls Urban IDP Profiling

Perhaps because many urban-based IDPs settle in slum areas, where they tend to blend in with the existing population, they are often perceived, even by some officials in humanitarian agencies, as a population less deserving of serious attention than their fellow citizens living in camps. Some humanitarian workers even claim that these people are nothing more than economic migrants, despite their unique history and circumstances.

Such claims in some instances offer an excuse for inaction; there is no doubt that dispersed urban IDPs pose far greater challenges to effective intervention than do rurally encamped ones. However, as populations generally become more and more urbanized, it will become ever harder for agencies to avoid confronting such challenges, and indeed, in some countries, including neighbouring Sudan, displacement to urban areas is being given considerable attention.

Discussions with local government officials in Gulu suggest that if urban IDPs do manage to return to their areas of former domicile they will benefit from assistance just like their rurally-based counterparts. However, the dynamics of return are not the same for both categories and without a doubt, urban IDPs' needs and protection concerns are different: their return demands should accommodate this distinction. For example, many urban IDPs have noted that they are unable to return because they do not wish to interrupt the education of their children.

When, in August this year, UNHCR started to host ad hoc meetings for organizations working with urban IDPs, it was therefore a welcome development. The aim of the meetings, which involved members of the existing protection cluster, including ASB, IOM, RLP, UNICEF, and WFP, was to plan profiling exercises which could begin to fill a critical information gap and lay the groundwork for assistance to this long-overlooked



Left Hanging...

Hopes were high for many IDPs in 'Acholi Quarters' in Kireka in February of this year when Hon. Musa Ecweru, the minister of relief, disaster preparedness and refugees, visited the slum. "We all know that home is a lot better than here," he said then to the IDPs, many of them seeking assistance to return to northern Uganda. But now the government has suspended profiling of urban IDPs, a starting point in understanding the needs of this long-neglected group. Since his visit, the IDPs in Kireka have faced an outbreak of cholera and some of their homes have been demolished at the demand of neighboring landowners who want them out.

population. Although some profiling was done in Masindi, Teso, Lango, and Adjumani in 2006, little is known about IDPs displaced to larger urban centres, notably Kampala, Jinja and Entebbe. Moreover, the little that is now known demonstrates a critical gap in knowledge and information on this category of people.

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Timeline of Interventions

DEC

RLP releases Briefing Paper "What About Us? The Exclusion of Urban IDPs From Uganda's IDP Related Policies and Interventions"

JAN

RLP hosts public seminar on urban IDPs at Makerere University. Attendees include representatives from OPM, UNHCR and IDP community groups around Kampala.

FEB

Hon. Musa Ecweru meets IDPs in the 'Acholi Quarters' slum in Kireka. He promises the IDPs some food assistance, lorry trucks to transport willing families to northern Uganda and facilitation for elders to travel to their home districts to assess the feasibility of return.

MARCH

Fifty bags of maize flour are dispersed to IDP families in Kireka. Portioned out, many households received only one cup.

APR

MAY

Some IDP elders residing in Kampala and Jinja traveled to northern Uganda to meet with LCVs in their home districts.

JUNE

JULY

AUG

UNHCR puts urban IDPs on the agenda for protection cluster programming for 2009, coordinating with OPM to execute profiling and needs-assessment activities.

SEPT

OPM forestalls urban IDP profiling.

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At the meeting, it was agreed to conduct a rapid population assessment and profiling exercise, beginning in the first week of September. This would have given time to identify urban IDPs' protection needs and concerns and to use such information for fundraising under the Consolidated Appeals Process for Uganda for 2009.

Unfortunately, the whole enterprise was stalled as a result of a request from the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), a move which calls into question the government's commitment to honoring its obligations under the national IDP policy and the Constitution of Uganda. Sources suggest that the OPM has yet to finalise a position on urban IDPs, which seems to confirm our earlier observations that the National IDP Policy was drafted with displacement to rural areas in mind exclusively, and should perhaps have been called the 'Rural IDP Policy'. When the RLP contacted OPM to confirm its position, we were told by a senior officer that he was "too busy to comment". In a separate interview, another high-up OPM official however suggested that lack of information regarding the situation and concerns of urban IDPs is a major impediment to the identification of this population and provision of assistance. This suggests a lack of communication and coordination within OPM to seriously address this issue.

Given the limited time-frame in which the previously mentioned profiling exercise had to take place, the delay effectively precluded the possibility of fundraising for assistance to a population in an already dire situation. Despite the efforts of some humanitarian actors, and despite the fact that ignoring the problems associated with displacement to urban areas is clearly in breach of national obligations, the future welfare of urban IDPs, remains as uncertain as ever.

RECOMMENDATIONS

→ Urban IDPs must be recognised by Government as a constituency within the larger body of internally displaced persons in Uganda.

→ Now that the UNHCR-led protection cluster has begun to act on the situation of urban IDPs, the government should establish clear guidelines for managing displacement to urban areas and in particular streamline communication within the OPM as well between the central government and the local governments. In particular, it should negotiate with the protection cluster for the postponed profiling exercise to be undertaken.

→ District Disaster Management Committees (DDMCs) across northern Uganda, including Teso, should include returning urban IDPs on to their agenda.

→ Both government and humanitarian agencies need to establish a clear mechanism for collaborating on the protection and assistance of urban IDPs including establishing whether urban IDPs qualify to be included under the category "uniquely vulnerable groups/individuals". If they do, programming for this population is a matter of urgency.