

February 2009

Peace, Recovery and Development: Challenges in Northern Uganda

Northern Uganda has seen significant progress since the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement between the government and the Lord's Resistance Army in August 2006. In 2008 there were no LRA-related incidents in northern Uganda, and there is cause for cautious optimism that northern Uganda has turned an important page in its history, despite the LRA's repeated refusal to sign the Final Peace Agreement with the Government of Uganda. The improvement in the security situation has allowed about half of the 1.8 million people who had been forced into camps to return to their homes and to start the process of rebuilding their lives. The war-affected districts have embarked on the road towards reconstruction and recovery.

However, the journey begins without the impetus required. The implementation of the *Peace, Recovery and Development Plan for Northern Uganda* (PRDP) will not fully commence until the start of the 2009-2010 fiscal year, i.e. in July 2009. The government of Uganda has affirmed its commitment to uplifting the north, but the delay in availing funds and setting up frameworks for the recovery phase has disappointed people in northern districts and elicited angry responses from MPs in the region. It is imperative now that the war-affected population sees and feels the benefits of peace. Humanitarian assistance is being phased out at a rapid pace and if not replaced by other forms of support and encouragement, there is a risk of renewed instability. It must not be forgotten that a perception of neglect and marginalisation in the north was itself one of the root causes of the conflict.

At this critical time, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) urge Uganda's international donors to remain focused on the crisis in northern Uganda and to ensure that the progress made so far as a result of their generosity and engagement is cemented and made irreversible. Until northern Uganda is fully reintegrated into the rest of the country in terms of its economy and development indicators, and until the 1.8 million internally displaced people have found truly durable solutions to their plight, the advancements made to date risk being undone again. While these processes must be led by the government of Uganda, the continued support and commitment from the international community is vital to achieving the lasting change for which the people of northern Uganda have waited so long.

Reconstruction and recovery in return areas

In the past two years, hundreds of thousands of people have left the camps and have returned to their home villages to begin the long process of rebuilding their lives. The challenges they face in doing so are enormous. For a start, as the mid-year review of the 2008 Consolidated Appeal for Uganda noted, there is

“an appalling lack of services in the return areas,” including access to clean drinking water, clinics and education.¹ District health officials have warned of the risk of the spread of water-borne diseases in the absence of urgent action to provide access to potable water. Some districts have already battled with outbreaks of Hepatitis E as a result of the poor state of sanitation. Because of the lack of functioning schools in the return areas, parents are facing a terrible choice between leaving their children behind in the camps to finish their education there, which puts their children at a heightened risk of abuse, or denying their children the education on which their future depends.

Moreover, people who leave the camps do not become self-reliant overnight. They need seeds, tools and fertiliser to start growing their own food. While returnees have been able gradually to improve their own food security over the past few growing seasons, many remain in an unstable situation in terms of food security and continue to require assistance.² If returnees are to progress beyond subsistence farming, they need access to local markets, which in turn requires road construction. Poverty, a lack of opportunities for economic betterment and the availability of small arms are behind high levels of crime, to which the police and judicial systems in northern Uganda are ill-equipped to respond.

At the same, it must be acknowledged that years of humanitarian interventions have created high levels of dependency. These must be addressed for genuine progress in the north to be made. New approaches are required that encourage and reward initiative, responsibility and innovation. The people of northern Uganda, government authorities and their international partners all need to adjust to new ways of working together with a view to the sustained and sustainable development of the north.

The government of Uganda and local authorities in the war-affected districts have primary responsibility for addressing these issues. The government’s *Peace, Recovery and Development Plan for Northern Uganda* (PRDP) embodies an important step towards addressing the history of neglect and marginalisation of the north which lay at the root of the conflict between the government and the LRA. In the *Agreement on Comprehensive Solutions* that was signed by the government and the LRA as part of the peace negotiations in Juba, the government committed itself to “facilitat[ing] the further development and adoption of the Northern Uganda Peace, Recovery and Development Plan” and “ensur[ing] that recovery programmes are implemented expeditiously and where necessary ‘fast-tracked’ in order to respond effectively to the post-conflict needs in affected areas.”³

To date, insufficient progress has been made in this respect. The PRDP was formally adopted in October 2007 and was meant to run for three years. After already having postponed the implementation of the PRDP several times, the government recently announced that the implementation of the PRDP will now only begin at the start of the 2009-2010 fiscal year (in July 2009), thus confounding expectations in the north. Uganda’s international donors must hold the government of Uganda to account in respect of its obligations to the people of northern Uganda to provide services and infrastructure and to strive to bring development indicators for the north up to the same levels as for the rest of the country. Any delays in doing so bring further hardship to a population that has already endured two decades of war, and

¹ OCHA, *Mid-Year Review of the 2008 Consolidated Appeal*, 16 July 2008, p.7.

² See for example Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS Net), *Uganda Food Security Update*, November 2008, www.fews.net/docs/Publications/Uganda_11_2008_final.pdf

³ Agreement on Comprehensive Solutions between the Government of the Republic of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army/Movement, Juba, Sudan, 2 May 2007.

ultimately risk undermining the precarious peace itself by feeding the sense of grievance and injustice in the north.

It is incumbent upon Uganda's donors to map out a strategy for reducing humanitarian funding in a responsible manner, replacing it gradually with funding aimed at recovery and development, in agreement with Principle 9 of the *Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship*, which states that donors must "provide humanitarian assistance in ways that are supportive of recovery and long-term development, striving to ensure support, where appropriate, to the maintenance and return of sustainable livelihoods and transitions from humanitarian relief to recovery and development activities."⁴

In this process, cognizance must be taken of the fact that the structures of local government in northern Uganda have themselves be deeply affected by the war. There is as yet little capacity on the part of local authorities to take charge of the enormous task of rebuilding the north. The transition from humanitarian assistance run by international agencies to the planning and execution of recovery and development programming under the control of central and local authorities must itself be carefully managed. The situation in Lira district in the Lango sub-region should serve as a reminder, if one were needed, that a failure to do so risks having dismal consequences for populations left vulnerable by conflict and displacement. In Lira district, the returnee population suffered an increase in acute malnutrition rates between 2006 and 2007 as a result of insufficient food and reduced access to basic services once they left the camps and returned home, when local authorities proved ill-prepared to take over responsibility for providing for the needs of their people.⁵ Equally tellingly, mortality rates for the returnee population in Lira were higher than mortality rates in the Acholi districts.

Continuing humanitarian needs of camp-based populations

As of November 2008 almost 900,000 people remained in camps: 537,000 people still lived in the original IDP camps, while 332,000 people were living in so-called transit camps closer to their homes.⁶ Following the brutal attacks by the LRA against civilians in Southern Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo in late 2008 and early 2009, there have been increased movements of people back to camps and transit sites.

Not all IDPs who remain in camps want to return to their villages: some people will prefer to settle permanently in the locations of the former camps. Planning and investments are required to turn former camps into viable communities, so as to offer IDPs a genuine choice between different durable solutions. Issues of land ownership and compensation for owners of the land on which camps were situated need urgently to be addressed.

However, large numbers of the people who still reside in camps today are there because they have not yet been able to leave. The vast majority of this group continue to be in need of humanitarian aid. It would be

⁴ *Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship*, endorsed in Stockholm, 17 June 2003 by Germany, Australia, Belgium, Canada, the European Commission, Denmark, the United States, Finland, France, Ireland, Japan, Luxemburg, Norway, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Sweden and Switzerland.

⁵ See for example OCHA, *Mid-Year Review of the 2008 Consolidated Appeal*, 16 July 2008, p.19.

⁶ IASC, November 2008. Detailed statistics are available at www.internal-displacement.org/countries/uganda

a tragedy if donors, after having generously assisted these people through their darkest years, were to withdraw humanitarian funding prematurely.

In particular, a disproportionate number of the people who still reside in camps today are elderly, disabled and chronically ill people, including people living with HIV/AIDS. Many of them have expressed a desire to return to their villages, but they face insurmountable obstacles that prevent them from doing so. It must not be forgotten that “going home” in northern Uganda invariably means returning to villages that must quite literally be rebuilt from the ground up. The vulnerable people who have been left behind in the camps are often unable to build a hut in their home villages. Others need regular access to health care and cannot risk moving to places where the nearest clinic can only be reached by walking for several hours, or even days. At the same time, because so many other people have now left the camps, the support structures on which vulnerable people used to rely are rapidly disintegrating.

While guidelines for the phasing out of camps have been adopted according to which the process of phasing out a particular camp can begin when half the original camp population has left, the authorities have yet to plan for addressing the needs of vulnerable people who have little choice but to stay in the camps. Too much emphasis is being placed on a wait-and-see approach that postpones the shaping of solutions for this so-called “residual” camp population to a later stage. Donors must pressure the authorities and their partners on the ground to take a proactive stance in creating options for vulnerable people who might otherwise have none. Until that time, humanitarian assistance to the camp-based population, including food aid, must continue.

Regional challenges

While northern Uganda has not seen any LRA-related violence for many months, violence has continued in Uganda’s neighbouring countries. Following the failure by the LRA’s leader Joseph Kony to sign the Final Peace Agreement with the government of Uganda in early December 2008, the armies of Uganda, Southern Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo attacked the LRA’s bases in the DRC’s Garamba Park in late December 2008. The LRA has since attacked numerous villages in both DRC and Southern Sudan, killing almost 600 civilians and abducting more than 500 people. In the DRC a total of 104,000 people are now thought to have been forced into internal displacement by the LRA, while in Southern Sudan the LRA attacks are estimated to have displaced more than 13,500 people.⁷ Several thousands more Congolese people have fled across the border into Southern Sudan.

At the same time, fighting in north-eastern DRC in late 2008 between government troops and rebels led by renegade army general Laurent Nkunda sent thousands of Congolese refugees across the border into Uganda, while others fled to Southern Sudan. On Uganda’s eastern border the government of Uganda and relief agencies worked swiftly to organise a response to the humanitarian needs of the refugees.

Evidently, these crises are serious and they each require an urgent response in their own right.⁸ But Uganda’s international donors must not allow these crises to distract attention from the situation in

⁷ *Briefing to the Security Council on the Humanitarian Situation in the Areas Affected by the Lord’s Resistance Army* by John Holmes, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, 16 January 2009.

⁸ *WES [Western Equatoria State] Government Appeals for Emergency Humanitarian Aid for IDPs*, Sudan Tribune, 20 January 2009.

northern Uganda, where some of the progress that has been made so far threatens to be undone by the lack of a coordinated approach to the transition from humanitarian assistance to development. In fact, the process of recovery in northern Uganda is at risk of faltering. After years of providing generous humanitarian assistance to the people in the north, donor governments owe it to themselves, and above all to the people of northern Uganda, to capitalise on the opportunities for change that now present themselves. Sustained commitment is required for some time to come to ensure that the progress made thus far becomes irreversible.

Endnotes:

The **Norwegian Refugee Council** has been active in Uganda since 1997, implementing projects in Gulu, Amuru, Kitgum, Pader, Lira, Arua and Moyo, distributing food and non-food items, supporting food security initiatives, improving and providing education for children and youth, constructing schools, managing camps, monitoring return, and providing information counselling and legal assistance to both IDPs and refugees.

The **Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre**, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide. Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

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