

FURTHER CONTRIBUTION TO THE ACTION BOOK

SOME OF THE CHALLENGES OF INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS (IDPs) SITUATION IN NORTHERN UGANDA:By: Rosalba Oywa

Northern Uganda particularly the Acholiland sub-region comprising the Districts of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader has been affected by one of the longest armed-conflicts in the history of Uganda. The conflict which has now entered its 16th year has severely affected the economic and social lives of the local population.

The destructions of the communities_ social infrastructure in the rural areas caused massive population displacements. Despite the enormous problems and sufferings of the inhabitants of these areas, very little was known outside the Country until after 10 years when people began to be put in concentration camps commonly known as "Protected Villages" in 1996. Various Publications like "The Anguish of Northern Uganda", by Robert Gersony, USAID; "The Scars of War" by Human Rights Watch; "The Destruction of childhood by LRA", Amnesty International; "The Shattered Innocence", UNICEF, "Let my People go" by Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative and other reports and documentation by Agencies/NGOs operating in the Sub-region had helped to draw the attention of the International communities to the situation.

At the moment, a total figure of people living in the 42 IDP camps (33 Gulu, 6 Kitgum, 3 Pader, stand at 460,000 representing over 50% of population of the Acholi people that have remained in the 3 Districts. More than 50,000 people have migrated to Masindi District, while others have fled outside Uganda.

Field work has been conducted by Agency for Co-operation and Research in Development (ACORD) in the IDP camps in both Gulu and Kitgum for the past five years. For more than two years (March 1998 _ end of year 2000), field workers living in 10 IDP camps in Gulu and 4 in Kitgum have provided additional information in the form of monthly reports for a much wider DFID funded Research Project on Complex Political Emergencies (COPE). It is the Lessons and issues highlighted through the analysis and our work experiences which I wish to share with other stakeholders.

Key lessons and salient issues identified were as follows:

The creation of "Protected Villages" have further undermined Peoples means of livelihoods/Survival strategies and contributing to major Health Risks.

- * Life in the Government controlled "Protected Villages" have major implications for food security and have reduced the majority of the rural population to dependency on food aid from both Government and NGOs. People are unable to depend on food relief items and continue to express bitterness and frustration at their inability to sustain themselves and families especially when they consider that in the past they used to be self sufficient in food production and supply.
- * Access to land, the major means of survival remain severely restricted and dangerous due to fear and risk of landmines, being captured/abducted by rebels, and suffering rape. At certain times, people found cultivating their land were harrassed or tortured by either side of the fighting forces or treated as "rebel" by Government forces.
- * The disruption coupled with the loss of livestock due to cattle rustling have totally undermined the whole agricultural system in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader Districts. The impact of this is that casual labour, charcoal burning, local *waragi* brewing and selling have become main coping mechanisms, although some have harmful effects on both the environment and society. Even where people are able to cultivate, the need for cash income has affected food security as food and seed stock are sold off to meet other pressing needs.
- * Adjustment to the changing cash economy remains a challenge to most people. In many camps commercial sex and acts of prostitution have therefore become more prevalent amongst young women and girls. Some civilian men are being despised, by their wives because they lack sustained sources of income like their counter parts, the soldiers. Some women have openly confessed that they became engaged in sex-work because they don't want to see their children die.
- * Some parents have been accused of encouraging their daughters to elope with army men and other rich men. It is not uncommon to find girls as young as 13 years old already attached to soldiers as "wife". Although cases of defilement and rape continue to be identified and reported, justice is usually not done because parents are lured by money to have matter settled out of court.
- * Promoting behaviour change has become almost impossible in the camps. As a result, Gulu District in particular is now among the 8 highly affected Districts with HIV/AIDS/STDs

* The drastic decrease of production of crops like the highly nutritious finger millet, pigeon peas and beans is indicated by the high level of malnutrition particularly in children and the prevalence of a variety of diseases. Gulu District currently have the lowest life expectancy of 37.8 years for men and 44 for women, very high infant mortality rate of 172/1,000 live birth and maternal morbidity rate of 700/100,000 as compared to the National figure of 97/1,000 infant mortality rate and 500/100,000 morbidity rate respectively.

* There is growing resentment for camp life and desparation by the people to go back to their own land. So far, Government has not come up with policies regarding the IDPs in general and dismantling of the "Protected Villages" in particular. The proposed "decongestion policy" by some army commanders and local leaders is unpopular because people were not consulted. The "decongestion" plan of creating smaller camps in parishes is being interpreted negatively as a plot by Government to create permanent settlement camps in order to take away people's land. This has become a very sensitive issue which need to be handled carefully. People in Anaka told us in September 2001, that they prefer to die in their current status rather than moving into new settlements.

Security, Protection and Human Rights

* In October 1996, when the UPDF started ordering the remaining rural population from the Country side in Gulu District to move into the designated Trading Centres, the official reason given was to ensure adequate protection and security for the IDPs. That is why those camps were named "Protected villages".

The realities on the ground however indicate that deadly attacks in the displaced camps have been taking place right from the beginning. The analysis of monthly reports from ten (10) IDP camps in Gulu District between June _ December 1999, indicated the following incidences that took place:

Table 1: Types of incident and frequency June _ December 1999:

Types of Incident	Frequency	Types of Incident	Frequency
Raids and abduction	44	Suicides	9
Action by Military	30	Theft	9
Burning	13	Rebel movement	9
Poisoning	13	Killings	9
Rape	10	Mob. Justice	7

NB: Source COPE Working Paper No 34

In Opit camp alone, there has been eighteen attacks, while in Pabbo camp, reported 10 major attacks. The worst raid in Pabbo happened on 23rd March 1996 in which the LRA penetrated the Centre of the camp, looted shops, fired some shorts and departed. As they withdraw, the UPDF fired some mortar at them within the camp killing eight (8) civilians and 728 huts got burnt. In Anaka camp, the incidences on 5th December and 11th December 1998 resulted in the abductions of 18 and 50 people respectively. In Padibe camp, a murderous attack was carried out on 5th March 1997, leaving 12 people dead, 20 injured and 800 huts burnt.

The Location of military barracks within some of the "Protected Villages" have continued to generate debates as to who is protecting who. In Pabbo, Alero, Cwero and Awach in Gulu District, the military detaches are situated in the middle surrounded by temporary huts belonging to civilians. Concern about such co-location of civilians and military detachments have been raised by NGOs, Religious and Traditional Leaders but with no improvement. These arrangements have exposed civilians to direct attacks by rebels as well as exposing them to dangers of cross fire as the Pabbo incident has demonstrated.

Besides incidences of abduction, torture, murder, looting and destruction of properties by LRA rebels, there are also reports of UPDF soldiers harrasing displaced people by false arrests, looting, murder and destruction of property. In Pabbo camp in particular, people complained of being forced to clear land for a UPDF officer. In July 2001, one Johnson was beaten by UPDF claiming that people had refused to vote for an army man who contested the Parliamentary election in Kilak County.

In November 2001, UPDF fired guns at people during funeral right _ killing two people and injuring others. In December 2001, a UPDF soldier raped a woman in Jeng-gari _ area of the newly created camp under the Government

"Decongestion Policy". The concern for UPDF unbecoming behaviour further appeared in the New Vision of 3/11/2001 in the story "Is Gulu commercialising crime? Soldiers are defiling girls with impurity and they are only transferred to other stations". There are cases where some government soldiers have eloped and move away with civilian wives. Such actions have been interpreted by local people to be an expression of total domination and an attempt to destroy their culture and identity. Such disrespect for Human Rights especially by people who are supposed to protect civilians pre-occupy people's minds and is usually manifested in the form of trauma, domestic violence and delinquency. Such tensions can only help to fuel the ongoing conflict.

* Displaced people face additional attitudes of discrimination and prejudice by host communities. Since there are no policies to protect the IDPs, anger, low self-esteem, frustration, competition over resources, poverty, and different types of exploitation experienced in the camps has helped to encourage violence, murder and suicide.

Educational Opportunities:

* One of the social Institutions most affected by the displacement is that of education. Many schools were automatically closed as teachers, pupils and their parents fled in different directions. While the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) has to some extent put basic education in reach of larger number of children, the IDPs schools are too crowded to allow meaningful teaching to take place.

In most camps, several primary schools have been combined under the leadership of one of the headmasters. In Cwero P.7 School for example, in 1998 _ seven (7) schools from the parishes were combined into one. The 165 pupils had only two teachers; other teachers had left the camps and settled in Gulu town. In recent years, no pupils from the schools in the IDP camps got a first grade. In Acholibur, there were 1,050 pupils (only 17%) of the pupils were able to join secondary education in 2001. Palabek Gem Displaced School had 1,060 enrolled pupils with 20 teachers in 2000 and only 13% were able to join secondary school. In Pabbo, the average size of P.1 class is about 500 pupils and in Pajule Displaced Primary School, 300 pupils.

Given the above circumstances for most young people in the Acholi sub-region, the opportunities for pursuing secondary, let alone tertiary study, are severely limited. At the moment there are only two secondary schools, Opit and Pabbo that are fully operating outside Gulu town. These schools accommodate only less than 200 students each, which represent only less than 37% of the student population of 540 in the rural schools.

With regard to Government policy that each sub-county should have at least one secondary school, at the moment 9 (Alero, Amuru, Atiak, Lalogi, Ongako, Purongo, Palaro, Patiko and Koro) out of the 19 rural sub-counties in Gulu District have still no secondary school.

Many youth have become increasingly disenchanted as educational and employment opportunities become elusive. These youth have grown up in the midst of the conflict and their ability to cope with the current social, economic and political situation that characterises their world is threatening. The increased marginalisation of youth in accessing higher education is very stressful because without education, there will be no escape from the vicious circle of poverty. There is a likelihood that such discrimination and resentment which is already being manifested in anger and violence can further explode.

Moral Degeneration:

* The most striking sights in the camps are high number of unattended children, crowded youth playing cards, wandering aimlessly or drinking and chewing *marungi*. These are signs of separated families and inactivity/idleness due to lack of what to do. Parents most often are separated from each other or from their children. During the day, children are left behind as their parents risk their lives to go back to collect wild fruits and roots. In the process, some people were caught in the crossfires and got killed or maimed. As a result, the problems of orphans, homeless children, disability and trauma has emerged in the region.

The breakdown of family, social networks and social cohesion within communities through displacement, have deprived particularly women headed households (widows, single mothers), of the required support and assistance. As a result, there is general stress and signs of emotional and mental distress amongst different categories of people due to tension, worries, lost of hope and confusion. This trauma apart from becoming personal tragedy, can become a blockage for successful community rehabilitation and reconciliation.

Conclusion:

Our research in the IDP camps reveal that the root causes of the prolonged armed conflict involve a combination of political, military, economic and historical factors. The issues raised above further lead to a realisation that the key outcome of the conflict has been a weakening or failure to create trust between Government and the local population. The failure of Government to provide adequate protection have bred deep mistrust and lost of confidence by the local population in both the Government and the army. The continuous mishandling of the situation will only help to strengthen the alienation of the population, misperception, prejudices and weak Government capacity in Northern Uganda particularly Acholiland.

Furthermore, the cumulative impact of loss of education, health and economic opportunities will remain a key factor to fuel the conflict if not properly addressed.

The conflict itself is understood as being multi-level, involving local, national, Regional and International players who have a variety of interests which change over time. At each level, and between the different levels there are stakeholders, issues and relationships to be addressed. The starting point for a meaningful solution to this type of conflict should be to assess the involvement of the various stakeholders at the different levels in order to understand which ones in particular are gaining from the continuation of the conflict, and the implications of this for the area and the majority of people living there. Negotiating a settlement at one level and on one set of issues, while failing to address the stakeholders and issues at other levels, may not help since the interest of the key players are not the same.