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SEEKING SAFETY

**South Sudan on the brink of genocide**

South Sudan’s conflict is threatening to devolve into genocide. And, with 2,000 refugees crossing into Uganda every day, that country is also in desperate need of assistance

08 JUNE 2017 - 06:00 STEPHAN HOFSTATTER

Every day 2,000 refugees fleeing famine and a devastating civil war in South Sudan cross the border into Uganda. With armed groups increasingly targeting civilians, the conflict has created the world’s fastest-growing refugee crisis.

To date, 1.8m refugees have fled to six neighbouring countries, though most of them are in Uganda. Last year alone more than 500,000 fled to that country — more than crossed the Mediterranean to Europe. The number is soon expected to exceed 1m.

Uganda has a long history of settling refugees in villages rather than in temporary tented camps, and providing them with the same protection, access to services, employment and rights that its own citizens enjoy, though they are barred from getting involved in politics.

Uganda’s refugee commissioner, Apollo Kazungu, says this is partly reciprocal. "Ugandans have been refugees in the Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC], South Sudan, Rwanda [and] Kenya," he says. "There is a rich history of [Ugandans] having benefited from being refugees elsewhere. Even our topmost leadership have been refugees."

Close ethnic affiliation between groups on either side of the border makes integration easier, says Kazungu.

But the country’s progressive refugee policy has placed an intolerable strain on state and donor resources, worsened by food shortages in the settlements. Officials warn of a looming violent backlash from local communities and heightened tensions among refugees arriving in unprecedented numbers.

The Guardian reported in May that some villagers are resisting the relocation of refugees on their land, and fights are breaking out. In April, an aid convoy was ambushed by armed youths trying to stop it from reaching the settlements, and a refugee was killed during a fight over water, the report said.

"It’s a very scary situation," says Robert Baryamwesiga, who runs Bidi Bidi, Uganda’s largest settlement. The settlement hosts more than 270,000 refugees, making it the largest in the world.

The "tsunami" of refugees entering Uganda after hostilities flared again in South Sudan last year took everyone by surprise. "No-one expected Bidi Bidi to reach these numbers," Baryamwesiga says.

Last month the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, which co-ordinates emergency responses with governments and other agencies, warned that it needed another US$1.4bn to provide "life-saving aid" to refugees until the end of the year.

US President Donald Trump’s plan to slash funding to the UN is a major concern, and it may affect the willingness of other donors to contribute.

"The US is our biggest donor," says Baryamwesiga. "We are already catching the cold."

The chronic funding crunch means many schools and clinics remain temporary structures covered in tarpaulin that is torn to shreds during storms. "We can’t guarantee safety and dignity of children in classrooms," says Baryamwesiga.

He believes robust mediation efforts, coupled with military intervention to enforce peace agreements, offer the only hope for a long-term solution. "People who are committing violence against women and children must be stopped. As citizens of the world we have an obligation to stand up and say: no more violence against civilians."

The most recent arrivals in Uganda are from villages surrounding the town of Yei, 150km from South Sudan’s capital, Juba.

Until recently Yei had largely escaped the violence that has engulfed the country since civil war broke out in 2013. This changed last July, when heavy fighting broke out between rebels led by opposition leader and former vice-president Riek Machar and government forces loyal to President Salva Kiir. Machar fled to the DRC, with government forces in hot pursuit. He is currently in exile in SA.

According to a report released last month by the UN, what followed was a spree of looting, rape, pillage and murder by government troops and their allies. The report documents indiscriminate shelling of civilians, gang rapes, attacks on funerals and executions of civilians suspected of backing rebels.

UN investigators say both sides have targeted civilians based on ethnicity. On the one side are Kiir’s largely Dinka government soldiers, on the other Machar’s mostly Nuer rebels. Each has a complex constellation of allies made up of different ethnic groups that have been drawn into the conflict too.

During a visit to Yei in November, UN special adviser on genocide Adama Dieng warned that immediate action was needed to prevent the conflict from devolving into genocide.

The South Sudanese army has denied the allegations, accusing the UN of bias in failing to report that rebels regularly arm children to attack government troops. However, the UN report says both sides are committing atrocities, but investigators were denied access to rebel held areas.

Every day, 300 refugees cross a rickety wooden bridge separating Uganda from South Sudan at Busia border post, then trundle up a hill on motorbikes, bicycles and on foot, leaving the horrors of war behind them. From here they are taken to a transit camp before registering at a collection centre and being bused to various settlements.

Some returned to their homes after attacks to salvage some possessions, others fled with the clothes on their backs. Entire villages and up to 70% of some towns have been depopulated.

Samuel Lumori Cosmos offloads his luggage under a tree to be inspected by a border official. A soldier from the Uganda People’s Defence Force, armed with a machine gun mounted on a tripod, watches from the shade of a giant ant-heap.

Cosmos fled after his village was attacked by government soldiers last month.

"They came with guns and killed four civilians and shot another one in the hand, one in the groin and one in the leg," he says. He doesn’t know why they attacked. "They just came and started shooting people at the market. We had to leave. The whole village has fled into the bush and is coming here. If we stay there we will die."

Children are the worst affected. Government soldiers and rebels occupy or destroy schools, recruiting child soldiers at gunpoint. Those who resist or flee are shot or hacked to death with machetes. Many have lost their parents or been separated from them; they are forced to make the journey through the bush on foot, unaccompanied by adults.

Betty Kiden collapses in relief when she reaches the top of the hill at Busia. Her village lies more than 20km from the border. She walked with her 18-month-old twins, Anja and David Lotigo, on her back before a neighbour on a motorbike picked them up.

"It was very difficult," she says. "I feel safe now that I have crossed the border."

The war has left children, especially those who have witnessed relatives being killed, with psychological scars. The UN Children’s Fund (Unicef) warns the trauma of exposure to war could hamper cognitive development in children if it is not dealt with promptly.

"Exposure to conflict causes toxic stress that can affect brain development, even in the unborn child," says Unicef early child development officer Mystica Acheng.

With Unicef’s support, the Ugandan government has developed an integrated early childhood development strategy that’s been extended to the refugees. President Yoweri Museveni is a personal champion, and has instructed regional and district administrators to prioritise its implementation.

This approach is becoming increasingly important, with hundreds of thousands of child refugees growing up in Uganda.

"People are beginning to realise the human resource is very important in transforming the economy," says James Kaboggoza, assistant commissioner for children’s affairs. "Investing in children at an early age means they are more likely to increase the GDP of this country" than become a burden.

For many children crossing the border is the first step back to normality.

Moses Remo’s brother was gunned down in his fields. He spent five days walking through the bush and travelling on buses with his family to reach Imvepi, one of the newest settlements in Uganda.

When they arrived, his children were bewildered and traumatised. But Remo is grateful that they are safe at last.

"If they aren’t hearing gunshots they will get back to normal," he says. "At least they will go to school now."

• Produced with assistance from Unicef

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