

**INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE WORKING GROUP
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Northern Uganda: Background Document Prepared by ICVA

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Over the last 10 months, there have been a number of high-level missions to Northern Uganda. The UN Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), Jan Egeland, described the situation as the world's most forgotten humanitarian crisis. Unicef's Executive Director, Carol Bellamy, on a recent mission to Northern Uganda urged that the world's focus remain on the situation.

The IASC Working Group has discussed the situation in Northern Uganda several times, but at a recent NGO-IASC meeting in Geneva where the humanitarian situation was again discussed, it was noted that the issues raised continue to be the same as they were 10 months ago when the Representative of the Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), Dr. Francis Deng, visited Northern Uganda.¹

The Humanitarian Response

The humanitarian response to the situation has not increased to the extent that would be expected given the amount of international attention to the situation. Humanitarian agencies must ensure that their own efforts to respond to the humanitarian needs are moved ahead with the speed required of a situation where protection is lacking and the general health and nutrition situation is poor. The Government of Uganda, indeed, has the primary responsibility to ensure the protection of its citizens. The protection of civilians, and particularly IDPs, in Northern Uganda continues to be inadequate. In the last few weeks alone, there have been several attacks leaving more than 120 civilians dead and numerous wounded. The recent attacks in Gulu district all follow a similar pattern showing a lack of capacity and political will to end the conflict. The humanitarian community must continue to "responsibilise" the government to lead an appropriate response – whether through direct discussions with the government or via advocacy with donor governments.

¹ This background paper will not go into the details of the situation in Northern Uganda as they have been well documented elsewhere, including in IASC WG background papers. See, for example, "Specific Groups and Individuals Mass Exoduses and Displaced Persons: Report of the Representative of the Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons, Francis M. Deng, Addendum, Profiles in Displacement: Mission to Uganda," Commission on Human Rights, Sixtieth Session, E/CN.4/2004/77/Add.1, 3 March 2004; "IDP: Background Note on Uganda," 54th Meeting of the IASC WG, September 2003; "Northern Uganda Background Note," 55th Meeting of the IASC WG, November 2003; "Follow-Up Action Point Matrix 54th IASC WG Meeting," 55th Meeting of the IASC WG, November 2003; "Information Note on Follow-up actions to the 55th IASC WG meeting's discussion on Northern Uganda," 56th Meeting, February 2004; "Follow-Up Action Point Matrix 55th IASC WG Meeting," 56th Meeting, February 2004; and "Internal Displacement Unit Mission to Uganda: Mission Report," Internal Displacement Unit, 24 March 2004.

While a political solution to the conflict is needed, it seems that the attention on the situation is only slowly being translated into concrete improvements by humanitarian organisations – increases in staffing and programmes, for example, have not moved as quickly as they should have. It seems that organisations – both UN and NGOs – have been slow to move into the higher gear required for an emergency phase. As one NGO staff described the situation, “It’s like a frog in boiling water syndrome.”

Past IASC WG meetings have called for increased field presences in Northern Uganda, a review of the overall humanitarian strategy, and revitalising discussions around protection, among other recommendations. In some areas of the country, there are definite improvements in the situation – Lira and Teso being examples (though these improvements are also a result of rebel movements away from the areas).

Security and Access

The security situation in Northern Uganda definitely poses serious challenges to the humanitarian community being able to operate in safety. Insecurity and risks, however, are not to be avoided, but managed. Efforts have been undertaken to try and gain better humanitarian access, particularly with the appointment of an OCHA staff member to focus on the issue. Negotiations related to access should be taking place at higher levels and the Humanitarian Coordinator has a key role to play in this regard. Despite the efforts made to date, the improvements in terms of access for humanitarian workers remain limited. NGOs could be encouraged to work more actively on negotiating access with all parties to the conflict, but any such efforts should be done in a coordinated manner and information shared appropriately.

Armed Escorts

The use of armed escorts is an issue that has been discussed by the IASC WG before with a concrete recommendation being made. Some discussions have taken place on the use of armed escorts and the Country Team feels that their use is in-line with the IASC Guidelines on the Use of Armed Escorts. It would be helpful to have a review of the use of armed escorts among the broader humanitarian community given that some within the community find the use of armed escorts by others to be creating unhelpful perceptions. Such a wider discussion is in-line with the IASC Guidelines. The Guidelines also suggest the development of a situation-specific code of conduct, which could be revisited.

Protection

The efforts of the protection working groups, while having improved of late, could still be further improved. The protection working group in Gulu, for example, has recently made good progress working closely with the Ugandan Human Rights Commission. A mission by the IDP Unit in March 2004 offered much-needed protection expertise to support the work of these protection working groups, for a limited time, to help them have a more concrete impact on the protection of civilians and particularly IDPs.

To date, that offer of protection expertise by the IDP Unit has not been taken up. UNHCR has agreed to provide expertise and advice to the protection working group

in Kampala, but not leadership. While the IDP Unit mission suggested that Unicef could take on a leadership role on protection, there are questions around whether or not Unicef has the adequate resources in place to take on such a role, given the huge protection challenges facing children, let alone the broader population.

There is a lack of protection staff on the ground. Recent discussions with OHCHR could be an avenue for finding ways to improve this situation. In the meantime, given the recent discussions in the Senior Network on Internal Displacement on a possible protection stand-by force, Uganda perhaps could be a pilot case to put this external protection expertise into practice. However, agencies would have to provide protection staff for such a stand-by force to work.

Protection in the Protected Villages?

The so-called “protected villages” (aka IDP camps) are not providing the protection required for those in the camps. The government has a responsibility to ensure the protection of its citizens no matter where they are. There should be more discussions amongst humanitarian agencies on the ground as to the approach to take vis-à-vis the government on these camps. Based on the discussions resulting from the humanitarian community in Uganda on the “protected villages,” the IASC could consider the possibility of a statement similar to that produced in 1999 on the *regroupement* camps in Burundi.

Humanitarian Leadership

The number of IDPs in Northern Uganda has more than doubled in the last two years. It has been repeatedly noted that for the collaborative approach to IDPs to work, strong humanitarian leadership is required. Given the extremely different situations in the North and South of Uganda, combined with the fact that the challenges in the North are so great, it would seem logical to have a dedicated person in the UN system to ensure strong humanitarian leadership. The Humanitarian Coordinator must be able to engage in consistent and robust advocacy with the government on humanitarian issues on behalf of the broader humanitarian community. A separation of the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator functions would allow the time and space required for the HC to focus on ensuring that the protection and assistance needs of the civilian population in the North are met both through such advocacy and through strong humanitarian leadership.

Donor Response

While there has been increased attention from the donor community on Northern Uganda, the funds being provided are still inadequate. WFP is facing a shortfall in stocks come September, but even now the food basket remains incomplete. More work needs to be done by IASC members vis-à-vis donors to respond to the situation. At the same time, NGOs must ensure that they are in a position to respond to needs with their own resources.

Expected Outcomes:

- A better understanding of what and/or where the constraints are that are preventing agencies from providing a humanitarian response proportionate to the needs and concrete suggestions for overcoming those constraints.
- A commitment by agencies to re-examine their staffing to ensure that it is adequate in terms of numbers, quality, and location to meet the humanitarian needs.
- Broader discussions among the humanitarian community in Uganda on the use of armed escorts, given the impact on the humanitarian community as a whole when certain agencies use them.
- Discussion among the humanitarian community in Uganda on the approach to take vis-à-vis “protected villages” with a recommendation to be made to the IASC if an IASC statement on the issue would be helpful.
- A commitment by agencies to more engagement on moving forward on protection issues, including by calling in external protection expertise that has been offered by the IDP Unit.
- Agencies to identify ways to deploy protection staff urgently.
- The separation of the RC and HC functions to allow the HC to adequately address the gravity of the humanitarian situation both in terms of humanitarian leadership within the humanitarian community and in terms of advocacy vis-à-vis the government.
- Identify upcoming opportunities to emphasise the urgency of the Northern Uganda crisis to donors.

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