



IS UGANDA'S REPUTATION AS A REFUGEE PARADISE AT STAKE?

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UGANDA HAS HAD A LONG HISTORY OF HOSTING PEOPLE WHO ARE FLEEING UPHEAVALS IN THEIR COUNTRIES. IN THE 1930S AND EARLY 1940S, THE COUNTRY HOSTED IN NYABYEYA, KOJJA AND ARAPAI REFUGEE CAMPS EUROPEAN AND ARAB REFUGEES DISPLACED BY WORLD WAR II, INCLUDING ITALIAN PRISONERS OF WAR, WHO WERE HOUSED IN ENTEBBE.

In 2013, 27-year-old Kasereka Kahamba fled his home in Rwanguba, Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) after militants attacked his home. Alone, he walked to Nyakabande Transit Centre in Kisoro district.

“Life was very hard for me. I was alone. I did not know what had happened to my parents and brother,” he narrates. “I still do not know where they are.” Kahamba was eventually settled in Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement in Kamwenge district, western Uganda. “In the settlement, I realised I was the only member of the Nandi tribe. Most of my neighbours belonged to the tribe that attacked our home. It was distressing.”

He could have chosen to wallow in despair and self-pity, but Kahamba picked up the reins of his life. Back in Goma, Kahamba worked in a factory making walkie-talkie covers.

Relying on the memory of the knowledge he had acquired, he began making leather products for sale.

Kahamba would later enrol at a university. “In 2015, an advert for scholarships passed around calling upon those who were able to apply for scholarships at Bugema University. I applied and I got the scholarship to study Disaster Management.” Today, Kahamba is in his final year at university. He is one of the over one million refugees and asylum seekers who call Uganda home.

A history of hosting refugees
Uganda has had a long history of hosting people who are fleeing upheavals in their countries. In the 1930s and early 1940s, the country hosted European and Arab refugees displaced by World War II in Nyabyeya,



Kojja and Arapai refugee camps as well as Italian prisoners of war, who were housed in Entebbe.

Prompted by the influx of Sudanese refugees in 1950, the colonial administration enacted the Control of Refugees from Sudan Ordinance in 1951. This was soon followed by the Control of Alien Refugees Act, 1960, to cater for all refugees regardless of where they came from.

On 27 September 1976, Uganda ratified the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol of the Convention which stated that refugees and asylum seekers are entitled to the enjoyment of the rights enshrined in the International Human Rights Conventions, placing the responsibility of protecting refugees directly on the shoulders of host countries.

Uganda has since hosted refugees from Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan, the DRC, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia, among other countries.

Conducive laws, policies and practices
As at 31 January 2018, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for

Refugees (UNHCR), Uganda had hosted 1,411,794 refugees and asylum seekers, making Uganda the largest refugee hosting country in Africa. “Despite a slowing economic growth, poverty, rapid environmental deterioration, domestic difficulties in the sectors of energy, education, health and water, and limited access to financial services, Uganda has kept its borders open to refugees,” says Duniya Aslam Khan, UNHCR Uganda spokesperson.

Uganda has been praised for having the most progressive refugee laws and policies in the world. The Refugee Act, 2006 and the 2010 Refugee Regulations, for example, provide for the protection and integration of refugees and asylum seekers so that they can access the same public services, such as education and health care, as the host community.

Chapter 29 of the Refugee Act, 2006, stipulates that refugees are entitled to free and just treatment without discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, sex, nationality and ethnic identity, and that a refugee shall be accorded the same protection as is accorded to the nationals of Uganda, in respect of the protection of intellectual

property rights, including industrial inventions, patents, designs, trade names, copyrights and other artistic and scientific works.

In 2009, Uganda passed the Urban Refugee Policy, which designated urban areas as legitimate places where refugees can enjoy their rights. Also, in the second phase of the National Development Plan (NDP II), the government included refugee management and protection through the Refugee Settlement Transformative Agenda.

It is important to note that perhaps the enactment of the refugee-friendly policies would have been in vain had the host communities been hostile. Khan says the hospitality of Ugandans is laudable.

Uganda, the refugee haven

Upon arrival, refugees go through entry and settlement phases, and then, something unique to Uganda, they are integrated in the communities. According to John Paul Magezi, from the Department of Refugees in the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), refugees are free to move around the country and pursue economic opportunities.



“They are not confined to camps but live in settlements and are allocated land for subsistence farming. They have a right to education and other social services. Some Ugandans in Kampala are employed by refugees who fled their countries but were able to start all over again by building petrol stations and restaurants. Because of the conducive environment, refugees can own and register both formal and informal businesses.”

With such a policy environment and welcoming host communities, it is no wonder that Uganda is considered a haven for refugees.

Reputation at stake?

Hosting of refugees, however, comes with challenges such as environmental degradation and spill-over insecurity from the conflict in the country of origin. Refugees also put pressure on public social services such as education, water and health.

Currently, Uganda is also facing accountability questions over monies received for refugee humanitarian assistance. In February 2018, allegations of gross mismanagement

of resources for refugees, including the inflation of refugee numbers, came to light. In March 2018, the national press carried undercover reports of sexual exploitation and trafficking of refugee children and women.

The long-term repercussions of these scandals could be determined by how well and pragmatically the government handles them. The State Minister for Refugees, the Hon. Musa Eweru, said the government would thoroughly investigate the allegations and bring the culprits to book. In fact, officials implicated in the mismanagement of resources at the OPM have since been suspended and put under investigations. However, there is fear that these scandals could besmirch the image of Uganda as a paradise for refugees. Already, at the Uganda Solidarity Summit on Refugees held in June 2017, UN officials were sceptical about how the money collected would be used effectively to benefit refugees.

The Hon. Angel Mark Dulu, the Member of Parliament for Adjumani East, says the scandal may not have a big impact on Uganda as a country, because the management of refugees is a preserve of

the UN, not the host country. However, she notes that it is the refugees who may feel the pinch. “Already, we have been approached by refugees who are worried that this scandal has affected their food rations. Since UNHCR cut the rations it offers to refugees to half, refugees complain that the food they get is not enough.”

Officials at the OPM were hesitant to comment on this matter, given the sensitivity of the current refugee scandals rocking the country. With conflicts in the neighbouring countries, however, showing no sign of ending, it is needless to say that Uganda won’t stop receiving more refugees. The country absolutely needs funding to respond to humanitarian situations. The question is whether or not the emergency response and support mechanisms won’t be ruined should partners and agencies lose trust in Uganda’s accountability systems.

However instead of losing interest key stakeholders should support the government in its efforts to address the weaknesses.