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AUTHOR

Daniel Adyera

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The Case for Robust Policy Options for Countering Criminal Radicalisation and Inter-ethnic Extremism among South Sudanese Youth in Refugee Settlements in Uganda

Daniel Adyera

This policy brief explores policy options for countering criminal radicalisation and inter-ethnic extremism among South Sudanese youth in refugee settlements in Uganda. The paper adopts a working definition of 'criminal radicalisation' and 'inter-ethnic extremism'. The paper contends that the existing laws and policies regulating refugees in the country are to a large extent reactionary and non-target-specific, and do not adequately tackle the increasing crime and existing inter-ethnic extremism among South Sudanese. The researcher used qualitative research methodology consisting of open-ended questionnaires and literature review. Data was collected from key informants in refugee settlements and analysed with existing literature on refugee radicalisation, criminal coping and violent extremism in other refugee-hosting jurisdictions. Two key findings emerged from this study. First, the study found that there are combinations of mixed factors contributing to the criminal radicalisation of South Sudanese refugee youth. These factors are multivariate and operate at an interactional though different matrix levels, that is, at the micro and meso levels. Second, the study found that there are two categories of radical South Sudanese refugee youth, that is, the passive radicals and the active radicals. In an attempt to address South Sudanese refugee criminal radicalisation and inter-ethnic extremism, this policy brief recommends: i) mass sensitisation of all refugees in all settlements to Uganda's basic laws, particularly criminal law and land law; ii) the extension of inter-cultural/ethnic dialogue for South Sudanese refugees in all refugee settlements; and iii) empowerment of all refugee youth through meaningful engagement and active participation in decision making and implementation.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

There are growing concerns about the rising level of crime and inter-ethnic extremism among South Sudanese refugees in refugee settlements in Uganda.[1] This problem foments insecurity and sustains tension within the refugee settlements and surrounding host communities. Uganda is currently host to over 1.3 million refugees, most of whom are youth, from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi, Rwanda and Somalia, among others.[2] In the past few years, there have been some reports in the media[3] and from agencies such as the UN Refugee Agency (UNCHR)[4] about the rising crime rates and violence in refugee settlements, perpetrated by the youth, mainly from South Sudan. For instance, in 2018, refugees in Bidi Bidi camp[5] staged a violent strike over delayed and missed food rations, which led to massive looting, destruction of property and physical assaults on both UNHCR and World Food Programme (WFP) staff.[6] In other instances, several South Sudanese refugees have been intercepted or arrested for illegal possession of firearms and military attire and others for recruiting South Sudanese refugee youths into military organisations such as the Sudanese

People's Liberation Army-In Opposition (SPLA-IO).[7] In an attempt to counter the growing criminality, in July 2017, the UNHCR donated twelve patrol vehicles to the Uganda Police Force (UPF) to help patrol border areas and maintain peace, security, law and order in refugee settlements.[8]

There have been some intervention measures to curb crime and inter-ethnic extremism within the refugee settlements by the Ugandan government, donor agencies and community-based organisations (CBOs). For instance, the government has had police stations established within almost every refugee settlement. Donor agencies have also engaged in programmes aimed at equipping refugees with entrepreneurial skills to start their own businesses and desist from criminal activities. Also, international organisations like Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) have advocated dialogue and inter-ethnic tolerance by organising and hosting community radio talk shows (Kabake) in some refugee settlements, hence facilitating dialogue among South Sudanese refugees.[9]

However, much still remains to be done to reduce criminal radicalism and inter-ethnic conflicts in refugee settlements. The situation is exacerbated by the ongoing civil war in South Sudan and the porous Uganda-South Sudan border, where unsubstantiated reports suggest that some South Sudanese rebels hiding and recruiting young South Sudanese to fight in the South Sudan war.[10]

1.2. Uganda's refugee policy at a glance

Uganda's refugee laws (Refugees Act 2006 and Refugees Regulations 2010) and policies[11] have been lauded and branded as 'progressive' and a model for refugee-hosting countries around the world.[12] These laws and policies largely aim at promoting the social and economic welfare of refugees and fostering social integration within the host communities. The laws spell out rights, duties and freedoms for refugees such as access to education, health, land for agriculture and freedom of movement. However, notwithstanding Uganda's benevolence towards refugees, some scholars, such as Loescher and Milner (2005), have warned that there is need to understand and appreciate the 'security implications of hosting refugees'.[13] They argue, like Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo (1986),[14] that there are risks 'posed by the spill-over of conflict and [the problem] of refugee warriors'[15] in refugee settlements. For instance, allegations about the presence of South Sudanese rebels and reports of refugee recruitment drives in settlements have the potential to create hostile relations and misunderstandings between the Government of Uganda and that of South Sudan. Also, the socio-economic and environmental impacts of hosting refugees have been highlighted by some migration scholars.[16] They argue that the pressures and burdens of hosting refugees are heavy on host communities, leading to tension, conflicts and crime perpetration. There are numerous reports of cases of competition for land, energy resources (firewood), local services and infrastructure between refugees and their host communities, which have led to crime, strained relations and violence.[17]

Fig. 1: Statistics showing refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda
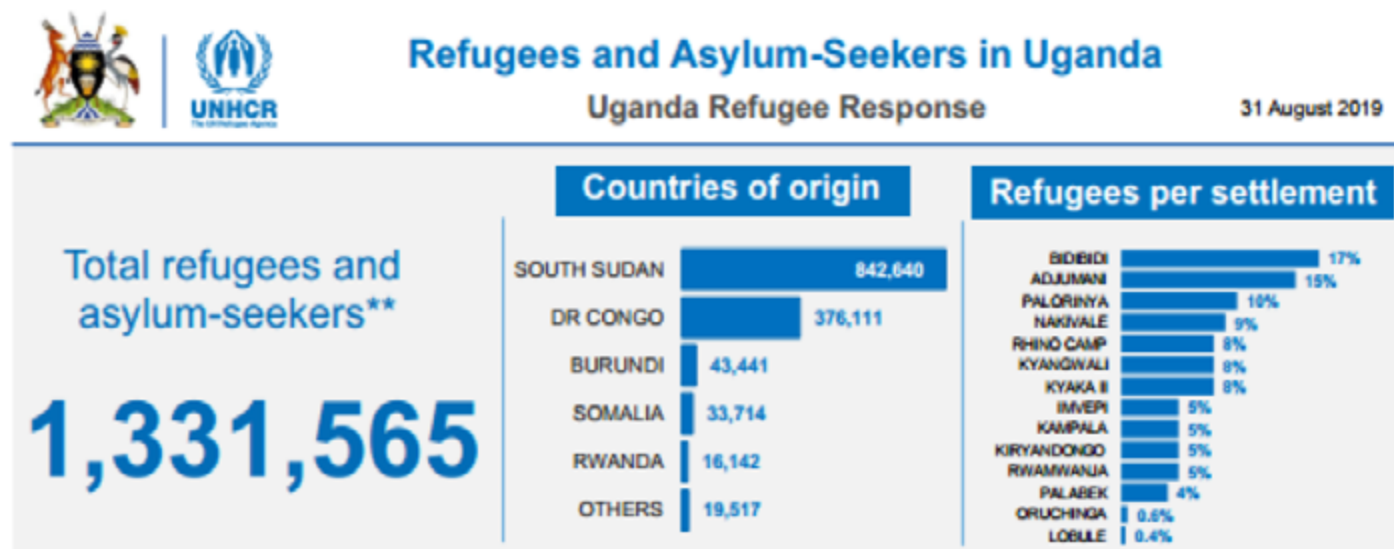
Source: OPM/UNHCR, 2019

Fig. 2: Map showing the distribution of refugee settlements in Uganda
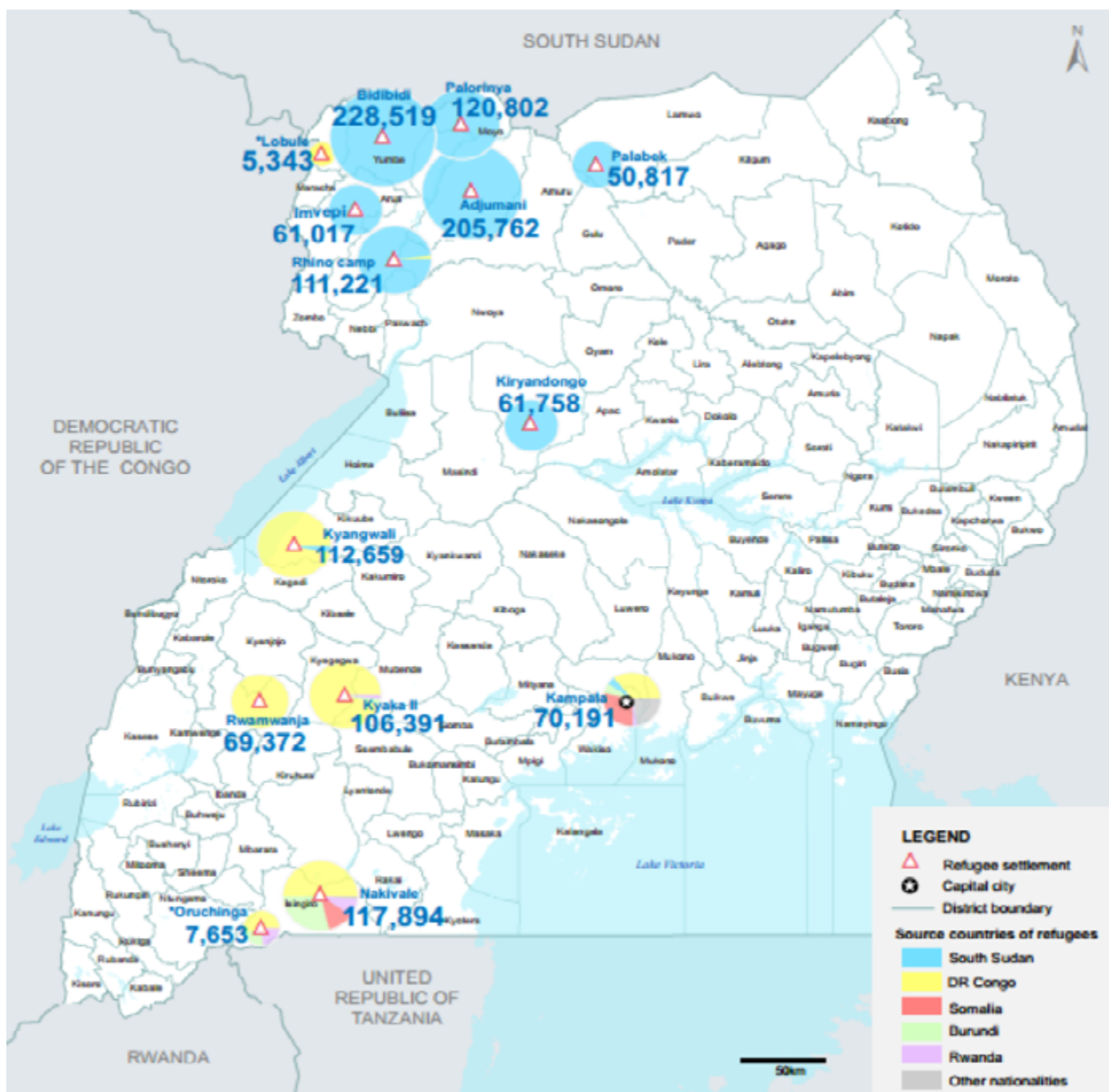
Source: OPM/UNCHR-Statistics, 2019 (ProGres version 4)

2. Methodology and Terminology

2.1. Methodology

In this study, the researcher used qualitative research methodology consisting of open-ended questionnaires and literature review. The questionnaire consisted of demographic information and questions related to causes of refugee youth criminal radicalisation/inter-ethnic extremism and current policy interventions to counter these problems. Data from key informants in refugee settlements was obtained and analysed with the existing literature review on refugee radicalisation in countries such as Turkey and Jordan and inter-ethnic extremism in Kakuma refugee settlement in north-western Kenya. The study was limited by a number of factors such as limited access to all key stakeholders and inadequate time to visit all refugee settlements with South Sudanese.

2.2. Terminology

There are continuing debates and complexities surrounding the meaning of the terms 'radicalisation' and 'extremism', and not much consensus has been reached.[18] To date, radicalisation and extremism have been conceived and evaluated mainly through military and political action, and terrorism lenses. According to Dr Alex P. Schmid,[19] 'there is lack of clarity and consensus with regard to key concepts of radicalisation [and] extremism'. He argues that 'radicalism is not a synonym for terrorism' despite the fact that 'much of the literature on radicalisation focuses on Islamist extremism and jihadist terrorism'.[20] These debates are not presented here. However, emerging research on radicalisation has shown some links between radicalisation and common/petty crime perpetration and criminal coping.[21] Hence, for the purposes of this paper, a crime perspective of radicalisation is adopted. Therefore, criminal radicalisation refers to the belief in, support for and adoption of an uncompromising mind-set towards crime perpetration against any target as a means of survival, revenge, gratification or any other purpose. And inter-ethnic extremism is defined as the 'belief in, support for and acceptance of violence against individuals of a different ethnicity'.[22]

2.3. Objective of the study

The objective of this study was to explore robust policy options to counter criminal radicalisation and inter-ethnic extremism among South Sudanese youth in refugee settlements in Uganda.

Crime and inter-ethnic violence not only affect 95 per cent of refugees who live in the settlements[23] but also threatens the security of surrounding host communities.[24].Key drivers of criminal radicalisation include factors such as extreme poverty, shortage of employment opportunities, limited access to education and inadequate access to factors of production.[25] These problems are manifested in the increasing crime rates and inter-ethnic extremist violence in the majority of South Sudan refugee settlements. South Sudanese inter-ethnic extremism is mainly caused by the deep political disagreements, especially between the ruling Dinka and the Nuer ethnic groups. According to the Refugee Law Project 2018 Annual Report, a total of 1,221 criminal cases were registered within the various refugee settlements.[26] The crimes reported include cases of violent rape (46 cases), murder (81 cases), malicious damage (63 cases) and robbery (32 cases), among others. For instance, in October 2019, Ian Natukunda, the officer in charge of Palorinya refugee settlement in Obongi district was shot and fatally wounded by a South Sudanese refugee, whom he attempted to disarm after he had stolen a gun from a female police officer. In response, the Inspector General of Police, Martins Okoth-Ochola urged the UPF to intensify vigilance and prohibit any form of violence within the refugee settlements.

Inter-ethnic extremism and tension within the refugee community have resulted in extreme violence.[27] For instance, in June 2018, the UNHCR condemned the extreme youth violence between the Dinka and Nuer tribal factions in Rhino Camp that left four people dead and scores injured, and led to the mass displacement of women and children.[28] The violence was triggered by a fight between two young men watching a World Cup game. Other incidents have been triggered by fights between women at water collection points and between school-going children. A teacher interviewed by the International Refugee Rights Initiative (IRRI) explained that '[w]hen children play together and

one is injured, for example a Kakwa and an Avokaya, they [their parents] fight'. Another added that '[t]here is friction, and only a small thing can trigger it. The problems of South Sudan are in our minds.' In other incidents, a Nuer woman living in Tika zone told IRRI: 'Some people who chased us from South Sudan were doing the same things here. We [they] said that once we would react, there would be consequences'.[29] Other forms of violence have also been reported among South Sudanese refugees of similar language and origins in Imvepi refugee settlement.[30] Also, some reports exist on tensions between host-community members and refugees emanating from sharing scarce resources such as land and public services, which have led to the commission of more crimes.[31]

2.4. Research questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

Primary research question

What robust policy options can be explored to counter criminal radicalisation and inter-ethnic extremism among South Sudanese youth in refugee settlements?

Secondary research questions

1. How are criminal radicalisation and inter-ethnic extremism being dealt with?

2. How can the government improve current refugee policies to address criminal radicalisation and inter-ethnic extremism?

3. Critique of the Existing Legal and Policy Framework

There are two main pieces of legislations and various policies regulating the existence of refugees in Uganda. The Refugees Act 2006 and the Refugees Regulations 2010 are the statutory sources of refugee rights, duties, obligations and protection in Uganda. The laws are supplemented by polices such as the Self Reliance Strategy (SRS) implemented by the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and the Refugee and Host Population Empowerment Strategic Framework (ReHoPE).[32] At best, the laws mainly regulate security measures at refugee entry points whereas the policies prioritise the socio-economic development of refugees. There are no clear policies specifically addressing criminal radicalisation and inter-ethnic extremism exhibited through resorting to crime and inter-ethnic violence.

3.1. The legal framework

Refugee Regulations 2010

S. 19 provides for the surrender of firearms at the registration entry points by refugee status applicants. Inasmuch as this law is entrenched in the refugee laws, media reports have cited cases of several South Sudan refugees entering Uganda with small firearms that they use to commit crimes and intimidate fellow refugees.[33]

S. 20 (i) and s.22 provide for screening of refugees seeking admission at every refugee border entry point and the separation of civilian refugees and disarmed combatants respectively. This is aimed at maintaining a purely civilian character of the refugee population in settlements. These provisions are largely premised on the securitisation, control and maintenance of peace and reducing insecurity risks during mass refugee admission into the country but not addressing the internal crime and security risks posed. Recently, the Government of South Sudan echoed their concerns and dismay towards Uganda, claiming that there are South Sudanese rebels dwelling in Ugandan refugee settlements, using it as a launching pad for numerous armed attacks and destabilising security in South Sudan.[34]

3.2. The policy framework

a) Criminal prosecutions

Refugees accused of committing crimes are prosecuted in courts of law by the Directorate of Public Prosecutions (DPP) on behalf of the Government of Uganda. However, the challenge is that criminal prosecutions need a lot of resources for investigations and trials yet the criminal courts are currently overwhelmed with case backlogs.

b) Separation of rival ethnic factions.

The separation of the rival Dinka ethnic group from the Nuer and Morolem has been carried out to prevent violent clashes. Inter-ethnic rivalry is the root cause of insecurity in South Sudan. Unfortunately, the separation may not solve inter-ethnic rivalry but only postpone clashes. In addition, given the freedom of movement enjoyed by refugees, rival ethnic groups can cross over to each other's territories, leading to violent clashes.

c) Mobile police patrols

Mobile police patrol refugee camps and settlements with the aim of keeping law and order. Adequate resources are needed in terms of manpower and finance to patrol the camps daily.

4. Research Findings

There are two main research findings from this study:

a) The findings of this study revealed that criminal radicalisation among refugee youth stems from a combination of factors, such as individual and collective strains and ecological factors, which are interrelated and operate at different matrix levels. Inter-ethnic extremism among South Sudanese in refugee settlements is an extension of decades of political rivalry and instability that are still ongoing in South Sudan.

b) The findings of this study also showed that there are two different categories of radicalised South Sudanese youth, that is, those with radical mind-sets but who do not engage in crime and inter-ethnic extremism (passive radicals) and those who perpetrate and engage in crime, inter-ethnic extremism and other violent acts (active radicals). This finding is in tandem with those of other research carried out by scholars such as Sude et al. (n.d.) who argue that radicalisation leading to crime and other violent extremisms is a process of both internal and external factors and motivations. It also supports Soliman, Bellaj and Khelifa's (2015) conclusion that 'not every radical is a criminal' (p.129).

4.1. Crime perpetration for survival, gratification or revenge

The findings of the present study revealed that there are combinations of mixed interrelated factors contributing to the criminal radicalisation of South Sudanese refugee youth. These contributory factors are multivariate and operate at different matrix levels, that is, at the micro level and meso levels. At the micro level lies individual and collective strains felt and experienced by the refugee youth, and at the meso level are ecological factors that have influences on youth's decision to become radicalised and engage in crime for survival or vengeance. In their 2017 study of Syrian refugees in Jordan, Badayneh, Alshawi and Alhasan[35] found that there is a significant relationship between strains experienced by refugees and radicalisation into crime and violence. They argue that refugee camps provide conditions and experiences that are no less difficult and traumatic for refugees than during and while escaping wars (and persecution), which make non-criminal coping a huge challenge for many (refugees) amidst situations of scarce resources, loss of income and source of livelihood, death or disability of loved ones.

4.1.1. Micro level: Individual and collective strains

The findings of this research revealed that refugee youths feel and experience numerous individual and collective strains. Scholars on crime and radicalisation and violent extremism among vulnerable populations, such as Robert Agnew,[36] have found that strains experienced by such individuals are the main drivers of the adoption of radical and uncompromising ideologies that advocate crime and violence as a coping mechanism.

Agnew argues, for instance, that these strains include grief resulting from the death or disappearance of loved ones, uncertain futures, unfulfilled dreams and ambitions, unemployment, inadequate labour market skills, extreme poverty, discrimination in employment, inadequate formal education, limited access to quality health services and food insecurity. For example, a member of the security personnel interviewed at Palabek refugee settlement said:

"Many refugees here are sad and angry because they lost their loved ones and everything in [during the] the war' … They [mainly the youth] move in groups, eat mairung'i, smoke njaga [marijuana], loiter in sports betting and then cause chaos whenever someone disagrees with them….they even don't fear the police and can attack them if they are with colleagues."

A local community leader added that'[t]hey have no respect for peoples' gardens. They sneak into our gardens and steal [food items]'.

4.1.2. Meso level: Ecological factors

The findings of this study revealed that ecological factors directly and indirectly influence individual and collective feelings and strains experienced by the refugee youth. Ecological factors are environmental contextual influences that affect and influence behavioural coping strategies and mechanisms for individual and collective choice-making to either adopt radical ideologies, engage in crime, violence and other deviant behaviour or remain law-abiding and respect social norms. These ecological factors include, among others: i) challenges in the assimilation and adoption of host-community norms, including national laws and tribal and ethnic intolerance and divisions. According to one local host-community leader interviewed, some of the factors to blame include

"easy access to cheap alcohol and [illicit] drugs, ethnic and tribal tensions [within the refugee settlements] and availability of sports betting houses [gambling facilities]. Because they [mostly male] lack what to do, after taking some *lira lira* [local gin], they start picking fights on the streets with anyone they may not like or have grudges against, but it's worse if a group of Dinkas met Nuers… it's fire [emphasis added]."

4.2. Categories of radicalised South Sudanese refugee youth

The study revealed that there are two categories of radical South Sudan refugee youth in refugee settlements in Uganda. The first category comprises those whose radicalism can be conceived as passive. They are dormant, characterised by 'passive deviant behaviour'. Their 'passive deviant' behaviour manifests through individual and collective non-norm or non-rule/regulation following. 'They are simply resistant and defiant to lawful authority, uncooperative and detached from both fellow refugees and locals [host community members]', said one community leader. Many are 'disobedient to orders and do not like following laws and other social regulations established by authorities', added a member of the security forces.

The second category comprises those whose radicalism can be conceived as 'active'. They share similar characteristics with those in the first category such as deviance from social norms and disobedience to lawful authority. However, unlike the 'passive' radicals, the 'active' ones are crime instigators and members of criminal gangs. 'They control small groups or gangs, engage in criminal activities such as theft, rape, intimate partner violence, riots and demonstrations', a local leader lamented. '*Waragi*, drugs and sports betting is their job,' he added. The active radicals are believed to be those with an uncompromising stance who perpetuate and participate in ethnic violence, conceal dangerous weapons such as guns, and have participated or have connections in civil unrest in their countries of origin.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

A review of the media and institutional reports on the rising crime rate and increasing inter-ethnic extremism among South Sudanese in refugee settlements in Uganda merits more attention from the government and other stakeholders. Despite some attempts being made towards countering crime and inter-ethnic extremism in the country, such as community policing, increased police patrols and inter-ethnic community dialogues,

there still exist reports of growing crime rates in refugee settlements with a South Sudanese majority. This state of affairs causes insecurity in both refugee settlements and the host communities, with some analysts concerned that in the long run, if unresolved, this might jeopardise security in the regions hosting them which, themselves, are just recovering from the ravages of decades of war.

5.2. Recommendations

5.2.1. The government and supporting agencies should carry out mass sensitisation to basic Ugandan laws, especially criminal law and land law, in all refugee settlements

All persons, including refugees, ought to be law-abiding citizens if peace, law and order are to be maintained. As foreigners with little knowledge and understanding of Uganda's basic laws and its penalties, refugees need basic lessons on Uganda's basic laws, in addition to other existing programmes, such as entrepreneurial skills. Embedded within these laws lie Uganda's attitude and stance on what are the acceptable standards of behaviour and social relations. Without doubt, the South Sudanese youth have hardly enjoyed relative peace. The majority have witnessed and participated in civil war, crime, inter-ethnic conflicts and unending violence. The majority have lived in largely lawless communities where survival for the fittest seems the norm and the rule. The need for this basic legal education for refugees is both timely and long overdue. For instance, after the shooting of the officer in charge of Palorinya refugee settlement, Uganda's IGP, Okoth-Ochola, condemned the incident and called for the education of refugees on Uganda's criminal laws so that the refugees can be law-abiding members of the community. In addition, legal education in basic land law, tenure and right use may also reduce conflicts and tension between refugees themselves, but mostly with host community members who have had bitter relations with refugees stemming from land disputes. This would also help in reducing crime perpetration arising from land disputes in refugee-hosting areas.

5.2.2. Extending inter-cultural/ethnic dialogue for South Sudanese refugees in all refugee settlements

The government, donor agencies and CBOs should continue and extend inter-cultural/ethnic dialogues for South Sudanese refugees in all refugee settlements. International organisations, for example KAS, have carried out many inter-ethnic/cultural activities such as dialogues and radio talk shows promoting peace and tolerance to reduce South Sudanese inter-ethnic tensions in refugee settlements in Bidi-Bidi, Rhino and Kiryandongo refugee settlements. Reports have indicated that these dialogues actually do work to reduce the tensions and promote tolerance and positive relations. If extended in all refugee settlements, these dialogues also have the potential to create a foundation for ending political agreements which are at the root of the South Sudanese civil war.

5.2.3. Empowering refugee youths through meaningful engagement and active participation in decision making and implementation

Refugee youth empowerment through meaningful engagement and active participation in decision making and implementation should be highly practised and encouraged. Given their numbers and ability to mobilise one another, an empowered youth group with a collective agenda for their own social and economic transformation is likely to challenge radical ideologies that have negative returns. Refugee youth have limited national fora or platform to advocate or air their plight for possible solutions and resolutions. Therefore, platforms for refugee youth engagement in some national affairs will put refugee youth interests and devise programmes for their meaningful engagement in the national agenda and other broad government programmes. This is likely to strengthen a sense of belonging, thus acting as a catalyst for hope and inspiration in the face of numerous challenges.

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