



Uganda Went From Being a Model of Refugee Response to a Cautionary Tale

Andrew Green | Monday, Dec. 10, 2018

The international community has long lauded Uganda for its response to the massive influx of South Sudanese refugees who have fled across the border since the start of that country's conflict in 2013. As the number of arrivals climbed into the hundreds of thousands, Kampala maintained an open-door policy and committed increasing amounts of land for agencies to construct temporary settlements and for refugees to build permanent shelters. The country opened up its schools and health clinics to the new arrivals. At a time when other countries around the world were taking steps to prevent asylum-seekers from even reaching their borders, Uganda was held up as an exemplar of humanitarianism.



From left to right, South Sudanese refugee Thomas Wani, his brother Peter Lemi, his mother Rose Sunday and his father Julius Lezu enter Uganda at the Busia crossing, near Kuluba, northern Uganda, June 8, 2017 (AP photo by Ben Curtis).

It turns out Uganda's response might have been exceptional in other ways. According to a newly released internal audit from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR, Uganda's response from mid-2016 until the end of 2017 was plagued by lapses in accountability and disregard for basic institutional safeguards. The result is that millions of dollars in expenditures, including \$320,000 for a piece of land now being used as a parking lot by the office of Uganda's prime minister, are being examined, even as UNHCR has to shell out additional millions to rectify problems stemming either from fraud or incompetence.

The lapses in oversight robbed refugees of resources that could have been used to assist them. But the level of mismanagement, which is unlike anything UNHCR has documented in previous responses, risks undermining an effort that has been held up as an international model and raises concerns about how committed Kampala will remain to supporting the refugees as international acclaim turns to derision. This comes at a particularly fraught moment: South Sudan is pushing forward with a peace deal that could easily collapse and force thousands more people to flee to Uganda.

When an earlier peace deal between South Sudan's government and rebel leaders fell apart in August 2016, it prompted a spike in the flow of refugees to Uganda. Kampala, which was responsible for

registering the new arrivals, reported that as many as 2,000 people were crossing the border each day in the period after the collapse of the agreement.

Warnings that something was off with Uganda's response, particularly around the number of refugees being recorded, began to circulate within UNHCR and among its partner organizations in 2017, according to the audit. For months, the Ugandan government put off questions about the veracity of its totals, despite suspicions that officials might be padding the numbers and siphoning off money intended for the "ghost" refugees. It turns out those concerns were warranted. Earlier this year the government acknowledged it had registered 300,000 more refugees than it could account for.

UNHCR was forced to spend \$11 million on that recounting process, which when completed in November officially reset the number of South Sudanese refugees (<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/southsudan/location/1925>) from more than 1 million to 785,000.

The dodgy numbers were only the beginning, though. The audit reveals a national UNHCR office that flouted institutional controls and best practices, resulting in the rampant waste of resources. That included months spent trucking in water to refugee settlements at incredible expense, instead of investing in sustainable water delivery systems. "Vast sums of UNHCR funds were expended on what should have been a short-term solution," the auditors wrote.

Corruption is rampant in Uganda, which ranked 151 out of 180 countries on Transparency International's 2017 Corruption Perceptions Index (https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2017#table). And officials and contractors there apparently took advantage of the local UNHCR office's disregard for safeguards.

Uganda has not indicated whether it will continue to champion the refugee program that made it a global darling.

In one example, the Ugandan prime minister's office, which has oversight of refugees, paid annual salaries totaling \$283,000 to 72 employees with UNHCR funds, but didn't provide any evidence that the staff members were working on the agency's projects. In another instance, bus companies, who charged UNHCR by the kilometer for transporting refugees to settlements, submitted invoices recording different mileages for the same trip.

The audit acknowledges that the lack of oversight and accountability has hindered the refugee response

and, with these new revelations, there are likely to be additional repercussions. UNHCR reports that some international donors had already suspended their support for the effort over concerns about corruption and others, including the United States and the European Union, have threatened to pull funds or conduct their own investigations. The new confirmation is certain to hinder UNHCR's future fundraising.

It also undermines a program that had been held up as a global model and calls into question UNHCR's capacity to oversee a refugee response, even as the agency sounds the alarm about worsening situations in Yemen and Venezuela.

To reassure donors, UNHCR's headquarters made 12 recommendations

(<https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2018/11/5c016d144/unhcr-statement-refugee-response-programme-uganda.html>) to the Uganda country office, including that it work with its Ugandan government counterparts to draw up a plan that reduces the risk that resources are wasted and shores up controls. The local office issued a statement confirming it was already in the process of implementing the recommendations. Meanwhile, the Ugandan government suspended four officials (<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/feb/08/they-exaggerated-figures-uganda-aid-officials-suspended-over-alleged-fraud>), including the commissioner for refugees, in the midst of the audit, though Kampala has not confirmed what additional steps it will take in the wake of the report's official release.

Uganda's government has also not indicated whether it will continue to champion the refugee program that made it a global darling. Kampala could easily decide it does not want to invite any more scrutiny or bear any additional costs that might come with a donor retreat and begin to pare down its generous refugee policy.

That could be catastrophic for the refugees already living in Uganda, who include not just South Sudanese, but also Congolese, Burundians, Somalis and others, none of whom feel it is safe to return to their home countries. It could also negatively impact people who might need shelter in the future. South Sudanese leaders maintain they are committed to the peace deal and appear to be implementing the steps laid out in the agreement, albeit more slowly than the deadlines they agreed to. But tensions in the country remain high.

If the agreement falls apart, it could trigger another exodus, but this time with no one to welcome the people who are fleeing.

Andrew Green is a freelance journalist based in Berlin. He writes regularly about health and human rights issues. You can view more of his work at www.theandrewgreen.com.