

The fragility of public authority in Palabek refugee settlement in Uganda

CPAID Comics

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As part of a series of [six comics on public authority](#) in different countries across Africa, Ugandan cartoonist and comic artist Charity Atukunda has illustrated some of [CPAID's cutting-edge research](#) on issues of public authority, refugees and spiritual danger in Uganda. Based on real events, the comic asks: what happens when refugee communities and those who are tasked with protecting them have differing opinions about what constitutes a threat?

Research on refugees, spiritual danger and public authority

The cartoon, A Poisoning in Palabek, is based on 12 months ethnographic fieldwork conducted among South Sudanese refugees living in Palabek Refugee Settlement in northern Uganda between 2017 and 2018, where there are currently over 2 million South Sudanese refugees, most resulting from the 2013-18 civil war. Despite now living in relative safety, many residents of Palabek Refugee Settlement still experience great feelings of insecurity and uncertainty, which reflect the complex difficulties of life without access to land, a steady source of food or income, or reliable health and educational support.

Unfortunately, these problems also make some refugees distrustful of others, especially members of other ethnic groups or those (like the elderly woman in this story) who are eligible for extra help or benefits. Many refugees also feel that [UNHCR](#) (the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) and the various NGOs that work in the settlement privilege the rights of specific individuals over those of the community as a whole. They find the individual-oriented focus of the wider refugee system especially worrying if the person being protected is believed to be engaged in harmful or anti-social activities such as theft, violence or, worst of all, witchcraft or other forms of spiritual aggression. In such situations, feeling abandoned and neglected by camp authorities, residents sometimes feel they must rely on themselves for protection.

This is the background for the story depicted in this cartoon, which had very tangible real-life consequences for many of the people involved.

Tensions negotiating public authority

The story depicted in the cartoon provided significant insights into the tensions involved in negotiating and maintaining public authority in a refugee settlement context, which is always highly imbalanced and unequal.

On one side of the equation are institutions representing legitimate Ugandan government authorities in the form of military, police and staff of the [Office of The Prime Minister](#), as well as members of the global community. On the other are the refugees, who are by no means a homogenous group and who collectively hold a variety of personal, communal and wider political assumptions, biases and interests, many of which conflicting with the settlement's authorities and other refugees.

Who gets to act in the settlement's instances of individual or collective (in)security, and on whose behalf, can be instructive for understanding how public authority within refugee settings actually works. Likewise, examples of who is called upon to act for whom can be particularly insightful for understanding how settlement residents themselves think about public authority, as are the ways in which formal settlement authorities respond to perceived challenges.

Noteworthy, however, is that all actors responded in the same way when presented with a situation that they perceived as a dire existential threat – through violence. While the community's response led to violence in the form of mob justice, the response from the settlement's formal authorities was equally as violent, although for entirely different reasons; by mobilising armed police, formal authorities demonstrated how, by taking action over their own security, the community's response upset the stratified hierarchies of the entire refugee industry.

[Learn more about the research](#)

Refereed Journal Articles

FORTHCOMING Resisting Resilience: Ground-up resiliencies among refugees resisting humanitarian corruption in Uganda. *Civil Wars Special Issue: "Exploring community experiences of post-conflict recovery: Vernacular versus humanitarian concepts of resilience in Uganda"*. Ryan Joseph O'Byrne and Julian Hopwood, eds. (Co-authored with Ogeno Charles, in review).

2020: Pragmatic Mobilities and Uncertain Lives: Agency and the Everyday Mobility of South Sudanese Refugees in Uganda. *Journal of Refugee Studies: Special Issue on "Trajectories of Displacement and the Politics of Return"*. Anna MacDonald and Holly E. Porter, eds. 33(4): 747–765 (Co-authored with Ogeno Charles).

<https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/33/4/747/6133609>

Blogs:

2018: The Illegal Economy of Refugee Registration: Insights into the Ugandan Refugee Scandal, with Ogeno Charles. Rights in Exile: The International Refugee Rights Initiative's Refugee Legal Aid Newsletter, July.

<https://rightsinexile.tumblr.com/post/175434663857/the-illegal-economy-of-refugee-registration>

2018: The Illegal Economy of Refugee Registration: Insights into the Ugandan Refugee Scandal, with Ogeno Charles. Africa@LSE, #PublicAuthority, CPAID Research Blog, London School of Economics.

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2018/03/08/the-illegal-economy-of-refugee-registration-insights-into-the-ugandan-refugee-scandal-publicauthority/>

2018: Refugees in northern Uganda now have 'democracy', but no authority, with Ogeno Charles. Africa@LSE , #LSEReturn, #PublicAuthority, CPAID Research Blog Series, London School of Economics.

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2018/10/11/refugees-in-northern-uganda-now-have-democracy-but-no-authority/>