

The Illegal Economy of Refugee Registration: Insights into the Ugandan Refugee Scandal #PublicAuthority

Although Uganda has received much acclaim for the hospitable treatment it extends to refugees, it has recently become embroiled in controversy, with the scandal reaching the highest levels of both in country-UNHCR and the Ugandan government. In this blog post, Charles Ogeno and Ryan Joseph O'Byrne examine locals' reactions to the recent influx of South Sudanese refugees and sheds light on one of the central concerns in the Ugandan refugee scandal: the buying and selling of refugee registration.

This article is part of the #PublicAuthority blog series, part of the ESRC-funded [Centre for Public Authority and International Development](#).

In early April 2017, we received reports that the South Sudanese town of Pajok, 25km north of Ugandan border, had been attacked. The following day, Charles' friend Celcio gave him some details about what had happened.

"For the last few years the government neglected us and we have been in the hands of rebels. Now the government has launched an assault on Pajok in order to take it back from the rebels." He felt the gross injustice of this: "It is not a big deal for us if Pajok is with government or rebels so long as they protect civilians." The rebels had harassed and forcibly conscripted civilians. The Government on the other hand [had committed a massacre](#). In a later conversation with Charles' cousin Anek, she said "[the government came and attacked the community, destroyed our properties, our loved ones have been killed. Women have been raped...](#) [and] when they find a man, they kill straight away."

After the attack, many people fled to Uganda, arriving at the border town of Ngomoromo. Another cousin, Ayari, praised the Uganda People Defence Forces (UPDF) for their understanding and fair treatment. She said: "*the UPDF speaks well with us; they know how to handle civilians*".

As Western countries make it increasingly hard for refugees to cross their borders, Uganda has become well-regarded for its [inclusive refugee policies](#). Once registered, refugees are given land for settlement and cultivation. They have freedom of movement throughout the country and are allowed to work, meaning they can earn a legitimate income.

There have been [many reports](#) about Ugandans' warm welcome for South Sudanese fleeing violence, which may result from memories of being refugees themselves. Furthermore, refugee resettlement opens up new economic opportunities: when you compare Bweyale, the town closest to Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, with Kiryandongo Town, the District Headquarters, there is a huge difference. The refugee settlement provides a ready market, making Bweyale a bustling centre with numerous economic activities. Kiryandongo on the other hand is less busy with relatively little economic activity.



Although refugees are welcomed because of the economic opportunities, infrastructure, and services provided to areas where they resettle, the amount of support they receive can generate envy, a feeling heightened by what is considered as inequality in resource distribution. With the conflict in South Sudan showing no signs of concluding, the [high influx of refugees](#) over the last two years has shifted the attitudes of locals who not only see refugees as having privileged access to food and land but feeling that the long-term costs of hosting refugees may outweigh any short term benefits.

It is within this context that the current [Ugandan refugee scandal](#) takes place: officials of the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) as well as the UN are charged with numerous illegal or immoral accusations, including: suspicions of inflating refugee numbers so staff can pocket extra money and other resources; a widespread abuse of food, funds, and other resources destined for refugee settlements; and the ‘trafficking’ of female refugees into undesired ‘marriages’.

Such accounts are not new, and a number of Ugandans have been trying to [register as South Sudanese refugees](#) since at least early 2017. Charles discovered evidence of this himself when talking to some young Ugandans in a Kiryandongo bar in February 2017, and Okongo (28) and Ojeke (26) both said they and others were looking for ways to get the money needed to register as refugees and enable their resettlement in the West. Indeed, even in late 2016 we had heard rumours from our connections among South Sudanese in Uganda that refugee registration had become substantially and prohibitively monetarised. These accounts not only spoke of Ugandans trying to buy themselves refugee status – a transaction said to require approximately 500,000 Ugandan schillings (USD \$140 or GBP £100) – but narrated that Ugandan government workers and UNHCR staff in some of the larger camps were routinely blackmailing refugees desperate to register. As the following examples from Bweyale in early 2017 show, at Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, at least, such practices had become increasingly standard:



Food aid being distributed in Palabek Refugee Settlement, Uganda. Each stack contains maize flour, beans, and cooking oil for 30 people. Image Credit: Ryan O'Byrne

One woman explained that “Registration is a very difficult exercise for us. At reception, they asked for money from us in order to register. My registration form was thrown away because I had no money to bribe the registrar. I was told I would have to re-register – I regretted coming here”.

A 36-year-old man who heads an extended family of 20 children (comprising eight biological children and 12 orphans) was asked how and when he registered as a refugee. He said *“I am not a registered refugee because to register I was asked to pay over UGX 1,000,000 as bribe to the registrars (USD \$275 or GBP £195). I am struggling even to get food for these children, how can I get UGX 1,000,000 to bribe the registrar? And even if you bribe, you will not receive relief like the food ration. I know a family which paid UGX 350,000 (USD \$95 or GBP £70) for only four family members but they are not even receiving relief services, so they are struggling to find something to eat just like us. So, if there is no relief, I see no reason to call myself a refugee. The UN should respect our rights! I took refuge here not because I wanted to but conditions in my country forced me”*.



UNHCR vehicle makes use of the little morning shade available at the Reception Centre in Palabek Refugee Settlement, Uganda Image Credit: Ryan O’Byrne

Because of these and similar activities, there are now refugees living in some settlements without legal refugee status. Some leave one settlement with the intention of reuniting with family in another, but this runs the risk of having their refugee status withdrawn on arrival at the second settlement and being told to return to the border to re-register, which is difficult and expensive. Worse yet are those previously-registered refugees who have had their registration documentation purposefully destroyed or removed, a seemingly not-uncommon practice when a poverty-stricken refugee family is unable to pay the money demanded from them.



After being given a tarpaulin, poles, and scant other building materials, in Uganda refugees are left to construct their own shelter out of whatever resources are available, including mud. Image Credit: Ryan O'Byrne

These and similar stories demonstrate the veracity and significance of one of CPAID's guiding principles: that public authority in fragile contexts does not always function solely via official or normative means, but rather involves multiple actors and institutions – both formal and informal – operating under their own logics and mechanisms concurrently with or alternate to more official channels. In the case of the current Ugandan refugee scandal, the same public authority institutions formally employed to promote human rights, good governance, and social justice are also those engaged in opportunistic social and economic exploitation, no matter how unofficially. Thus, in public authority situations such as this, we not only see how formal and informal mechanisms of governance can both play out through multiple alternate channels at the same time, but also how these varying governance forms can involve the same actors engaging in competing strategies simultaneously.



A gift from the NGOs named on the side, this wheelbarrow helps a disabled woman collect her food aid. Note the food distribution taking place in the background. Palabek Refugee Settlement, Uganda. Image Credit: Ryan O'Byrne

Given such a situation, the problem must be stated clearly:

Asking for money to enable refugee registration amounts to an illegal bribe which not only violates UNHCR best practice but should be seen as a human rights abuse.

We say this because the [Geneva Convention](#) not only emphasises that refugees have good reason to seek security, but further stipulates they should not be penalised for entering a country. Therefore, asking for money to register a refugee not only penalises that refugee – many of whom flee their country of origin with no money or goods – but also undermines international refugee law. Moreover, having inaccurate data makes refugee-related planning and operation extremely difficult for both UNHCR and the Ugandan government, further exacerbating the very problems which underlie the current Ugandan refugee scandal. For example, case studies like those above make it very difficult to accept Uganda's refugee population figure, a major factor in donors' calls for [investigation into the Ugandan refugee situation](#). The fact is, [many people can manipulate the registration process for their own benefit](#). In Uganda, however, it seems that despite negative discourses to the contrary, in Uganda it seems that it is humanitarian and government workers rather than refugees who are most grossly manipulating the registration process for their own enrichment. In doing so, they have not only breached their legal and ethical mandates to ensure refugee's security and protection; they have also negatively impacted the views, opinions, and charity of donors and the international community, likely exacerbating the difficulties and tensions involved in managing the global refugee crisis.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog, the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa or the London School of Economics and Political Science.