

Displacement as Resistance in Northern Uganda: How 234 Rural Farmers Occupied a UN Compound to Defend Their Land

Tessa Laing and Sara Weschler provide a comprehensive account of forced displacement endured by the Acholi people for over 100 years and how one community chose to occupy the UN Human Rights office in Gulu to draw attention to land injustice being suffered at the hands of the government.

This article is part of our [#LSEReturn](#) series, exploring themes around [Displacement and Return](#).

On the morning of July 11, 2018, following more than 20 hours of gruelling travel on foot and by lorry, 234 men, women, and children from the sub-parish of Apaa at the western edge of Uganda's Acholi ethnic region filed in through the gates of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN OHCHR) in the town of Gulu. They represented a community that in the preceding months had seen three individuals killed, 844 huts burned down, and over 2,000 people left homeless in brutally violent evictions carried out by Ugandan state forces. Yet, for all they had been through, on the day this group turned up at the OHCHR compound they were not fleeing for shelter. Rather, they were embarking on a remarkable and carefully planned civic action – the likes of which the United Nations system had never before encountered.

A History of Forced Displacement

The inhabitants of the Acholi districts of northern Uganda have endured repeated waves of forced displacement for over a century. During the early colonial era, British officials used sleeping sickness control campaigns as a reason to uproot the entire population of western Acholiland, forcibly resettling them along newly constructed [roads for administrative and economic convenience](#). In subsequent decades, colonial authorities often converted the territories they had coercively emptied into nature reserves. Yet Acholis would maintain fierce ties to their historic lands, returning to resettle them during periods of degazettement – only to be evicted again [as successive colonial and post-colonial governments altered the administrative landscape of their region](#).

These smaller waves of displacement were overshadowed at the end of the 20th century by a far more traumatic campaign of forced relocation, when beginning in 1996, the Government of Uganda [drove 90 per cent of the Acholi population into Internally Displaced Persons \(IDP\) camps for over a decade](#). The Government framed this policy as a measure to protect Acholi civilians from the attacks by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). This narrative, however, is widely disputed, as the camps became sites of both extreme humanitarian suffering, and state-perpetrated human rights abuses.

Like nearly all rural Acholis, the inhabitants of Apaa spent this period confined to camps. When the LRA withdrew from Uganda, though, the Apaa community's process of return [would prove more fraught than most](#). In 2007, as IDPs made their way back to Apaa, they learned that although they had always been administered by the Acholi districts of northern Uganda, their lands were demarcated as part of the neighbouring Madi ethnic district of Adjumani. More alarmingly, the community [found their homes gazetted into an Adjumani wildlife reserve](#) off limits, they were told, to human inhabitants. Over the next decade, they would face repeated attacks from state authorities as they tried to defend the lands on which they had lived for decades prior to the LRA war.



The ruins of a home in Luru Village, Apaa (May 2018). The hut is just one of more than 844 huts destroyed by Ugandan state forces since late 2017 alone.

In 2009, the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), Adjumani District officials, and a South African game park investor signed a [20-year management concession](#) for the territory in question. [The UWA began large-scale violent evictions the following year](#). Although the community launched two court cases — one of them resulting in an ongoing, active injunction (on file with the authors) against further evictions — [the UWA's onslaught continued to intensify](#), increasingly aided by the Ugandan police and the national army, the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF). State attacks ebbed and flowed, with a bout of particularly egregious violence in [2012 leaving 6,000 people displaced and two dead](#). In mid-2017 the crisis [appeared to take on an ethnic dimension](#) when, despite generations of predominantly peaceful coexistence, Adjumani political leaders incited Madi villagers to clash with the Apaa community, [resulting in at least nine deaths](#). State forces resumed their attacks on Apaa at the end of 2017, initiating the most recent wave of violence, mentioned above, which has taken three lives, destroyed 844 homes, and at last count rendered more than 2,000 people homeless.

Eleven years after leaving the camps to which they had been confined to by their own government, the community of Apaa have still not been allowed to embark on the process of post-conflict recovery. Instead they find themselves trapped in a new iteration of the top-down cycles of eviction and forced relocation that have plagued the Acholi region for more than a hundred years.

Chosen Displacement: Bold Community Action

This history renders the actions of the 234 Apaa representatives who recently occupied the OHCHR office in Gulu all the more striking. Upon entering the compound on 11 July 2018, these demonstrators essentially flipped the script on the long narrative of mass displacement in their region. By *choosing* to uproot themselves and make a nearly 100 km journey from home, they turned their own relocation into a means of protest. When they took up residence on the OHCHR grounds, they did so not as victims of a distant authority's policies, but rather as agents of a grassroots campaign to seek a just solution to their plight. Over the next 36 days, they would use their presence in an unfamiliar and often inhospitable place as a tool to draw international attention to their struggle for the rights that their own government had so long ignored, and even violated.

The community of Apaa arrived armed with a letter addressed to the outgoing UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Prince [Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein](#). The [document](#) entreated the High Commissioner to dispatch the Head of the OHCHR's Kampala office to Gulu for a meeting with the protesters, and to encourage foreign embassies to hear their testimonies. The community's most substantial request was for UN OHCHR to engage the office of Uganda President Yoweri Museveni to demand respect for the active court injunction against evictions in Apaa, the removal of roadblocks and hostile security forces from the surrounding area, an immediate stop to violent attacks, and the degazettement of any parts of Apaa allocated to the wildlife reserve.

If the government failed to respond, the community of Apaa boldly called for the High Commissioner to urge foreign embassies such as the European Union and United States to threaten a withdrawal of funding from the Ugandan army, police, and wildlife authorities. The occupiers' letter highlighted the fact that the UN has vociferously [praised the Ugandan Government for providing land to refugees](#), while remaining silent about the same government's role in the violent seizure of land from its own citizens, themselves struggling to recover from decades of war. Some refugee camps such as the Maaji and Rhino camps are located as close as 20km to villages in Apaa, serving as a constant reminder of the international community's double standards on this matter.



Prominent Acholi political opposition leader Norbert Mao visits the protesters at the UN Human Rights Office

Perhaps perceiving a potential public relations disaster, the UN team decided against calling state security to forcibly remove the occupiers. After an initial tense standoff, the UN staff relented, and the occupiers quickly and expertly set up neat rows of tents constructed with bamboo and tarpaulins, as well as an outdoor cooking area. Patterns emerged: each morning the Gulu UN staff team would arrive at work, awkwardly wave at the 234 rural villagers camped on their lawn, then disappear into their office for most of the day. In the first week of the protest, surprised local Members of Parliament, civil society groups, business groups, religious leaders and well-wishers flooded to see the occupiers from Apaa, bringing with them sacks of maize, beans, clothes, and cooking oil. As they waited for a response from the UN, the occupiers established joint daily rhythms of strategy meetings and prayers, and created groups responsible for overseeing medical care, songwriting, games and practical tasks.

Unreceptive Hosts: the UN's Response to a Rural Farmers Protest

Yet despite the group's obvious ingenuity and organisation, the UN OHCHR team appeared unwilling to believe the protesters had been the architects of their own civic action. Convinced that the community could not have planned the occupation or secured the requisite financial and strategic support, UN staff initially treated the 234 villagers in the compound as bit players in what they took to be someone else's political drama. Sidelining the occupiers themselves, staff engaged MPs, district officials, and religious leaders in a series of closed-door meetings — certain that these local elites had instigated the unprecedented protest unfolding on their lawn. In fact, not one of these political or cultural leaders had had any inkling of the Apaa community's intentions until the occupiers arrived at the OHCHR gates.

Understandably frustrated by the staff's attitude and assumptions, the community penned a new [letter to the UN](#), singling out the "lack of communication" with the occupiers themselves as both "demeaning and unhelpful." Nevertheless, even after it became abundantly clear that the occupiers were acting entirely on their own initiative, UN staff remained unwilling to engage with the occupiers' requests. Most strikingly perhaps, the newly-arrived country director for the OHCHR in Uganda refused to visit Gulu at any point during the five-week-long protest. In what may have been an attempt to downplay the significance or legitimacy of the occupation, she chose to manage the crisis from over 300km away in Kampala, never making an effort to directly assess the situation on the ground.



Protesters occupy the UN Human Rights compound in northern Uganda

Such pervasively dismissive behaviour toward the Apaa protesters raises troubling questions about how UN staffers perceive local communities in the countries in which they are stationed.

Early in the occupation, the UN staff began to repeat four paradoxical narratives about their response to the occupiers:

- 1) UN OHCHR had monitored the situation in Apaa for years, and did not 'need' the occupation to spur their engagement in the issue.
- 2) Since the occupation started, UN OHCHR had been working around the clock to engage the government on Apaa.
- 3) The occupation was preventing UN OHCHR from effectively working on solutions on the Apaa issue because a) staff were constantly distracted about the risk of outbreak of disease in the camp and b) by 'hosting' the occupiers they risked their image as a 'neutral' body that could effectively engage in dialogue with the Government.
- 4) The UN team's 'hands were tied' from exerting pressure on the Government, because they rely upon governmental goodwill to remain in Uganda. As staff constantly reiterated, the UN OHCHR's current mandate to operate in Uganda is set to expire in early 2019. In this context, UN staff insisted that applying direct pressure or making public statements condemning human rights abuses in Apaa could spell the end of their work in the country.

The contradictions inherent in these narratives were readily apparent to all concerned in Gulu. While the OHCHR had indeed spared one paragraph for Apaa in a 39-page [report from 2013](#), community members pointed out that if the organisation had been continuously monitoring the situation since, its engagement had yielded shockingly few results: in recent years, human rights abuses in Apaa have only escalated.

Meanwhile, the assertion that UN OHCHR was suddenly vigorously engaging the Government over Apaa's struggle (point 2) belied the claim that the occupation was a hindrance to advocacy (point 3). The latter seemed simply intended to frighten protesters into a rapid exit. Far from *stymying* the UN's work on Apaa, the continuous pressure of 234 people living fulltime on OHCHR premises clearly spurred staff to urgently confront the Ugandan Government and army on the Apaa crisis. Finally, with point 4, the UN appeared to ask the community to protect the interests of the OHCHR when, protesters argued, the dynamic should have been the other way around.



Youth from protesters' home community travel to provide practical support

Throughout the protest, occupiers remained frustrated that the UN would not engage with their requests or publicly condemn the abuses perpetrated against them. [Contradicting information on their own website](#), UN Staff insisted that their mandate in Uganda restricts them to monitoring and does not extend to publishing reports or issuing statements condemning human rights abuses. [In fact, the UN OHCHR eventually did issue a public statement](#) which studiously avoided any critique of the Ugandan Government or expression of sympathy for the protesters, and even went as far as praising "law enforcement agencies on site" for acting "in line with human rights principles."

Eventually, in their efforts to avoid upsetting the Government by appearing to "side" with the occupiers, UN OHCHR began to treat the Apaa community unkindly, even inhumanely. Determined to make their stay as unpleasant as possible, the UN soon began to block all well-wishers, family, religious leaders, and — particularly strikingly for an organisation that [touts its commitment to press freedom](#) — journalists from visiting the community. When the pit latrine filled up, staff initially refused to allow local civil society groups to have it emptied. For four days, the occupiers struggled in unhygienic conditions until the intervention of an MP pushed the UN office to relent.

Read the [second article](#) which explores how the UN responded to the occupation of its offices in Gulu and what this occupation tells us about the way the UN tackles governmental human rights abuses.

Find out more about the [Politics of Return](#) and our [Trajectories of Displacement](#) research projects, which are based at the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa and funded by ESRC/AHRC.

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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.

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