

Refugee in Uganda: A poor nation opens its doors

by [David A. Hoekema](#) in the [December 10, 2014](#) issue



Congolese children play at Uganda's Waju refugee transfer camp while the adults build houses out of handmade bricks and thatch. PHOTOS BY DAVID HOEKEMA

Last summer, while the attention of the world was focused on the World Cup in Brazil—the two weeks of the year when even Americans get excited about soccer—another competition was being organized in northern Uganda. According to a news release from the relief organization World Vision, Sudanese men living in refugee settlements organized a series of friendly “football for peace” matches. Each team included men from different ethnic groups—groups whose differences have sparked deadly clashes in their home countries.

Even though there were fewer soccer balls than teams, and even fewer uniforms to help players recognize their teammates, these matches helped overcome some divisions, World Vision reported. Watching their sons competing for goals motivated the elders to work more closely together across ethnic lines.

The East African nation of Uganda is not wealthy by any measure. United Nations figures for 2011 show per capita income of less than \$2 per day. Life expectancy at birth is about 54 years; infant mortality rates stand at 72 per thousand live births. Per capita income in the United States is nearly 100 times higher; life expectancy is

35 years longer; and infant mortality is less than one-tenth as high. With so little in its own pantry, one would hardly expect Uganda to be a major contributor to its neighbors' welfare.

Yet Uganda is host to 220,520 refugees, according to 2014 figures compiled by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. In the United States, there are 263,662. Every day we hear American politicians and pundits complain about the heavy burdens placed upon the people of the United States by refugees, and yet we assist just one refugee in this country for every 1,200 residents. In Uganda, the comparable figure is one per 160 residents.

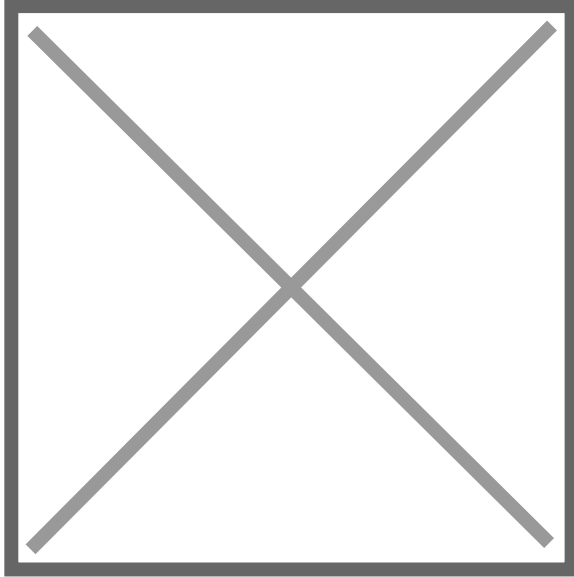
The burden of care for refugees, in other words, is 7.5 times higher, in refugees per thousand residents, in Uganda than in the United States. Yet not once in several visits to that country have I heard a Ugandan politician, pastor, or community leader complain about the social or financial costs of their reception and resettlement. Foreign governments and NGOs fund many of the services provided, to be sure, but local residents also do their part.

Northern Uganda is free from armed conflict today, but just across its borders civil wars rage in two countries. On a study tour of Uganda earlier this year, some Calvin College students and I visited a transfer camp for several hundred Congolese who have fled the simmering conflicts in their home country, just a few kilometers to the west. Other nearby camps, including the one where the football tournament was organized, serve a flood of new arrivals from South Sudan, 15 kilometers to the north.

Our visit was arranged by staff members of World Renew (formerly Christian Reformed World Relief Committee), and in the camp we worked alongside others from Compassion International and the Lutheran World Federation. Some of the American students checked names from the eligibility list maintained by the regional UNHCR office. Others helped distribute clothing from assorted piles of overseas donations, according to family circumstances. Those who were not needed for these tasks taught singing games to Congolese children and learned their games in turn. The Hokey Pokey bridged the language and culture gap, drawing gales of laughter from the children and their watching parents.

On the day before our visit we met with the Ugandan prime minister's representative for refugee affairs in the region. John Arinaitwe is a man of limitless

energy, little patience, and passionate dedication to his work. “We have an obligation under the 1961 UN Convention on Refugees, and also under the African Union charter, to assist anyone who comes to our country fleeing political violence,” he told us. Accordingly, no one whose refugee status has been verified is turned away.



**John Arinaitwe, representative for refugee affairs, says that Uganda accepts any newcomer with a verified refugee status.**

Refugees, he added, are by definition fleeing from violence and persecution in their home country on the basis of religion, ethnicity, or political affiliation. Ugandan immigration officials require evidence of such treatment before they grant refugee status, except when that status has been extended to entire ethnic groups by action of the Ugandan government. Economic migrants are not eligible for resettlement and are sent back to their home countries.

“Who should bear the responsibility for caring for refugees,” asked Arinaitwe, “in a country where we cannot afford to meet the basic needs of our own people?” The answer lies in collaboration between local, national, and international partners. Basic services for refugees are provided by NGOs and UNHCR. The World Food Programme, a United Nations agency based in Rome and funded by voluntary donations from governments and individuals, provides three months of basic food assistance to new arrivals. The Ugandan government, churches, and local landowners provide land to create resettlement camps. Churches in the area, particularly the Church of Uganda and the Catholic Church, provide opportunities for

education and training, and they assist families who eventually move from resettlement villages to the towns and villages of the region.

“The refugee presence in northern Uganda is not new,” Arinaitwe added, “although the numbers have increased very rapidly. There are children in resettlement villages who have never seen the place that their parents call home.”

Newcomers are housed initially in huge UN tents in a transfer camp, collecting food each day from USAID trucks. But this is not a suitable long-term arrangement, he emphasized. As soon as possible, usually within a few weeks, each family is moved to a plot in a resettlement village, where they can build a home and plant crops.

Until violence subsides back home and it is safe to return, the Congolese immigrants will live and provide for themselves in Uganda. It may be a long wait. There is effectively no central government in eastern Congo today, only a patchwork of territories controlled by warlords and private armies. Deep in the bush are a few hundred loyalists still in hiding with Joseph Kony, founder of the Lord’s Resistance Army.

The area west of the Nile River was never under LRA control, but for nearly a quarter century Kony’s reign of terror in the Acholi and Longi districts to the east cut off supply routes and left the entire area isolated and impoverished. Today travel is safe, and there is no armed conflict inside Ugandan borders.

Poverty and social dislocation persist. Yet local authorities in the villages and towns of the region have joined in the effort to accommodate those fleeing from conflict elsewhere. At the district offices situated on a hill in the small and dusty town of Koboko, we looked to the west over forests that span the nearby Congo border. Koboko has long served as a market town for Congolese, Sudanese, and Ugandans alike, district administrators told us, but only in recent years have so many sought refuge from violence at home.

“The number of patients treated at our regional hospital has more than doubled with the arrival of refugees,” said the district health officer, Dr. Norbert Kaggwa. And there are cultural and sanitary challenges as well, added Peter Abeson, district health and education officer: “Many of the people fleeing from conflict in rural areas prefer the bush to the toilet.” Because basic medical care and childhood vaccinations are unavailable in their home villages, a number of diseases now rare in Uganda, such as hepatitis B and guinea worm, afflict the refugee communities.

The government has made it a priority to provide vaccinations and immunizations immediately to new arrivals.

After families are moved from transfer camp to resettlement village, we learned on our visit to Waju a few miles to the north, basic food assistance continues until crops can be harvested. White plastic tents stamped with the UNHCR symbol—one per family, not one per hundred people as at the transfer site—provide temporary shelter. Walking through the village with children as guides, the students and I met family members who were building new homes from mud bricks that they had molded from the bed of a nearby stream, then roofing them with thatch they had harvested from nearby fields. Under the relentless tropical sun, “sweat equity” in new homes has a very literal meaning.

But these temporary provisions are not satisfactory as permanent homes. Arinaitwe told us he believes there are just three durable solutions to the plight of refugees, in Uganda and elsewhere. The first is repatriation, when the circumstances from which refugees were fleeing have been resolved and it is safe to return. That is the best long-term solution, he said, but sometimes it backfires. During the 1990s many Sudanese refugees to Uganda and Kenya were repatriated, only to be caught up in renewed ethnic violence following South Sudanese independence in 2011.

The second solution is full integration into the host community. This is a distant and difficult goal. Language poses an initial barrier: many of the Congolese refugees speak only Kakwa, those who have attended school speak limited French, and very few have learned any English. Placing refugee children in primary and secondary schools is critical, but it increases the demands on already overburdened and underpaid teachers.

A third long-term solution—the refugees’ first preference, in many cases, but seldom available—is resettlement in a third country. East Africans are aware of the massive resettlement of Somali refugees in the United States, for instance. According to the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, more than 55,000 Somalis came to the United States in the two decades before 2004. The numbers of refugees accepted today by the United States are declining, however, and administrative delays in handling emigration requests last for years. Arinaitwe told me he had just learned that some of the Rwandans in temporary settlements in southwest Uganda had been accepted by the United States—just eight of them.

In the Waju transfer camp, many called to us, in broken English or broken French, "Take me to America! I love America!" But very few of the men and women we met will find the path to resettlement abroad open to them. Most will spend years living in the mud brick houses they have built and farming a small plot to feed their families until they can return home safely. Others will seek out English lessons, learn to do paid work, and settle in one of the towns of northern Uganda.

One of the most respected figures in the camp was a Presbyterian pastor whose ministry spans the Uganda-Congo border, David Legai. He explained in French that he encourages camp residents to send their children to school, even though they will have a difficult time until they master English. In the meantime they can converse with their fellow students in Kakwa, the local language on both sides of the border.

When Uganda is in the news in the West, it usually appears in a very bad light. The stories are about the LRA rebellion; few know that the Protestant pastors, Catholic priests, and Muslim leaders of the Acholi region came together during the worst years of that conflict to form the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative, which was able to initiate talks with both rebel and government forces and played a decisive role in the LRA withdrawal from Uganda in 2006. Everyone has read about the Anti-Homosexuality Act which was debated for five years and enacted earlier this year. Far fewer know that the Ugandan Constitutional Court struck it down or that some courageous pastors and church members in East Africa are stalwart advocates of greater inclusiveness despite the opposition of church and political authorities.

The remarkable generosity of the people of northwestern Uganda, which my students observed in the words and deeds of church and government workers in support of refugees, give evidence that dire poverty and great generosity sometimes coincide. If we want to know what it means to live faithfully under the most difficult circumstances, and if we seek examples of those who have very little sharing with others who have even less, northern Uganda today deserves a close look.