

Hopes for the future

The case of Sudanese refugees in Uganda

Tania Kaiser



Refugees at Kiryandongo.

Source: Tania Kaiser

Tania Kaiser is a lecturer in Refugee Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Her research is currently focused on long-term Sudanese refugees living in Uganda.

The Kiryandongo refugee settlement in Uganda's Masindi District was established in 1991 for a group of Eastern Equatorial refugees who fled fighting between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and Sudanese government forces. Their exile had begun in Kitgum District but Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) attacks led to their transfer to Masindi by the Government of Uganda and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). After an initially uneasy relationship between this refugee group and the SPLM/A, relations improved markedly during the decade culminating in the much celebrated visit of John Garang in the late 1990s. As has been the case for much of the Sudanese diaspora, links and networks between refugees and those remaining in Sudan have been maintained to a large extent. In some cases it has been possible for Sudanese in Uganda to re-cross the border from time to time and interest in news from Sudan is always extremely high in the settlements.

Sudan and displacement

The Kiryandongo refugee settlement is one of many. Conflict in Sudan has displaced enormous numbers of civilians with an estimated 4 million internally displaced since 1981. Several hundred thousand southern Sudanese people – the UNHCR estimates 350,000 – have been displaced to neighbouring countries including Uganda, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic. By the mid 1990s, Uganda was hosting around 250,000 refugees, of whom 170-180,000 remained in the country in early 2006. According to UNHCR, 27,000 of the Sudanese refugees in Uganda had registered to repatriate by May. Since it started voluntary repatriations in December 2005, some 4000 refugees had returned from neighbouring countries to southern Sudan. Despite widespread pleasure at the signing of the *Comprehensive Peace Agreement* (CPA), residents of Kiryandongo have been relatively slow to register for voluntary repatriation. They have cited the threat of ongoing LRA activity in Eastern Equatoria as a serious disincentive. The untimely death of John Garang also gave many pause for thought in this respect. Finally, in 2006, LRA activity to the west of the Nile in Sudan has led to the arrival of around 500 new refugees in Uganda. However, the Government of Southern Sudan's attempts to mediate an agreement between the LRA and the Government of Uganda give some cause for optimism.

Refugees and the CPA

In very few cases were representatives of Uganda's refugee population directly involved in the peace process leading to the CPA. Some individuals, connected to various civil society organizations including women's groups, were invited from the settlements to participate in the wider consultation

process around the talks. But for the vast majority of the refugees, information about the talks came only after the event and from the usual sources: the BBC, the Ugandan press, local networks, and accounts relayed from those who had been directly or tangentially involved. It seems that no systematic attempt was made by either the Government of Sudan (GoS) or the SPLM/A to disseminate information among the regional diaspora with the exception of key political figures. For residents of a relatively low profile settlement like Kiryandongo whose largely peasant residents are drawn from small ethnic groups and are relatively marginal in political terms, the dissemination of accurate and timely information appears not to have been a priority for any of the major actors.

Knowledge of the CPA and its provisions

For a minority of the settlement's residents, it has been possible to become somewhat informed about the contents of the CPA and its provisions. Many of the settlement's 'intellectuals', students, teachers, those in employment with NGOs or other organizations, those involved in political activity and some traders have found sources of information in the media or through personal networks and have contrived to keep abreast of developments. A few copies of the CPA's principal documents have found their way to the settlement from different sources. One university student, for example, obtained a copy of the CPA from a diplomat friend and was able to bring this to the settlement. Reading matter – especially when related to the conflict in Sudan – is eagerly shared by the literate and politically informed classes there. Amongst this group the CPA and its provisions have provoked cautious optimism.

Amongst the majority of the population, which is made up mainly of farmers, petty traders and day labourers, few are familiar with the detailed contents of the agreement. Almost all are aware, however, that agreement has been made to share power and wealth – including oil wealth – with the government, and that a referendum is to be held on self-determination for the south after a period of six years. The precise nature of these arrangements is not known by the majority, which largely assumes that the southern negotiators would not have accepted disadvantageous terms if this could be helped.

Perhaps more important than what is known in the settlement about the CPA in the abstract, is what is understood about how it differs from the 1972 *Addis Ababa Agreement*. Two features stand out in this respect: firstly, the promise of a referendum, which many Kiryandongo refugees hope and assume will result in the eventual secession of the south from the north. Secondly, most are aware that, unlike in 1972, the SPLA will be maintained in some form as a distinct entity rather than being subsumed entirely into the national army.

The extent to which attitudes among settlement refugees towards those to whom they still refer pejoratively as 'the Arabs' have changed since the signing of the CPA seems to be negligible. Refugees most desire of the peace agreement that the southerners this time avoid the kind of 'betrayal' at the hands of the northerners that they perceive themselves to have experienced during the implementation of the *Addis Ababa Agreement*. Both the referendum and the continued existence of the SPLA are seen as protection against this possibility.

Views on the CPA

For the 15,000 long-term refugees of the Kiryandongo refugee settlement, the signing of the CPA first and foremost means that they can start thinking about going home. This prospect is viewed with delight by the majority – but does not come without strings attached as far as they are concerned. In the first instance, having in many cases experienced exile and repatriation previously, these refugees want to be sure that long-term security in Sudan is assured. In addition, research among refugees in several settlements in northern Uganda including Kiryandongo has found that refugees want to see progress with infrastructural and developmental activities before they return home to areas that they know have been devastated by the war. Even in places that never benefited from these before, refugees talk of wanting to see in their home areas the roads, schools and hospitals to which they have become at least partly accustomed while in exile. Political and religious leaders in the settlements exhort refugees to think positively about going home and to take active control rather than waiting for anyone to come and develop their villages for them. While they are willing to do this, they point out that they will still need help, not least with problems like landmine clearance.

In addition, refugees from minority groups express their concerns that in the absence of powerful advocates to speak on their behalf, their areas may miss out or be slow to benefit from badly needed developmental inputs. They fear that the CPA will be implemented in such a way that more powerful groups benefit most and first in this respect.

Conclusion

For many of the refugees of the Kiryandongo settlement, the success of the CPA and its implementation may be judged retrospectively by its capacity to deliver security and development. While the mood is positive, massive needs will exist on repatriation, and support to refugees, returnees and other vulnerable groups should be provided fairly and transparently, without reference to the ethnic and political identities of recipients.