REFUGEES IN UGANDA
AND RWANDA:

THE BANYARWANDAN TRAGEDY
By Roger P. Winter
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This Issue Brief was prepared by Roger P. Winter, Director of the U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR). It is based on an onsite review of the situation in northeast Rwanda and southwest Uganda conducted by Mr. Winter in late January 1983. A detailed report on the findings of that review will soon be available from Cultural Survival, Inc., which joined USCR in this review.
Although advances in communications technology are widely heralded as evidence of progress by the world community, major events of dramatic impact continue to occur virtually unnoticed. In October 1982, tens of thousands of people in southwest Uganda were uprooted and forced to flee their homes. Their plight is little known by the public due to the isolation of the areas involved, but its causes are familiar scourges of mankind — greed, hatred among ethnic groups, hunger for power, and short-sighted politics.

In earlier times, the lines on maps demarcating the suzerainty of national governments in East Africa were of limited significance; such is not the case today, even where those boundaries bear little relation to peoples' patterns of habitation. Thus it is that people with common roots and often common language and culture can be found within the boundaries of several nation-states. Such is the case in the multinational area west and north of Lake Victoria.

The area of particular interest for this account is that near the border between northeast Rwanda and southwest Uganda, largely the Kigezi, Ankole, and Toro districts. The people of this account are often described as "of Rwandan origin:" although there are many distinguishable groups included in this description, the term "Banyarwanda" encompasses all the uprooted subjects of this report.

Many Banyarwanda have lived in what is now Uganda from colonial days. Many, and certainly their children, are Ugandan citizens under the provisions of that nation's constitution. Others came to Uganda in the early sixties when inter-group warfare in Rwanda caused thousands to flee. Many of these refugees, who were assisted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, lived in refugee settlements, at Nakivale, Oruchinga, and the Fort Portal area; some gradually integrated outside the settlements, often at the urging of the Ugandan government.

The Precipitation of Crisis

Anti-Banyarwanda sentiment is not new in Uganda, although it has varied in intensity for decades. Ugandan leader Milton Obote ordered the registration of all Rwandan refugees in 1969, in what many believe was a first step towards their expulsion. The takeover of the Ugandan government by Idi Amin in 1972 precluded implementation of the expulsion. At least partially in reaction to Obote's actions, many Banyarwanda welcomed the arrival of Amin and identified with his government. After Amin's flight from the country in 1979, this identification provided a basis for some again to promote anti-Banyarwanda sentiment. Steps were taken by Obote and others to assure the Banyarwanda were not allowed to vote in the elections of 1980 which resulted (many believe through vote fraud) in the return of Obote to the presidency and control of the government by his party, the Uganda People's Congress (UPC).

Since that time, the anti-Banyarwanda sentiment of the UPC has been expressed quite openly. Some officials have blamed atrocities of the Amin regime on the Banyarwanda and have accused them of being in the forefront of illegal anti-government activities since the elections. (Most knowledgeable observers, however, dismiss these assertions as attempts to make scapegoats of the political opposition, for the barely functioning economy and massive inflation.) The Banyarwanda's Catholicism is also a factor causing friction in their relations with the UPC.
By early 1982, it was obvious to close observers that a major action against the Banyarwanda by the UPC and its members in the government was imminent. In late spring, UNHCR's representative in Uganda's capital, Tom Unwin, protested impending government action to force many Banyarwanda (whether refugees or not) into the refugee settlements established in the 1960s. This protest, apparently accompanied by pressure from other international sources, averted the confrontation.

The threats and inflammatory rhetoric of the UPC and government officials continued, however, but what happened next took many international observers, including UNHCR, by surprise.

In late September 1982, officials of the government and UPC, including cabinet-level ministers and members of Parliament, signaled the initiation of a large-scale, centrally orchestrated displacement of Banyarwanda. Affected were those who had always lived in Uganda as well as refugees who had arrived in the sixties, citizens and non-citizens alike. Beginning on October 1, teams of local officials, members of the "youth wing" of the UPC, and special police attacked Banyarwanda homes. These were destroyed or rendered uninhabitable as the mud walls were pushed in or the corrugated metal roofs were stolen. Even homes on the perimeter of the long established refugee settlements were destroyed, and still today the contrast between the lush Uganda countryside where many Banyarwanda resided and the devastation wreaked upon their homes is shocking.

Intimidation of the people, accompanied by beatings and a number of killings, precipitated large-scale displacement. By October 2, Banyarwanda were streaming from their homesites, some into the established refugee settlements and some across the border into Rwanda. Generally, they were unable to bring any belongings with them and local non-Banyarwanda inhabitants were prevented by the eviction teams from providing water or food to those in flight.

Most who entered Rwanda crossed a small bridge over a branch of the Kagera River connecting Merama Hills, Uganda, and Kakitumba, Rwanda. Caught largely unprepared, officials of Rwanda arranged for trucks to transport the refugees to hastily erected camps. Those who fled to the established refugee settlements within Uganda waited in fear for that government's next actions. By the beginning of November, that potential displacement was so large that Rwanda closed its border.

Developments in Rwanda

UNHCR appealed to the international community for financial assistance; the U.S. made a substantial contribution. However, credit for averting disaster is due to the fortunate presence of highly capable voluntary agency personnel from Catholic Relief Services and Oxfam (U.K.) in Rwanda at the time of the crisis, as well as the enlightened response of the Rwandan government. Food and shelter were rapidly supplied, and two refugee camps were established to house the 44,000 refugees who crossed the border before it was closed. One at Mehega initially held approximately 13,000 cattle herders, along with 50,000 head of cattle. Another at Kanyinya initially held some 30,000 agriculturalists; it constituted the third largest "city" in Rwanda.

The threat of measles, which caused the death of a substantial number of children between the ages of five and ten, has been brought under control by various health authorities and Medicins sans Frontieres, a French voluntary medical service agency.
Enormous numbers of cattle died due to lack of forage, and since late January, many of the herders at Mehega have moved to the Lake Nasho area in the south with their remaining herds. The refugees at Kanyinya have been moved to a tented camp at Kibondo. The numbers are relatively stable, although small numbers of refugees have moved back and forth across the border at isolated points.

A physical tragedy, then, has been avoided, but the spiritual and legal tragedy remains. These thousands have now lived in structured camp facilities for half a year. They have lost their lands and possessions. The conditions under which the refugees live in Rwanda are crowded and difficult, and there is little constructive activity to occupy the months. Traditional family roles have been disrupted: women no longer have a hearth to maintain, and extended family relationships cannot be maintained in the regimented living situation. Most have been expelled from the only homeland they have ever known.

Rwanda's ability to maintain the refugees even in these marginal conditions is tenuous. A small country, it is the most populous in Africa on a person-space measure and its ability to meet refugee needs from its own resources is limited. The environmental devastation wrought by refugees' cattle is substantial on land which regenerates exceedingly slowly. The nation's ethnic balance is delicate, and the political problems created by the presence of this large refugee population are significant. Yet Rwanda is in some ways a captive in this situation: it is landlocked and largely dependent on transit through Uganda for all of its imports and exports.

**Developments in Uganda**

Most of the 35,000 newly displaced Banyarwanda who remained in Uganda fled to existing refugee settlements and joined an equal number who had been in the settlements since the 1960s. Although the majority arrived in October and November, others in smaller numbers continued to arrive for months thereafter. Those at Merama Hill did not join a pre-existing settlement: they are encamped within several hundred yards of the bridge to Rwanda, having arrived at the border just after it was closed by Rwandan authorities. The numbers in each settlement as of early February 1983 were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Settlement</th>
<th>New</th>
<th>Old</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nakivali</td>
<td>14,700</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oruchinga</td>
<td>11,200</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>18,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fort Portal area</td>
<td>4,500</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>16,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merama Hill</td>
<td>4,500</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>4,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>34,900</strong></td>
<td><strong>35,000</strong></td>
<td><strong>69,900</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

UNHCR's Unwin vigorously protested the displacement to government officials and received some international media attention. He was ordered expelled by Ugandan authorities, but they relented upon learning that he would be departing shortly as his tour of duty was nearing completion. His replacement designated by UNHCR has not yet been accepted by Uganda.
For the displaced Banyarwanda still in Uganda, life is quite difficult. The system of supply is weaker than it is for those now in Rwanda, although there is less regimentation to life in the Ugandan settlements. Physical deterioration of the land is substantial. The education of most children has been disrupted, a tragedy for many that may never be fully rectified.

However, the most notable of the settlements' characteristics is fear. As one expert on refugees in Africa noted in March, "I have never seen a group of refugees more afraid for their safety." Ugandan internal security police are routinely present in the settlements and UPC officials hold key positions in settlement administration. The international presence is exceedingly limited: there are no representatives of UNHCR, UNICEF, or international voluntary agencies present on a full-time basis, and no U.S. agency has any presence. The most effective "outside" presence at the settlements is that of the Roman Catholic Society of Missionaries of Africa, also known as the White Fathers. Their constant helping presence was recently disrupted, perhaps temporarily, because of difficulties with the government. Oxfam (U.K.) has provided medical assistance at Merama Hill.

At the time the displacement began in October 1982, President Obote was out of the country. Upon his return he issued public statements (characterized by some as being primarily for international consumption) calling for reinstitution of the rule of law in connection with treatment of Banyarwanda. However, actions taken by the government or which the government has failed to take cast doubt on the credibility of those statements. Official statements characterized the displacement as "a local misunderstanding which led to some fighting between a group of refugees and some of the indigenous inhabitants of the area. In the aftermath of the fighting, some refugees fled the area in fear. The government of Uganda acted swiftly to restore law and order in the area and ensure the security and welfare of refugees."

In fact, onsite observers, including this writer, confirm the absence of constructive actions by the Ugandan government. Although official representatives of Rwanda and Uganda met at Gabiro, Rwanda, in late October and agreed to an initial plan to resolve the crisis, there was no noticeable follow-through on the part of Uganda. In actuality, a team appointed by the president traveled throughout southwest Uganda in a "mopping up" operation which resulted in additional displaced Banyarwanda fleeing to the settlements, particularly to those at Fort Portal. Government officials have openly discussed declaring some areas inhabited by Banyarwanda as new national parks in order to require further displacement of large groups.

The government has taken no steps to punish the evictors, even though they are well known, nor those who have taken possession of the land, homes, cattle, and other belongings of the displaced Banyarwanda. Nor has it moved to compensate the displaced for their losses. The conclusion of most observers, including myself, is that, whether or not the president initiated the displacement, the government countenanced the harsh treatment of this group which is part of the political opposition.
Recent Developments

Uganda re-entered discussions with Rwanda and UNHCR at Kabale, Uganda, in early March 1983. That it did so may be due to constructive pressure from certain governments, particularly Western European, and to the international embarrassment caused to the Ugandan government by the divergence of its statements and actions, the very useful intervention of the UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar, and the facilitative efforts of UNHCR.

A joint communique issued on March 11 committed the two governments to certain actions intended to lead to a resolution of the Banyarwanda tragedy. The provisions on balance seem to favor Uganda at Rwanda's expense, but, coupled with the recent agreement by Uganda to provide additional land to relieve overcrowding in the current refugee settlements in Uganda, the agreement represents progress. It remains to be seen if Uganda will honor it.

At this time it is critical for governments, humanitarian agencies, and interested individuals to:

1. Be aware that 80,000 displaced Banyarwanda now reside in camps in northeast Rwanda and southwest Uganda in very difficult circumstances.

2. Press through appropriate means for Uganda to assure that no further displacement occurs; ensure the safety of the refugee camps within its borders; cooperate with international authorities in achieving an equitable resolution to the crisis; and arrange for adequate compensation for those who have been dispossessed.

3. Continue to monitor the actions of Uganda and Rwanda as implementation of the March 11 agreement procedes.

Given the isolation of the victim population, only persistent attention by the world community will foster constructive action.