Northern Uganda: A humanitarian crisis that demands sustained focus

A humanitarian tragedy has been unfolding in the northern part of Uganda - its impact on some of the most vulnerable groups, especially children, is a story that demands close and continuous attention.

The Story

While the situation in Uganda has received growing international scrutiny over the past year, continued and sustained attention to the tragedy of civilians – particularly children – caught in the deadly conflict in the north of the country remains a high priority. United Nations relief officials have repeatedly expressed concern about the neglected humanitarian crisis in northern Uganda, where up to 1.6 million people have been displaced by the conflict with the rebel Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), notorious for its campaigns of lootings, murders, mutilations and abduction of children to serve its militia.

To provide context, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the area is close to that of Darfur, Sudan, but the plight of Ugandan children is especially troubling.

“It is mind-boggling how little international attention there has been and also how difficult it has been over the years to fund the work for the children, the reintegration of the children who have escaped, and a real response to the crisis in the north,” says Jan Egeland, who heads the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). According to OCHA, conditions in the IDP camps across the north are poor, despite improvements over the last year and a half. Medical care and water and sanitation are well below standards. Insecurity has been a major limiting factor, and this is linked to the relatively small humanitarian presence in the north.

The context

- Uganda has rich agricultural potential but more than half the population lives in abject poverty with insufficient food to eat.
- The World Food Programme (WFP) provided emergency supplies to a record 2.8 million people in 2004, but a shortfall on resources threatens WFP’s delivery capacity this year. In the northern Karamoja district alone the numbers dependent on food assistance were expected to quadruple from 117,000 people in March to 570,000 in April.
- Families living outside the camps continue to shepherd their children into secure lodgings at the end of each day for fear that the LRA will raid their villages at night and carry them off. According to UNICEF there were 11,000 of these ‘night commuters’ in the district of Gulu alone in March 2005.
- In 2004, UN sought $158 million for Uganda as part of its overall $1.7 billion appeal for 2005. Most of the funds were targeted to providing basic goods and services such as clinics, clean water and sanitation, food and supplies.

For further information

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