Briefing Paper

Feinstein International Center

Strengthening the humanity and dignity of people in crisis through knowledge and practice

Humanitarian Agenda 2015 Northern Uganda Country Study

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Humanitarian Agenda 2015 (HA2015) **is a policy research project aimed at equipping the humanitarian enterprise to more effectively address emerging challenges around four major themes: universality, terrorism and counter terrorism, coherence, and security.**

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Overview

The HA2015 study examines the effects of four broad challenges on the humanitarian enterprise: universality, terrorism, coherence and security. Each of these has resonance in the context of northern Uganda. There are parallels between the Uganda case and other country studies in some aspects. The manifestation of the terrorism/counter-terrorism paradigm, for instance, has many parallels to Colombia. In other respects, such as the question of coherence, Uganda is unique in the countries examined to date.

Discussions on universality in northern Uganda examined the problems of delivering human rights messages and implementing rights-based programs in communities characterized by a traditional and patriarchal culture. The survival needs of the population existed in tension with the rights and training programming of western donors and associated agencies. Communities were appreciative of trainings and rights-based assistance but were perplexed by what they saw as a disconnect between this type of aid and the basic essentials that they needed.

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Conversations on terrorism and counter-terrorism have particular relevance in the context of Uganda, as the Government of Uganda (GoU) increased its use of the "terrorist" label in 2002 in an apparent effort to garner more international military and financial backing for the war in the north. In 2006 the emphasis on counter-terrorism continues to affect the ability of civil society organizations, including international NGOs, and opposition political parties to operate freely.

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Questions of coherence arose primarily with regard to the role of the Ugandan military (UPDF) in providing escorts for humanitarian organizations, particularly concerning how this collaboration affects the efficacy and neutrality of the aid enterprise. This topic led to more in-depth discussions about the role of various actors (including the GoU, the UPDF, and the international community) in the continuation of the war. Northern Uganda is one of the pilot cases for implementation of the United Nations' cluster approach to improve the management of and response to humanitarian crises, but implementation is in the very early stages in the country and was not a topic of interviews.

In regard to security, interviews focused on the unpredictability of security in the north and the effects that this has upon local communities as well as on the humanitarian enterprise. The overall consensus is that while security has improved in 2006, attacks and incidents continue to occur and the civilian population remains severely constrained in the pursuit of livelihood strategies.

Methodology

This country study is a result of field research in northern Uganda in March and April 2006, supplemented by previous research in June 2005. Data collection methods included focus group discussions with approximately 30 war-affected individuals and interviews with four humanitarian assistance workers in national and international organizations. All of the focus groups and most of the interviews with humanitarian staff were conducted in Gulu district, the center of the war for many years and currently host to a greater number of humanitarian agencies and activities than other northern districts.

This study also draws upon relevant data collected in four weeks of work on a separate project.[1] Also qualitative in nature, this data is from interviews with individuals and focus groups in IDP camps and semi-settled villages. Interviews with NGO and UN workers, representing local and international organizations and staff members, also contribute to this larger body of knowledge. All these interviews were conducted in Kitgum district and organized independently by the assessment team. Kitgum borders Gulu and remains even more insecure for both humanitarian organizations and local communities.

Interviews for the HA2015 project with war-affected communities in Gulu district were facilitated by a local NGO. Staff from this NGO provided translation for these interviews. The association with this NGO may create bias in the data, as the staff members were well-known to the communities visited and were in the process of implementing programs in these same areas. The author made clear at the start of the interviews that no assistance would be provided as a result of our conversations and that the interviews were entirely separate from the programs of the local NGO. Such explanations do not, however, eliminate a sense of expectation on the part of the communities and the responses may have been skewed accordingly. Interviews with staff members from national and international NGOs were conducted in a private capacity and organized independently.

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Historical Context

The conflict in northern Uganda began shortly after the current president, Yoweri Museveni, took power through a military coup in 1986. The take-over by Museveni's forces, the National Resistance Army (NRA), came after years of political, military, and social turmoil dating back to the regime of Idi Amin in the 1970s. The NRA took power after battling the national army of the time, the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA). A large portion of the officer corps of the UNLA was dominated by northerners, and many of these soldiers fled to the north of the country fearing retribution by the NRA forces. Some of these UNLA soldiers demobilized while others crossed the border into Sudan. The NRA did move north and some NRA soldiers engaged in abuses against the northern populations, including pillage, rape, torture, widespread theft of cattle, and destruction of infrastructure. These events sowed the seeds of rebellion in the north, and the late 1980s saw the emergence of a series of resistance movements with varying degrees of popular support. The longest lasting in the line of resistance leaders has been Joseph Kony who operates with his forces, known (after several earlier iterations) as the Lord's Resistance Army or LRA.

Kony based the LRA in southern Sudan, and the movement received overt support from the Sudanese government for much of the 1990s in an effort to counter the activities of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in the same area. In turn, the Ugandan government supported the SPLA, creating a proxy war between the two countries. Overt support to the LRA from the Sudanese government dwindled in the late 1990s due to increased international pressure and an agreement between Khartoum and Kampala, but support to Kony from elements within the Sudanese military allegedly continues.

Unlike earlier popular northern resistance movements, such as Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement (HSM), the LRA quickly lost popular support among the local population due primarily to the terror the group inflicted upon civilians. Attacks upon the populations of Acholiland (Gulu, Kitgum, and Pader districts) increased and intensified in the 1990s and soon spread to the Lango and Teso sub-regions. The Ugandan national army (the United People's Defense Force or UPDF) began to forcibly move civilians into camps and "protected villages" allegedly in order to cut the rebels' food supply. Corralling the population was also meant to decrease the abduction and forced recruitment of children and youth into the rebel forces. However, the protection of civilians in the displacement camps has been inconsistent and often ineffective, with many of the most serious massacres and waves of abduction occurring after people were forced into the camps.

In 2003, the GoU encouraged the creation of local militias to provide protection to the population. These militias are under the control of the UPDF but are often poorly trained and lack regular salaries and other support.

The World Food Programme (WFP) has been providing food rations to the IDP population since the mid-1990s and operates under heavy security provided by the UPDF.[2] The number of national and international NGOs and UN organizations has increased in the north in the last three to four years as the humanitarian situation has worsened and world attention to the conflict has increased. Insecurity and limited humanitarian access often hinder effective programming and monitoring, and most organizations rely on UPDF escorts to travel to many of the camps in Kitgum and Pader districts.

At present, up to 95% of the population in Acholiland remains displaced. The number of attacks upon civilians has decreased over the last year, but national and international NGOs came under direct attack in November 2005 following the International Criminal Court's (ICC) release of indictments for five top LRA officials.

Although the conflict between the GoU and the LRA is usually considered to be the main conflict in the north, there are a series of over-lapping issues that affect the humanitarian and political situation. For instance, violent and at times deadly cattle raids by the Karamojong (pastoral groups in northeastern Uganda) are one of the most pressing security threats for much of the population in the eastern part of Acholiland and Lango and Teso sub-regions. In addition, the economic, political and social marginalization of the northern populations by the GoU underlies all aspects of the conflict, and this is unlikely to be resolved through a military strategy or negotiated peace with the LRA.

Universality

International Versus National Organizations

There is a division apparent within the humanitarian enterprise in northern Uganda between national and international organizations. The "big players" are all international organizations with western or northern funding, including United Nations agencies (such as WFP and Unicef) and NGOs (such as the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC)). National organizations do have a presence and some are long-standing entities (such as Concerned Parent's Association, founded in the mid-1990s), but their reach, visibility, and programming is minimal in comparison to most of

the international agencies. This division between the international and national organizations is due to a variety of factors, including funding sources, membership base, and institutional capacity.

The majority of organizations working in northern Uganda use military (UPDF) escorts to reach the IDP camps in the heavily affected districts (escorts are currently used to access most camps in Kitgum and Pader districts). Although the military provides the escorts free of charge, organizations must rent the escort vehicles used by the soldiers. These vehicles are provided by private transport contractors at rates starting at roughly 1200 USh per kilometer (US$0.65). These rates push up operational costs very quickly, particularly for organizations seeking to conduct regular field work.[3] As a result, organizations that wish to use escorts (not all do) but that have more limited financial resources are hindered in their ability to implement and monitor projects in the most war-affected areas.[4]

National organizations that receive funding for specific projects from international donors are expected to adhere to principles dictated by the donor organizations. While no respondent felt that these western norms created substantial problems in working with local populations, areas of tension and disconnect were raised by all agency interviewees.

Issues of support and capacity also contribute to the differences between national and international organizations in northern Uganda. The conflict and accompanying humanitarian crisis in Uganda affects only the northern districts while the rest of the country functions as one of Africa's more prosperous and growth-oriented countries. Accordingly, the GoU receives large amounts of international financial support.[5] The divide between the northern districts and the rest of the country means that there is little national support at either the state or popular level for Ugandan organizations operating in the conflict-affected area. Furthermore, national organizations often have lower human resource and management capacity than their international counterparts, in part because many qualified individuals in the northern region have either moved to areas with better economic opportunities (and improved security) or are already employed by the better-paying international organizations.

As in many countries, international organizations in northern Uganda are able to maintain a substantially larger presence in regards to programs and financing than their national counterparts. This influence extends to the principles and values promoted within the humanitarian enterprise. For instance, interviewees at both local and international organizations that received western funding for child-focused projects spoke of the problems in adhering to the donors' definition of "youth" in the context of northern Uganda. Donors stipulate that only individuals under age 18 are eligible to participate in programs, whereas agencies on the ground point out that many of the young people who return from LRA captivity are in their late teens and

early 20s and are in need of basic inputs, primary education, rights-based training, and other forms of support.

More substantive contradictions in local versus outsider norms relate to the discrepancy between the needs of the communities and the mandates imposed by donor agencies. One senior-level manager at an international NGO explained that his organization receives funds for rights-based programming, whereas the beneficiary communities all have needs-based priorities.[6] Similarly, many international organizations or their local partners are implementing training programs. These programs may have benefits—even recognized benefits—for the communities, but the local populations place much greater emphasis on basic needs programming than on trainings on what they perceive to be relatively abstract agendas (for instance, sensitizing communities to the rights of women and children). According to respondents in the humanitarian agencies, the rights-based approach is more likely to focus, for example, on the overall rights of the children to go to school and might entail repair of school facilities and other broad and "enabling" interventions. One of the main obstacles to education, however, is based on the needs of specific families (such as lack of books or uniforms), and these gaps will not be addressed through a broader rights-based approach. Respondents in focus groups explained that while they would accept any assistance offered by the humanitarian agencies, their most pressing needs were food, medicine and soap. In discussing these program-specific constraints, interviewees within organizations expressed a wish that the donors be more flexible and better able to adapt funding and program criteria to reflect the reality on the ground.

Perception Gap

Humanitarian aid workers spoke of a perception gap between the western values or international principles espoused by the humanitarian agencies and the values and perceptions of the local communities. Both national and international staff members explained that much of this tension was due to a clash between human rights norms and the dominant values of traditional Acholi culture.[7] Respondents felt that this perception gap was most pronounced regarding gender dynamics and women's rights.[8] A growing number of aid organizations (including national organizations) are conducting gender sensitization trainings and seminars on the rights of women

and children. Male and female aid workers spoke of the difficultly of changing gender attitudes at the community level. Some local leaders also discussed what appears to be a backlash against these new ideas, explaining that "yes, domestic violence is on the rise, but it is because women are getting ideas that they can talk back to their husbands."[9] According to these local councilors, these "ideas" were being propagated by aid workers.

Western Agencies, Western Agendas

Overall, western agencies appear to be trusted by the local communities in which they are working. When focus groups were asked if they had a preference for where humanitarian assistance came from, nearly all respondents expressed a preference for western assistance, which was considered to be "more plentiful and of better quality" than aid from other sources. In fact, many of the respondents in war-affected communities stated explicitly that they would rather have the aid be delivered by westerners than by local workers. This preference is due to a belief that the Ugandan aid workers and agencies are more likely to be corrupt. One woman gave an example of an international program that had been staffed by expatriates in the early phases but had "then been turned over to local staff. Once that happened the quality of the goods and the amount that we received went downhill."[10] Such a change could have been due to a variety of factors, including changes in the program, supplier, or funding stream, but she felt that the deterioration in the assistance was a direct result of the transfer of the program to local control.

Interviews with Ugandan aid personnel revealed that there is a widespread belief within society that western-funded agencies have a hidden agenda, although there was discrepancy among respondents as to the exact nature of and motivation for this belief. Two respondents said that this perception is propagated by politicians seeking to garner support. For instance, opposition politicians might say that "the international donors have helped to support the current regime [in Kampala] because all the aid goes through the government, which ends up providing the regime with increased credibility."[11] Another respondent reported that politicians sometimes use rumors about the international presence to contribute to conspiracy theories (which are rife in Northern Uganda), such as "the whites are coming to take away your land" or "the whites have set up cults here."[12] A third interviewee felt that there was distrust of the western agenda in some middle-class circles within Ugandan society, including the belief that American NGOs were front agencies for spies. Although all of these respondents said that belief in hidden agendas of western organizations did exist, none felt that it was a serious problem that had a substantial impact

on the work of the aid organizations. They also pointed out that such beliefs and any resentment or hostility towards aid agencies was unusual at the beneficiary level, largely because these communities were more focused on survival than upon the political nuances of the humanitarian community.

The role of western donors in dictating the nature of humanitarian assistance is perhaps more relevant in the context of northern Uganda than is the rumor mill regarding a possible hidden agenda. The agenda and priorities of western donors is apparent in the strategy of the UN agencies, including efforts to move the population toward greater self-sufficiency by decreasing food rations and support for the national strategy of creating "decongestion" camps. The input of the local population is largely absent in both of these initiatives. While there may be some local support for the decongestion process, the level of support appears to vary from one area to the next. As of yet there has been little documentation and analysis of the views and concerns of the communities regarding this process.

Aid personnel also discussed the role of western donors in determining the programs of agencies on the ground. One respondent, an expatriate working for a European NGO, commented that when he arrived in the country three years ago the donors had come to the agencies to ask "what is needed?" and had funded needs-based programs accordingly. Now, however, most of the donors put out requests for proposals stating their "funding interests" (he noted the Dutch government as one exception). NGOs must craft their project proposals accordingly, regardless of the assessed need or priorities on the ground. Donor-driven response is, of course, very widespread in both humanitarian and development contexts, as this interviewee pointed out: "I guess northern Uganda is becoming more like all the other emergencies in this regard."[13]

A related topic is the possible role played by international donors in the perpetuation of the conflict. A large portion of western aid money goes through the GoU and the Ugandan government is considered, by many, to be in a position to benefit from the indefinite continuation of the conflict. According to respondents, this is evident in the lack of engagement between the UPDF forces and the LRA (if fighting occurs it is usually between the militias and the LRA), the failure to apprehend

Kony and other top LRA leaders over the past 20 years, and the economic opportunities available to government and army officials through lucrative business deals, investments, black market trading, and the large amount of money made off of military and humanitarian assistance passing through government channels.
One interviewee stressed that the donors bear responsibility for the continuation of the war because they are not taking active steps to push the government to end the conflict. Like others, he argued that the GoU's dependence on foreign funding gives the donor nations a great deal of power over the Museveni regime. Therefore, in the view of the respondent, the donors could cut financial support until the GoU takes specific steps to bring the conflict to a close or, alternatively, to improve the protection of civilians or to direct more funds towards social programs in the north.[14]

Terrorism

Uganda is not on the usual list of countries thought to have associations with or to provide refuge for terrorist groups. However, the "global war on terror" and counter-terrorist activities and policies have had a direct impact upon humanitarian assistance and the conflict in northern Uganda.

The GoU passed the Anti-Terrorism Act in May 2002. Observers believe that this law sought to capitalize on the American government's effort to root out terrorism and was aimed at increasing U.S. financial and military assistance to Uganda. The law includes a broad definition of terrorism, stating that terrorism is the "use of violence or threat of violence with intent to promote or achieve political, religious, economic and cultural or social ends in an unlawful manner" and carries a mandatory death sentence for those found to be terrorists. Journalists publishing material "likely to promote terrorism" are also subject to prosecution.[15] This and other laws as well as constitutional provisions (such as detention for 360 days without charges) have allowed the government to increasingly stifle the political and civil society activity of those who disagree with the current regime. For instance, two elected members of parliament (MPs), two local elected officials, and a local businessman, all from the north and all supporters of the main opposition party, were arrested on trumped-up capital charges in 2005.[16] Radio stations in Gulu have been searched and staff members detained for giving air time to local opposition politicians.

The LRA is considered a terrorist organization by the United States government.[17] This classification has allowed the GoU to focus on the military defeat of the rebels as the primary strategy for ending the war—at the expense of peace negotiations and an amnesty process. In

early 2002 the UPDF launched Operation Iron Fist, a military offensive that allowed Uganda soldiers to cross into Sudanese territory to pursue suspected LRA rebels. This offensive led to an increase in rebel attacks against civilians in both Uganda and southern Sudan, resulted in a new wave of displacement across the north, and increased the number of civilian complaints of UPDF abuse.[18]

The readiness of the GoU to use the "terrorist" label has also affected the ability of the NGOs to operate freely, particularly in the north. One interviewee explained that the government makes references to "the NGOs in the north who are involved in supporting terrorists" but has yet to specify which organizations these are.[19] NGOs that take a rights-based approach or focus on advocacy are considered more susceptible to scrutiny and pressure than those who provide material humanitarian assistance. In early April 2006, the Ugandan parliament passed the Non-Governmental Organisations Registration (Amendment) Bill that was first introduced in 2001. This law creates a board of fifteen people to oversee the actions of NGOs in Uganda. Thirteen of the fifteen members are drawn from government institutions, including the security sector, and two from the public. NGOs themselves have no representation on the board. The same law tightens the registration rules for NGOs, thereby bringing these organizations under more regular scrutiny and tighter control by the government, including regular renewal of permission for them to operate in the country.[20]

Interviewees largely agreed that the GoU was using the rubric of terrorism as a political tool to increase internal repression and to garner additional international military and financial support. However, respondents also pointed to some positive effects of the increased attention to "terrorism" within Uganda, mainly the increase in international attention to the conflict and the subsequent growth in humanitarian programs to address the conditions in the north. Respondents who view the ICC indictments as a positive step also credit the increased attention brought by the "terrorism" debate as leading to the involvement of the ICC.

The global war on terror has had less of a direct impact upon humanitarian assistance in Uganda than in other countries. While NGO staff said that assistance activities have become more closely monitored, this shift was not seen as having a pronounced retrenchment in the larger humanitarian enterprise. Most specific examples of changes cited in western-funded humanitarian assistance since 9/11 related to minor incidents. For instance, one respondent said that she is able to buy office or project supplies for a USAID-funded project only from an approved list of companies and countries,

and this was not the case prior to the 9/11 attacks.[21] Another interviewee discussed the decrease in funding over the past few years for USAID-funded agricultural projects. He felt that this was due to a shift in focus within the USG from Africa to countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq, but he could not be certain that the phasing out of this project was not due to other reasons.[22]

Coherence

A discussion of coherence in the context of northern Uganda could include a variety of topics. This section looks at coherence (or incoherence) at a theoretical or strategic level, at the extent of coherence within the international humanitarian response, and at the presence of the Uganda army within the humanitarian enterprise in the north.

In some instances agencies have been known to have armed military personnel ride in their vehicle, such as in the back of an extended-cab pick-up truck. Upon witnessing this practice, Ugandan members of the Tufts team commented that this actually increased the security risk to the agency, as rebels could fire upon the soldier(s) as a "legitimate" military target while the army personnel were in the NGO vehicle.

The primary question to examine at the theoretical or strategic level is whether the political, military and humanitarian agendas of the national and international actors are coherent with one another. Put simply, are these three agendas operating in parallel or moving toward different ends? As of mid-2006 the military agenda is led entirely by the Uganda armed forces and associated local defense units. The purported military aim is to defeat the rebels in order to bring an end to the conflict. The strategy to achieve this end, however, includes the displacement of nearly two million civilians into under-serviced, highly congested, disease-ridden and poorly protected IDP camps. The military strategy, therefore, is in direct opposition to the humanitarian strategy, which is seeking to alleviate the suffering cased by the rebel attacks and exacerbated by the government-imposed strategy of camps.

The political strategy is controlled primarily by the GoU, and purportedly seeks to resolve the conflict through, in part, limited international involvement (as evident through invitations to the ICC to operate in Uganda), a negotiated settlement and an amnesty process. However, the stated political strategy is hindered by the current regime's desire to hold on to power by repressing opposition parties and the freedom of civil society, the lack of political will to reinvigorate peace negotiations and the confusion regarding the future of the amnesty process following the ICC indictments. The international dimension to these strategies further hinders coherence, as western nations continue to support the discordant humanitarian, military and political agendas at work in northern Uganda without seeking to address or rectify the ways in which these three strategies collide.

With respect to coordination within the international humanitarian response in northern Uganda, the major humanitarian actors are in the

process of transforming from a loosely coordinated program to the new "cluster approach." The United Nations is testing the cluster approach in response to internal displacement in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, and northern Uganda. Meetings on this approach in November 2005 in Uganda showed "general acceptance among humanitarian partners that sector management and accountability in Uganda needs to be strengthened" but also demonstrated confusion regarding the implementation of the cluster approach.[23] Interviews for the HA2015 project did not directly address the shift to the cluster approach, but informal conversations pointed to a relatively high level of uncertainty regarding the move towards a new coordination model. A repeated area of concern is the lack of clarity regarding the new role of UNHCR, which will be the lead agency on protection and camp management (a sub-cluster under protection), but has for years only played a limited role in northern Uganda with a specific focus on the Sudanese refugees.[24]

One of the most tangible aspects of the coherence debate in northern Uganda is the role of the UPDF in humanitarian assistance.[25] Many of the humanitarian agencies that conduct work in the IDP camps in Kitgum and Pader districts travel under military escort. Agency vehicles may travel with their own escorts or in larger convoys. The organizations that make regular trips to the field set a schedule of their movements in advance, allowing for coordination and sharing of escort vehicles. (The Tufts research team, for instance, was able to join UN convoys traveling to specific locations in Kitgum.) Most agencies use two escort vehicles, although one may be used on routes considered to be more secure. In some instances agencies have been known to have armed military personnel ride in their vehicle, such as in the back of an extended-cab pick-up truck. Upon witnessing this practice, Ugandan members of the Tufts team commented that this actually increased the security risk to the agency, as rebels could fire upon the soldier(s) as a "legitimate" military target while the army personnel were in the NGO vehicle.

The World Food Programme (and, by extension, WFP's implementing partners the Norwegian Refugee Council and World Vision) use the most extensive military escorts. Unlike the other agencies operating in the north, WFP convoys travel with heavy artillery, including members of the "Black Mambas," an elite group of soldiers best known for

protecting President Museveni. Although there is some criticism from national and international actors regarding the close links between WFP and the Ugandan military, in times of heightened insecurity (as occurred, for instance, in 2002 and 2003 after the launch of Operation Iron Fist) WFP is often the only agency able to access all of the IDP camps.[26] All interviewees (within affected communities and humanitarian agencies) recognized the close cooperation between WFP and the UPDF, but all agreed that the current system of escorts allows WFP to make consistent and uninterrupted deliveries of food aid. Even when asked directly, no respondents felt that the links between WFP and the military compromised the humanitarian agenda or principles of the UN agency. Beneficiary communities in particular felt that this cooperation was positive and should continue.

Certain agencies do not use military escorts due to organization principles and policies, namely ICRC and MSF. War-affected communities were well aware of this fact and most respondents gave credit to these organizations for remaining totally independent. Most interviewees at the community level acknowledged the public information and sensitization campaigns of these organizations (largely by radio) as helping to prevent ambushes or attacks. Humanitarian workers from other organizations were slightly more skeptical and stressed that security in the north is unpredictable and that there was no clear correlation between sensitization campaigns and a recent string of good luck. (Interviews with ICRC and MSF did not address this specific topic).

Opinions differed on the current extent of coordination among the different humanitarian actors in the north. Respondents in beneficiary communities largely believe that the agencies do follow a coordinated plan of action but say that this was not the case in the past. Evidence of coordination comes from the fact that different agencies do not provide the same inputs at the same time in the same area and that "if WFP brings food, then ICRC will bring saucepans." Interviews with agency personnel pointed to policy and message areas where coordination was lacking, such as the lack of a coordinated response to the ICC indictments. Some agencies are in favor of the ICC indictments whereas others feel that the indictments will not assist in ending the conflict. Staff members of organizations are often asked about the ICC process when working with beneficiary groups, and the lack of a coordinated message was seen as both potentially dangerous (discussed below) and problematic for the agencies.[27]

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Security

Insecurity continues to be the main factor dictating the living conditions of the population in northern Uganda. The on-going threat of insecurity also influences the nature and provision of humanitarian assistance. However, all respondents felt that the security had improved over the last two years. Rebel attacks were minimal in the first part of 2006, but interviewees were quick to point out that insecurity in the north is cyclical.

Discussing certain topics while in the camps, such as opinions on the ICC indictment of the LRA leaders, could be a security risk due to the presence of LRA networks among the camp population. If overheard, such discussions could also negatively affect the security of members of the community.

Regardless of the improvements in security, the vast majority of people in Acholiland continue to live in IDP camps. Most of the camps are highly congested and residents have limited access to land for subsistence farming. Economic opportunities are almost non-existent and the primary income-generating activities are firewood collection, charcoal making, beer brewing, and petty trade. UPDF soldiers and local defense units guard the camps and residents are permitted to leave the camp only during set hours each day. Camp residents throughout northern Uganda report harassment and abuse (including beatings) by the soldiers of people who were found to be outside of the camps after curfew, which can be as early as mid-afternoon in some areas. A "security perimeter" of between two and three kilometers (more in some areas) is maintained during daylight hours and those who are able to access land (often by paying steep rents) must farm within this area. People do venture beyond the security perimeter to collect firewood, wild greens, grasses for thatch, and seasonal fruits and greens. Most of these chores are performed by women and/or children who incur risk from attack by LRA, bandits or Karamojong warriors (in certain areas).The UPDF at times allows excursions, but many people leave the security perimeter without the knowledge of the soldiers.

The threat of insecurity also affects humanitarian operations. The use of military escorts in Kitgum and Pader constrains humanitarian access and hinders the ability of organizations—especially smaller organizations—to effectively run and monitor project activities. To note, focus groups respondents in Gulu district did not feel that the use of military escorts by humanitarian agencies affected the way in which communities view the aid organizations, but this has not been tested in other districts where military escorts are more common.

As of early April, organizations were not using escorts in Gulu district as per the order of district government officials, who have deemed Gulu safe for all agencies. Several staff members with organizations based in Gulu felt that this assessment was somewhat arbitrary and pointed out that people in the camps are reporting regular movement by the LRA. One respondent said that he fears that the organizations were being

used as "guinea pigs" to test the government's theory that the rebels were weak and near defeat. In his experiences, some of the UPDF units in more remote areas of Gulu district will not let agency vehicles pass without an escort, stating that the road is too insecure for travel.[28] This perception gap between the official position and the reality expressed by local people and military units causes anxiety among staff members and hinders consistent access.

Road travel in northern Uganda must occur between specific hours, roughly 9 AM to 4 PM depending on the location. (This is the case for movement both with and without military escorts). The limited daily timeframe further constrains the ability of organizations to conduct projects in the camps, especially in those areas that are farther away from the district centers where all NGO and UN offices are located.

Even in a period of relative security, the threat of violence has a clear effect on communities and aid personnel. Research in three IDP camps in Kitgum indicates that people are unwilling to leave the camps and return to their original homes until they believe that the LRA has been defeated entirely. Daily activities such as the collection of wood and wild greens resulted in much anxiety about the possibility of a rebel attack. Camp residents feel that they receive unclear and occasionally contradictory information from the UPDF and other officials, which makes it difficult for them to make informed decisions regarding security threats.

Aid personnel state that the threat of insecurity continues to affect humanitarian operations. All respondents stressed that the security situation was extremely unpredictable and that attacks could occur against any organization at any time. One interviewee from a national NGO felt that her organization did not take adequate security measures due to both financial and policy constraints. She felt that security would be greatly improved if they had radios in their vehicles and if organization policy and funds allowed for the use of military escorts. At present her office had no way of knowing if colleagues had been attacked or encountered problems while in the field.[29]

Several respondents with humanitarian organizations explained that interactions with local communities could have an impact upon the security of a particular agency. One interviewee from a national organization explained that having good relations with the people in the IDP camps meant that you were likely to be alerted if there was a security threat or a problem known to the camp residents.[30] Another interviewee explained that discussing certain topics while in the camps, such as opinions on the ICC indictment of the LRA leaders, could be a

security risk due to the presence of LRA networks among the camp population. If overheard, such discussions could also negatively affect the security of members of the community.[31]

Views among beneficiary populations differed regarding the relative safety of humanitarian agencies as compared to local residents. One woman said that "aid workers are more susceptible [than communities] because they are always moving [on the roads], but the people in the camps are protected."[32] In contrast, a group of men felt that the communities were at greater risk because "the rebels' target is the people, not the agencies."[33] The pattern of rebel attacks over the last 10 years indicates that the communities are at much greater risk than aid agencies, which have only been attacked on a handful of occasions. However, there was a recent spate of ambushes on aid agencies immediately after the unsealing of the ICC indictments in November 2005, and these incidents may have led some respondents to feel that the aid agencies have come under increased danger.

Conclusion

This report examines questions of universality, terrorism, coherence, and security as largely discreet themes underlying and influencing the humanitarian enterprise in northern Uganda. It is in the linkages among and between these themes, however, where we stand to learn the most about humanitarian action. Some of these linkages have been discussed in brief in this report, such as the correlation between insecurity, coherence and the perpetuation of the war under the rubric of terrorism. Further research would be needed, however, to understand the broader relevance of some of the issues that began to emerge in this analysis. Some of this research would require more extensive follow-up at the community level. Questions to examine, for instance, could include the ways in which western values (such as gender equity and child rights) are incorporated (or not) into local values over time; the changing views of international aid operations as a war and accompanying humanitarian operation extended indefinitely; and the impact at the beneficiary level of improved humanitarian coordination.

Other aspects of the research would be at a higher level, and would seek to question some of the premises underlying the linkages between humanitarian, political, and military agendas. This could include, for instance, studies by independent international bodies on the role of western nations in perpetuating or initiating conflict through military action or direct or indirect financial and logistical support and the use of humanitarian dollars and missions to underpin such campaigns. Questions to examine might include how such dual agendas influence

perceptions of western nations, what are the long- versus short-term benefits of different types of humanitarian assistance (e.g., visible "hearts and minds" projects versus longer-term efforts to rebuild educational systems), and what are the lessons learned from interventions with varying degrees of military, political and humanitarian coherence. Answering these questions at the community and geo-political level will require studies in multiple countries and a commitment on the part of donors and researchers to tackle the difficult and potentially unpopular topics that are likely to dictate the future and efficacy of humanitarian action.

Notes

[1] The primary purpose of the author's trip to Uganda was to conduct research as part of a multi-year FIC project. This project entails a regional analysis of the conflicts in Northern Uganda, Eastern Uganda (Karamoja) and South Sudan. As per prior arrangement the author conducted concurrent work on the HA2015 project, dedicating roughly four days to data collection specifically on this project. Due to the limited time for field work, the information on northern Uganda is not designed or expected to be as detailed or as thorough as the data and findings from other countries case studies in the HA2015 project, but rather to serve as a complement or addition to relevant themes from these case studies.

[2] WFP rations were at 75% of total food needs until 2006 when they dropped to 60% for most recipients in Kitgum and Pader and to 40-50% in Gulu district and Lango sub-region (Apac and Lira districts). Ration levels are set to decrease further in the second half of 2006, but extremely vulnerable individuals (EVIs) will be provided with 100% rations. This category currently includes widow-headed households, child-headed households, disabled-headed households, and households affected by HIV.

[3] Two escort vehicles are needed in most areas. At a rate of US$0.65/km, the 100 kilometer trip (one-way) from Kitgum town to Gulu town would cost an agency US$130 if accompanied by two escort vehicles. In Kitgum District alone some of the IDPs camps are situated approximately 75 kms from Kitgum town. If an NGO (or researcher) wished to work in one of these camps every day for five days the cost in security escorts alone would be close to US$1000 (with two escort vehicles).

[4] The decision regarding use of military escorts is not purely financial, and many organizations do not use armed escort based on principle. As expected, this is the case for MSF and ICRC in northern Uganda, but the ethical dilemma raised by use of military escorts comes up for many other agencies as well. The Tufts team did use military escorts to access research sites in Kitgum district.

[5] International support has started to wane somewhat due to corruption scandals regarding use of donor funds and the increasingly autocratic nature of the Ugandan government.

[6] Interview, senior national staff member of international NGO, Gulu District, April 11, 2006.

[7] The war-affected area also includes people of the Langi and Teso ethnic groups, but the research in March and April 2006 was conducted only in Acholi areas.

[8] Acholi culture is strongly patriarchal and hierarchical and women are expected to respect and obey their male relatives. Women have limited ownership rights to land and property except through their husbands or fathers. Widows may lose these rights if challenged by their husband's family or if they refuse to be 'inherited' by a brother-in-law. Both the traditional and state justice system (represented by the clan leaders and the local council system respectively) give priority to the man's interpretation of events and claims to children and property.

[9] Focus group interview with clan leaders, Kitgum District, April 6, 2006.

[10] Woman in focus group interview, Coope IDP camp, Gulu District, April 8, 2006.

[11] Interview, senior national staff member of international NGO, Gulu District, April 10, 2006.

[12] Interview, junior national staff member of national NGO, Gulu District, April 10, 2006.

[13] Interview, expatriate staff member with international humanitarian organization, Kitgum District, March 22, 2006.

[14] Interview, expatriate worker with international humanitarian organization, Kitgum District, March 22, 2006.

[15] See Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2003; Uganda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2003).

[16] Human Rights Watch, "Uganda: Key opposition MPs arrested," April 27, 2005 available at **http://hrw.org/english/docs/2005/04/27/uganda10548.htm**.

[17] The U.S. Department of State has not designated the LRA as an official terrorist group but does include the LRA on the list of terrorist organizations. Individuals associated with the LRA are barred from entering the United States due to the LRA's inclusion on the Terrorist Exclusion List.

[18] See, among many others, Human Rights Watch, *LRA Conflict in Northern Uganda and Southern Sudan, 2002,* Background Briefing (New York: Human Rights Watch, October 29, 2002); Human Rights Watch, *Abducted and abused: renewed conflict in Northern Uganda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, July 2003); International Crisis Group, *Northern Uganda: understanding and solving the conflict* (Nairobi/Brussels: International Crisis Group, April 2004).

[19] Interview, senior national staff member of international NGO, Gulu District, April 11, 2006.

[20] See Coalition on Non-Governmental Organisations (Amendment) Bill (CONOB), "Press Statement for Immediate Release 12th April, 2006," available at http://www.civicus.org/new/media/CONOBPRESSRELEASEUganda.doc

[21] Interview, junior national staff member of national NGO, Gulu District, April 10, 2006.

[22] Interview, senior national staff member of international NGO, Gulu District, April 10, 2006.

[23] "OCHA-IDD Support mission to Uganda (14-18 November 2005)". Access on-line on May 25, 2006; available at http://www.reliefweb.int/idp/docs/reports/2005/Ugandamissionreport14-18November05.pdf

[24] See also Refugees International, "Northern Uganda: Humanitarian response to crisis still a failure" (Washington, DC: Refugees International, February 2006).

[25] There are currently no peace-keeping missions or other multi-national military forces in northern Uganda.

[26] WFP Uganda, "SITREP for December 2003," Kampala, WFP Uganda, December 1-31st, 2003.

[27] Interview, senior national staff member of international NGO, Gulu District, April 11, 2006

[28] Interview, senior national staff member of international NGO, Gulu District, April 10, 2006.

[29] Interview, junior national staff member of national NGO, Gulu District, April 10, 2006.

[30] Interview, junior national staff member of national NGO, Gulu District, April 10, 2006.

[31] Interview, senior national staff member of international NGO, Gulu District, April 11, 2006.

[32] Woman in female focus group, Patuda Parish, Gulu municipality, April 9, 2006.

[33] Focus group interview, four men, Coope camp, Gulu District, April 8, 2006.