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UGANDA AND UN DENY ASSISTANCE TO URBAN REFUGEES IN KAMPALA, CHARGES UGANDAN ADVOCACY GROUP

Washington DC, June 27, 2005: Thousands of refugees seeking asylum in the Ugandan capital of Kampala are being denied assistance and protection by the Ugandan government and the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), according to a new report from the Refugee Law Project (RLP), a Ugandan partner of the Advocacy Project.

The report, entitled 'A Drop in the Ocean,' was released recently on the occasion of World Refugee Day (June 20), which is celebrated annually by the United Nations in an effort to highlight the needs of the world's refugees (currently 12 million). The report is based on interviews with 160 refugees, asylum seekers, city officials, UNHCR, the Ugandan government and NGOs over a period of five months.

Uganda hosts over 200,000 refugees from conflicts in Sudan, Rwanda, Kenya, Somalia, and Ethiopia. But even as it earns accolades for its generosity, Uganda's policy of refugee assistance "discriminates" against urban refugees, argues the RLP.

Refugees in Uganda are given two choices. They can either remain in Kampala, in which case they forfeit the right to refugee assistance and must sign a contract to be "self-sufficient" under a 1998 "Self-Reliance" policy agreed by the UNHCR and the Ugandan government. Or the refugees can move to a resettlement camp, where they receive food aid, health care and other social services.

According to the RLP between 10,000 and 15,000 refugees may be living in Kampala. But, it reports, "self-sufficiency" in Kampala is often impossible to attain because the refugees face discrimination when enrolling in schools or applying for jobs. In addition, many do not speak the local language.

In spite of this, refugees are generally unwilling to move to resettlement camps, where the rights to move and work are often highly restricted and where educational and recreational services are poor. Refugees have also returned from camps in northern Uganda after they were attacked by local security forces or suffered from cross-border incursions. For the refugees, Kampala is the best place to achieve a sustainable livelihood. "Settlements still patently do not provide the conditions for economic survival," according to the RLP report.

The RLP report has raised questions about UNHCR's policy towards urban refugees, which was laid out in a 1997 policy: "Where refugees are assisted in settlements or camps outside urban areas, UNHCR should provide assistance in urban areas to refugees from the same country of origin only with the agreement of the government and if there are compelling reasons to do so."

In the case of Uganda, argues RLP, UNHCR accepts the government's argument that urban refugees should be pressed, if necessary, to return to camps. This is echoed by a recent study from Human Rights Watch, which concluded: "UNHCR is reluctant to continue assisting even the small number of refugees it helps in Kampala." An April 2005 Humanitarian Update by the UN reported that out of 230,000 refugees who received assistance in Uganda, only 210 in Kampala were receiving assistance by UNHCR.

Eun Ha Kim, an Advocacy Project intern working with the RLP, writes in her latest blog that most Ugandans do not even know that refugees are living in Kampala, and that there are no services or structures catering to the needs of these "urban refugees."

The RLP urges Kampala's civil society to help Uganda's urban refugee population by offering language courses and degree certification. These, it says, would make it easier for the refugees to apply for jobs, educate their children, and integrate them more fully into society, allowing them to "live life like any other Kampala city resident."

* For the RLP report "A Drop in the Ocean," click here:

http://www.refugeelawproject.org/files/working_papers/RLP.WP16.pdf

* For the RLP website click here: <http://www.refugeelawproject.org/>

* For Eun Ha Kim's blogs click here:

<http://www.advocacy.net.org/author/eun-ha-kim/>

* To read the Human Rights Watch report click here:

<http://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/kenyugan/>

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