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DISABLED REFUGEES FACE INACCESSIBLE SERVICES AND FOOD SHORTAGES IN UGANDAN CAMPS



Gulu District, Uganda: Refugees who have been disabled by the war in Northern Uganda are confronting food shortages and inaccessible public services in government-run camps. At the same time they are under growing pressure to return home, even though they lack the resources to resume a normal life.

This warning was issued recently by the Gulu Disabled Persons Union (GDPU), an advocacy group. It comes at a time when the Ugandan government is stepping up efforts to empty the camps, which house over 900,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

“People with disabilities are benefiting very little from current intervention,” said Simon Ong’om, Chairman of the Gulu Disabled Persons Union (GDPU), a leading advocacy group in Gulu.

The GDPU is urging the government and relief agencies to focus more on the needs of the disabled as they begin the task of reconstruction in Gulu, which has been devastated by the long and brutal rebellion of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA).

The GDPU campaign is being supported by the Washington-based Survivor Corps, which will hold trainings for GDPU members in Gulu next week, and by The Advocacy Project (AP). AP has recruited a Peace Fellow to volunteer with the GDPU.

Thousands of disabled IDPs are thought to live in Uganda's IDP camps. Many are direct casualties of the war, like those who were maimed by LRA fighters or wounded by landmines. But overcrowding in the IDP camps has also led to outbreaks of tuberculosis, which has in turn triggered spinal injury and epilepsy.

Very few programs specifically address their needs. During a recent mission to the Opit camp for IDPs, Mendi Njonjo, Director of AP's Africa program, found that public toilets and vocational schools are inaccessible to people with disability because they lack ramps for wheelchairs.

Many disabled camp inhabitants are also running low on food. Elyphansia Nyaga, a visually-impaired woman who cares for seven grandchildren, received five cups of maize during the month to feed her family, and even that was delivered two weeks late. She depends on the generosity of other IDPs to keep her grandchildren from starving.

An April 2008 study by the government estimated that 80 percent of those remaining in some camps were elderly or had a disability. Still, the government's Peace, Recovery and Development Plan, the roadmap for reconstruction in Northern Uganda, makes no mention of people with disabilities (PWDs). A recent study by the GDPU concluded that "PWDs are not identified, counted and planned for."

A second pressure on disabled IDPs comes from the government's determination to empty the camps. The World Food Program will shortly start reducing food rations in the camps. Those who own camp land are also putting pressure on camp residents to leave because they can only receive compensation when the land is cleared.

But many disabled IDPs like Ms Nyaga, who is elderly and has many dependants, lack the means to return. Since her daughter died in the Opit camp, Ms Nyaga has had no adult relative at her side. It takes several months for abandoned farms to produce food, and many disabled IDPs are unsure whether they will even own their land on return. Ms Njonjo reports that "land-grabbing" has been widespread in the wake of the conflict, and that IDPs who leave the camps often face legal disputes back home.

According to advocates, the government's approach ignores these many problems. Annelieke van de Wiel, an AP Peace Fellow from Amsterdam University who is volunteering with the GDPU, wrote in a recent [blog](#):

"The radio broadcasts urging people to go home disappear into thin air when it comes to targeting the deaf. Government support in the form of supply of hoes and seeds are useless to the blind. If you are dependent on your wheelchair for some form of mobility, how are you going to find transport to go back home? And what is 'home' after having been away for so long?"

- Read the [blog](#) of Peace Fellow Annelieke van de Wiel:
- Visit the Survivor Corps website: www.survivorcorps.org

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