

special report

NUMBER

1 million

Seeking refuge. Number of South Sudanese refugees in Uganda.

Sorrow, joy of refugees through the camera lens

Struggle. Several photographers recently exhibited their works showing the tribulations of refugees in Uganda and how they are coping, writes **Bamaturaki Musinguzi**

Some of the captivating photographs in Esther Mbabazi's project *The Things We Carry* displayed at a recent photography exhibition in Kampala explore what things refugees manage to carry with them when leaving their homes behind in times of conflict and war.

"As one cannot walk long distances with heavy items, he or she is left with no option but to carry the lightest important item with them, if possible. I documented South Sudanese refugees in Bidi Bidi refugee camp... and asked them what the most important thing they carried with them is and what it means to them," says Mbabazi, a young Ugandan photographer.

"I can't say there were 'common' items they carried. To almost every person I talked to, they carried different things that meant a lot to them. Of course everyone said they carried clothes and they were important, but I always asked deeper and unveiled items they had a special connection with and believed were of greater importance to them. Also, through these images, I wanted to bring out a side of someone that we'd otherwise miss through looking at them in a portrait," Mbabazi told *Saturday Monitor*.

As to why they chose to flee with particular items Mbabazi, said: "People flee with specific items for specific reasons. One young boy carried a mattress because he was told there'd

not be one to sleep on. One mother carried saucepans because she had young children to feed on the road. Another mother carried a pile of clothes because it was all she could grab in that moment while one teenage girl carried a Bible and a graduation present from her dad because those two items give her hope and keep her going."

Another Uganda photographer, Joel Ongwech's project is titled *Elvis (The Kitenge Trader)*. Elvis is a 27-year-old Congolese refugee who moved to Kampala from Bukavu,

eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. When his family arrived in Kampala they settled at a church in Katwe before they could find a place to stay.

Elvis' parents could not get employment because they did not speak the local languages and secondly most employers first consider Ugandans. So the only employment opportunity was for the refugees to work at construction sites.

Elvis' mother got a job at a local restaurant in their neighborhood. But her income could not support the family.

With help from one of her friends who was already in the business, Elvis' mother began hawking Kitenge (fabrics) and asked Elvis to help her hawk some of her clothes. Now they do not worry any more on what they will eat or where they will get money for rent in the city.

Against all odds

Through their perseverance Elvis and his mother soon established themselves and got space to sell their clothes in Kampala.

Now Elvis sells Kitenge from Zaia Plaza, a centre of fabrics in downtown Kampala. He likes playing the guitar and singing.

The projects *The Things We Carry* and *Elvis (The Kitenge Trader)* were among the 10 photography projects that were featured at the exhibition "Open Doors: Encounters in Bidibidi and Kampala" held at The Square in Kampala from November 29 to December 19, 2017.

The other featured artists were: Andrew Kartende (Uganda), Anne Ackermann (Germany), Hajarah Nalwadda (Uganda), Anne A-R (France), Hamis Ahmed aka Hamis Zzy

REFUGEE POLICY

Uganda's refugee policy grants refugees' access to healthcare, education, a right to work and freedom of movement. Refugees are also provided with land for settlement purposes and to practice some agriculture to supplement food rations.



Relief Call 011



Appreciation. "It is necessary for the international community to recognise that Uganda has had an exemplary refugee policy in the past and, even today faced with the largest refugee in-flow of the past year, Uganda remains a symbol of the integrity of the refugee protection regime that unfortunately is not being respected everywhere in the world." **ANTÓNIO GUTERRES, UN SECRETARY GENERAL**



Earning a living
Elvis, a 27-year-old Congolese refugee who moved to Kampala from Bukavu, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, sells Kitenge. This shot is part of the photographer's Elvis (*The Kitenge Trader*) project. PHOTO BY JOEL DINGWECHE



(Uganda), Marshal Owach (Uganda), Stuart Tibaweswa (Uganda) and Sula Sendagire (Uganda).

There were 130 photos in total at the exhibition. Each photographer had a photo-story of about eight to 15 photos.

The exhibition is part of a collaborative project initiated by Alliance Française Kampala and Goethe-Zentrum Kampala.

The project "Open Doors: Integration and the Impact of Refugee Populations" compares the situation of refugees in Uganda, Germany and France and the respective country's policy of asylum and reception of refugees through public dialogue, talks, film and photography.

The exhibition brought together experiences of displacement in rural refugee settlements

with experiences of the city as a place of refuge within Uganda.

It sheds light on single stories that, brought into context with each other, can as well give insights into the highly complex situation of refugee populations in Uganda.

Presented through the eyes of the photographer, the viewer experiences personal stories of human encounters - moments of exchange between the photographers and the individuals from Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement in Yumbe District in northwestern Uganda and urban refugees in the capital Kampala.

As diverse as the life realities of refugees in Uganda, these encounters tell stories that take place at the edge of despair and hope, of survival and new beginnings, as well as of immense

creative and entrepreneurial energy.

Kampala's 'little Mogadishu'

Anne Ackermann's project *Behind Veils and Walls* (2016) documents the life of young Somali women in Kampala.

"To document migration from within Africa, I met the young women in Kampala's Little Mogadishu, for whom exile felt like life in a parallel universe. Connected to family, friends, and dates all over the world almost 24/7, they seemingly maintain their bonds through telephone, Internet, social media, rotating wedding videos, and gossip rather than living in the actual country they inhabit. We're in Uganda, but could be anywhere, really," Ackermann says.

"The women in my photos are mainly engaged into social activities, like gathering and traditional festivities, or activities centred around the home (leisure, children). The emphasis in my photo project lies on being in touch with other Somalis in the international Diaspora, so you would also see the women on smart phones or in internet cafes," Ackermann told *Saturday Monitor*.

As to why she concentrated on their indoor activities Ackermann, said: "The project is called *Behind Veils and Walls* so it is really the intimate look into a usually hidden private home sphere what mattered to me. The outside world may hold hostilities and restrictions, so indoors is where life fully unfolds."

The *Self-employed Refugees* project is by Marshal Owach. This series portrays Congolese refugees eking out a living in Kampala.

These refugees decided to monetise their skills such as tailoring and carpentry instead of seeking other forms of employment.

Hamis Ahmed aka Hamis Zzy's project is titled *Building a Church in Bidibidi*. This is a story about a young man known as Joseph Elisha and his fellow South Sudanese who are living in Bidi Bidi refugee camp.

Joseph and his fellow refugees believe that the only way of bringing all these different tribes together is through building a church. They used wood and mud for building the foundation of the church and UNHCR-supplied tarpaulins were used to cover the roof.

The other projects were: *South Sudanese Refugee in the City* by Hajarrah Nalwadda (about the daily life of Joy Nyakang Simon, a six-year-old South Sudanese child born in Kampala); *Surviving Bidi Bidi* by Stuart Tibaweswa; *Ishara Bagalwa* by Sula Sendagire; and *Child Life in Bidi Bidi* by Andrew Kartende.

One of the moving life-size printed photographs by the French photographer and documentary filmmaker Anne A-R is an image of a crying young South Sudanese refugee mother in Uganda as she narrated the sad moments that forced her and children out of her troubled youngest country in the world.

In the moving coloured photo titled *I am Vivian* the 18-year-old distressed Vivian Ebiola, who is seated on UNHCR tarpaulin and donning a dirty torn dress, is shedding tears while carrying one sleeping twin in her left hand and the other twin, who is sucking his finger, is sitting on her right.

A-R told *Saturday Monitor* that she met Vivian in the reception centre of the Imvepi Refugee Settlement in Arua District in northern Uganda in November 2017. "She had crossed the border two days before. She was alone with her twins David and Patrick. When she arrived, she had nothing."

"When the soldiers (national army) came into her village and began to shoot, she was inside her house and her husband was in the field working. She had just the time to grab her twins and run. She ran between two houses to escape but she had no clue where her husband was. She still doesn't know if he is alive or not and where he is," A-R added.

The photo of Vivian and her twins is one of the images in A-R's long-term international photography project titled *I am with them* - a manifesto for refugees from their exodus. It began in 2015 with the crisis in Europe. And now, here in Uganda, it focuses on South Sudanese refugees in refugee camps in northern Uganda.

HELPING REFUGEES TO RISE

For 12 weeks, between September 2015 and February 2016, A-R met people in exile on European roads. She had only one objective: getting to know them in order to give them their identity back.

Through the lens, A-R reminds us that migrants and refugees are not just numbers, they are people with names, faces and stories. "We must stop looking at refugees as a mass," she says.

Through her project "I am with them" she wants to put the refugees back on their feet "so that we look at them in the eye as equals."

"The idea is to look at them, one by one, because they are more than the exile, they are in. Each time, once I have spent time with them on the roads or in the camps, we organise exhibitions all over the world, in large scale, so the public can face them

"The principle of "I am with them" is that the pictures are the result of a meeting between me and someone. It is an encounter. When I do a photo, it is because I had a long talk with them before. The story I described to you before, it is the story she (Vivian) told me, with me not taking pictures. I take photos with a static lens, a 35mm. that means that when I take pictures I am two metres from them," A-R said.

"For Vivian, we were seating in front of each other, she was talking to me. At the end of her story she was crying. And she stared at me. I took the images looking at her. There is always a moment when you are so near to somebody, where you can feel if they want to have a picture taken or not. If they don't want, they can say it, they can have a slight movement of 'no'. Then I don't do it. And it is okay."

Vivian, she wanted to tell me her story, she wanted the pictures (I have 25 pictures of her and her kids) and she wanted her story told," A-R added.

Vivian was eventually relocated to Omugo Settlement, an extension of Rhino Camp in Arua District.

In preparation of the exhibition, A-R was invited to the Bidi Bidi settlement. While being a workshop facilitator, she also created her own photographic series in Bidi Bidi.

Frank Schinski, a photographer from Germany and part of the collective "Ostkreuz", also held a workshop in Kampala for another group of four upcoming Ugandan professionals. This group worked on the theme of urban refugee communities.

Each group learnt new approaches of