Refugees hit hard as aid dwindles

The funding shortfall has forced humanitarian agencies to reduce food rations, strained health services, and weakened education support.

BY KARIM MUYOBO

Humanitarian partners and local leaders have raised concerns over growing food insecurity in refugee settlements after major funding cuts left more than 60 percent of refugees without food assistance, healthcare, and education support.

Uganda, which hosts about 1.6 million refugees, the highest number in Africa and the third globally, has seen humanitarian funding decline sharply over the past three years, putting pressure on already stretched services in refugee settlements.

Figures from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) show that humanitarian aid stood at $490m (Shs1.8 trillion) in 2018, rising slightly to $500m (Shs1.9 trillion) in 2019 before beginning a steady decline. Funding dropped to $491m in 2020, $370 (about Shs1.4 trillion) in 2021 and $414 million in 2022. It further declined to $294m (Shs1.1 trillion) in 2024 and between $130m (Shs487b) and $140m (Shs524b) in 2025.

The shortfall has forced humanitarian agencies to reduce food rations, strain health services, and weaken education support. Some refugee households now receive only 30 to 60 percent of their basic food needs.

Mr Titus Tumusime, the Country Director of ChildFund Uganda, said the reduction in support from international donors has significantly affected families living in refugee settlements.

"The cuts in humanitarian funding have placed immense pressure on refugee households. In the last few years, we have experienced huge reductions in funding, and at the moment, more than 60 percent of the refugees are not receiving food aid from the World Food Programme," Mr Tumusime said during a visit to Palorinya Refugee Settlement in Obongi District last week.

"Many children are unable to concentrate in school because they are hungry while some go to school without meals and others lack sufficient nutrients. This places a huge strain on the communities and their lives," he added.

Mr Tumusime said with the current situation, families struggle to meet their basic needs. These realities compel us to work harder to implement self-reliance initiatives that strengthen both refugee and host communities, enabling them to sustainably provide for their families.

District leaders say the funding are creating an acute shortage of teachers and health workers in refugee-hosting areas.

However, they say the crisis has also prompted a rethink on the country's reliance on donor support.

Mr Samuel Mpimbazi Hashaka, the Resident District Commissioner of Obongi District, said the withdrawal of funding from the US, one of the refugee programme main supporters, has exposed the risks of foreign aid overdependence.

"After the US withdrew, it looked like a crisis but it also opened our eyes as Uganda is an agricultural country," he said.

Solutions

In response, ChildFund Uganda, in partnership with ChorogUsan for Children and Good Farmers from South Korea, with funding from the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), has commissioned newly constructed classrooms and a central demonstration farm at Palorinya Refugee Settlement in Obongi District.

The initiative is part of an integrated livelihood, education, and protection programme aimed at strengthening resilience among both refugees and host communities.

Palorinya Refugee Settlement was re-established in December 2016 following an influx of refugees fleeing conflict in South Sudan. The settlement currently hosts more than 142,000 refugees, of whom 53 percent are children.

Despite their resilience, many families face significant challenges, including overcrowded classrooms, high caregiver-to-learner ratios, and limited access to livelihood opportunities. Food security also remains fragile due to limited access to arable land and irrigation.

Ms Ahn Jihee, the Country Director of Korea International Cooperation Agency, said the newly renovated early childhood development classrooms will provide a safer and more supportive learning environment for young children.

"Early childhood education is critical because it builds the foundation for lifelong learning, confidence, and well-being," Ms Jihee said.

She added that the central farm for poultry and goat production will serve as a demonstration site where refugees and host community members can learn improved farming practices to strengthen livelihoods and enhance household nutrition.

"Korea's own development experience reminds us that even in the most difficult circumstances, communities can rebuild and move forward together. After the devastation of the Korean War, Korea was once one of the poorest countries in the world," she said.

As of October 1, 2025, Uganda's refugee population mainly comes from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (52.5 percent), South Sudan (32.8 percent), Sudan (4.7 percent), Eritrea (2.9 percent), Somalia (2.9 percent), Burundi (2.4 percent), Rwanda (1.3 percent) and Ethiopia (0.8 percent), with others accounting for 0.1 percent.

FUNDING DROP

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