

Refugee scandal: OPM suspends 4 officials

Allegations. This comes after UN report noted incidences of gross mismanagement, fraud and corruption in Ugandan refugee operations, among other allegations.

BY ERIASA MUKIIBI SSERUNJOJI
emukibi@ug.nationmedia.com

KAMPALA. The Minister for Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees, Mr Hillary Onok, has suspended the Permanent Secretary of the Office of the Prime Minister, Christine Guwatudde Kintu, and interdicted four officials as investigations into the alleged misuse of resources meant for refugees commence.

The affected officials are Mr Apollo Kazungu (commissioner of refugees), Mr Walter Omondik (refugee Desk Officer in Mbarara), John Baptist Sentamu, formerly a camp commandant in Mbarara, who was recently transferred to Kumi and Mr Francis Nkwasi (biometric registration officer/assistant commandant in Mbarara, who too had been recently transferred).

The directive, which Mr Onok issued a week ago, on January 30, is to take "immediate effect". Speaking to *Daily Monitor* yesterday evening, Mr Kazungu said he was still in office and had not received any communication from Ms Guwatudde that he had been interdicted.

We were unable to speak to Ms Guwatudde because she did not respond to our repeated phone calls and text messages.

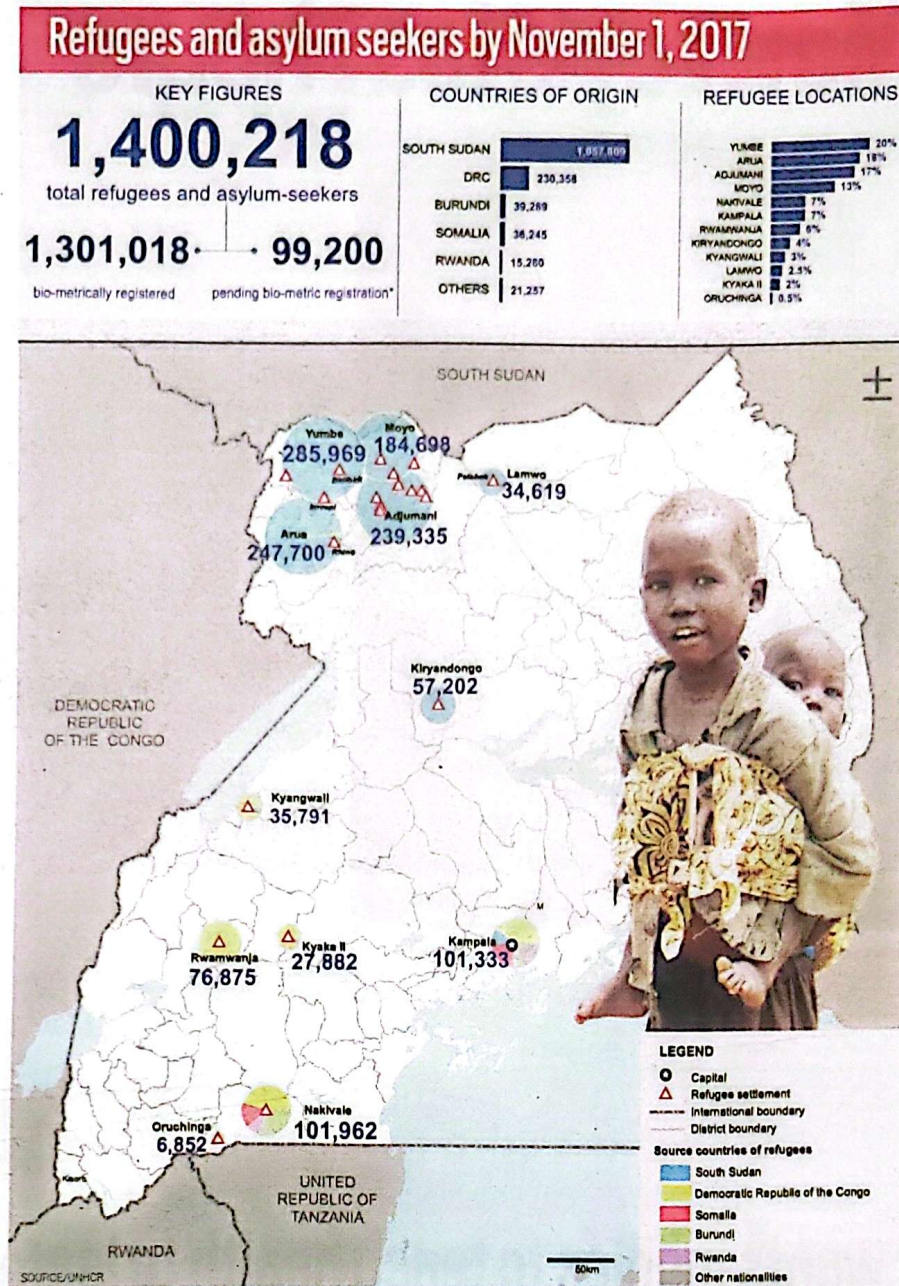
Mr Musa Eweru, the State Minister for Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees, told *Monitor* yesterday that all he and his senior minister would do in these circumstances is to direct the permanent secretary to interdict concerned officers.

He said he had by yesterday not received communication from the officials whether the four officials had been interdicted, but stressed Ms Guwatudde had to carry out his instructions or be accused of subordination.

Onok's letter to Ms Guwatudde was worded in mandatory terms. Eweru's view of the above and to enable a full investigation and non-interference by the suspected staff and, I would, therefore, like to request you to either interdict or direct the following officers to step aside while investigation into their activities commences immediately," the minister wrote.

The minister said in the letter that he received a report from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the global authority responsible for refugees, that staff facing threats and harassment by the camp commandant of Nakivale Refugee Camp, Mr John Bosco, and the refugee desk officer in Mbarara, Mr Walter

Onok stated that as a result of the UNHCR report dated



Somalia. According to figures from last year, Uganda is said to be the top refugee hosting nation in the world, with only Pakistan and Turkey holding more refugees.

The figure of refugees is said to be about 1.6 million, although the figure is now contested following the concerns that have been raised by the UN and donor countries.

One key concern is that there is possible inflating of refugee numbers by refugee staff to create 'ghost' refugees, meaning for the "ghost" refugees.

This is why the UNHCR and OPM have since embarked on biometric registration of refugees in the country to ascertain the actual number.

Reaction

In the wake of *Daily Monitor's* story published yesterday under the title "OPM hit by refugee corruption scandal", Mr Eweru issued a press statement in which he said they took the allegations "seriously".

"As such, the leadership in the Office of the Prime Minister which oversees refugee issues in the country, in collaboration with partners, is already seized by the matter and is working with stakeholders, including the United Nations system at different levels, with a view of establishing the facts and truth and taking remedial action".

Mr Eweru said the government had already "commenced measures to investigate" the allegations, and that it had also taken "immediate administrative measures" including the biometric registration of all refugees in the country. We have confirmed that the registration of refugees in Kampala is taking place at Old Kampala playground.

The European Union delegation in Uganda, which is a major funder to the refugee effort in the country, yesterday issued a statement reacting to reports of abuse of refugee resources, saying that they take "a zero-tolerance approach when it comes to any allegations of misconduct occurring in European Union-funded projects".

"As soon as we were informed about allegations of corruption and fraud affecting EU supported humanitarian actions, we formally submitted the case to the EU's anti-fraud office (OLAF) for investigation," the statement reads in part.

As the EU conducts its own investigations, the statement indicated they are keen on the investigations that the statement said the Prime Minister promised to carry out.

Counter accusations

Sources in OPM have told *Daily Monitor* that when the allegations were brought to the attention of the Prime Minister, the officials against whom allegations had been made were asked to explain.

The sources say one common theme in all the officials' explanations, apart from denying

December 14, 2017, he wrote to the Inspector General of Police to cause investigations into the matter and bring the concerned officers to book.

As the minister waited for the results of the investigations he had ordered, The Prime Minister, Dr Ruhakana Rugunda, on January 26 received another letter from the UN resident coordinator, Ms Rosa Malango.

Ms Malango's letter, Mr Onok wrote, was "drawing attention to incidences of gross mismanagement, fraud and corruption in Ugandan refugees operations and in those allegations, numerous theft of relief items for refugees and misapplication of government land for themselves, allegations of trafficking minor

girls and married women to men not of their choice and interference in refugee elections and community leaders by staff of Department of Refugees headed by Mr Apollo Kazungu, the commissioner (for refugees)."

Mr Onok said as a result of the allegations, donors, especially US, European Union and UK, threatened to withdraw aid to refugee programmes in Uganda.

The minister further reminded the PS that in the meeting, which both of them had attended that day (January 30), the donors had reiterated their concerns and threats to withdraw aid.

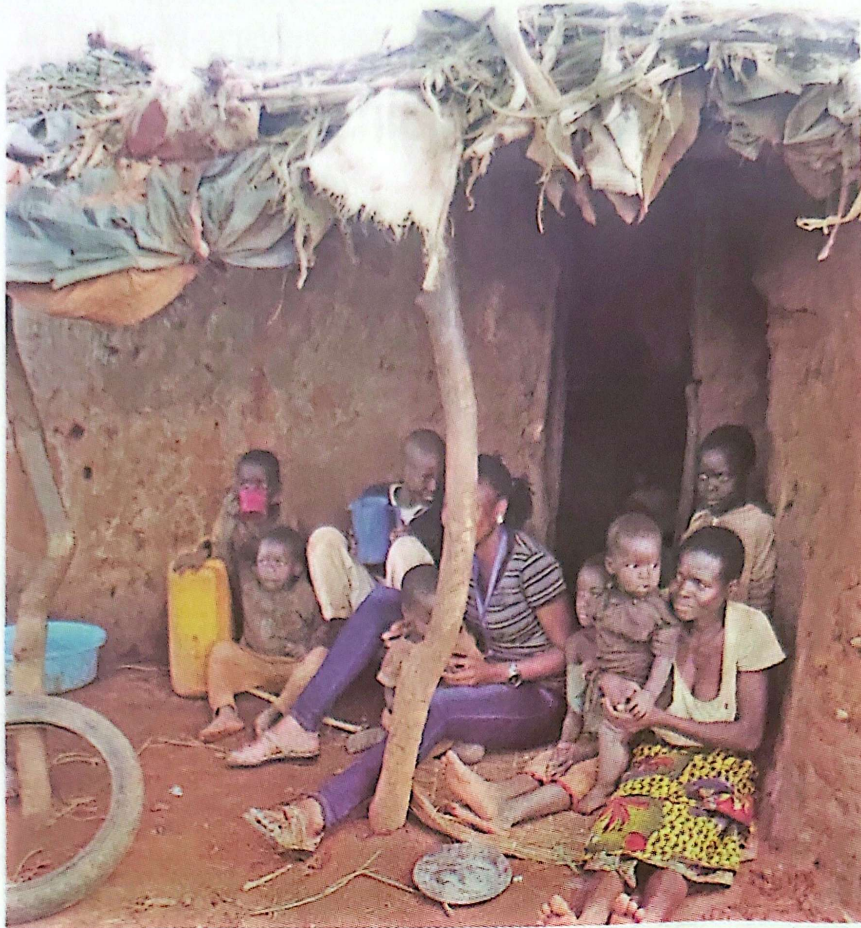
In the said meeting were Dr Rugunda, 2nd Deputy Prime Minister Kirunda Kivejinja and Mr Eweru.

Dr Rugunda had publicly vowed that the government's policy is "zero tolerance to corruption" and that the allegations would be thoroughly investigated, a vow which Mr Onok echoed in his letter to Ms Guwatudde.

"Uganda has been rated as a model country with respect to hospitality and generosity to refugees who ran to our country," Mr Onok wrote.

"The above allegations against the refugee department and actions of some of our officers are now causing doubt to our programme and denting our image internationally," he added.

Uganda has an open-door policy towards refugees and has taken in refugees from 12 countries, with the biggest numbers currently coming from South Sudan, DR Congo and



EU STAT

The Eu delegar has ide its UN partne WFP a malfea corrup refuge progra EU fur provid agenc for the and th broug direct of the Uganc We ta appro to any misco in Eur funde even has p effec vuln such com Our UNt Foc dul hav

the allegations, was throwing part of the blame at officials of UNHCR, who they say are responsible for a number of activities, including food distribution.

More queries

One of the officials, who asked not to be named, said whereas there may be things that OPM officials did not do well, there were programmes which were to be entirely run by UNHCR officials and were not well implemented, with suspicions that funds were stolen or misused.

The official cited a Shs1.5b project to build Eragi Bridge in Adjumani District which the official said was never built, and that a water trucking project funded to the tune \$20m was shoddily handled.

We were unable to obtain

independent verification of these allegations and were not in position to contact UNHCR for a comment on these allegations.

Mr Kazungu said as commissioner of refugees, he was not directly involved in running affairs in Nakivale refugee camp where many of the allegations stem from and the other four interdicted officials were based.

He said in general, OPM does not handle food distribution, which he said is a mandate of UNHCR.

Mr Kazungu said whatever has been raised are just allegations, and that the UN and other donors have pointed out as much, saying that he is ready to be investigated.

However, the official said he had by yesterday not been contacted by the police regarding the investigations.

Conditions: An official (centre) interacts with refugees at Nakivale refugee camp.

PHOTO BY RAJAB MUKOMBOZI

Tomorrow in
Daily Monitor

In Homes & Real Estate magazine,

- Find out how you can build this

