

Refugees appeal for sanitary towels



The forced migration of a large number of South Sudanese has seen over one million refugees seek safety in West Nile, Uganda. The fighting in South Sudan that broke out in December 2013 between government forces loyal to President Salva Kiir and the former vice-president, Dr Riek Machar, left many needy and vulnerable. For the next one month, *New Vision* will publish articles to highlight the plight of refugees under the campaign *Be Your Brother's Keeper* to encourage Ugandans to support refugees in all ways possible.

By Benedict Okethwengu

Rose Konga, 24, left Yei county in South Sudan in March last year. Together with four of her siblings, they fled the war in South Sudan to Ofra Refugee Settlement in South Sudan.

Konga was quickly transferred to Imvepi Refugee Settlement in Arua district. There, she now lives with thousands of other refugees from South Sudan. She hopes to return once peace is restored in the world's youngest nation.

The war has forced more than a third of its 12 million citizens to flee their homes.

Tens of thousands have died, some in ethnic killings, others from starvation and disease.

But much as Konga is safe from the guns and can access services such as health, water and food at the refugee settlement, she is disappointed by the lack of sanitary pads for women.

"I have not seen sanitary pads since I came here. I use pieces of cloth, which I have to wash and reuse, but water is scarce at the settlement," she says.

Thirty-year-old Gloria Tabu says although the dignity kits are available, their prices are a little high for refugees.

"Most of us hide when we get into our periods for fear of being embarrassed in case our clothes get stains," says Stella Atzoi. "We have to weigh between buying food and sanitary towels and most times, we

Refugees at Yida Refugee Camp in South Sudan. It is difficult for women and girls to afford sanitary towels in the settlements. AFP photo



choose food," she adds.

A packet of pads costs between sh2,000 and sh3,000 on the open market.

"We pray that the aid organisations also give us sanitary towels. We face a lot of stigma during our menstrual periods. We use pieces of cloth, which are not clean," Atzoi says.

Mary Angupani, the in-charge of Sipiri Health Centre III in Rhino Camp, says menstrual hygiene is a big challenge for the women and young girls at the settlement.

Angupani says a number of refugees do not have pads.

"It is worse for refugees of school-going age. Most of them fear that they will stain their clothes in class, so they would rather not go to school when in their periods," she says.

Julius Ocen, the Windle Trust field co-ordinator at Arua office, says their organisation offers pads for school going refugees.

He says while it is a good idea to give pads to both women and girls in the settlement, resources are not enough.

Lauben Mwetware, the project co-ordinator of Finn Church Aid at Arua office, says providing pads for women and girls will require a concerted effort.

"Partners are willing to provide the

IMPACT ON HOST COMMUNITIES

The increasing number of refugees entering Uganda daily has strained the delivery of public services to host communities around refugee settlements.

This has especially affected sectors such as health, education and water as host communities have to now compete with refugees for most of these services.

Aid agencies are doing whatever it takes to provide stand-alone services inside refugee settlements, but this is yet to succeed due to lack of enough funds.

And with the enactment

and coming into force of the 2006 Refugee Act, refugees in Uganda under section 28, are entitled to internationally recognised refugee rights, including the right to work and freedom of movement.

They are also entitled to the same rights as nationals with respect to practicing their religion and are entitled to elementary education for which they must, under Section 29, receive the same treatment as nationals.

A refugee may also, under Section 44(2), reside in any place within Uganda other than a refugee settlement.

best services for refugees, but the challenge is that resources at hand cannot meet the needs of the rising number of refugees," he says.

Charles Aguilar, the country director of ADRA, one of the implementing partners in the refugee settlement, says he is optimistic that the donations will go a long way in addressing the

shortage of dignity kits for girls and women in Bidibidi settlement.

Status of refugees

Uganda has seen the size of its refugee population rapidly increase in recent years as it continues to welcome new arrivals from three ongoing emergencies in South Sudan,

the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Burundi.

The first two months of 2018 saw more than 50,000 new arrivals, predominantly fleeing violence in eastern DR Congo. They arrived on boats through Lake Albert.

Currently, Uganda is the largest refugee host nation in Africa, with an estimated 1.4 million people. It is also one of the countries hosting the biggest number of refugees in the world.

The UNICEF Uganda Humanitarian Situation Report for January 2018 indicates that the number of South Sudanese refugees arriving in West Nile region has greatly reduced to an average of 40-50 individuals per day, compared to 100 individuals per day in December 2017.

Despite the ceasefire agreement signed in December 2017 between the warring parties in South Sudan, the new arrivals report that the humanitarian situation remains unpredictable and people prefer to seek refuge in Uganda.

Most of the new arrivals are reported to be reuniting with family members and are being settled in Omugu and Rhino camp in Arua district.

Plans are underway to open another settlement in Nebbi district for the refugees in West Nile.

WHAT REFUGEE WOMEN SAY ABOUT SANITARY TOWELS

Viona Opani
We should be given sanitary towels. It is a basic need, yet we do not have money to buy them. Imagine you have to choose between pads and food if you want to survive.



Mariam Kolo
Most women and girls use pieces of clothes, not because they want to, but because they have no choice.



Harriet Neva
For three months now, I have been using cloths. In South Sudan, I used pads. I hope to see some Good Samaritan give us sanitary towels.



Joyce Koja, 26
The south Sudan war has reduced us to beggars. God will reward those helping us here in Uganda. I only ask that they should give us sanitary pad as well.

