



Refugees wait their turn to receive treatment in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement. HIV testing has not taken root among refugees

Refugees afraid to test for HIV



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 Robert Ariaka

Refugees in Imvepi Refugee Settlement and Rhino Camp in Arua district fear to test for HIV because of the implications — stigma and the burden of accessing hard-to-get treatment.

Those who test positive have to walk long distances to access health services or are just unaware of where to find treatment and counselling.

Refugees have asked the Government and implementing partners to roll out HIV outreach services so that people who live far away from health facilities are sensitised about the illness and made aware of the available treatment.

Situation overview

A UNHCR operational update indicates that 6,397 South Sudanese refugees arrived in Uganda during the month of March, at an average daily rate of 208, bringing the total number to over one million.

The refugees are reportedly fleeing primarily out of fear of being killed by fighters belonging to the government and the different rebel factions in South Sudan.

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 re-uniting with family and are being settled at Omugu and Rhino Camp in Arua district.

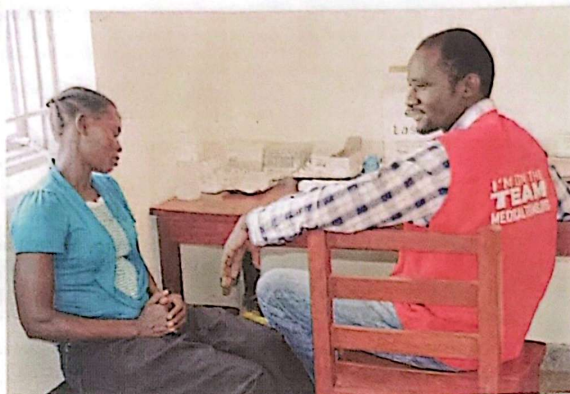
Joseph Lubari, 23, from South Sudan, says he has never tested for HIV because he is afraid of what the results might show. He is married with one child.

"Many men fear to test for HIV because they think it means the end of life. Some of them have multiple partners," he says.

Lubari says unmarried men do not test with their girlfriends because they do not want to get disagreements with them, in case the results turn out to be positive.

"The Government should provide funds to sensitise the refugees and inform the people of the importance of testing for HIV."

"Those who gather the courage to test do it secretly at clinics. They dodge the main health facilities



A refugee woman talks with a health worker. Most women go for HIV testing without their partners. Photos by Hope Mafaranga

because they might be seen," he says. Lubari says most people are not aware of the HIV services in refugee settlements and, therefore, need to be sensitised.

He says the safe male circumcision services which were taken to the settlements attracted men who were also tested for HIV before the circumcision was done.

"The services are only available at the main health facilities, so most people remain in the dark," he says.

"Most people are not aware of HIV testing services, but when they go to the health centres, they are tested and that is how some people get to know about it," Lubari adds.

Moses Malice, a South Sudanese refugee and father of two, says he has not tested for HIV since he arrived in Uganda in 2016.

"I last tested in South Sudan. I do not know my status. Aid organisations have never brought the services closer to where I stay at Village 6 Point," he says. Village 6 Point has over 3,000 refugees.

Malice says most husbands do not go with their wives for HIV testing and, therefore, need to be sensitised on the importance of testing as a

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couple.

Tabu Neima, 20, a mother of one, came to Uganda in 2016 with her husband after the war escalated in South Sudan.

She says she delivered her baby at Ciripi Health Centre III at Rhino Camp.

"Because of the antenatal services at the centre, my husband was also tested for HIV," she says.

Mary Anguparu, who is in charge of Ciripi Health Centre, says the refugees have a negative attitude towards testing for HIV, which makes it difficult to treat them.

"They continue to live in denial, even after they test positive," the medical worker says.

Anguparu says Ciripi Health Centre handles 15,966 people — both nationals and refugees — and that the health centre lacks drugs to manage people who test positive for HIV and TB.

"We are also faced with the challenge of stigma. People living with HIV are treated poorly in the refugee camps and local communities. We try to follow up with the patients to sensitise those around them, but it is not enough," she says.

She says they also conduct HIV testing and give counselling services during the outreach programmes in the refugee settlements and host communities.

"Another challenge is of couples coming to test together. We have encountered cases of missing partners when it comes to HIV testing and counselling. Some refugee women tell us their husbands have gone back to South Sudan, while others say their partners died during the war."

"Some even refuse to disclose the whereabouts of their partners, especially pregnant women who come for antenatal services," Anguparu says.

She also says some refugees keep shifting from one location to another, which affects those who are on treatment.

Ciripi Health Centre currently has 140 people enrolled on anti-retroviral drugs (ARVs).

Anguparu says even when they do outreaches, just a handful come to test for HIV. The health centre used to handle 30 to 40 patients a day, but the number has now shot up to over 100 patients following the refugee influx in Uganda.

The HIV prevalence rate in West Nile region currently stands at 2.3% while the national prevalence stands at 6.0%, according to Ministry of Health data