Local leaders say the situation is spiralling out of control.

Food cuts fuel mental health crisis in refugees

BY TOBBIAS JOLLY OWINY

When Mr Justine Ayek Bol arrived at Palabek Refugee Settlement in Lamwo District in September 2018 with his wife and four children, he felt a sense of relief. They had fled insecurity in Nasir, Upper Nile State, and Uganda offered safety.

For a while, life stabilised. But the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020 marked a turning point. By 2023, global economic shocks had triggered a sharp decline in donor funding, forcing the World Food Programme (WFP) to reduce food rations significantly.

In 2024, with relative calm returning to his home area, Mr Ayek made the difficult decision to leave the settlement and return to South Sudan to cultivate land and earn income to support his family.

Eleven months later, when he returned to check on them, he was met with devastating news.

"I found my wife in a terrible state. She had developed a psychological disorder due to the hardships they faced in my absence," Mr Ayek said during an interview last week. "Many times, she failed to provide food, medical care and other necessities for the children," he added.

His wife has since been relocated to Gulu City for treatment with the help of relatives.

Now back in the settlement, Ayek faces a different struggle—survival.

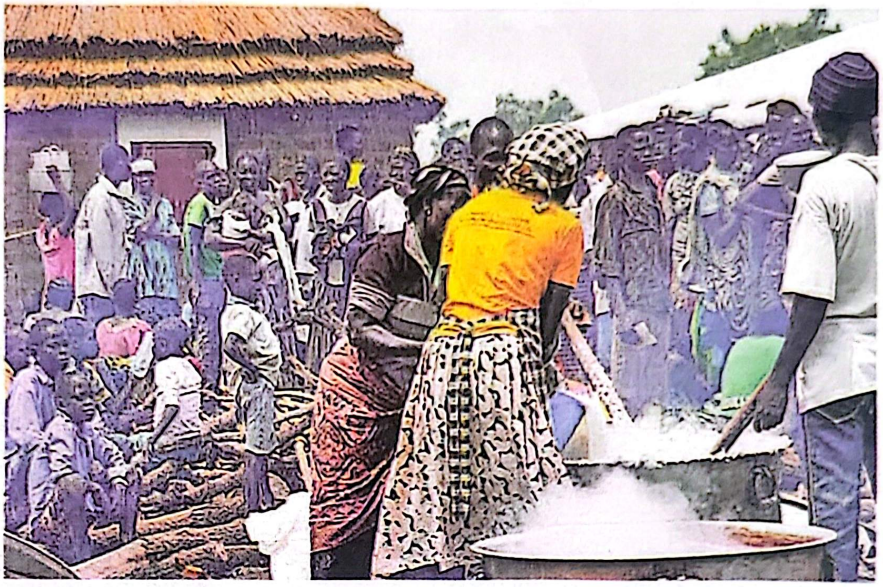
"The toughest challenge is food. Sometimes you wake up and you are not sure whether there will be anything to cook," he said.

He explained that the small plots allocated to refugees are no longer productive enough to supplement the shrinking rations.

Mr Ayek's story reflects a broader crisis affecting thousands of South Sudanese refugees in northern Uganda.

Palabek settlement, established in 2016 at the height of South Sudan's civil war, hosted about 87,860 refugees by January 2025, with women and children making up 83 percent of the population.

However, beyond food insecurity, a silent crisis is unfolding—mental health. Local leaders say the psychological toll of war, displacement and poverty is worsening.



Women and men prepare a meal for South Sudan refugees in Pagirinya Refugee Settlement in Adjumani. PHOTO/FILE

Mr Christopher Omal, the Palabek Sub-county chairperson, said harsh living conditions have pushed many refugees into mental health disorders, with some turning to alcohol and drugs.

"The refugees have lost livelihoods, homes and property. Here, they cannot adequately provide for themselves. This has serious implications on their mental well-being," he said.

According to Mr Omal, the situation is worsened by a severe shortage of mental health personnel. The entire settlement relies on just two psychiatric nurses who visit once a week.

"At Palabek Health Centre III and Akworo Health Centre II, there are very few counsellors to support such a large population," he noted.

A June 2025 study by the Refugee-led Research Hub paints a similar picture. The report highlights widespread cases of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety and substance abuse among refugees.

Researcher Lonah Akot Olweny said many refugees suffer the long-term effects of exposure to violence, torture and gender-based abuse.

"There is a high mental health burden characterised by emotional distress, anxiety disorders, depression, psychosis and substance-use disorders," she said.

She added that food insecurity plays a major role in worsening mental health.

Warning

The decline in humanitarian support has further strained services. Meanwhile, the World Food Programme warned in its August 2025 country brief of worsening food insecurity among refugees in Uganda.

Of the 13 refugee settlements, about 712,000 people—37 percent of the population assessed—were projected to face high levels of acute food insecurity between August 2025 and February 2026.

Mental health challenges are not confined to settlements. In Gulu City, authorities report a growing number of refugees struggling with psychological disorders.

Mr Geoffrey Toopiny Onyuta, the city's senior health educator and mental health focal person, said many refugees live in extreme poverty.

"They rent small rooms, often overcrowded, and cannot meet basic needs such as food, healthcare and education," he said.

He added that financial stress has pushed some into substance abuse and risky coping mechanisms.

"For substance abuse, many hotspots in the city have large numbers of South Sudanese refugees. It is very common," he said, adding that cases involving marijuana and injectable drugs.

Some women, he added, have resorted to prostitution to support their families.

Efforts to address the crisis are ongoing but limited.

Through its health and well-being pillar, the Women's Peace Initiative Directorate (WPID) has been providing trauma-informed care, sexual and reproductive health education, and community awareness programmes.

In 2025 alone, WPID assessed 2,860 individuals for conditions such as severe depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation. It provided counselling to 292 people and referred 111 for specialised care.

Efforts

The organisation also conducted 34 mental health awareness sessions across schools, health centres and communities.

Faith-based institutions are also stepping in. At PACTA Uganda, a rehabilitation centre in Gulu, many patients are refugees battling health issues linked to substance abuse.

Fr Samuel Mwaka Okidi, the director, said the burden is overwhelming.

"Both nationals and refugees are suffering. Many cases of addiction are rooted in trauma and mental illness," he said.

Between 2018 and December 2025, the centre treated 446 clients, with about 80 percent recovering and reintegrating into society.

Despite these interventions, the need far outweighs the available support.

KEY FACTS

National data underscores the scale of the problem. The 2025 State of Uganda Population Report by the National Planning Authority shows that refugees experience significantly higher levels of mental health disorders. In Nakivale Refugee Settlement. For instance, anxiety levels stood at 73 percent, PTSD at 67 percent, and major depression at 58 percent.

editorial@ug.nationmedia.com

CamScanner