Rwandan Refugees in Uganda: Livelihood, Security and Rights

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Abstract: - This is a case study research about Rwandan refugees in Uganda since 1959 to 2018 in Nakaseke, Lyantonde, Nakivale and Kampala with approximately 140 participants, among whom 48 were selected as relevant. We snowballed our participants and purposefully sampled key informants between July 2016 and December 2018.

Rwandans became refugees since 1959 due to a violent political crisis which had originated from pre-colonial social inequalities that were formalized by Belgian colonizers into estranged ethnic identities. While in exile, these refugees gained political and military networks as they joined rebels of the Ugandan National Resistance Army and took over Uganda in 1986. Despite the good positions and wealth gained in Exile, they lacked identity, dignity and a sense of belonging which led them to organize themselves into Rwandan Patriotic Front which took over Rwanda in 1994.

As most of the mainly Batutsi old case load refugees repatriated in victory, new case load Bahutu refugees replaced them with renewed challenges of livelihood and security. Through thematic analysis, we discovered that refugee services like resettlement and asylum have been denied to them to the extent that more than 70% of new Rwandan refugees register as Congolese nationals to survive. Kidnappings, murders, loss of dignity, forced repatriation, porous borders and refugee manipulation for political capital are some of the threats to the security of Rwandan refugees, Uganda and the states in the Great Lakes Region.

Sharing an open political space led by the rule of law in the home country while sincerely availing all durable solutions to Rwandan refugees in the host country like implementation of naturalization and resettlement options in addition to voluntary repatriation will remedy the livelihood and security challenges in the respective countries and solve the refugee crisis in the Great Lakes Region.

Frequent words: Refugee, Rights, Livelihood, Security, Peace.

I. UGANDA IS THE GREENER PASTURE

When analyzing the conversation we had with participants, especially the old case load; Uganda is not considered as a refugee in the sense that most of them suffer no persecution back in Rwanda anymore. However, it has turned out to be that the economic factor is keeping them back from their country of origin. Some of the participants look at Uganda as a source of livelihood and Rwanda as home. From the discussion we had with the 35 year old man in Nakaseke “I am happy in Uganda and I am here for survival. It is my greener pasture” (An interview with RBM35: Rwoona-Butebero 15/12/2018). This particular participant has no property of his own, he rents a house he lives in, he is a business man who is born in Uganda. He sees his life in Uganda on an opportunistic level, not on a citizen level. In case there was a better deal in Rwanda, he would claim his belonging there. He claims no persecution or security challenges in both countries, therefore, opportunity defines his belonging.

II. MANUAL LABOR IN EXCHANGE FOR FOOD RATIONS

Most of the participants were found to have manual labor as means of surviving. The manual labor they do is in terms of mainly doing subsistence farming for host communities, cultivating in their maize, sweet potatoes, banana plantations, for food. This is because Rwandan refugees in the settlement have been receiving food that is not enough to feed themselves and their families, which causes them to look for supplements outside the camp.

As it has already been said, the years these refugees have spent in Uganda, according to the refugee agents, they are supposed to have become self-sustainable. The services given to them earlier, have been cut down or completely eliminated. The majority do not have employable skills. This gives implications of fairly low level standards of living and high levels of vulnerability to exploitative or subversive engagements thus high risks of crime and insecurity

III. TAKING AWAY PLOTS OF LANDS

Agriculture is the main activity of refugees in the settlement and having a plot of land is a sure means of surviving pipe breaks and insufficient WFP supplies. Considering the open refugee policy of Uganda, where refugees are put in settlements with the aim of self-sustainability, taking away a plot of land from a refugee is a sure way of starving them. This has been done to Rwandan refugees in Nakivale settlement with the official reason being the long stay of Rwandans, it has been a serious drawback to their livelihood.

In case this was the underlying reason as most refugees believe it was, it has victimized many. As the 25 years old man states “these days they are taking plots of land away” (Interview with NSM 25 Isangano 18/09/2018). For the financial status of Rwandans, they used to rely on their own strength to grow goods that they used to sell and get good money out of it, since they have no relatives that send dollars like it happens to Congolese, Burundias and Somalis. Their status was obtained through their harvest. “My life really
sucks. I used to cultivate and survive on the harvest, they have taken away my small plot of land from me. They feed me small amounts of food when I used to harvest sacks of maize, feed my large family and even sale some of it for other needs” (Interview with NSF 40: Isangano 18/09/2018) While initially hospitable, host communities near the southwestern Nakivale refugee settlement soon became xenophobic against refugees, calling for them to repatriate, as it became clear that many would not be able to return “home” for a long time (Kalyango 2006). Uganda’s settlement’s approach was designed with the view that the refugees would eventually return to their home countries, however prolonged conflict in the region has led more refugees to arrive, and few to return. This has heightened competition for agricultural and grazing land, water and forests, resources that host communities depend on for their livelihoods (ibid).

This competition for land and livelihoods around the Nakivale settlement has been exacerbated by: the exceeding of field or residential boundaries (encroachment of land); the acquisition of land by nationals (sometimes as land loans); the shrinking of land settlement and grazing in surrounding areas; out migration from neighbouring districts (Bushenyi and Ntugamo); population increases; the advent of a cash economy increasing the value of land; the lack of clear refugee settlement boundaries; and weak land administration systems that have been prone to abuse (Kalyango, 2006). And domestic land problems in Rwanda have exacerbated this further as: high population density in Rwanda means many are landless, and many lost land during the conflicts and for politically and ethnically motivated reasons (ibid). This has made repatriation from Uganda less attractive for Rwandans, and have led some repatriated Rwandans to return to Uganda to repossess their land in the refugee settlement (Kalyango, 2006, p.5). These issues have particularly affected refugee women, and their livelihoods. Increased competition for land has meant

IV. IDENTITY SWITCH

Rwandan refugees in Uganda have been discriminated against due to the long stay in the host country, among other reasons. As means of survival, some of them have resorted to registering themselves as Congolese in order to obtain the services. I am not living well because they ignore us, this leads Rwandan refugees to acquire other nationality. They register as Congolese or Burundians. Intimated a 67 year old man (Interview with NKM67: Kigali 20/09/2018) apart from the incentive for food, Rwandan refugees who have been denied resettlement for many years, use the opportunity of calling themselves Congolese to be sent to America and Europe for resettlement like other refugees.

Overworked civil servants from the office of the Office of the Prime Minister and other ministries that relate to Rwandan refugees at the registration point do register Rwandans as Congolese, even with the knowledge that they are lying. They are underpaid, not empowered, not training, lowly motivated and some of the refugees have a lot of money, which they have no problem dishing out in order to shorten the processes. The government staff stated “I am paid to register the information that I am given, I am not paid to be an investigator. I write whatever the refugee tell me” (Interview with KOF 37: Kampala-OPM Postal Building office 20/11/2018) the careless attitude and lack of patriotism of these entry point officers have allowed the changing of identities among the refugees to go on without any hindrance.

As KOF 37 intimates, there is no feasibility of repatriation of Rwandan refugees in Uganda, were 80% registering currently (November 2018), as Congolese. “Even when they are lying and they are shaking in front of you, with too much inconsistencies in the story line and glaring evidence like language and simple geographic knowledge, you register the nationality they have told you”.

V. DEPTH OF RELIGIOUS DEVOTION

Some big difference between the old care load and the new case load is about the influence of religion among the new case load. They kept on referring to God in relation to their happiness or symbolisms. I am not living well because they ignore us, this leads Rwandan refugees to acquire other nationality. They register as Congolese or Burundians. Intimated a 67 year old man (Interview with NKM67: Kigali 20/09/2018) apart from the incentive for food, Rwandan refugees who have been denied resettlement for many years, use the opportunity of calling themselves Congolese to be sent to America and Europe for resettlement like other refugees.

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VI. WITCHCRAFT AND POISON

Some big difference between the old care load and the new case load is about the influence of religion among the new case load. They kept on referring to God in relation to their situation. Despite their high level of poverty compared to the old case load, their religiosity is highly noticeable. From the rosaries they are wearing, to their names that have “Imana” in most of them, Uwimana, Musabyimana, Habimana etc. As this female believer, victim of torture stated: “Mumibereho yose, Imana niyo ibizi kandi tabaho kabera Imana. ” “God is in control and we survive because of God (Interview with NSF 40: Kigali 20/09/2018) Wimbeleho yose, Imana niyo ibizi kandi tabaho kabera Imana. ” “God is in control and we survive because of God (Interview with NSF 40: Kigali 20/09/2018) Wimbeleho yose, Imana niyo ibizi kandi tabaho kabera Imana. ” “God is in control and we survive because of God (Interview with NSF 40: Kigali 20/09/2018) Wimbeleho yose, Imana niyo ibizi kandi tabaho kabera Imana. ”

VII. DRUG ABUSE AND PROSTITUTION

Due to lack of school fees of most Rwandan refugee school going youth, prostitution and drug abuse have become the escape route. Prostitution is rampant among refugees in Nakivale, according to the Rwandan Refugee Welfare Committee member in charge of women affairs; the red zones are Isangano, Gisura and Kigali. She states that Congolese women are the majority (NKF 61: Kigali 26/11/2018). The mostly abused drug, according to the 42 years old woman in...
charge of health at the Refugee Welfare Committee in Rubondo is Marijuana. The mostly abused alcohol is “waragi” that is sold in small cheap plastic wraps. There are other varieties of locally made alcohol types, from fermented bananas, wheat, cassava, etc. The Somalis have also introduced drugs that are a variety of chewable greens/grass. (Interview with NRF 42: Rubondo 28/11/2018).

Unemployment, poverty, anxiety, depression, insecurity, lack of education, failure to fulfill their dreams were mentioned as causes of abuse of drugs and increased levels of prostitution. The youth are the majority in abusing drugs and becoming prostitutes. It has been discovered that there are prostitution rings that stretch from the settlements into the capital city, a specific building at Mawanda road in Kamwokya was highlighted as a venue where Rwandan refugee girls are prostituted to highly placed businessmen in the city. Due to the limited time and resources, the researcher was not able to confirm the validity of the statement. This can be a line of future research.

VIII. CONSTANT PSYCHOLOGICAL TORTURE AND HELPLESSNESS

For most torture victims and survivors of Rwandan atrocities, refugees, whenever they threaten to take them back, they re-live their nightmares and some of them have developed physical sicknesses due to constant anxiety. “I have high blood pressure. I got it after my parents were killed and ever since, whenever they threaten to take us back to Rwanda. I get an attack and I fall ill” (NNF55: Nyaruguru 18/9/2018) This constant threat of being “refouled” is also considered by some participants as terror. As the 40 years old woman from Isangano said: “there is no security because they terrorize us constantly. The Rwandan state wants to force us back home. When you are unjustly treated, you have no connection or powers to defend yourself” (NSF40: Isangano 18/9/2018) the feeling of helplessness here comes through when she talks about lack of defense when unjustly treated. For the 49 years old gentleman in Isangano, he considers the constant threat of forced repatriation torture: “we are not safe in Uganda. The Ugandan authorities keep torturing us psychologically that they will forcefully repatriate all Rwandan refugees” (NSM 49: Isangano 18/9/2018)

IX. PARANOIA

For those refugees who fled from Rwanda after being tortured and imprisoned, fear has turned into paranoia. This fear has frozen the qualified refugees to look for good jobs, for going in the public and away from the comfort zones is a scare. The example of a 51 years old victim of torture, professional driver, who lives in hiding in Kampala, yet unable to acquire a driving job to feed his exiled starving family “I used to be a driver, but because I am scared for my security, I hide myself. The other cause is because jobs are given to those who have connections and I know nobody in Uganda” (KAM 51: ACTV). He said that he was not secure at all. That there has been several kidnappings and murders, while other refugees have been forced to repatriate. He blames this to the proximity with Rwanda and also, the fact that Rwandan spies use their Ugandan networks to access Uganda in all its corners. Thus, killing whoever they want wherever they are. The participant intimated that he is scared of people, especially the ones that look like Rwandans, in fact, he participated in the research through the ACTV nurse, for he refused to meet the researcher face to face.

X. FORCED REPATRIATION

There have been day light forced repatriation in Nakivale and covert kidnappings that either end in murders or prisons back in Rwanda. As the 45 years old states “The worst threat to my security is to be taken back to Rwanda by force. Those I fled from have access to me here in the refugee settlement. They connive with OPM and kidnap people here. I am scared that they will take me too” (Interview with NSM45: Isangano 18/9/2018) for some refugees, families were split, as kidnappings happen. Like this woman of 37 years with five children. My husband was kidnapped and taken back to Rwanda. I never saw him again. My children are not studying, for I have no money to pay for them. I receive less aid yet am a widow now. Getting food to feed my children is really hard” (Interview with NSF 37 Isangano 18/9/18)

XI. DENIAL OF RESETTLEMENT

When some Rwandans were no longer safe in their country, they got refugee status in Uganda. There are opportunities that are given to other refugees like naturalization, which giving refugees’ citizenship and when a refugee is no longer is feeling safe in the host country, they are sent to a third country, which is often European or USA. This happens to other refugees from Congo, Burundi, Somalia, Sudan and other countries yet, it has been said often by our participants that Rwandans have been denied resettlement. This is in addition to being denied citizenship in Uganda. “I do not have a house of my own, I rent in the settlement. My children lack education, yet other refugees like Congolese get free everything. The refugee authorities have refused to give me resettlement to a third country and I do not have enough food to eat” (Interview with NNF55: Nyaruguru 18/9/2018)

Some of those denied resettlement to a third country are torture victims, who have escaped prisons and torture houses. Living in Kampala, they are not safe as one participant we found at the center of tortured victims shared “The livelihood of my family and me is very miserable. I fear to look for a job because I fear spies to catch up with me. There is much segregation in certain urban refugee offices. I am not able to live with my family because I live in hiding. My children are not accessing education and I have been denied to go in a third country even when there is no security for me in Kampala. (Interview with KAM 51: Kampala-ACTV 18/7/2018)

Some refugees are frustrated. The 35 year old woman found at the center for torture victims states “I am not heard as a
refugee. We are not equally received, like refugees from other countries. We need to be resettled in the third country that protects us. Why are Rwandan refugees neglected in Uganda? I do not understand! (Interview with KAF35 Kampala-ACTV 16/7/2018)

XII. POROUS BORDERS

The porous borders have allowed unmonitored movement of people and goods in and out of Uganda. This is was confirmed with the interviews with some participants, who intimated that spies come in and out of the country; in addition to this, in the interview with the OPM officer in charge of the north western region in 2016, we were told “some refugees cross the border to join looting gangs in the DRC and when they come back, they dig to bury their guns and cross borders with their loots to sale in the settlement and beyond. They cannot cross back to Uganda with Guns though” (Interview with WWO: Mbarara 06/07/2016)

The poorly paid border security agents are easily bribed by anyone who wants to cross into or out of Uganda. Thus, Uganda has become a refugee preferred destination; for there is that flexibility of keeping in touch with their families back home.

In relation to the border security, we learnt that there might a deliberate relaxation for the Public Relations Image of the government’s refugee open policy and hospitality rankings from the international community. (Interview with KOF 37: Kampala-OPM Postal Building 20/11/2018)

Internal systems in Uganda, according to the same Officer of the OPM, the civil servants in most of the government offices lack motivation, they accept any "Kitu Kidogo" bribes as long as it feeds and pays fees for their children, they will close their eyes to any activity. This has allowed even the official border posts around the country to allow questionable movements to go on without accountability.

Another high ranking OPM officer, gave us an understanding about recyclers. “They keep going to and from their country of origin. The Ugandan borders are very open, there is nothing OPM can do to stop them. Some of them go to do gardening and go back for harvesting. "When you are dealing with human beings, expect anything. They lie, they fake things,” (Interview with KOF39 Kampala-OPM -Sir Apolo Kagwa 22/11/2018)

XIII. CONCLUSION

Rwandan refugees in Uganda are going through hard time in the host country, not only should this be looked at on the particular case but also when looked at in a global context of refugee phenomenon, we find that since the end of the cold war, the dynamics of humanitariam have changed towards state security than humanitariam. The donor fatigue and regional politics have not been left out in influencing how refugees are received and treated in the second or third country.

From the 1959 to date, Uganda has hosted Rwandan refugees, successive political regimes have manipulated them for their own gains, from including them into the research bureaus of intelligence to do their dirty work, to the expulsion and murder of the same refugees and up to the point of recruiting them in the rebel group that took over the home country. Rwandan refugees have proved to be resilient and a focus group that used all the networks to repatriate in victory and take over the home country.

One of the hardest challenges that the Rwandan refugees have faced in Uganda is naturalization, for there are Rwandans who have lived in Uganda since before independence and they are still treated as foreigners. The denial of citizenship is a thorn in the Uganda refugee policy that has otherwise won the hearts of the international community, yet, Ugandans themselves question the fuss with refugees inclusivity while they, themselves are not receiving the services they badly need. This is because some of the strategies on refugees are now said to suggest an inclusion of refugees to the Ugandan budget, which is already strained and thus, the sharing of the burden by the international community will no longer be an obligation, yet, refugees do not cease to increase in the country.

This was a case study research that was highly qualitative and we used purposive and snowball sampling procedures in order to get our participants, whose characteristics differed, yet had the needed information. We interviewed and observed their reactions, together with the documentation already at hand, we managed to get to the root of livelihood and security issues of Rwandan refugees in Uganda. We used open coding and thematic analysis in order to get knowledge out of the information and for reliability of the themes, we used an inter rater system to compare themes from different individuals of the same data and come up with the ones used in this thesis. We also triangled methods, data and for the translation from English to Kinyarwanda and back to English, we used language experts in order not to lose meaning along the translation route.

New Case Loads that live in urban areas like Kampala were found to be more security conscious and most of them have been persecuted and they live in fear of kidnapping, murder or forced repatriation more than those that live in the refugee settlements around the country. This is a group that is very sensitive, highly involved in politics and if there is need to monitor, this is the most likely group to steer and lead any likely refugee mobilization in the future. The old caseloads living in Nakaseke, Lyanonde and elsewhere have settled as Ugandans in a de-facto naturalization, which they enjoy until they need to get passports, then they and their children are told of their foreignness, this fact drains loyalty out of these members who have known nothing but Uganda as their country of birth.

The livelihood of refugees in Uganda is very poor and unpredictable, for most of them are living from hand to
mouth, with irregular food ratios delivered within an uncertain system that is influenced by donors and regional politics. In relation to Rwandan refugees, politics have taken precedence and humanitarianism has faded, without the option of naturalization and resettlement, the only option is repatriation, which in the past has been proved to be forced than voluntary, thus violating humanitarian laws; the silence that followed these violations was a sign that the international community is complicit in this whole “conspiracy” as refugees called it.

Considering the Rwandan soils, climate, population and size of the country, those Rwandans who had lived outside of the country and obtained social and military positions would have stayed in the host countries and lived “happily ever after” if economic factors were the ones that they had fled from. Yet, despite the riches they had acquired, they stripped of it all to enter a guerilla war to go back home to their country for identity, belonging, dignity and power. This analysis brings doubt to the one of those researchers, who have rounded up the causes of flight to make them greener pastures, thus making Rwandan refugees seem to be economic rather than political. This should be a more precise research in the future, to ascertain which percentage is economic and political and what relevance either has on the peace in the host countries and the region in general.

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