

Shrinking global funding has forced many refugees to voluntary return to their respective countries.

BY ELIZABETH KAMURUNGI

In the early hours of November 26, buses marked with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) logo left the Nakivale Refugee Settlement. Their destination? Burundi.

On board were 133 individuals who had sought refuge in Uganda but decided to return home through the voluntary repatriation process.

Among them was 70-year-old Robert Mikaasi, who fled Burundi following speculations of an imminent war, and ended up in Uganda in September, after two years in Tanzania and Kenya. For him, there is no place like home.

"I am alone here. I have a family in Burundi. They are waiting for me. My land and house are waiting for me," he said.

But for Ms Beatrice Ngabire, who has lived in Uganda for nine years, returning to her homeland is the last resort due to the growing challenges. "I have a small piece of land back at home where I will do some farming, or maybe some simple business. I am optimistic about returning home. Life here is impossible."

Voluntary repatriation is a global option for dealing with the refugee crisis. International law and protocols provide that refugees may return to their countries of origin only if willing.

According to the UNHCR handbook, this should be done in circumstances that guarantee the safety and welfare of the individuals.

The government of Uganda (GoU) and partners, including UNHCR, started implementing this in 2022 with Burundian nationals in the Nakivale Refugee Settlement. This has since been extended to other nationalities, including Sudanese.

Mr Patrick Okello, the commissioner for refugees in the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), explained that voluntary repatriation applies to nationals from countries with relative peace.

"Voluntary repatriation is part of the durable solutions for Refugees. It's informed by relative peace in the country of origin, coupled with return in safety and dignity," Mr Okello said.

Mr Frank Walusimbi, the associate communications officer at UNHCR, said: "Voluntary, informed, and safe returns respect the fundamental right of refugees to return to their country of origin while ensuring that no one is forced back, in line with the principle of non-refoulement. Ultimately, promoting voluntary repatriation when refugees make a well-informed decision to return and when conditions align with international law, safeguards refugee rights, and offers a sustainable solution to displacement."

Statistics from the two entities show that between 14,000 and 15,000 Burundians and 2,000 Sudanese have been repatriated. Returnees are provided a return package, including a cash grant for every individual, a family health insurance card, a three-month food ration, and each household is given a mobile phone and SIM.

A survey conducted early this year by the refugee agency found that Burundian refugees mention family reunification, access to education, and access to livelihood opportunities as the main reasons for those opting to return.

Shrinking funds compel refugees to return home



Refugees prepare to be repatriated at the Kabazaana Reception Centre. Statistics show that between 14,000 and 15,000 Burundians and 2,000 Sudanese have been repatriated. PHOTO/COURTESY OF UNHCR

WAY FORWARD

On December 2, the UNHCR held a pledging conference for 2026 and raised \$1.5 billion (Shs5.3 trillion), almost 18 percent of the projected funding needs of \$8.504 billion (Shs30 trillion) for the coming year.

"The pledges for 2026 highlight a worrisome trend as the percentage of unearmarked funding pledged has dropped to 17 percent, nearly half of what it was in 2023," UNHCR reported.

For Uganda, authorities are predicting a difficult 2026 as the population is predicted to surpass two million in months. Some of the

donors have, however, reiterated their commitment to support the government in the refugee response, in spite of the cuts.

The EU, through the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), has so far committed €16.7 million (Shs68.7 billion) to the refugee response in Uganda. Mr Liam Kelly, the head of office at ECHO Uganda, said in 2024, the EU allocated €36.4 million (Shs149.9 billion) in humanitarian aid, and over €24 million (Shs98.8 billion) so far in 2025, part of the aid that has facilitated health, WASH, and infrastructure services in

settlements like Nakivale.

"In addition to humanitarian funding, we are working with the government and partners on securing a rapid integration of refugees in development programmes in Uganda, as this is crucial to support the government's efforts and reduce refugees' dependence on humanitarian assistance," Mr Kelly said.

The Government of Uganda and partners are also finalising processes of mainstreaming refugee response to local governments to consolidate resources.

Difficult times

While repatriation is voluntary, with refugees registering at will and free to change their minds at any point, deeper interrogation indicates underlying factors, leaving refugees with limited choices.

Ms Ngabire, who fled Burundi due to insecurity in 2016, and was separated from her husband, with whom she has never reconnected, says she can no longer make ends meet.

"I have decided to go back because life has become hard. I was removed from cash and food assistance. The children have dropped out of school, and I can hardly find food. Before we were getting cash, but when it was scrapped, life became nearly impossible," the head of a family of six, including grandchildren, said.

Ms Ngabire's story mirrors that of several refugees living in the settlement, as life-sustaining assistance shrinks due to significant and then drastic falls in funding to the refugee response.

"When we arrived, we received 15 kilograms of food per person. This

was reduced to 12 kilogrammes, then to eight, six, then to three, and now I get nothing. We are given small portions of land, we cannot grow our own food," Christopher Munezero, who fled the DRC in 2009, said.

He, however, can't return home because of the cycle of insecurity.

Funding to the refugee response has reduced globally, with Uganda, the biggest refugee host in Africa, and home to 1.9 million refugees, reeling under the growing numbers and shrinking financing.

Agencies like UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP) are now forced to ration, while other vulnerable populations have been completely stripped of assistance.

Funding to the country dropped to \$143 million (Shs505.3 billion) in 2024 from \$460 million (Shs1.6 trillion) in 2020.

According to insiders, 2025 has been the toughest year yet. The United States, the biggest funder, cut global refugee funding to UNHCR by more than half from \$2.1 billion (Shs7.4 trillion) in 2024 to \$843 million (Shs2.9 trillion),

leaving countries and partners on edge.

The impact on Uganda, the fifth largest host of refugees in the world, was unprecedented. As of June, Uganda had only 18 percent of the required funding, according to the Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan (UCRRP).

In the crosshairs

In Nakivale, where 54 percent of the refugees are women, youth and children, reduced funding has taken away basics, including food, education, health, water, and sanitation services and birthed challenges like abuse of minors, increased criminality, and insecurity.

Officials in the OPM, Department of Refugees, say the country is stretched thin by the ever-growing numbers and shrinking funding. The consequences are cutting across the refugee and host communities.

"Last week we received 46 convoys. A convoy is usually composed of 400 to 500 households, yet our teachers, medical personnel and food rations have been reduced. There is a need for more support because we are receiving more, yet the situation is worsening," Ms Monica Kyokutamba, the Nakivale settlement commandant at the OPM discloses. She says while refugees would sustain themselves by tilling the land allocated by the government, it has been reduced significantly due to high numbers.

"Girls are dropping out of school and being married off, young children are forced to the streets to beg, and there they are being harmed."

"There is a lot of theft and break-ins. The children are turning to the streets to beg or criminal activity like break-ins, due to a lack of food. There is an increased dropout rate because parents cannot afford to pay the required. The teacher-pupil ratio, with the coming influx, in a classroom, which is supposed to be one teacher, 57 students, but ours is one teacher, 150 to 200," Ms Kyokutamba told *Saturday Monitor*.

Health challenges like mental health and malnutrition have also worsened. This year alone, the settlement registered two cases of completed suicide, with cases of mostly depressive disorders, post-traumatic stress disorders, and bipolar associated disorders, increasing.

"We had a psychiatric clinical officer who would support, but the person was laid off due to the funding gaps. Nowadays, we partner with another partner who sends us one once in a while."

"In case you get an emergency, there is no person to attend to that," Dr Kenneth Sembuze, coordinator of Medical Teams International at Nakivale Health Centre III, which serves as the referral point for the other six health centres in the camp, says.

Malnutrition has also increased from 5.2 in October 2024 to 6.9 in October this year, according to the Mass nutrition screening in the settlement, Mr Wasswa Yosiya, a nutritionist, said.

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