

REFUGEES WANT TO TAKE PART IN PEACE TALKS

On Tuesday, Uganda joined the rest of the world to commemorate the International Day of Peace. Despite commemorating the day, the wounds of South Sudan refugees currently living in Uganda are still fresh. They want to take part in bringing peace to their country that has been in insurgency for over eight years. **Lawrence Mulondo** and **Adam Gule** write

PHOTOS BY LAWRENCE MULONDO

A family of South Sudanese refugees in Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement. (Scan the image using the New Vision Digital Experience to watch a related video)



Memories of gunshots and fire blazing on their houses still run fresh in the mind of Assumpta Wani, four years after she fled South Sudan to Uganda.

In fear and anger, Wani, 40, walked 140km from South Sudan's capital Juba to Uganda in 2016, for refuge after she lost her parents and other family members in the war between the South Sudanese government and rebels.

"I walked alone to Uganda, only praying that my husband and nine children whom I was not staying with survive the war and join me in Uganda one day," Wani, a refugee in Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement in Yumbe, said.

She was lucky that her husband managed to run away with their nine children to Uganda.

After handing them over to their mother, he went back for other relatives and he has since not returned.

A resident of Village 14, zone 3 in Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement asked the Government to involve the affected people to bring back peace in South Sudan.

"There is no gain in fighting and bloodshed. The war increases the number of orphans and kills the economy. Leaders should solve their differences without killing and displacing their citizens," she said.

Bidi-Bidi Refugee Settlement was established by the Government in 2016. It is home to more than 270,000 refugees who fled the December 2013



Sam Businge

fighting in South Sudan, when President Silva Kiir accused his former deputy, Riek Machar, and 10 others of attempting a coup d'état.

DELAYED PEACE TALKS

Hellen Koporo, the Refugee Welfare Council (RWC) acting vice-chairperson of Village 14 in zone 3, said peace talks between the rebels and government in South Sudan have taken long without yielding positive results.

"We have tested peace in Uganda and have learnt how it is achieved. It is high time we

REFUGEES' TAKE

LOYCE AYONZO, 35, A REFUGEE IN VILLAGE 14:

After the peace-building training, I can now solve conflicts that were once solved by only men. People invite me for advice when they have misunderstandings in their families or communities.



JAMES KENYI 41, REFUGEE IN VILLAGE 14:

Sensitisation from peace builders have strengthened the bond between members of the host communities and the refugees.

came on board as refugees to advise the fighting teams on how to restore peace in our country," she said.

She is surprised that since she came to Uganda in 2016, she has not had a single bullet fired and people are living in peace.

"Political aspirants need to be legitimately elected by the people. It is important to believe in democracy, other than forceful acquiring power," she said.

Zone 3 RWC chairperson

Moses Wenge said although they want to participate in the talks to restore peace in their country, they cannot travel to South Sudan due to fears of the ongoing insecurities.

He said one of the things the talks should achieve is ensuring that South Sudanese refugees do not spend over 30 years in Uganda.

"When someone opens their door for you when in trouble, it does not make it your home. We should go back home and regain our lives and participate

in rebuilding our country," he said.

PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

With sh1.7b funding from the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Uganda, Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) is implementing Programme for Education Advocacy, Counselling and Economic Empowerment (PEACE) to promote peaceful coexistence, among other things, for the people in the settlement.

Charles Ed II Aguilar, the ADRA-Uganda country director, said they have worked on building the capacities of religious and cultural leaders to promote peaceful coexistence.

"We value the role faith leaders play in peace-building in a post-conflict context and their congregations are recognised as having a significant role in peaceful outcomes," he said.

Sam Businge, the PEACE project manager, said they trained

LEADERS SPEAK

Samadu Aguku, the Yumbe youth councillor and secretary for production and community services, said peace is a major factor for development as investors are easily attracted.

He asked the youth to partake in peace building activities, adding that 80% of the district's population are young people.

Linus Kayiah, the vice-chairperson of Yumbe, said the district has been home to South Sudan refugees since 1996. They regard them as their sisters and brothers. He said they share resources, like firewood, health centres, schools and water.

"Refugees and host communities have kept a clean sheet in terms of violence. Refugees share the little resources with host communities peacefully," he said.

Kayiah appealed to development partners to share resources and job opportunities equally to both groups, to promote peace, unity and co-existence.

committees, who are charged with carrying out conflict mapping and mediations within the settlement.

"Committee members have been empowered to report directly to the Office of the Prime Minister for immediate actions before conflicts erupt," he said.

Businge said besides peace-building committees, ADRA-Uganda has also given refugees agriculture input to improve livelihood and food security.

Pastor Simon Abe, the chairperson of a peace-building committee in Village 14, zone 3, said before ADRA-Uganda's interventions, many domestic violence cases were being reported and most of them came from men who would sell off their family's food from the World Food Programme and use the money to buy alcohol.

Alice Nuwahereza, the ADRA-Uganda co-ordinator of the PEACE project, said 120 women and 60 men, all peace-builders, had participated in peace dialogues and mediations.

No clashes – govt

Michael Nabugere, the Bidi-Bidi Refugee Settlement commandant, said they have not had major clashes that could cost a life.

"Access to resources remains the main cause of the few conflicts, especially where the host community is competing with refugees for water and fuel, among other things.

Nabugere said some cases of rape of women as they go to collect firewood have been reported, because some parts of the camp are isolated.

"We have kept the presence of the Police in the five zones to respond to emergencies that may arise," Nabugere said.



South Sudanese refugees collecting water from a tap Bidi Bidi