

Inside Uganda: Home of the fastest-growing refugee crisis in the world

BY JACOB WIRTSCHAFTER | PUBLISHED AUG 31, 2017 | [COVER STORY](#)

They live in huts and mud houses, partaking of bare essentials only when they are available. There are few markets and fewer police. Daily life is a constant struggle to survive.

This is the Bidi Bidi refugee camp, deep in the bush of northern Uganda in central east Africa. More than 272,000 people are living in conditions that would make reaching poverty seem like an aspirational goal.

The people in Bidi Bidi are among more than 1 million South Sudanese living as refugees from civil war and ethnic cleansing. Bidi Bidi has become the largest resettlement camp in the world, according to the United Nations Refugee Agency. The sprawling 89-square-mile camp covers an area larger than the city of Seattle.

Foremost among those helping in Bidi Bidi are several leading Jewish and Israeli organizations, doing what they can to support desperate needs and raise awareness about the world's fastest-growing refugee crisis.

"Refugees are not just fleeing because of the violence but to escape an economic collapse and crazy inflation," Mike Brand, advocacy and programs director at the Encino-based [Jewish World Watch](#) (JWW), said in an interview as he surveyed the crisis in Uganda's Adjumani border district, adjacent to the Bidi Bidi camp. "People can't afford to work and buy food in South Sudan, and severe food insecurity has been plaguing the country."

[Bidi Bidi: [Struggling to cope with life at the world's largest refugee settlement](#)]

South Sudan is the world's newest nation, gaining independence from Sudan to the north in 2011. Even so, tribal clashes in South Sudan that predated independence have continued, lighting a fuse that led to the current crisis.

After a failed attempt at a peace agreement, violence erupted again in July 2016 with massive clashes in the South Sudan capital, Juba, near President Salva Kiir's palace and a United Nations compound, resulting in more displacement of civilians.

Although the U.N. Security Council called for up to 4,000 peacekeepers to quell the fighting in August 2016, it took until last month for just 150 Rwandan soldiers to take up the mission.

"The government thinks they can win the war militarily and isn't interested in sharing power," Brand said of the conflict. "The various rebel movements aren't strong enough to force a negotiated settlement, so they must keep fighting. A lot of the conflict boils down to money, land and power. All sides have committed gross human rights violations, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and maybe even genocide."



Bidi Bidi is the single largest refugee settlement in the world. Photo by Trocaire

Jewish aid groups are part of a worldwide response to deal with a humanitarian crisis that rivals others that have gained more attention through political conflict and media coverage. The groups include the Los Angeles-based Real Medicine Foundation and the American Refugee Committee of Minneapolis, as well as the Uganda-based World Action Fund and global operators like Doctors Without Borders and Save the Children.

Uganda currently has 140 nongovernment organizations operating in the country, according to the nation's official directory.

Jewish World Watch has been working in Sudan and the surrounding region since JWW's founding 13 years ago in response to the Darfur genocide. Brand, 31, worked for the conflict-prevention group Saferworld in South Sudan before joining JWW in 2015.

A June "global solidarity summit" held in Kampala, the Ugandan capital, ended with the international community pledging less than 20 percent of the funds required to meet the extraordinary needs generated by a crisis that also includes growing famine.

"The World Food Programme cut rations over the last two years," said Brand, pointing out that monthly nutritional supplements — like flour, sorghum and cooking oil — were cut in half to 6 kilograms, about 13 pounds, for a family. "And it seems to have been reduced again, down to 3 kilograms a month.

"One of the things I am trying to do is understand what is working here," he added. "The refugee settlements created here are happening because Ugandan families donated their land. It's the people that live here, not the government, who are allowing refugees to build homes and farm.

"Uganda has been quite welcoming, especially when you compare their refugee response to the United States and Europe."

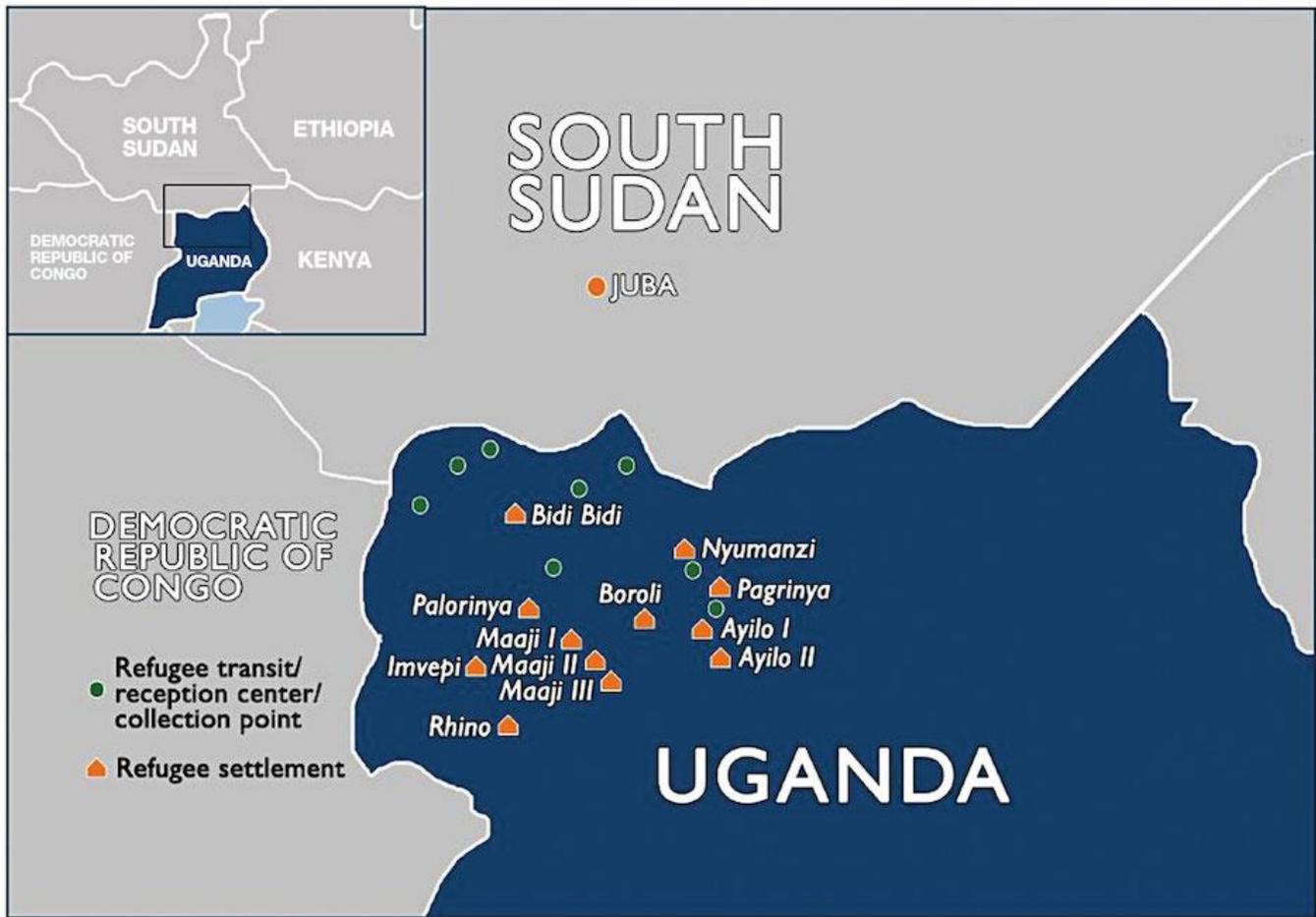


Image courtesy of Refugees International

Brand cited the Trump administration’s decision to reduce and cut various foreign support programs as contributing to the crisis.

“President [Donald] Trump’s stance on cutting foreign aid, funding to the U.N. and limiting the State Department’s effectiveness will have disastrous results for crises like South Sudan,” he said, explaining why JWW is launching initiatives for refugee self-sufficiency and advocating for U.S. funding of their basic needs.

The administration, however, said cutbacks in foreign aid have not affected U.S. support for South Sudan.

“We are the single largest donor in the affected areas of Uganda, and as conditions have worsened, we have increased our contributions significantly,” said Deborah Malac, the U.S. Ambassador to Uganda. “Since October 2016, we have provided nearly \$154 million for humanitarian assistance, including \$57.4 million announced by President Trump on May 24.”

But despite the U.N. and 57 other aid organizations working in northern Uganda, the need to provide food and shelter this year was \$1.4 billion, and only 18 percent of it has been received.

To help, Israel recently provided 6 tons of food aid to areas of drought-stricken South Sudan, Israel’s Foreign Ministry said.

Meanwhile, the Israeli nonprofit IsraAID is running psychological support programs and safe drinking water projects in the Ugandan districts where refugees are concentrated.

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“Last year, it was Greece in the spotlight with the Syrian refugee crisis. But somehow this catastrophe is seen as an African problem instead of a global concern,” said Dahlia Olinsky, Uganda country director for IsraAID. “It is pretty easy for TV networks to get on a plane to Greece and get shots of refugees crossing in boats from Turkey. But the border crossings with South Sudan are a 13-hour drive through the bush from the Kampala airport.”

She said during some months, as many as 3,000 refugees a day cross into Uganda.

Proliferation of informal border crossings are a window into the massive scale of the refugee crisis. The three official passages are on the three roads linking South Sudan with Uganda, but in recent months, authorities opened 10 additional frontier posts on migrant footpaths running through the bush.

“The image that keeps me up at night is of these pregnant teenage girls who have walked for days in the bush with another child or two in tow,” said Olinsky, 35, who coordinates a team of about 12 South Sudanese trained to support the group’s psychological wellness and technical assistance programs.

Eighty-six percent of the South Sudanese refugees are women and children. The men are largely either trying to hold on to ancestral lands or engaged in the fighting.

IsraAID specialists rotate into Uganda and South Sudan, where humanitarian groups estimate that as many as 1.5 million internally displaced people are in flight from fighting in their home villages.

“We work in areas like water, sanitation and hygiene,” Olinsky said. “But our core mission is to build the refugees’ knowledge and skills to handle the psychological impact of their displacement and rebuild their lives.”

More than 20,000 people now have access to clean water because of a training program IsraAID set up at Gulu University, 65 miles south of the Uganda-South Sudan border.

IsraAID employs locals as well as refugees as a way to limit conflict over resources between the two groups, especially in districts where South Sudanese are starting to outnumber native-born Ugandans.

“I gained practical experience in digging wells and installing and maintaining the electric pumps that tap into the underground aquifers which help us get drinking water to the refugees settling here,” said Anena Kevin, 25, a Ugandan and graduate of IsraAID’s training program.

IsraAID, which has raised funds in North America for its efforts in Greece and in Germany for Syrian refugees, has struggled to find donors for the projects in South Sudan and Uganda. Less than 10 percent of its \$2 million program expenses has been covered by U.S. donors.

“The lack of attention to this crisis has affected the amounts available for this, but we are doing what we can,” Olinsky said.



A temporary school structure at Bidi Bidi that was destroyed by rain. Photo by Mike Brand/Jewish World Watch

HIAS, the American-Jewish group founded in 1881 to bring Eastern Europeans fleeing pogroms to the U.S., now is engaged in refugee assistance and resettlement with active programs in Venezuela for Colombians fleeing civil war and in Greece, for those escaping the crisis in Syria.

HIAS also is active in Africa. It has sustained a Uganda program for 15 years with a field office in Kampala to support refugees from the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo — another sparsely reported African conflict known for the widespread use of rape as a weapon as common as gunfire.

In recent weeks, international resettlement agencies like HIAS have reported an increase of refugees arriving from Congo, with up to 600 crossing the border each day.

“We are thinking strategically about how to step in with the South Sudanese refugees in the north and are eager to work with partners and donors to respond to this massive crisis,” said Rachel Levitan, associate vice president for program planning and management at HIAS.

“I don’t know when the Jewish community is going to respond the way they need to the fact that there are a million South Sudanese in Uganda,” she said. “But I hope we can raise our own awareness and then bring the world’s attention to it, especially for the survivors of gender-based violence.”

Back in Encino, Susan Freudenheim, executive director of JWW, said the promise of no more genocides, of “never again” has to mean something.

“We sent Mike to Uganda to visit Bidi Bidi and other refugee settlement camps to bear witness, because we know from experience the best way to find out what kind of support people really need is to get our own firsthand account.”

Meanwhile in Washington, D.C., JWW is organizing a lobbying effort to persuade Congress to increase aid.

“We are not the United Nations,” Freudenheim said. “We can’t spend millions to feed people, but we can be effective in helping meet specific needs in ways that can be replicated and, hopefully, are helpful.”