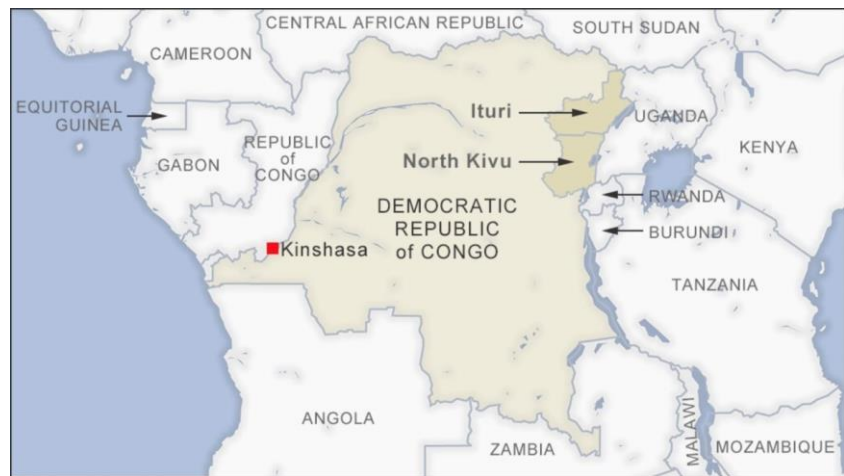




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UGANDA'S REFUGEE POLICY & DRC REFUGEES

The Uplifting Africa Program



The Area on the Map of Refugee Crisis: Photo Credit: Voice of America

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Uganda's Refugee Policy Impacting The Democratic Republic of the Congo Refugees

As violence escalates in The Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) North Kivu & Ituri provinces, Uganda's progressive refugee policy matters more than ever. Uganda's long history as a welcoming host country for refugees is vital for the survival of incoming DRC nationals. The UNHCR's 2022-2025 Refugee Response Plan on Uganda highlights how, "Uganda continues to be Africa's largest refugee hosting country with over 1.5 million refugees from South Sudan, The Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, and other countries".¹ The progressive nature of Uganda's refugee policy stems from a consistently thorough recognition and respect of refugees' universal basic human rights. In particular, the right to movement is valued and applicable to refugees of all nationalities and backgrounds entering Uganda.² Likewise, access to healthcare and social services for newcomers is required by Uganda's 2006 Refugee Act and 2010 Refugee Protocol.³ Asylum seekers have the right to seek gainful employment as well.⁴ In particular, the Ugandan government's allocation of land plots to those refugees with agricultural skills has been a strong point in the country's refugee policy.⁵ Moreover, refugees can choose to reside within integrated host communities or resettle elsewhere in Uganda. Most refugees temporarily live within transitional refugee camps upon arrival, particularly refugees hailing from DRC or South Sudan.

¹ UNHCR and Government of Uganda, "Inter-Agency Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan (UCRRP) 2022-2025," UNHCR Operational Data Portal (ODP), 2022, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/92447>.

² The World Bank World Bank Group, "Uganda's Progressive Approach to Refugee Management," World Bank (World Bank Group, August 30, 2016), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/brief/ugandas-progressive-approach-refugee-management>.

³ <https://www.unhcr.org/afr/news/press/2021/12/61b83c004/uganda-joins-high-level-officials-meeting-amid-record-number-of-refugees.html>

⁴ UNHCR and Government of Uganda, "Inter-Agency Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan (UCRRP) 2022-2025," UNHCR Operational Data Portal (ODP), 2022, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/92447>.

⁵ Clements, Kelly T., Timothy Shoffner, and Leah Zamore. "Uganda's Approach to Refugee Self-Reliance." *Forced Migration Review* no. 52 (05, 2016): 49-51, <http://proxyau.wrlc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/ugandas-approach-refugee-self-reliance/docview/1790567049/se-2> (accessed May 26, 2022).



Students attending class in Maaji refugee settlement
Photo Credit: UNHCR ; Duniya Aslam Khan

Although Uganda’s refugee legislation is coherent, a lack of funding and influx of refugees has put financial strain on the country’s resources. The Ugandan Government’s Refugee Response Plan urgently states, “only \$41 million USD have been received for the Country Refugee Response Plan by mid-April 2022, covering 5 percent of the total \$804 million USD funding needs for 2022”.⁶ Insufficient funding threatens to significantly impact the well-being of all Uganda’s refugees, including those fleeing from DRC currently.

The effects of insufficient funding for Uganda’s refugee capacity are particularly noticeable within transitional camps. Within Ugandan transitional centers, refugees wait to be processed and function as a temporary safe haven from ongoing conflict. However, overcrowding at transitional centers undermines the ability of Ugandan refugee policy to be fully accommodating. On May 19, 2022, the UNHCR highlighted how transition and reception centers in Uganda, particularly near DRC border, were 17% over capacity, at a total of 24,657 refugees.⁷ United Nations (UN) affiliated organizations and Ugandan government officials alike have expressed

⁶ UNHCR and Government of Uganda, “Inter-Agency Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan (UCRRP) 2022-2025,” UNHCR Operational Data Portal (ODP), 2022, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/92447>.

⁷ UNHCR, “Inter-Agency Situation Report - Uganda Refugee Emergency, 9-13 May 2022 - Uganda,” ReliefWeb (UNHCR & OCHA, May 26, 2022), <https://reliefweb.int/report/uganda/inter-agency-situation-report-uganda-refugee-emergency-9-13-may-2022>.

concern over quality of life in transitional centers, noting food security as a primary concern. The Guardian discusses Emily Doe’s commentary, a representative of World Food Program, on living standards within Uganda’s transitional camps, asserting “We do not know how long this will go on – we are stretched. We need more funding, more donors, to support Uganda’s refugee response.”⁸



Congolese Refugees in Nyakabande Transit Center in Uganda
Photo Credit: TheNewHumanitarian.com

Despite the Ugandan government’s best efforts, insufficient funding also provides a challenge for refugees looking for social mobility. The World Bank reports on Ugandan refugees’ socio-economic status, stating “Despite feeling safe and secure and having the same access as locals to basic services, nearly half of refugees live in grim conditions and endure poverty, compared to 17% of the host population.”⁹ Without a steady, immediate infusion of resources into Uganda’s transitional centres, the welcoming policy of Uganda may become infeasible to fully sustain.

⁸ Patience Akumu, “You Hear Bullets, You Run’: Congolese Refugees Stream over Uganda’s Border,” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, May 27, 2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/may/27/you-hear-bullets-you-run-congolese-refugees-stream-over-ugandas-border>.

⁹ World Bank World Bank Group, “Uganda: Supporting Refugees and Host Communities to Become Secure and Self-Reliant,” World Bank (World Bank Group, September 30, 2019), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/uganda/publication/uganda-supporting-refugees-and-host-communities-to-become-secure-and-self-reliant>.



Congolese citizens fleeing during M23 attempted military base takeover
Photo: San Diego Union-Tribune; Moses Sawasawa

Since March 2022, thousands of refugees from DRC have fled to bordering Uganda following violent clashes between Congolese rebel group M23 and the local government. The fighting has escalated during the third week of May. Africa News reported May 27, 2022, “At least 37,000 people have fled their homes in four days in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo to escape fighting between the army and M23 rebels”.¹⁰ Violent confrontations between the Congolese Army and M23 are expected to grow. In fact, on May 26th, a critical confrontation was waged by M23’s attempted overthrow of a large, domestic military base located in Rutshuru, DRC.¹¹ The Congolese Army successfully thwarted M23’s attempts to overtake the military base. However, the base’s location in North Kivu province, a territory bordering Uganda, continues to encourage DRC residents to flee.

¹⁰ Rédaction Africanews and AFP, “At Least 37,000 Displaced amidst DRC Army/M23 Battle,” Africanews (Africanews, May 27, 2022), <https://www.africanews.com/2022/05/27/at-least-37-000-displaced-amidst-drc-army-m23-battle/>.

¹¹ Jean-Yves Kamale, “Congo's M23 Rebels Attack Military Base in Country's East,” Tribune (San Diego Union-Tribune, May 26, 2022), <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/nation-world/story/2022-05-26/congos-m23-rebels-attack-military-base-in-countrys-east>.



Congolese refugee mother awaits allocation of farming land from Uganda's government\
Photo Credit: UNHCR/David Azia

Congo's violent clashes put pressure on Uganda's capacity to continually provide livable conditions for the growing influx of DRC refugees. Voice of America reporter Halima Athumani recalls Hillary Onek statements, Uganda's Minister of Refugees, regarding safety concerns for Ugandans and DRC refugees alike, "It is actually affecting even our population [Ugandans] who are at the border," Onek said. "Because, when people shoot, sometimes they shoot across the border. Frankly speaking, it is overwhelming."¹² Without adequate funding, Uganda's refugee policy could become increasingly impossible to implement for every refugee. For refugees hailing from DRC, a lack of funding could lead to deteriorating quality of life.

¹² Halima Athumani, "Uganda 'Overwhelmed' with New DRC Refugee Influx," VOA (Uganda 'Overwhelmed' with New DRC Refugee Influx, May 24, 2022), <https://www.voanews.com/a/uganda-overwhelmed-with-new-drc-refugee-influx-/6587209.html>.