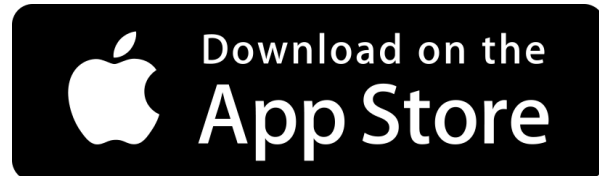


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MIGRATION (/AFRICARENEWAL/SECTION/MIGRATION)

Uganda stands out in refugees hospitality

The country hosts the largest number of refugees in Africa – more than a million



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Photo: UN Photo/Mark Garten

Refugee students in a classroom in Uganda. Photo: UN Photo/Mark Garten

As thousands of desperate men, women and children flee conflicts and natural disasters in search of a place of refuge, some countries are debating whether to accept or reject asylum seekers. But Uganda has opened its doors to refugees in record numbers.

Thirteen-year-old Robert Yatta was living with his aunt and going to school in South Sudan's capital, Juba, when fighting broke out in early 2017.

"One night we woke up to heavy gunfire," he recalled in an interview with *Africa Renewal*. "Schools were closed and we were locked up in the house for a week before we made our escape to the Bidi Bidi refugee settlement in northwest Uganda." More than a quarter of a million refugees are living there.

At the peak of the fighting in South Sudan in 2016, Bidi Bidi received thousands of refugees every day. The 234 square kilometres settlement is used for residential and agricultural purposes. It is about

the size of the city of Birmingham, in the UK.

\$8.2 billion

is required to fund refugee operations in 2018

"Life in Uganda is good," reflects Yatta, though he is separated from his parents. "I am once again going to school."

The teenager is one of the brightest pupils in his class. He speaks English fluently and even provides academic guidance to his peers and older children.

Largest host country

Though poor, Uganda is the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa, with over a million refugees, most of them from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Burundi and Somalia. Kenya, Sudan, DRC and Ethiopia are also among the top refugee-hosting countries on the continent.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported in early 2018 that there are about 68.5 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, including 40 million who are internally displaced. And developing countries, mostly in Africa, host 85% of the refugee population.

Mugisha Willent, 26, a refugee from the DRC, remembered fleeing Goma in 2000. "All I knew was that there was fighting going on." Now, "Uganda has given us peace, land and more. I call Uganda home," she told African Renewal.

This year, Ms. Willent was one of three women to win a Voices of Courage Award from the Women's Refugee Commission in New York.

While in Uganda, she helps out-of-school girls, young mothers and survivors of gender-based violence. She also serves as a UNHCR youth ambassador and has recently spoken at the UN in Geneva on behalf of her peers in Uganda to advocate for free movement in host countries, access to international travel documents and parity in school fees between refugees and national students.

Open-door policy

The refugee population in Uganda has been growing since 2013. Currently about 200 asylum seekers arrive daily in the country.

"Uganda has continued to maintain an open-door policy to refugees based on traditional African hospitality and not turning away anybody who is running to us for safety," says Hilary Onek, Uganda's Minister of Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees.

Addressing the UNHCR's governing executive committee meeting in Geneva in October, Mr. Onek noted that his government continues to maintain a policy of accepting refugees despite the country's challenges.

At 4.5%, Uganda's economy is "growing at a slower pace recently, thus reducing its impact on poverty," notes the World Bank. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the economic growth rate was 7%.

Humanitarian experts applaud Uganda's open-door refugee policy as the most generous in the world. The government's strategy integrates refugee issues into its national planning framework.

"It is necessary for the international community to recognize that Uganda has had an exemplary refugee policy in the past and even today, faced with the largest refugee inflow of the past year, Uganda remains a symbol of the integrity of the refugee protection regime that unfortunately is not being respected everywhere in the world," UN Secretary-General António Guterres said in June 2017.

Uganda's refugee policy guarantees freedom of movement and the right to employment, education and health, as well as the right to start a business. The government also provides refugees plots of land so they can farm and construct shelters. It empowers refugees to become economically self-reliant, while granting them the same rights that citizens enjoy.

Angèle Dikongué-Atangana, UNHCR's Deputy Director for the East and Horn of Africa region reminds critics that refugees have knowledge and skills to contribute to host countries.

"In Uganda, some refugees have established businesses and employed nationals, while others are boosting food production through agricultural activities. Additionally, some are working as professionals," said Ms. Dikongué-Atangana, underscoring that, if given the opportunity, refugees can immensely contribute to their host countries.

Last June, Congolese refugee Robert Hakiza, now based in Uganda, told the annual UNHCR-NGO consultations in Geneva that the organization he cofounded—Young African Refugees for Integral Development (YARID)—was helping to empower refugees and contribute to their host community. YARID, whose motto is "Refugees may be forced to leave their homes, but they don't leave behind their skills and knowledge," creates the space for refugees and host communities to meet, discuss challenges and explore communally sourced solutions.

"Closing borders to refugees is not the solution. Among refugees are doctors, lawyers and other university graduates that can make valuable contributions to host communities," says Mr. Hakiza, advocating free movement in host countries and across borders.

Speaking to *Africa Renewal*, UNHCR's director for Africa, Valentin Tapsoba, said, "Uganda's assistance to refugees is commendable, as they have a progressive policy for hosting refugees. We are trying to encourage other countries to follow the same model as Uganda.

African hospitality

"Africa's hospitality towards refugees is remarkable. African countries are opening their borders and their hearts to receive refugees. Host communities are welcoming refugees even before UNHCR and the international community can assist."

Mr. Tapsoba would like to see more international support for host communities, warning that inadequate funding affects the protection of refugees, the food supply, health, shelter, and education, among other services.

According to UNHCR data, based on contributions to date, funding for 2018 is expected to be a mere 55% of the required \$8.2 billion. This compares to 56.6% in 2017 and 58% in 2016. As of October 2018, funding to Uganda was just 42% of the total budget.

While funding remains a massive challenge, Mr. Tapsoba notes that UNHCR is collaborating with partners to enable hundreds of refugees to voluntarily return home. "There are ongoing repatriation operations for Ivorian, Somali, Mozambican, Burundian and Central African Republic refugees," he says.

Besides its operations in Uganda, UNHCR highlights the plight of thousands who are taking great risks to cross the Sahel into Libya and the Mediterranean and then into Europe. UNHCR is collaborating with some governments and the International Organization for Migration, the UN migration agency, to evacuate and sometimes resettle this group.

The chief executive officer of the World Bank, Kristalina Georgieva, says poverty, conflicts, natural disasters and climate change are key drivers of displacement. Under its International Development Association programme, the World Bank will spend \$2 billion between July 2017 and June 2020 in support of African refugees.

Development experts believe that prevention is key to solving the refugee and migrant crisis. "The best way to deal with a humanitarian crisis is not to have it in the first place," stresses Ms. Georgieva.

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