

Palabek, Lamwo, north Uganda Refugee Settlement Area – Trip Report by Nelson Reed

On May 11, 2017, Pastor Peter Oketta, Richard of ACTION Uganda, Dr. John Farren, Bruce Ingram, Linda and Nelson Reed traveled from Gulu, Uganda to Lamwo district in northern Uganda, to newly established refugee camps. Lamwo is essentially straight north of Gulu, relatively near the South Sudan border.

The civil war in South Sudan has spread to this area directly north of north, central Uganda. It is my understanding that for over a year the fighting has been the most intense in southwest South Sudan about a hundred miles west of Lamwo. The conflict in this area has contributed to the huge refugee camps in NW Uganda in the Nile basin area. In fact, apparently the largest refugee camp in the world is in this region. We did not go to NW Uganda. We went to north central.

Our visit was a rather quick trip. Peter wanted to get right back so after he acquired the information he wanted, we headed back to Gulu. The entire trip took about 8 hours. We were only on site about 1 maybe 1 1/2 hours.

Most of us forgot to bring our passports and there was some apprehension we might not be allowed to get in. At the entrance to the large rural bush complex, Peter explained to the military guards that we were there to visit the Office of the Prime Minister to learn about the facility with the view of helping since we were a Christian NGO. The guard let us in, directing us to the OPM administration tent.

I might mention that we had a little difficulty with the disk brakes overheating on the way up. It added at least a half hour to the trip, plus the road was under construction so travel was slow. Returning from Lamwo, we went west to Atiak and made it much faster. The road was wonderful!

My impressions:

- UNHCR's presence is extensive and dominant; their huge bright white tents are seen from miles away. They seemed to be well organized and very professional at what they do.
- The Processing Center and Refugee camps are in the bush, far away from towns. About 400 refugees arrive per day at the Processing Center, seven days a week. Already 10,000 have arrive since the Processing Center and camps were established April 12, 2017.
- Logistics and site preparations are ongoing and well ahead of the arrival of refugees. There were many laborers and heavy equipment clearing land, putting up fences and building more holding centers. It was very apparent that the authorities anticipate thousands of more refugees!

- Office of the Prime Minister (OPM of Uganda) is overseeing and seemingly managing the overall planning and operations. The OPM coordinator that showed us around (Gerald) was very helpful and kind, though seemingly under a lot of pressure. He indicated that about 6-7 NGOs are doing all the service work and investing funds and resources such as medical checkups, taking seriously ill to the hospitals (which are about 2 hours away), inoculating everyone, providing facilities for bathing and cleaning up, giving blankets, food, cooking stoves, pots and pans, kitchen and eating utensils, clothes, and materials for the people to build simple shelters.

- We asked about spiritual work, churches and workers. The two coordinators we spoke with (Gerald and Arnold?) did not know of any, but Arnold thought there must be something going on.

- Refugees are first screened at the Uganda/South Sudan border, then shipped down in buses (1-2 hours) to the Palabek, Lamwo Settlement area, arriving at the huge processing center first. Their luggage is put in trucks that follow the buses. Refugees first thing registered at the Processing Center where they are assessed regarding a variety of things and given medical, supplies, orientation and other services. Refugees are either Acholi and Dinka. There are native speakers available to help them.

- After one to two days stay at the processing center, the refugees are then moved by bus to a piece of land in one of 7 Zones, the actual refugee camp sites. Zone 1 is a short drive away from the Processing Center, maybe a half mile. At the camps the refugees are responsible to build their own simple houses (make shift houses/huts) and plant gardens. They do all their own cooking, water carrying, farming, construction and so on. Some materials are provided for construction and gardening purposes. Huge water tanks are set up at intervals in the camps and large water trucks keep them supplied with water from a nearby (few miles away) water treatment plant next to a small river. The huts are not too close together so it allows space for gardening. I "guesstimate" the individual plots size is between 100 to 200 square meters. The coordinator said that the plan is not to crowd any more people and dwellings into these camps so as to keep ample space for gardening and to keep over population down. New zones are being developed so when the present 7 Zones are filled to capacity, the new arrivals will have a place to set up. I couldn't tell whether the latrines were set up by the refugees or by the NGO site developers. Whatever, there seemed to be enough pit latrines to provide for the need.

What do we still need to learn:

- Are there born again Christians among the refugees? Is this information available at the processing center (i.e. do the refugees indicate what religion they identify with when they register)? Are there pastors among the refugees? Does the processing procedure identify occupations and know where these people are

living? Would it be possible for ACTION Uganda or another NGO to acquire this information?

- Are there churches close to the refugee camps, closer than Kitgum, that we and/or Gulu churches could partner with to minister among the refugees? Train trainers concept.
- Are there churches or Gospel-centered NGOs working already at the camps? If not, are any planning to work there in the future?
- Are there other missionaries or organizations making plans to work in these camps? How do we find out? Who knows? Is there a Christian networking group in northern Uganda that might have this information?
- What specifically are the NGOs that are working there doing? Are there any essential needs or opportunities that are not being addressed? What are they? Is anyone planning to address these needs?
- What is the long term plans and vision for these people and the camps where they are settling in? Is the OPM going to let them stay there indefinitely?
- What are hopes and dreams of the refugees?

Conclusion:

- The time is NOW to send another small team to do this research.
- Even before concluding the research, I think it is a no brainer that we should find partners to train as children's workers and disciple-maker church planters and send them, and go with them, to live as near to the refugee centers as possible so to be able to spend as much time as possible building relationships in the various Zones, conducting Children Bible clubs and the like, home Bible studies, minister to the spiritual and trauma needs of the people.

Lord of the Harvest, thrust forth more workers!