

Refugees and IDPs: A Twin of Common Woes

By: Adimula, Ruth Abiola¹

The growth in the number of displaced persons globally is alarming and recently it has become a concern to government and people around the world. Incidentally, Africa including Nigeria are having a bulk share of the woes experienced by the affected persons, usually referred to as refugees or internally displaced persons (IDPs). The two main difference are that refugees are displaced persons who have crossed the borders of their countries, while IDPs have not; also refugees are governed by international Treaty while IPDs are guided by United Nations guiding Principles.

In my sojourn of refugees and IDPs camps in West Africa, I discovered that many times what is seen in camps is worse than as read or seen in pictures. For example in Grafton (Amputees) IDPs camp in Sierra Leone, abject poverty is vivid in the living standard of the camp residents, manifested in the mud dilapidated buildings of the victims of war, who all have their hands chopped off from the wrist or forearm, otherwise called “long sleeve or short sleeve” during the Sierra Leoneans war between 1991 and 2002. Each of the men living with his family in deplorable conditions of lack of water, no electricity nor basic welfare. In fact as beggars within the Freetown host community, they are treated as outcasts in their own country.

For the refugees in Oru camp, Nigeria, lack of security in the camp is a matter of great concern as the gate is permanently opened, making movement in and out of the camp porous. In January, 2012, it was reported that a 50 year old man from the host community raped a 10 year old girl in the camp and left her mother to bear the cost of repair to severe medical damage on the young damsel.

When you visit Buduburam refugee camp, Ghana in the night, the usual scene is array of ladies (young and middle aged) seductively adorned waiting by the road sides for a pick up by men longing for cheap “enjoyment”. The reason I discovered from some of the ladies was to make ends meet and “forced prostitution” presents a quick, easy and available avenue for them.

To know that no medical facilities are available for treatment or maternity services in Bakassi IDPs camp in Nigeria and that you need to travel 40 kilometers to get medical treatment is Calabar town, leading to unnecessary child mortality and that an untrained birth attendant in the camp midwife all the pregnant women deliveries in a population of over 2000 residents is worrisome.

What do we say about the activities of the Boko Haram sect in the north-east Nigeria that caused displacement of millions of people and creation of camps for relocation of several IDPs. It was reported that during President Muhammadu Buhari visit to Malkohi IDPs camp in Yola in the southern part of Adamawa State in November, 2015 , the President described the condition of the IDPs as unfortunate; he said: “the children are the worst hit. The situation has caused anxieties especially when we sleep at night”. The Director General of National Emergency Management Authority (NEMA), Mr Sani Sidi, also told the President that: “at present, the camp had 80 pregnant women and 175 unaccompanied children”.

¹ . LL.B, BL, LL.M; Ph.D (Peace & Development Studies with specialization in Gender based violence in Refugees and IDPs Camps in West Africa); Lecturer, University of Ilorin, Nigeria; adimulabiola@gmail.com

In Kakuma refugees camp Kenya, it was reported that the incidence of rape and sexual violence is extremely high and domestic violence is commonplace. In that camp, women are frequently raped and sexually mutilated by gangs of men. Women who are raped by rival groups, especially those who give birth to babies, are stigmatised and harassed.

Furthermore, in Uganda, it was reported that “more than 1.7 million northerners have been displaced by the war and live in harsh and often desperate conditions in camps for the internally displaced (IDP). . . camp conditions have led to acute malnutrition in children and the near-total destruction of social networks, culture and norms. . . more than 300,000 children under the age of five suffer from malaria, pneumonia, diarrhea and preventable diseases. . . Many women and girls are forced to trade sex for basic necessities, obviously contributing to the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. In addition, the camps are far from secure, in spite of the presence of local militias organized for protection”.

Not only that, refugee women, like many migrant workers have been reported to be frequently treated as second-class citizens in their countries of destination. They are discriminated against in terms of wages, job security, working conditions, job-related training, and the right to unionize. They are also subjected to physical and sexual abuse. When illegally employed, they have no access to labour laws. They are not given equal access to the law, nor are they treated equally under the law. Their employment opportunities are limited largely to domestic work or the sex industry, where their right to work, freedom of movement, reproductive rights, right to acquire, change, or retain their nationality, right to health and other basic human rights are violated. The result is that refugee women and their families are more vulnerable to religious, racial, and gender discrimination and exploitation.

According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) the problem of human displacement in Africa is expanding and becoming increasingly complex. Approximately 4.6 million refugees reside in African border camps while about 9.5 million of the world’s 20 million internally displaced persons are found in Africa.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) reported that in 2014, the total number of people internally displaced by armed conflict and violence worldwide was estimated to be 38 million people, the highest figure IDMC has ever recorded. Also that there were 12.5 million IDPs in the 21 sub-Saharan countries as at end of 2013, which is about a third of the global total, and that Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Sudan had the largest populations of IDPs in Africa.

According to Global Protection Cluster Working Group report in 2006, in more than 50 countries around the world, some 26 million individuals are uprooted from their homes and displaced in their own countries as a result of conflict or human rights violations. In addition, natural disasters caused the displacement of 36 million persons worldwide in 2008. They explained that IDPs are part of the broader civilian population that needs protection and assistance because of conflict and human rights abuses or due to natural disasters.

In West Africa, the UNHCR reported in 2012, that 280,540 refugees are found in the sub region and approximately 168,000 refugees, mainly Ghanaians, Ivoirians, Liberians, Mauritians and Senegalese, are dispersed in both urban and rural areas in several West African countries.

Similarly, the activities of Boko Haram in the North East Nigeria has resulted in high threats to lives and properties, death of many and displacement of several people. National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA 2015) put the figure of people that are internally displaced to be about 1,400,000 in the north east Nigeria alone.

Then it occurred to me that whether as a displaced person in foreign or home land the experiences are identical.

It is however disturbing that, despite the fact that international instruments make provisions for the protection of refugees and IDPs from identified woes of insecurity, congestion, discrimination, sexual violence, malnutrition and other gender based violence, which instruments countries of the world are signatories to, yet the extent of compliance is still very much in doubt, thus, there is a need to appeal to national governments and international actors to intervene in bringing succor to these displaced individuals.