

World Refugee Day: Addressing the Needs of Africa's Refugees
The views of an operational relief, development & resettlement agency

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Testimony of:
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Thank you for holding this hearing, putting a spotlight on refugees in Africa and for the invitation to appear today. The International Rescue Committee will celebrate our 75th anniversary next year. We got our start rescuing people fleeing Nazism in Germany. Today, we resettle refugees in 22 American cities and also work overseas in about 25 countries. In Africa, we work in 14 countries;¹ we have 9,829 staff members – most of whom are nationals of African countries – and millions of beneficiaries.

As US legislators, you are in a powerful position for the world's most distressed people. When the United States acts, things happen. For this reason, I appreciate your decision to hold a hearing today, on World Refugee Day, on this important topic.

Refugees and other displaced peoples

Right now there are about 35 million displaced people in the world. This is roughly the population of a medium-sized country. One in every 170 persons in the world has been uprooted by war. This is the largest category of vulnerable people in the world. About one third of them are officially recognized refugees because they have crossed an international border. The other two thirds are so-called internally displaced persons, or IDPs, because they are still within their own country.

Of the world's 12 million or so refugees, about 3.2 million – a little over 25% – are in Africa. In addition, Africa has about half of the world's 25 million IDPs.² Sudan still has the highest number of IDPs in the world – 5 million; northern Uganda has 1.7 million; the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has 1.1 million. In addition to these situations, internal displacement took place in 2006 in Chad, the Central African Republic, Ethiopia, and Somalia.

¹ Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, DR Congo, Ethiopia, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda. In 2006, we left Eritrea and we transitioned out of Congo (Brazzaville). We are assessing whether to go back into Somalia.

² Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Geneva.

So we are talking about some 15 million or more Africans who have fled violence, conflict, or persecution in their home cities or villages. Many are in need of help. National governments have the primary responsibility for taking care of displaced people within their own borders. But this does not always happen, and the displaced depend on the international community to provide help, especially to those who live in extreme poverty or fear or have few resources.

In some camps in Africa, we are witnessing the second and third generation of residents. Children have spent their entire childhood in the camp. They are fed and sheltered but this is really no way to live one's life – parents don't have jobs, children don't have futures and whole families are dependent on help from others.

This is where the IRC steps in to provide help and protection. Our new motto, "From Harm to Home," really captures the goal of many of our activities. We want to see the displaced return to someplace that they can call home, whether going home means the repatriation of refugees to their homeland after a peace agreement or a fresh start in a safe, stable place in a neighboring country or in a completely new place, such as an American city.

Sudan

The IRC has worked in Sudan or with Sudanese people since 1980. The IRC works with Sudanese refugees in Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia and Chad. We also help the displaced throughout Sudan – IRC has an office in Khartoum and we divide our operations into three regions: West Sudan (Darfur), North and East Sudan, and South Sudan. The IRC's long-term goal is to improve the Sudanese people's ability to exercise their fundamental rights, access basic services and manage their own livelihoods.

Because we are an operational NGO, I will leave to others to analyze and discuss the political and diplomatic situation in the country. My remarks will focus on the humanitarian response, the world's largest, aiding 5 million people inside Sudan. Another half-million Sudanese are in surrounding countries. We manage camps for the displaced and provide water, sanitation, health care, and education programs.

Darfur

The IRC has worked in Darfur since 2004. IRC operates out of five field sites in Darfur: Nyala and Kass in South Darfur; El Fasher and Kutum in North Darfur; and Zalingei in West Darfur. We provide services to about 790,000 people. The IRC also supports six health clinics in the Hashaba rural area of North Darfur, which provide services to over 85,000 conflict-affected persons there. (Heavy fighting has rendered the rural clinics largely inaccessible since June 2006, yet IRC's community health workers continue to treat patients there.)

IRC runs programs in the areas of: Primary and Reproductive Health, Environmental Health (water and sanitation), Prevention and Response to Gender-Based

Violence, Child and Youth Protection and Development, Camp Management and Community Services, and Protection and the Rule of Law.

We are one of the few implementing agencies on the ground with a focus on assistance specifically for survivors of violence against women and girls. Our staff uses a community-based approach to build and enhance local knowledge, capacity and skills to prevent violence from happening in the first place and to provide essential support to survivors. Women and girls use IRC's psychosocial support, skills building, and referral services approximately 16,000 times a month at ten camp-based Women's Community Centers. This program indirectly benefits over 470,000 people in North, South, and West Darfur whose female relatives receive emotional and physical support.

We also operate six Justice and Confidence Centers where trained paralegal volunteers provide legal advice and reconciliation services as well as raise awareness amongst the communities of the rights and responsibilities stemming from international and national human rights standards. To date, IRC has trained over 10,000 people on human rights and national and international law.

Chad

IRC has been in neighboring Chad since early 2004. In Chad, IRC provides life-saving assistance at the Oure Cassoni refugee camp through provision of water, health, and camp community services, including education and child protection. This camp is in a remote area of Chad, near a village called Bahai and not far from the border with Sudan. It is a very challenging environment. Nearly 90% of the camp's 26,000 residents are either women or children under age 18. Although the camp borders a lake, water in the lake must be chemically treated before drinking and can dry up during the dry season. IRC designed and implemented a water treatment plant. IRC has supported the construction of hundreds of public latrines and supported families to build their own, private latrines.

There are also upwards of 150,000 Chadians who have been displaced by internal conflict. There is an under-reaction of humanitarian donors to this crisis. We have seen that refugees from Darfur who cross into Chad get three times as much aid as displaced Chadians. More needs to be done.

In a perverse situation, over 45,000 Chadians have fled Chad to seek sanctuary in Darfur! Our staff has referred to the crisis of displacement in Chad as the worst protection crisis in the world.

South and East Sudan

The signing of two peace agreements in the South and East of Sudan³ over the past two years represents great diplomatic achievements and offers a return to stability and peace in these very poor and troubled areas.

Our hope is that, as peace is restored in southern Sudan, displaced people will be able to return to revitalized communities. What we have seen so far, however, is of concern. While considerable funds were pledged by international donors to support development in the south, many of these pledges have yet to materialize. Plans for millions of refugees to return home to the South are in doubt because the places to which they would return lack basic health and education facilities and little opportunity for returning refugees to earn a living. Peace in the south is also fragile; there are tribal tensions, land and water disputes, cattle looting, a flourishing arms trade, corruption, crime and the presence of irregular armed groups – a volatile environment. Tensions also arise as returning refugees place strains on relatively weak communities.

In the East, local groups have been promised greater political representation and millions of dollars in development aid. In both the South and the East, the engagement of and follow through from the international community is needed if peace is to become a reality.

Democratic Republic of Congo

The 2003 peace agreement in the Congo ended years of civil war. Yet, sporadic violence continues to force people to flee. Recent months have seen a landmark election as well as outbreaks of hostility in the capital Kinshasa. The U.N. peacekeeping mission in Congo, known as MONUC, is charged with keeping the peace but has never had sufficient means or political backing to fulfill its mandate. Resources available to MONUC remain inadequate for the scope of Congo's needs.

IRC has worked in Congo since 1996 and runs programs in six provinces (North Kivu, South Kivu, Orientale, Kasai Occidental, Katanga. IRC operates 190 health facilities in 11 conflict-affected zones with 1 million inhabitants, and is especially focused on improving the health of women and children. IRC also runs a civil society development program to help communities. In South Kivu, IRC provides immediate assistance in response to outbreaks of violence and provides health care, shelter, and water and sanitation facilities to the displaced.

IRC has recently begun implementing a major Community Driven Reconstruction program through funding from the United Kingdom's Department for International Development. IRC is the lead agency in a consortium of three international NGO's in this \$49.3 million, three-year program.

³ The Comprehensive Peace Agreement, or CPA, between North and South was signed on January 9, 2005; the East Sudan Peace Agreement was signed in October 2006 between the Government of Sudan and the East Sudan Front.

In addition to the services we provide to refugees and the displaced in the Congo, the IRC has played a key role in documenting the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis through a series of four mortality surveys. The survey of 2004 is among the largest ever conducted in a conflict zone and was published in the British medical journal *The Lancet*. It has since been widely cited by key humanitarian and advocacy agencies, the media and in academic literature. The survey found that more than 3.9 million people died as a result of the conflict between August 1998 and April 2004, with 98 percent of deaths being due to easily preventable and curable diseases. The survey found that as many as 1200 people were dying a day (in excess of normal mortality), or more than 30,000 a month. Many of the victims were children.

It's tragically simple: war led to the collapse of much of Congo's health system and economy, which resulted in disease and food shortages. Violence and insecurity has kept people away from clinics, and medical staff away from those in need. It's a recipe for disaster.

Right now in Congo a team of my colleagues are carrying out the fifth nationwide mortality survey, which will cover the period from January 2006 to April 2007. Five teams consisting of 16 primary researchers and 105 Congolese health workers worked to survey the population in 31 randomly selected health zones across all of D.R. Congo's eleven provinces. A total of 12,400 households were interviewed about war-related mortality.

The results of this latest survey, which are expected some time this fall, are needed to let us know whether or not the situation in Congo is improving, and particularly how the conflict-ridden east of the country is faring.

Worsening mortality data may suggest that not enough is being done to protect and aid the Congolese. On the other hand, an improving situation may inadvertently suggest that the crisis in Congo is over. IRC staff believes that it will be several years before anyone can make that claim. Again: the international community must remain engaged. Too often donors celebrate the conclusion of successful elections with a cut in support and reduction in peacekeepers, and then wind down of relief and development activities. Please don't let this happen.

Northern Uganda

For the past 20 years, the people of northern Uganda have been caught up in the middle of a conflict between the Government of Uganda and the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Up to 2 million people – eighty percent of the population of the north – have been displaced and forced to live in camps. Currently some 1.2 million people are displaced.

The situation in northern Uganda is well known to members of this subcommittee but not well known to many Americans. The LRA has used horrific tactics that include forced abduction and conscription, mutilation, torture, rape and sexual assault. Abduction and forced conscription of children has ruined lives and torn families apart.

Violations of basic human rights have proliferated both inside and outside of displaced persons camps. It has been a little-noticed humanitarian catastrophe.

The IRC runs programs in the districts of Lira, Pader and Kitgum. In Kitgum district, IRC provides basic health services to more than 152,000 displaced people in ten “core” camps and their environs. In addition, IRC supports HIV/AIDS testing and prevention activities, water and sanitation projects, children and youth protection programs, skills training and other programs to help earn an income – benefiting about 200,000 people. All of these programs are intended to help the displaced to become self-reliant. In Pader and Lira, the IRC emphasizes education programs for children, especially girls, and tries to get children back to school and away from exploitative child labor.

Last year, the LRA and the Government of Uganda signed a cessation of hostilities agreement, but a final peace settlement has yet to be negotiated. Peace talks between the Ugandan government and the LRA resumed in April, offering renewed hope to the people of Northern Uganda. These talks represent an unprecedented opportunity to end this long-running war. Under the auspices of south Sudan’s leadership, and with the involvement of the U.N Secretary-General’s Special Envoy Joachim Chissano, both sides have returned to the conference table. The stakes are high: if this opportunity for peaceful settlement of the conflict fails, the conflict may reignite. US support for the peace talks has been weak; we ask this subcommittee to do everything it can to pressure the White House, staff of the National Security Council, and State Department to take a greater interest in the peace talks.

Resettlement in the United States: the Lost Boys of Sudan and the Somali Bantu

As of the end of May 2007, the United States had resettled 8,276 African refugees during the 2007 fiscal year. The IRC was responsible for 970 of these refugees.

In recent years, perhaps the most talked about groups of refugees coming to the United States have been the Lost Boys of Sudan and the Somali Bantu.

The Bantu were brought to Somalia as slaves in the 1800’s from Mozambique, Malawi and Tanzania. After slavery was abolished in Somalia, the Bantus still lived on the margins of society. When Somalia descended into anarchy in 1991 and many Bantus were killed, raped or beaten, they fled to refugee camps in Kenya where the same kind of abuse and persecution continued.

After Mozambique and Tanzania refused to resettle them and with no chance of safe repatriation to Somalia, the US government agreed to resettle 12,000 to 13,000 Somali Bantus in the United States on humanitarian grounds, starting in 2003.

By September 2002, more than 12,000 Bantu refugees had been transferred from the Dadaab Refugee Camp to the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, where the IRC

manages the health care system and provides adult education services. Kakuma was a safer location for US authorities to conduct an application and screening process.

The IRC quickly constructed new sanitation and bathing facilities, and our clinics and feeding centers soon filled up with the new arrivals, many suffering from malaria and malnutrition. We also created a special “survival” literacy course to help introduce the Bantu refugees to the language, culture and practices of a place vastly different to the one they would be leaving.

The IRC trained some 85 teachers from the Bantu community and within two months, nearly 5,000 Bantus, almost the entire adult population at the camp, were enrolled. For most of the Bantu, illiterate and unexposed to modern conveniences, the classes were both bewildering and exciting. They learned the English alphabet and how to write the kind of family information that would be required on many US forms. They learned basic salutations, how to ask for directions, and how to report an emergency.

And then one day, after a year of seemingly endless interviews, checkups and vaccinations, they started coming to the United States.

Soon after their arrival, resettlement caseworkers and volunteers took the families on shopping excursions and gave lessons on food preparation, storage and clean-up. They showed the family how to lock doors, turn on sinks, stoves and lights, and use a washing machine and vacuum cleaner. They explained the concept of banks and paying bills. They registered the children in local schools, arranged for tutoring and enrolled the family in English classes.

In as little as two months, and sometime less, many of the Somali Bantu had secured entry level jobs and began working their way up the economic ladder and achieving independence.

Since 2003, IRC has resettled 1,766 Somali Bantu. Most arrived in 2004 and 2005. Only a few new cases have been added to this group since that time, however some continue to arrive. For example IRC had a new Somali Bantu case allocated to us only a couple weeks ago that we resettled in Baltimore. The generosity of everyday Americans has contributed to the successful resettlement of many resilient Somali Bantu families.

Perhaps even better known are the Lost Boys of Sudan, whose courage, determination and sheer physical endurance captured the imagination of the public. As children, they had walked up to 600 miles to Ethiopia to flee civil war in their homeland in the late 1980s. When warfare erupted there, they returned to Sudan and then headed hundreds of miles north to the safety of Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya.

In 1999, the State Department made the remarkable decision to accept nearly 4,000 of these young men for resettlement across the US. You may have been reminded of them through recent films like “God Grew Tired of Us” or works of literature such as

Dave Eggers's novel "What is the What" and non-fiction accounts by several other authors.

The Lost Boys of Sudan — and they're men, really — are working hard to get ahead. They put a particularly high premium on education, and many of them seek degrees while working full time in demanding jobs. This past spring, IRC offices across the United States joined in the celebration as several of these young men graduated from college.

Challenges of Resettlement: Funding & "Material Support" Provisions

The people being identified for resettlement now are often not the people whose stories are in the news. You may read a lot about Iraq and Darfur, but we are not resettling refugees from there at the moment. IRC is resettling Somalis who have been living in refugee camps for upwards of ten years. We are also resettling people who fled Burundi as a result of conflict in 1972! This lack of media coverage presents a challenge: the caring public is seized by what is happening over there, but hears very little in terms of people arriving here in the United States. This makes it harder to build grassroots support for refugee resettlement programs.

IRC's resettlement offices are funded from a mix of sources: the federal government, including the State Department and Department of Health and Human Services, state governments, local sources of funding, and grants and private contributions. Our resettlement offices really run on modest annual budgets, yet they regularly succeed in successfully resettling thousands of refugee families each year, and help them integrate in their communities and become contributing members of their new neighborhoods.

An even greater challenge is coping with the impact of recent anti-terrorism legislation. Laws intended to protect the United States from terrorists are preventing refugees from being resettled here. The USA PATRIOT Act of 2001 and the REAL ID Act of 2005 expanded the definition of terrorist activity and the categories of terrorist organizations. These provisions were meant to protect America from genuine terrorist threats. But in recent months, the Department of Homeland Security has interpreted these laws to keep out not only terrorists but also the victims of terrorism and oppression.

Refugees and asylum seekers who have been persecuted for their religious or political beliefs and seek sanctuary in the United States are being turned away if they ever provided any assistance whatsoever to a terrorist or terrorist organization — even if that assistance was provided under duress or given in the form of a ransom to kidnappers. While the US certainly should keep all terrorists and their supporters out of the country, refugees are not terrorists. They are victims of terror. Refugees share our values and have suffered for it. They deserve our help and sanctuary. Refugees should be protected rather than treated as a threat.

You may have heard of this problem with regard to Colombians who have paid ransom to hostage takers, or Burmese refugees who had contact with rebels. This provision has also affected African women who have been victims of sexual violence. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, rebel groups have broken into homes and taken residence there, during which time they raped the females of the household and also forced them to cook for them and do their laundry. The provision of such “assistance” has been deemed material support to terrorists, and these refugee cases have been put on hold by DHS.

The White House has taken a series of steps to address this problem through waivers, but a permanent solution is needed. Congress can provide this permanent fix in legislation. Without it, the US refugee admissions program will never recover from the severe cuts in numbers of refugees admitted that took place after September 11, 2001. Each unused slot represents a man, woman, or child who has suffered religious, political, or other persecution and will be denied the opportunity for a new life and new hope in the United States.

Violence against Women and Girls

During most conflicts around the world, women and girls are targeted for sexual violence. Women and girls who live in conflict-affected regions are especially vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation.

What is not well understood is that violence against women plays a role in every major aspect of a woman’s life – affecting her physical and mental health, exposing her to HIV/AIDS, threatening her ability to work, travel and take care of herself and her family, and potentially damaging her relationships with the society around her. The health consequences, in particular, are severe and far-reaching and include maternal and infant mortality.

In an effort to raise public awareness about this epidemic of violence and to spur policy-makers to action, the IRC is collecting signatures on a petition in the United States and a complementary petition in Europe. The petition calls for greater government support for programs to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls. This includes initiatives that allow survivors of sexual violence to recover their dignity, health, livelihood, and families, greater access for women and girls to education and training so they can support themselves, sustain a livelihood, and contribute to their communities, and community programs that also target men and boys so that they can begin to break the cycle of sexual violence.

We expect to present a petition with thousands of signatures to Congressional leaders in the autumn. We are cheered by the many people, among the public and here on Capitol Hill, who have already signed and support this initiative.

Support for Post-Conflict Development

Another challenge we face is ensuring that resources are available after a conflict ends. This is the concern I've already mentioned related to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South and East Sudan. Too often, there is a significant funding gap that develops when traditional emergency donors leave a former crisis area (such as USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, or the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration) and more development-focused agencies and donors move in to set up development programs (such as USAID's regional development bureaus). In fragile states, especially those emerging from decades of conflict, the emergency may be over but that doesn't mean that national governments have the capacity to provide direct services to citizens. Liberia is a case in point. Liberia is no longer within the top 20 failed states⁴ and it is rated as one of the most improved states in the current ranking. But life is still extremely difficult for the average Liberian. The Liberian Government has made it clear that it is unable to cover the basic costs of running health care and educational services. The government must continue to rely on help from NGOs (NGOs and other groups run approximately 75% of the health system in Liberia).

The Fiscal Year 2008 Budget

Before closing, I should mention the importance of refugee and humanitarian aid. IRC is a recipient of US government funding, primarily from the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration and from USAID. You might expect me to speak up in favor of healthy funding levels for the two main refugee accounts – and I am! But I also want to point out that a comprehensive approach to addressing and resolving crises abroad also requires US support for programs for disaster assistance, food aid, peacekeepers and, as mentioned above, post-conflict development as well as strong and sustained diplomatic attention.

In the past few years, annual appropriations bills have provided only partial funding to meet the needs of critical humanitarian accounts. Each year, we rely on supplemental appropriations legislation to address funding shortfalls and fill gaps. While our community very much appreciates getting this additional funding, this two-stage process makes it even more difficult to provide life-saving assistance in the field without interruption.

This year is no exception – the State, Foreign Operations and related programs bill being taken up by the House this week provides more funding than the President requested in Fiscal Year 2008 for refugee and disaster accounts but less than is needed to support current operations. We appreciate the work of Chairman Lowey and her staff to increase these accounts but we also ask that Congress try to match or exceed the amounts appropriated last year for these critically important budget accounts.

⁴ Foreign Policy magazine's Failed States Index, 2007.

View from Washington D.C.

In my job here in Washington, D.C., I try to find ways to get policy makers and citizens to learn more and care about Africa, especially Africa's neglected or forgotten crises. Despite the glut of depressing news that daily fill our newspapers and computer screens about far-flung crises, I can report some modest reasons for hope. First, Americans in large numbers want to help refugees and displaced people, and this issue enjoys bipartisan support. We have real champions here in Congress, on both sides of the aisle. Congressional leaders sponsor legislation, increase funding and travel to international hot-spots to see first-hand the problems that we and other NGOs are trying to address, often supported by US aid dollars. There are also some champions in the media. In the past two years, IRC has presented our "excellence in media" award to Terry George, the director of the film "Hotel Rwanda", and Nicholas Kristof of the NY Times for his coverage of humanitarian crises. Celebrities are also helping to raise awareness about some of these crises. Thanks in part to these efforts, there is a growing interest among Americans – churches, communities, citizens' groups – and especially American youth in doing more to help. Although we are grateful for the attention brought by celebrities, this is also a problem: movie stars should not be filling the void in the foreign policy debate and generating policy solutions; this is the responsibility of policy-makers in this very city, in this very room.

Not too long ago, colleagues in Kinshasa asked us to try to organize a grass-roots organization to care about the Congo. I admit to greeting this idea with skepticism: while we have supporters across the United States, the IRC is not a grass-roots advocacy organization. Nonetheless, several of my colleagues⁵ decided to pull together as many concerned NGOs, church and student groups, ex-Peace Corps Volunteers, academics and expatriate Congolese as they could find. The result is Congo Global Action, a fast-growing coalition that will advocate for Congo and urge increased local and international response, beginning with governments. Keep an eye out for them – they will be visiting your offices in the near future! One more attempt to draw the attention of Americans to crises in Africa.

And this – drawing attention to Africa – is also the point of your hearing today. Thank you for holding this hearing, for the work you do throughout the year, and for the opportunity to appear today. I speak for the entire board and staff of the International Rescue Committee in expressing our deep gratitude.

⁵ Notably Herve de Baillénx, Gerald Martone, and Shannon Meehan, aided by intern Cynthia Berning.