

EDITORIAL

Gov't for the poeple?

The poverty crisis is growing more serious every day in all the return sites of former IDPs, and the time for action has even past.

Last week, the House of Representatives passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which will jumpstart their economy and put more than 3 million people back to work.

What about the issue of PRDP for the war affected region? Why is it not a priority? Are we really nationalistic?

See America, it is to sign the recovery plan into law in the next few weeks. What about us Ugandan, why do we see a poeple suffer for over twenty years and failed to plan for it in a year or two.

Ugandan need to know how it will affect their lives -- The parliament, ministers and the president need to invest in economic growth and stability, especially of the disadvantaged group of people.

The stakes are too high to allow partisan politics to get in the way of PRDP.

I have never seen Parliament and executive urgently consulting with each other to put together a plan that addresses crisis we face in northern Uganda without politiking it. A way should be found to unite Ugandans including leaders. Steps also should be taken to ensure an unprecedented level of transparency and accountability in using funds for public goods.

People are even skeptical, they think PRDP funing may not even benefit the intended poeple as was seen with NUSAF, etc.

In the wake of the LRA: HIV in northern Uganda

A 2004/2005 Uganda National Sero-Behavioural Survey indicates the prevalence rate for the North Central Region is 8%, significantly above the national rate of 6.4%, according to Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon's survey, a South African Rhodes Scholar

He added that antenatal data at St Mary's Lacor Hospital - a Catholic hospital near Gulu Town - indicate a prevalence rate of 11.9%, though local organizations believe the rates would have been far higher in some camps, when IDPs were still locked up in those camps.

The lyrics of the latest Acholi pop songs are a lament: they mourn the loss of "values" in northern Uganda after a two-decade civil war that has displaced two million people.

"The singer says all the girls are now prostitutes and the men have turned to drink," said Alex Odong as he translated the lyrics of a song blaring from the radio in his taxi, in the northern town of Kitgum. "He wonders what has gone wrong with our society since the war."

A walk through Labuje camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Kitgum proves the singer's point. It is only 10 o'clock in the morning, but in a small round hut with 'Ber' - 'good' in Acholi - written on it, several men huddle in a circle, sucking on long straws that snake out of a pot filled with the local alcoholic brew.

While the men drink, women and young children, hoes in hand, walk several kilometres to work their fields. At the height of the war, insecurity made cultivation impossible, and women were regularly attacked as they farmed. Now that the north is largely peaceful, they are back on the land.

But not all women live a traditional lifestyle toiling away in the fields. In Kitgum town, young women trawl the bars at night; in the clubs, couples are slow grinding on the dance floor before slipping off together.

According to Odong, the behaviour of the urban youth is a far cry from the traditional Acholi way of life, when men earned their position of respect by providing economic support and physical protection to their wives and children, and women looked after the household.

In Kitgum district the war forced 90 percent of the people off the land and into desperate, squalid IDP camps. Now, talks between the government and the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) have raised hopes that the long lull in fighting may crystallise into a permanent peace.

But many Acholi worry that the 20-year experience of the war has irreversibly changed traditional values, and a new culture of hard drinking and sexual freedom may heighten the new threat of HIV.

Kitgum already has an HIV prevalence rate of nine percent, about one and a half times higher than the national average. "Young people no longer respect their elders; girls don't listen to their mothers, and men have forgotten how to work," Odong said. "AIDS is killing us; it is the next killer after the war."

The people the girls are listening to are the men who provide

for them financially, commented Rufina Oloa, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) project officer for HIV in Kitgum. "They listen to the soldiers who patrol the roads; they have relatively more money than the IDP men and women."

Olushola Ismail, head of the UNICEF office in Kitgum, said excessive drinking was driving sexual infidelity and, worse,

sexual violence and child sex abuse. He suggested that the high rates of alcohol abuse by men could be linked to the dependency and emasculation they felt in the camps.

"The men live in camps for years, unable to feed their families or take any real responsibility for them, so they turn to alcohol," he said. "The women turn to soldiers, not only because

they have money, but because they are 'real' men, who work - not drunks in bars."

Relief workers in northern Uganda are looking into ways of resurrecting traditional Acholi values as part of "early recovery," to help post-war communities get back on their feet.

"One of the biggest problems has been that no one listens to the men; no one has given them a chance to express their frustration with their lives, or to discuss with them alternative ways for them to be productive," Ismail said.

On the few occasions when he had sat down with local men, they had expressed a desire to 'go back to yesterday' and reclaim their place as the respected heads of their communities.

"It will be a long road back to yesterday, but once real social workers, not just NGOs [non-governmental organisations], get the chance to speak to the men, and once they get involved in income-generating activities, like farming, they can own their manhood again, and their self-esteem can begin to be restored," Ismail said.

There was also an urgent need for every child, particularly girls, to be in school, he said, which would ensure they were not only fully aware of the facts about HIV, but had little time to spend with men interested in them only for sex.



Former IDP camp in Kalongo, Pader district. This crowding helped in some camps to spread HIV/AIDS