

IGNORED OR FORGOTTEN? UGANDA'S DUTY TO THE PEOPLE OF KARAMOJA

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Brief background

Karamoja is made up of five districts namely Abim, Kabong, Kotido, Moroto and Nakapiririt which are found in North Eastern Uganda. The region borders both South Sudan and Kenya.

Karamoja's climate is harsh. In many areas rains do not often exceed 800 millimeters per year sometimes hovering around a mere 500 millimeters (at least 1000 millimeters is needed to sustain people in a land without infrastructure).¹ In recent years, drought has become more frequent and severe. The region has once again been hit by famine that has led to the deaths of about 20 people. Hon. Aleper Simon, the representative for Moroto Municipality informed Parliament of the plight of the people in Karamoja in his submission during a recent plenary session. "Our call to Government is for them to step up, so that we don't lose more people to famine." He begged.

Pastoralism is the dominant means of economic livelihood for the Karamojong and its viability as both a way of life and a livelihood—largely dependent on the availability of natural resources, access to land and environmental factors. It has been argued that the government's focus on efforts which apparently seek to reduce the mobility of the Karamojong have actually led to increased poverty among the Karamojong pastoralists and led to more violent cattle raids.² In addition to this, the government's disarmament project which was widely celebrated as a successful one has left the Karamojong vulnerable to cross border incursions by groups from neighboring Kenya and South Sudan.

Famine and hunger are clearly among the driving factors of the long term insecurity in the region as they have led to protracted intra and inter clan conflicts over cattle and access to pasture and

¹ Available at <http://www.karamoja.com/karamoja.html>.

² Margaret Kakande, "Understanding and Addressing Poverty Spatial Traps: Karamoja in Uganda," available at <http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/events-presentations/278.pdf> accessed 10/21/2015

resources³ as well as clashes with pastoralists from the neighboring countries. In addition, a high level of small arms proliferation has also negatively affected the region's socio-economic development.

Karamoja's famine troubles are not very recent and have been well documented for a while now. The Uganda National Policy for Disaster Preparedness and Management defines famine as a severe shortage of food that may lead to malnutrition and death.⁴ The policy notes that the areas that are most prone to famine in Uganda are Karamoja, Acholi, Lango, Teso and parts of West Nile. It cannot therefore be argued that government was unaware of the risk of famine in Karamoja. However, the government's response so far has been limited to sending food and other relief items to Karamoja.

Overview of Uganda's Legal and Policy Framework on Disaster Preparedness

Uganda's response and preparation for disasters is addressed first of all in the National Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy (NODPSP) in the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1995. The purpose of the NODPSP as stated in the Constitution is to guide all organs and agencies of the State, all citizens, organizations and other bodies and persons in applying, or interpreting the Constitution or any other law and in taking and implementing any policy decisions for the establishment and promotion of a just, free and democratic society. Although the enforceability of these objectives has long been a source of debate among legal practitioners and policy makers, it is clear that the government and other state actors are bound to receive guidance from these directives in making policy.

Objective XXI requires the State to take all practical measures to promote a good water management system at all levels. Furthermore, Objective XXII calls upon the State to take appropriate steps to encourage people to grow and store adequate food; establish national food reserves; and encourage and promote proper nutrition through mass education and other appropriate means in order to build a healthy State. Similarly, Objective XXIII extols the State to institute an effective machinery for dealing with any hazard or disaster arising out of natural

³ Joe Powell, "Karamoja: A Literature Review," March 2010, Available at http://mercury.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/121396/ipublicationdocument_singledocument/ceabe0f7-9428-4aa9-a67a-475880931722/en/2010-03_Karamoja+A+literature+review.pdf accessed 10/21/2015

⁴ The National Policy For Disaster Preparedness And Management, Directorate Of Relief, Disaster Preparedness And Refugees, Office Of The Prime Minister.

calamities or any situation resulting in general displacement of people or serious disruption of the normal life.

The Office of the Prime Minister houses the Department of Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Management (DRDPM) which is headed by the Minister for Disaster Preparedness and is in charge of coordinating risk reduction, prevention, preparedness and mitigation on a national scale in consultation with other line ministries, development partners, local government and the Private sector. One of the line ministries is the Ministry for Karamoja Affairs, headed by Mrs. Janet Museveni since 2011. The problems in Karamoja have been blamed to some extent on the inefficiency of the Ministry of Karamoja Affairs, accusations which are difficult to rebut or agree with given the scarcity of information on the Ministry's role and activities. An online search for any official documents from the Ministry proved fruitless, aside from the mentions of the Ministry on the OPM website and mentions of its collaborations with the Department of Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Management. The Minister for Karamoja Affairs is reported to have met with local leaders from the seven Districts of Karamoja at Morulinga State Lodge where she told them that "Even other areas in the country have been experiencing this dry spell, but unlike in Karamoja, people elsewhere know how to sustain themselves when this happens...therefore the onus is on you the leaders of this region to educate the communities on how to sustain their families through the different seasons of the year. This entails growing sufficient food and storing some for the bad days. We must also implement our regulation of 1 acre of cassava per family. This requires more sensitization to our people."⁵ This statement is in line with the tone that the Minister has taken in her dealings with the people of Karamoja, which usually involves criticizing the people in the region for their shortcomings and asking them to trust in God and do better.

In its list of achievements for the financial year 2012/2013, the DRDPM included the fact that together with the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), World Food Program (WFP) Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries, the department carried out surveys of the food security situation in Karamoja and provided preliminary forecasts for 2014. They however noted that the forecasts were subject to further assessments of harvests of second seasons of the

⁵ Ronald Musoke, 'Janet Museveni's Karamoja Dream' The Independent, August 2, 2013, <http://independent.co.ug/news/news-analysis/8069-janet-musevenis-karamoja-dream>. See also <http://www.chimpreports.com/janet-blames-karamoja-famine-on-locals/>, accessed 30th Sept, 2015.

previous year. The achievements report also indicated that multi hazard risk and vulnerability mapping would be done in Karamoja (among other areas) in February 2014. The DRDPM also prepared the National Policy on Disaster Preparedness and Management 2010 which notes the problem of famine and food security in various parts of Uganda, particularly Karamoja, and outlines government's policies in response. The National Policy notes that drought is the main cause of famine and that famine and drought situations have compounded poverty among the peasants, incapacitating the communities from participating in economic development and lowering their nutritional status.

What can the government do?

From the foregoing, it is clear that Uganda has a comprehensive policy framework for handling disasters such as famine. In fact, the National Disaster Preparedness Policy 2010 includes policy actions which the government intends (intended at that time) to alleviate famine. These included to establish and maintain adequate grain stores for famine prone areas and other emergencies, among others. It seems that the problem lies in implementation of these policies as well as in following through on promises/policy proposals made by government. For example the DRDPM in its list of achievements for 2012/13 stated that multi hazard risk and vulnerability mapping would be done in Karamoja in February 2014. However, there is no indication that this was done and yet this mapping might have led to an earlier discovery of the risk of famine enabling the government to act faster to save lives. Furthermore, Members of parliament recently criticized the Karamoja Affairs Ministry over the delay in rolling out water harvesting technologies in the region⁶ despite the allocation of 100 million shillings towards water production in the sub-region this financial year. Woman representative Christine Abia accused the NRM Government of failure to store water for production and tasked the minister to explain what it would cost Ugandans to store water for production. The need for a proactive response to Karamoja has been noted by the government as well. Ruth Nankabirwa (then government representative) stated at plenary that "Facts cannot be changed, the situation in Karamoja is not as it used to be, relief to Karamoja is not enough; we need more discussion to solve food scarcity." It is therefore clear

⁶ Olive Eyotaru, 'MPs Demand Explanation On Karamoja Famine,' Uganda Radio Network, September 30, 2015, accessed at <http://ugandaradionetwork.com/story/mps-bitter-with-ministry-over-famine-in-karamoja-district>.

that the government has the relevant policies and commitments towards improving the situation in Karamoja, the issue right now is with the implementation of these policies.

Another big problem is the time within which government responds to crises once they arise. Local and international press as well as the MPs from Karamoja region had been reporting cases of several deaths and the worsening situation in Karamoja for roughly one month before the government commented. Even after President Museveni pledged assistance to the people of Karamoja, it was another 2 weeks before relief arrived in Moroto and several of the districts in Karamoja. Quick response is of utmost importance especially in situations where lives are at stake. The government of Uganda needs to improve its response time to disasters like famine because as it is right now, we will continue to unnecessarily lose lives.

The famine problem in Karamoja cannot be attributed to just one factor. The contributing factors include the extended period of insecurity, illiteracy, poor infrastructure and the continued marginalization of Karamoja sub- region in discussions of national issues in Uganda. The approach to solving the problem in Karamoja must therefore be multi- pronged. Despite having its own ministry, infrastructure development in Karamoja has continued to be slow. The poor road network especially is what keeps Karamoja cut off from the rest of Uganda. In addition to this, despite the existence of UPE, FAL and USE, Karamoja continues to record one of the lowest literacy rates in Uganda of 12%.⁷ This is aggravated by a complexity of factors including the traditional agro- pastoral lifestyle of the Karamojong that requires the labour of young boys and girls as herders, high levels of poverty and negative perception of education by the parents. The high failure rates in the already existing schools discourage parents from sending their children to school. The government needs to pursue programs within the education sector targeted at improving the literacy levels in Karamoja including sensitization of parents and students as well as improving the quality of teachers and materials sent to schools in the region. These can be pursued alongside Ministry of Agriculture programs targeted at teaching improved and more efficient ways of farming. The agro- pastoralist lifestyle does not only affect the education of children, it affects ability to produce sufficient food, Karamoja region has some of

⁷ Office of the Prime Minister, Karamoja Intergrated Disarmament and Development Program: Arevised Sector Comprehensive Log Frame (2011-2015), available at <http://opm.go.ug/assets/media/resources/15/KIDDP.pdf> accesses 10/10/2015

the most fertile soils in Uganda but only one rainy season, failure of which has great implications for food security.⁸ Ministry of Agriculture has set policies towards improving food security in Karamoja which should be implemented. However, the high rates of illiteracy will continue to negatively impact the success of these government programs in the region. It should therefore be given priority.

The concerns raised by Members of Parliament from Karamoja region highlight the reluctance within government in addressing the problems faced by the region. The numerous relief and rehabilitation projects the government has already undertaken, some of which were highlighted by Hon. Rose Nankabirwa in Parliament do not seem to have taken hold in terms of promoting long term self sustenance in the region. This is an issue that can be best addressed by Parliament which is the law making body of Uganda. As part of its legislative mandate, Parliament is in charge of approving budgets made by the Ministry of Finance Planning and Economic development. Members of Parliament can therefore push for a bigger budget allocation to Karamoja region in order to ensure the flagging off of the different projects the government of Uganda and Policy makers have drafted to handle the unique problems facing the region. As representatives of the people of Karamoja, Members of Parliament from the region should take the lead, as they have already, in pushing the government and ensuring that it is held accountable to the people of Karamoja.

In conclusion, the government of Uganda has a comprehensive and detailed network of policies among its different sectors for addressing the Karamoja question. The only problem lies in the implementation of these policies. Government needs to follow through on all the commitments it has made towards the development of Karamoja if the region's issues are ever to be finally resolved.

⁸ Ibid at s.3.1