LANDINFO
Country of Origin Information Centre

Report

Uganda

Asylum seekers and refugees: Registration, documentation and other aspects

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Summary

Uganda has a liberal refugee policy. The country hosts more than 1.7 million asylum seekers and refugees and receives approximately 100,000 new asylum seekers annually. Most people who seek asylum in Uganda are granted refugee status, either prima facie or based on individual assessment. Asylum seekers and refugees are registered in digital registers and receive documentation of their stay. Refugees can apply for refugee travel documents.

Asylum seekers and refugees have several rights, including freedom of movement, the right to work, and access to basic public services such as health care, and primary education. However, in practice, access to formal sector employment and public services may be inadequate. Refugee status does not form the basis for citizenship, and therefore one can maintain refugee status even after several years of residence in the country.

In recent years, there has been a marked increase in asylum seekers from regional countries that do not border Uganda, including from Somalia and Eritrea. The majority of these reside in Kampala, and several sources noted growing discontent among parts of the population regarding the large arrivals. Ugandan authorities temporarily suspended the registration of Somali asylum seekers in March 2023 and Eritrean asylum seekers in January 2025.

Contents

1 Introduction

This report describes conditions for asylum seekers and refugees in Uganda, including registration, documentation, living conditions, and the possibility of acquiring citizenship. Primarily, Uganda's handling of refugees is regulated by the 2006 Refugee Act and the 2010 Refugee Regulations. The report refers to these and other relevant laws but mainly addresses how these conditions unfold in practice.

1.1 Sources

The report is based on open sources and meetings with authorities and international organizations knowledgeable about the practical conditions for asylum seekers and refugees, in connection with an information-gathering trip to Uganda in September and October 2024.

Three of the oral sources have been anonymized at their request due to their work situation.

2 Background

With approximately 1.7 million registered refugees and asylum seekers, Uganda has the most refugees in Africa (UNHCR 2024, p. 3). The largest groups come from neighbouring countries South Sudan (around 950,000) and the DR Congo (520,000), in addition to Somalia (50,000), Eritrea (50,000), Burundi (40,000), Sudan (40,000), Rwanda (25,000), and Ethiopia (13,000). In recent years, there has been a significant increase in asylum seekers from Eritrea, Sudan, and Somalia. This increase is likely due to both Uganda's open refugee policy and that Kampala, after the outbreak of wars in Sudan and Ethiopia, has become a popular transit destination for, among others, Eritreans attempting onward migration to Western countries (Source A; Source B, meetings 2024).

Uganda's refugee policy is often described as one of the most liberal in the world. Refugees and asylum seekers have freedom of movement, the right to work and to access basic welfare services. Most refugees live in settlements, where they regularly receive humanitarian aid and are allocated a small plot of land where they can build a home and engage in agriculture (UNHCR 2024c).

Researcher Kristof Titeca (2021) has pointed out that there are also realpolitik motives behind Uganda's progressive refugee policy. It provides the Museveni government with significant international capital, a potential bargaining chip in dealings with international actors, including in connection to allegations of widespread corruption in Uganda’s refugee sector (see Chapter 7).

However, large arrivals and decreasing funding from international donors have put Uganda's refugee system under pressure. This has led to a reduction in the monthly humanitarian aid received by refugees in the settlements, and newly arrived refugees being allocated smaller plots of land. Also, the processing time has increased significantly for asylum seekers applying for protection on an individual basis.

Simultaneously, sources reported emerging dissatisfaction among the local population with the large influx of refugees, and that refugee policy may, to a greater extent than before, become an internal political issue. The authorities stopped all registrations of Somali asylum seekers in March 2023 and Eritrean asylum seekers in January 2025. Although given specific justifications and said to be temporary, the registration halts can also be seen as political moves to curb immigration from two countries with historically little immigration to Uganda.

2.1 Uganda's asylum administration

Uganda's asylum administration is under the Department of Refugees at the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and has a structure similar to Norway's asylum administration.

Asylum seekers applying for asylum on an individual basis are first registered at the Refugee Desk in Kampala, which is operated by Ugandan police authorities. Registration and asylum interviews are then conducted by the Refugee Eligibility Committee (REC) at OPM, which also processes the application. If rejected, the applicant can first appeal the decision to the REC, and if rejected again, to the Refugee Appeals Board (RAB).

The asylum administration and Uganda's broader refugee efforts are primarily funded by international donors (NRC 2023). UNHCR plays a central role, assisting the authorities in several stages, including with the registration of asylum seekers.

3 Registration and application for sylum

Asylum applications are processed in two tracks. Asylum seekers from eastern DR Congo, South Sudan, and Sudan are initially granted prima facie refugee status upon arrival at the border. Asylum seekers from other countries must apply for asylum in Kampala for individual processing.

3.1 Registration of asylum seekers from countries granted *prima facie* refugee status

Asylum seekers from South Sudan and eastern DR Congo usually enter Uganda across the respective borders. They are received by the authorities at staffed border crossings and taken to reception centres. There, the authorities, with support from UNHCR, register the individual's personal details and biometrics, and check the data against a digital database of registered refugees. The purpose of this check is, among other things, to prevent pendulum migration. Then, the asylum seekers undergo a health check to identify certain contagious diseases and receive information about their rights and the subsequent application and settling process (Source A, meeting 2024).

Additionally, Ugandan security authorities screen asylum seekers to assess their eligibility for refugee status. The sources we spoke with had limited insight into the specific investigations but believed that the security authorities are mainly looking to identify former combatants. Asylum seekers suspected of having participated in actions that could exclude them from refugee status lose their prima facie status. Instead, their asylum applications are individually processed by a body affiliated with the security authorities (Source A; OPM, meetings 2024).

The number of cases in which exclusion is considered is unclear. OPM stated that it concerned "a few cases" and that prior affiliation to a militia does not necessarily result in automatic exclusion. Source A noted that security authorities assess exclusion based on factors such as age, the circumstances of recruitment, and how long the individual has been part of the militia. Children recruited under duress and who was only briefly involved in a militia are generally not excluded, according to the source.

Generally, asylum seekers should not stay more than two weeks at the reception centre before being resettled in a refugee settlement (Source B, meeting 2024).[1] After registration and security screening, recognized refugees are transported by bus to a designated settlement. There, they receive a plot of land, some necessary settlement materials, and a cash payment. They are also issued a "Family Attestation" document, which serves as proof of their refugee status (Source A; Source B, meetings 2024). Refugees aged 16 and above can apply for refugee ID cards (Ryan 2018; Source B, meeting 2024).[2]

Sudanese, South Sudanese, and eastern DR Congolese cannot apply for prima facie status in Kampala but must register their applications at designated reception centres or refugee settlements. Sudanese arriving directly in Kampala are required

[1] The settlements host designated nationalities. For a geographical overview of the settlements and the distribution of nationalities, refer to UNHCR (2023a).

[2] See chapter 4.2 and 4.3.

to travel 200 km to the Kiryandongo settlement to register.[3] After registering in Kiryandongo, they can return to Kampala. However, in doing so they forfeit their right to the allocated plot of land and humanitarian assistance provided to refugees registered in the Kiryandongo settlement (Source A; Source B, meetings 2024).[4]

3.2 Registration of asylum seekers for individual processing in Kampala

Asylum seekers from areas other than eastern DR Congo, South Sudan, and Sudan must apply for asylum in Kampala. The five largest countries of origin for asylum applications between 2020 and June 2024 were Somalia (41,000), Eritrea (36,000), Rwanda (17,000), Burundi (11,000), and Ethiopia (8,000).[5] Individual asylum applications are processed by REC, which sorts under OPM.

Most Somali and Eritrean migrants prefer to stay in Kampala. Sources (Source A; Source B; OPM, meetings 2024) indicated that many migrants from these countries come from urban areas and/or see Uganda as a transit destination for further migration, such as to North America or Europe. Settling in Kampala is therefore more practical.

3.2.1 Registration at Refugee Desk

Persons arriving in Uganda through a staffed border crossing intending to seek asylum are usually permitted to travel to Kampala to apply for asylum there (OPM, meeting 2024). In Kampala, asylum seekers must register their asylum application with the Refugee Desk.[6] The Refugee Desk is formally under REC, but in practice, it is operated by the Directorate for Crime Intelligence within the Ugandan police force, which prioritizes national security (Source A, meeting 2024).

Asylum applications should be submitted within 30 days of arrival in Uganda (Refugee Act 2006, § 19). However, our impression is that the 30-day requirement is not strictly enforced, meaning it is possible to apply for asylum after a longer stay in the country. This is supported by Source A (meeting 2024), which mentioned that even foreign businesspeople who have been in Uganda for

[3] Initially, Sudanese asylum seekers were able to register their asylum applications at the Refugee Desk in Kampala. In January 2024, the authorities announced that the registration of Sudanese nationals in Kampala was suspended and that they would instead have to register their asylum applications in Kiryandongo (Ayin Network 2024).

[4] Asylum applications from Sudanese increased drastically following the outbreak of conflict in Khartoum on April 15, 2023. The sources indicated that many of the Sudanese seeking asylum in Uganda come from Sudan's urban middle class and prefer to stay in Kampala rather than reside in refugee settlements located in rural areas.

[5] Rounded to the nearest 1,000.

[6] Refugee Desk Plot 302 Sentema Road in Menga, se map in UNHCR (n.d.).

an extended period sometimes apply for asylum to avoid taxes and/or costs associated with work permits.

Asylum seekers must provide passport photos, fill out an application form, and provide fingerprints when registering at the Refugee Desk. They are also asked to present any ID documents they have. Sources (Source A; Source B; OPM, meetings 2024) agreed that asylum seekers rarely present passports or ID cards, and the registration of identity information largely depends on details applicants provide themselves.[7] The identity information registered at arrival then follows the applicant throughout the asylum process.

Additionally, a security screening is conducted by a committee with representatives from the police, internal and external intelligence services, and a migration officer from the Ministry of the Interior (Source A; Source B; OPM, meetings 2024). According to Source A, the committee rejects very few asylum seekers, and rejections typically apply to individuals considered a threat to national security.

Once completed, the registration is forwarded to OPM. The asylum seeker receives a registration certificate — an Asylum Registration Card — a paper slip with their name, nationality, and the application's reference number (see copy of document in Ryan 2018, p. 25). According to an information guide for refugees published by Signpost Uganda (Muhindo 2024), the registration process at the Refugee Desk can take anywhere from one day to several weeks.

3.2.1.1 Registration of Somali asylum seekers halted in March 2023

Ugandan authorities decided to stop registering Somali asylum seekers in March 2023 due to a significant increase in applications from Somalis. The authorities suspected that many of them were Kenyan-Somalis (UNHCR 2024c).

OPM (meeting 2024) linked the increase to the Kenyan government's announcement that the Somali refugee camps in Kenya would be closed. According to OPM the increase of Somali applicants after the announcement included many Kenyan-Somalis taking advantage of the opportunity to seek asylum in Uganda as Somalis, hoping for a pathway to relocation. According to Source B (meeting 2024), the registration halt meant that more Somalis are now staying in Kampala as unregistered asylum seekers (see section 3.3).

[7] OPM (meeting 2024) pointed out that they were aware that individuals from border areas, such as Tigrinya speakers from Eritrea or Ethiopia (especially Tigray), might claim a different nationality than their actual one. However, they noted that, like most other immigration authorities, they have limited means to verify this in the absence of identification documents.

The registration of Somalis was still halted when we visited Kampala in October 2024, and there is no information indicating that it has resumed.

3.2.1.2 Registration of Eritrean asylum seekers halted in January 2025

According to Source B (email 2025), who is well-informed about asylum and refugee matters in Uganda, OPM temporarily halted the registration of Eritrean asylum seekers starting January 10, 2025. Eritrean asylum seekers who arrived before January 10 and had initiated the process at the Refugee Desk can complete the registration and subsequent application process. OPM is reportedly open to allowing the registration of "vulnerable individuals." However, the criteria for eligibility and the specific process involved were unclear to the source.

Landinfo's search of open sources has not found other references to the registration halt, but we will follow up with a new publication when more information becomes available.

3.2.2 Registration and asylum interview at OPM

After the application is registered at the Refugee Desk, the applicant must go to OPM to schedule an appointment for further registration. OPM (meeting 2024) usually registers people from specific nationalities on designated weekdays. Families are asked to attend together, but individuals over the age of 18 should be registered separately. During registration, the applicant is given an appointment for an asylum interview and is issued an asylum seeker certificate (see section 4.1).

Asylum interviews are conducted at OPM and focus on the reasons for seeking asylum. According to the Refugee Act (2006, § 20 (2)), the application should be processed within three months. However, this deadline is typically not met due to large backlogs and limited capacity at OPM. Source B (meeting 2024) estimated that in October 2024, OPM had approximately 50,000 pending asylum applications, 20,000 of which were from Eritreans. Source A (meeting 2024) indicated that individuals who were registered as asylum seekers in October 2024 were given appointments in August 2026.

According to Source A, the number of interviewers at OPM is very limited, and each interviewer conducts several interviews per day. The source described the interviews as "very basic," with interview reports—including personal details—rarely exceeding three or four pages. After the interviews, the interviewer prepares a report that the REC uses to decide on the case.

3.2.3 Most asylum applications are approved

According to UNHCR's (2024b) statistics for the first half of 2024, the REC decided on 9,874 individual asylum cases. Only 32 were rejected, giving an approval rate exceeding 99%. The fact that most individual asylum applications are approved is also consistent with feedback from OPM and other sources knowledgeable about the topic in Uganda (Source A; Source B, meetings 2024).

Between 2014 and 2016, Uganda granted asylum to only 28% of Eritrean asylum seekers distinguishing itself from most other countries receiving Eritrean asylum seekers (see Ryan 2018, pp. 12-15). This changed in 2020, and Uganda has since granted asylum to 92–98% of Eritrean asylum applications processed by the REC. In the first half of 2024, Uganda granted asylum to 98% of Eritrean asylum seekers (UNHCR 2024b).

Explaining the change, Source A (meeting 2024) pointed to Ugandan authorities altering their stance on whether the obligation to undergo Eritrean national service constitutes a valid ground for protection under the Refugee Convention.[8]

3.2.4 Appeal process for rejection

If an asylum application is rejected, the decision can be appealed to REC within 30 days. If REC upholds the rejection, the decision can then be appealed to a review board—the Refugee Appeals Board (RAB). The appeal process may involve the appellant being called for another asylum interview (UNHCR n.d.; NRC 2024).

According to UNHCR's (2024b) statistics, 154 of 284 appeals were successful in the first half of 2024.

3.2.5 What happens to individuals who are rejected?

There is no information to suggest that Ugandan authorities systematically carry out forced returns of individuals whose asylum applications have been rejected. According to OPM (2024), some leave the country voluntarily, while others likely remain in Uganda without a residence permit.

Source A (meeting 2024) was not aware of ongoing forced returns, while Source B (meeting 2024) stated that forced returns are rare and only happen in "extreme cases." None of the sources we spoke to in Uganda, including OPM, were aware of recent examples of forced returns to Eritrea.

[8] For more information about Eritrean national service, see EASO (2019) and Landinfo (2022).

3.3 Unregistered refugees and migrants

According to Source B (meeting 2024), there are pockets of unregistered individuals in Kampala and other areas of Uganda. The source specifically mentioned Somalis unable to register their asylum applications since March 2023, as well as Sudanese individuals in Kampala who have not travelled to Kiryandongo for registration. The source also noted the presence of some South Sudanese and Eritreans among those who, for various reasons, have not registered with the authorities.

Unregistered migrants, according to Source B, risk being arrested for illegal stay. Immigration authorities, in collaboration with the police, occasionally conduct raids to identify individuals without legal residency status in Kampala (see for example Immigration Uganda 2024). For more about this, see section 5.3.

4 Identity and residency documentation

Asylum seekers and refugees are issued various documents throughout the application process. The information recorded in the ID documents is largely based on details provided by asylum seekers themselves and is recorded in OPM's database of asylum seekers and refugees.

In the absence of other ID documents, these documents serve as both identification and proof of legal stay in Uganda. Both Ugandans and foreigners are required to carry identification, and failure to present documentation when interacting with Ugandan police may result in detention (see section 5.3).

4.1 Asylum seeker certificate

Asylum seekers who have registered their asylum application with OPM (see section 3.2.3) are issued a temporary Asylum Seeker Certificate by OPM. The certificate, an A4 sheet, contains personal details, a passport photo, and a case number, along with passport photos and personal details of household family members. The latest version of the certificate includes QR codes for each family member.

These documents are valid for three months and can be renewed until a final decision is made by the REC (OPM; Source B, meetings and email 2024).

4.2 Refugee family attestation

Asylum seekers who have registered their asylum application with OPM (see section 3.2.3) are issued a temporary Asylum Seeker Certificate by OPM. The certificate, an A4 sheet, contains personal details, a passport photo, and a case

number, along with passport photos and personal details of household family members. The latest version of the certificate includes QR codes for each family member.

These documents are valid for three months and can be renewed until a final decision is made by the REC (OPM; Source B, meetings and email 2024).

4.3 Refugee ID cards

Refugees aged 16 and above can be issued a refugee ID card. The ID card is a plastic card the size of a bank card, featuring a photo and personal details of the holder (see example in Ryan 2018, p. 26), and is valid for five years (UNHCR 2024c, p. 6).

According to the Signpost Uganda information guide (Muhindo 2024), the issuance of the ID card may take some time. As of June 2023, 85% of eligible refugees had been issued one (UNHCR 2024c, p. 6). Refugees without an ID card can instead use the Refugee Family Attestation as an identification document.

In two studies of refugees in district towns, NRC (Cunial 2024; Cunial & Mathie 2024) found that 99% of the sample in Arua either had an ID card or a Refugee Family Attestation issued by OPM, while the corresponding figure for the towns of Adjumani, Hoima, Koboko, and Mbarara was 92%. This means that 8% of the sample indicated not possessing an ID document issued by OPM.

4.4 Temporary documents while awaiting appeal processing

Rejected asylum applicants can obtain documentation of legal stay while waiting for their appeal to be processed. This includes an Asylum Certificate Pending Review when appealing to REC, and an Asylum Certificate Pending Appeal when appealing to RAB (OPM, meeting 2024).

4.5 Marriage and birth certificates

Individuals with refugee status can marry civilly and obtain a marriage certificate or marry religiously and receive confirmation that the marriage is registered with the National Identification and Registration Authority (NIRA). Asylum seekers, however, cannot marry civilly or register their marriage with NIRA (for more on marriage documentation, see Landinfo 2024).

Upon application, NIRA also issues a birth certificate for children born to asylum seekers or refugees in Uganda. One of the parents must provide a birth notification from the hospital or local authorities and submit this to NIRA along with identification documents, such as a refugee ID card (Source B, meeting 2024).

The prevalence of birth and marriage certificates in the Ugandan population is relatively low, as many people only acquire these documents when there is a practical need (see Landinfo 2025). In two NRC studies (Cunial 2024, p. 14-15; Cunial & Mathie 2024, p. 17-20) of refugees and asylum seekers in district towns, fewer than half of the respondents were found to have birth certificates for their children. However, the majority of couples who had married in Uganda possessed a marriage certificate, although the prevalence varied from town to town.

4.6 Refugee travel documents

Travel documents for refugees are issued by the Directorate of Citizenship and Immigration Control (DCIC). The applicant must have refugee status and submit a recommendation letter from OPM and a refugee ID card (DCIC, no date).

According to Source A (meeting 2024), the system for issuing travel documents has improved compared to previous years and is now "quite efficient." The source noted that DCIC receives about 200 applications for travel documents each week.

According to OPM (meeting 2024), the application process for the travel document is as follows:

- Firstly, the applicant must register their refugee number on DCIC's online portal.[9]
- The applicant must bring a printed copy of their application, refugee ID card, and any other relevant documents to OPM's office. OPM checks the documents against its database and issues a recommendation letter.
- The applicant must pay the issuance fee of 220,000 Ugandan shillings at a bank.
- The applicant brings a receipt of the payment to OPM, which then contacts DCIC to arrange an appointment for fingerprinting and the personalization of the travel document.
- The applicant attends the DCIC office for fingerprinting and personalization of the travel document.
- The applicant is then contacted by OPM to collect the travel document.

The travel document is valid for five years and can be used for entry to all countries except the holder's home country. If the holder possesses another passport, it must be surrendered to the Ugandan authorities (Refugee Law, §31).

[9] The web portal can be found here: https://passports.go.ug/ctd/application

However, it is believed that this rarely happens, as sources (OPM; Source A, meetings 2024) mentioned that asylum seekers rarely present passports when applying for asylum.

Sources (Source A; OPM, meetings 2024) also noted that renewing a travel document abroad would be very challenging, if not impossible. OPM cited one case where a holder attempted to renew a travel document at a Ugandan diplomatic mission but was unsuccessful.

It is important to note that the personal information in the travel document is taken from the identity data registered in OPM's refugee database, which is primarily based on the information provided by the individual (and their family) during the asylum application process. According to Landinfo's assessment, Ugandan authorities have limited means of verifying the information against objective sources, such as reliable ID documents or records from the country of origin.

4.7 Errors in registered personal information are common

According to Source B (meeting 2024), errors in the registration of asylum seekers' personal information, particularly in the names of family members, are quite common. These errors cause numerous requests to OPM to correct the mistakes.

5 Conditions for refugees in Uganda

Uganda's refugee policy is often regarded among the most progressive and generous in the world. In accordance with the Refugee Act of 2006 and the Refugee Regulations of 2010, recognized refugees have freedom of movement, access to the labour market - including the ability to establish their own businesses - and access to public services such as education and healthcare (UNHCR 2023c).

However, this situation must be seen in the context of nearly one-third of Uganda's population living below the poverty line and the limited capacity of public services. The proportion of poor and unemployed individuals is significantly higher among refugees, and actual access to healthcare services is lower (World Bank Group 2022, pp. iii, 79-80).[10] Many refugees depend on assistance from international organizations, which has been reduced in recent years as donations have failed to keep pace with the influx of refugees (SIHMA 2024; UNHCR 2023c, pp. 4; 2023b, pp. 24-25).

[10] According to study by the World Bank (2022, p. 79), only 28 % of refugees are employed, compared to 64% pf Ugandan citizens.

5.1 Refugee Settlements

Uganda's 30 refugee settlements house over 90% of refugees in Uganda (see map in UNHCR 2025). The settlements are located near established villages in relatively remote areas, typically in districts bordering the refugees' country of origin. South Sudanese make up the majority of the population in the settlements in the northwest, while Congolese are the majority in the settlements in the southwest.

Refugees who choose to settle in a settlement are allocated a small plot of land where they can build a shelter and cultivate crops (Ryan 2018, p. 9). The land is often provided by the authorities through negotiations with local community leaders. Irene Dawa (2020) describes the settlements in Arua District as being closely integrated with nearby villages, making it difficult to distinguish between refugee households and local households. Refugees interact daily with locals, many of whom belong to the same ethnic groups as the local Ugandan population. They also share access to public services, including clinics and schools.

Refugees in the settlements receive assistance from the authorities and international organizations, including food, cash transfers, and materials to construct basic shelters (Dawa 2020; UNHCR 2023c).

The mostly remote settlement locations provide access to land but also mean poorer general infrastructure and public services compared to more central and urban areas. Source A (meeting 2024) noted that the land allocated to refugees and the monthly assistance provided to each family have been reduced in recent years due to large refugee arrivals and dwindling funding.

Based on these reductions, NRC (Cunial 2024; Cunial & Mathie 2024) found that many refugees have left the settlements in favour of nearby district towns, where the labour market is larger. Many try upholding their registration in the settlement, enabling continued assistance.

According to Refugee Regulations § 65, refugees cannot sell or lease the land allocated to them. Like other foreign nationals, refugees also do not have the right to own land in Uganda (Source B, meeting 2024).

5.2 Refugees in urban areas

Around 8% of registered refugees in Uganda have chosen to settle in urban areas, primarily in Kampala (UNHCR 2023c, p. 3). This includes most Eritrean, Somali, and Sudanese refugees. Many of them come from urban areas and/or consider Uganda a transit destination for further migration to Western countries (Source A; Source B; OPM, meetings 2024).

Refugees living outside settlements must register with Local Council 1 (LC1) (Muhindo 2024). LC1 is the lowest administrative level in Uganda and is responsible for registering residents in the neighbourhood or village under their responsibility. Refugees living outside settlements must support themselves and receive very limited, if any, financial assistance from the authorities or international organizations (Source A, meeting 2024).

Most refugees rent accommodation and support themselves through the informal economy or remittances from relatives. Under the Refugee Act § 29, urban refugees also have access to basic public healthcare and primary education, similar to Ugandan citizens. However, in practice, refugees are often not prioritized. Consequentially, many rely on private healthcare services. Additionally, only a quarter of refugee children of primary school age in Kampala are enrolled in school (UNCHR, 2024a).

There are several prominent diaspora communities in Kampala, including Somali, Eritrean, and Congolese. An example is the Kasanga neighbourhood in Kampala, which is home to a large Eritrean population, most of whom are asylum seekers or refugees. During a visit to the area in October 2024, we observed numerous Eritrean shops and restaurants, as well as the prominent Eritrean Orthodox St. Gabriel Church.

All the sources we met in Kampala mentioned that parts of the local population have grown increasingly sceptical of Uganda's liberal refugee policy in recent years. This scepticism is largely attributed to the significant influx of refugees, which has led to changes to the demographic composition of some neighbourhoods and an increase in rent prices.

5.3 Obligation to present identification

Around 8% of registered refugees in Uganda have chosen to settle in urban areas, primarily in Kampala (UNHCR 2023c, p. 3). This includes most Eritrean, Somali, and Sudanese refugees. Many of them come from urban areas and/or consider Uganda a transit destination for further migration to Western countries (Source A; Source B; OPM, meetings 2024).

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6 Refugees cannot become Ugandan citizens

Around 8% of registered refugees in Uganda have chosen to settle in urban areas, primarily in Kampala (UNHCR 2023c, p. 3). This includes most Eritrean, Somali, and Sudanese refugees. Many of them come from urban areas and/or consider Uganda a transit destination for further migration to Western countries (Source A; Source B; OPM, meetings 2024).

Refugees living outside settlements must register with Local Council 1 (LC1) (Muhindo 2024). LC1 is the lowest administrative level in Uganda and is responsible for registering residents in the neighbourhood or village under their responsibility. Refugees living outside settlements must support themselves and receive very limited, if any, financial assistance from the authorities or international organizations (Source A, meeting 2024).

Most refugees rent accommodation and support themselves through the informal economy or remittances from relatives. Under the Refugee Act § 29, urban refugees also have access to basic public healthcare and primary education, similar to Ugandan citizens. However, in practice, refugees are often not prioritized. Consequentially, many rely on private healthcare services. Additionally, only a quarter of refugee children of primary school age in Kampala are enrolled in school (UNCHR, 2024a).

6.1 Children of refugees

Children born in Uganda, where one of the parents or grandparents has been a refugee in Uganda, cannot acquire Ugandan citizenship through registration, as stated in Article 14 of the Citizenship and Immigration Control Act of 1999. However, Article 12(b) states that "every person born in or outside Uganda one of whose parents or grandparent was at the time of birth of that person a citizen of Uganda by birth" shall be a Ugandan citizen by birth.

A World Bank Group report (2019, p. 17) claims that refugee children cannot acquire Ugandan citizenship, even if one of the parents is a Ugandan citizen. According to Source C (2021), this is incorrect. The source emphasized that refugee children are indeed Ugandan citizens if one of their parents is a Ugandan citizen and was aware of several such cases.

7 Corruption

Suspicions of widespread irregularities in the registration process led Ugandan authorities and UNHCR in 2018 to carry out a biometric verification of all refugees in the country (Okiror 2018; Bond 2018). The verification revealed that the actual number of refugees was significantly lower -around 25% less- than previously reported (Biryabarema 2018; Van Der Straaten, Korsiak & Bujoreanu 2018, p. 10).

Also, the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services uncovered extensive corruption and fraud involving refugee funds, both by Ugandan officials and UNHCR staff (Mbiyozo 2019). Despite these revelations, corruption allegations have continued to surface among officials, UNHCR staff, and others working in refugee settlements in Uganda. For example, claims suggest that refugees pay for resettlement to Western countries, and that false medical certificates are issued as part of this process (Breng & Amberger 2020; Hauswedell 2020; Hayden 2019).

In 2022, fraud involving over 6,000 false identities were discovered in the Kiryandongo, Rhino, and Bidi Bidi settlements. These fraud cases implicated OPM staff who allegedly had received bribes from refugees to register non-existent newborns, enabling households to claim higher benefits. Following the discovery, it was revealed that internal controls were inadequate, allowing newborns to be registered in OPM records without the necessary documentation (Titeca 2023).

7.1 Ugandan citizens registering as refugees

In 2022, the Ugandan newspaper The Observer (Kisakye 2022) published a story about corruption related to resettlement to Western countries. The article featured an interview with a South Sudanese refugee who in 2021 discovered that his family's resettlement places to Canada, initially allocated in 2017, had been sold to Ugandan citizens, who also assumed the family's identities. Also, other sources have made similar claims of Ugandans paying bribes to register as refugees and be selected for resettlement (Ogeno & O'Byrne 2018).

Ugandan authorities are aware that Ugandan citizens have registered as refugees (OPM, meeting 2024). According to OPM, it is now possible to cross-check the refugee database created in 2018 against Uganda's ID register (see Landinfo 2025), to detect double registrations. Landinfo is not familiar with how effective this procedure is. Technical capabilities to detect fraud must also be weighed against the general corruption level within the Ugandan refugee bureaucracy, which researcher Kristof Titeca (2021, 2022, 2023) has referred to as "endemic," given the repeated corruption scandals.

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