Democratic Republic of the Congo refugees cross into Uganda

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Attention has been on the violence in Burundi and its people leaving the country, but there is also a fresh — though silent— influx of Congolese refugees into Uganda, fleeing violence, rape and killings by militias in the North Kivu region.

On November 11 alone, Uganda received some 881 Congolese refugees who are causing a strain on the already overstretched facilities, officials said.

David Mugenyi, the Commandant of Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement in South Western Uganda says there has been an increase in the number of refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo since the international community stopped focusing on the country especially when large rebel groups like M23 were disbanded.

“There is need to focus on small rebel groups as these too can cause a lot of havoc,” he says.

The refugees some of whom are returning, following repatriation in 2014, cite renewed abductions, sexual abuse, killing and forced recruitment of young men and women by armed groups and looting from the numerous mushrooming militias, as the main reasons for flight.

Information from UNHCR shows that weekly arrivals from the DRC into Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement are above 600. Since the beginning of the year, over 25,781 have arrived from the North Kivu region alone.

At the current trend, UNHCR expects that at least 4,500 will arrive before the end of the year hence requiring more aid.

Data from UNHCR shows that 78 per cent of Congolese refugees are women and children.

Mr Mugenyi says that Uganda, with support from the different UN agencies had in November 2014 started to support the repatriation of Congolese.

However, the former refugees are returning and are joined by new asylum seekers leading to an increased need for medical, water and education facilities and services.

At Rwamwanja, for instance, officials have been forced to create three new villages that require health centres, schools, roads and boreholes.

Most of the new arrivals are of Hutu ethnicity entering Uganda through Bunagana and nearby porous border points.

For now, the humanitarian agencies can afford the 100 per cent food rations for these refugees, but Mr Mugenyi says education, health, water and sanitation facilities will soon become overstretched.

In addition to the old refugees who have generally settled in Uganda, the increasing new arrivals mean that government and humanitarian agencies will have to invest in infrastructure.

Today, officials at the UN say it is easier to fundraise for Burundian refugees even when the Congolese are more.

In the week ending October 22, UNHCR data shows that there were only 39 new arrivals from Burundi, but since the beginning of 2015, Uganda has received 15,000 refugees from Burundi.