

UNHCR works against confrontation and for cooperation in South Kivu

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UVIRA, Democratic Republic of the Congo, June 9 (UNHCR) – Relative stability in the border province of South Kivu is encouraging Congolese refugees to return home, but some face problems once they get back – especially over land.

Land is at the heart of many disputes and confrontation between returnees and those who never fled, as well as between returnees and returnees, be they refugees or internally displaced people.

UNHCR, in a bid to ease the reintegration process and avert conflict over land, has been working with its partners to promote dialogue and mediation in the areas of return, said Nasir Fernandes, head of UNHCR's office in the South Kivu town of Uvira, while adding: "There is now a real window of opportunity to help uprooted Congolese return and rebuild their lives."

The UN refugee agency has conducted a comprehensive review on the issue of land disputes in major return zones and the main focus of its activities in this area is on renewing relationships between returnees and those left behind through a combination of communication, collaboration and reintegration activities.

To this end, UNHCR supports a project in South Kivu implemented by Search for Common Ground (SFCG), a United States-based non-governmental organization that specializes in conflict resolution and conflict prevention. SFCG uses inter-active drama to help resolve land disputes.

SFCG has trained 75 actors in conflict analysis and they listen to community concerns and conflicts and create a scenario and character set which reflects this reality. Audience members are invited to replace the actors to play out the scenario in ways that more constructively address the conflicts.

The actors have taken the message of reconciliation and cooperation to more than 400,000 people in the past 18 months in the main return zones of South Kivu, including Uvira, as well as in parts of Katanga province to the south.

"The participatory theatre technique enables the actors to absorb the conflict dynamics in the village, and then replay them before that same community" and with the participation of audience members, explained Lena Slachmijlder, country director of SFCG.

"This technique enables conflict to be addressed in a safe and participatory manner and brings to light innovative and appropriate solutions for addressing conflict without violence. It's a way of putting arts and culture to the service of the peaceful repatriation process," she added.

UNHCR and partners are also helping to strengthen local conflict resolution mechanisms, such as the traditional mediation committees. In the absence of effective government institutions, these are often the only available organizations for addressing issues such as land disputes.

And in some cases, disputes have been resolved through a combination of the mediation committees and the participatory theatre system. For example, refugee returnee Lucie became embroiled in a row with an internally displaced Congolese woman, Amina, after returning to the Baraka area from Tanzania last November.

Lucie found Amina building a house on land owned by Lucie's late husband, who also happened to be Amina's uncle. She argued that in Lucie's absence, the land had been sold to her father. Lucie, who had nowhere else to go, reportedly complained: "I don't understand Amina's behaviour."

After calls for police intervention failed to resolve the situation, Lucie approached UNHCR implementing partner, Arche D'Alliance, formed in South Kivu in 1997 to promote peace and defend human rights. The humanitarian agency referred the matter to the mediation committee in Baraka, which comprises eight members elected by civil society and meets every Thursday to resolve land

issues.

"We listen to the people and we give them advice," said one member, a teacher, adding: "We follow local culture and we know our people, so we are respected by the local authorities as well." She said the committee had resolved about three-quarters of the cases brought before it.

When Amina refused to give ground, the SFCG, with its actors and comedians, intervened. They produced an objective drama on the dispute between Lucie and Amina, and then performed it in front of the two women and their community.

This led to a solution: Lucie will stay in the house with her children and Amina will be able to build a new house in the Mwadinga area, near Baraka. Following lobbying by UNHCR, the government set aside land in Mwadinga for returnees who had none of their own.

Such ventures may not solve all the problems, but they show that the success of return and reintegration depends to a large degree on timely and active involvement of humanitarian and development agencies. UNHCR will continue to work with its partners towards the smooth transition between humanitarian and development activities.

*By Francesca Fontanini
In Uvira, Democratic Republic of the Congo*

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