

Lane Krainyk: Internship Report

I spent nine weeks as an intern in the Protection Unit in UNHCR Uganda's Kampala Branch Office. In my time with UNHCR, I was incredibly fortunate to have the opportunity to engage in a wide range of work. I am deeply grateful to have learned a lot over the course of my internship. I gained substantive knowledge about the region and the factors that force refugees to flee from different countries (including the acronyms of some of the many political and military groups in the DRC!). I also gained procedural knowledge on the process that asylum seekers go through when they seek refugee status in Uganda. Finally, I gained practical knowledge on how UNHCR works to assist refugees in Kampala and some of the challenges that UNHCR faces more generally in working to support refugees in vulnerable situations. Below is a more detailed description of some of the activities I had the opportunity to engage in during my time with UNHCR Uganda.

During my internship, I was responsible for meeting with refugees to discuss their protection concerns. In some instances, I met with refugees who had not previously met with the Protection unit before. In these instances, it was important to listen to the refugees' stories on why they left their country of origin. In other cases, I scheduled interviews with refugees so that follow up could be done on their cases or details could be sought for the purpose of addressing potential protection concerns. In total, I worked on the files of approximately 25 refugees. One aspect of this work that I most appreciated was that I had the opportunity to meet with refugees coming from seven different countries in the region (Barundi, Rwanda, DRC, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia). As a result, I learned a lot about the factors that drive refugees from different countries.

Through my work with these refugees and the guidance that I received from my colleagues, I was able to gain exposure to the different actions that Protection is able to take to assist refugees with their protection concerns. For some refugees that I worked with, we would encourage them to follow up with local police or, through the legal office at InterAid (our implementing partner), offer them assistance in dealing with the police. Depending on the issues presented, we also would refer refugees internally (to other units within UNHCR) or externally (to organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross or the African Centre for Treatment & Rehabilitation of Torture Victims) or InterAid (for issues including education and skills training, health and livelihood)). In cases where the refugees presented concerns that made them candidates for resettlement, we would write internal referrals so that their cases could be considered by the Senior Protection Officer. In many cases, we would help refugees develop strategies for enhancing their own security in Kampala on a day-to-day basis.

I really enjoyed drafting different types of assessments and referrals for my cases. I had the opportunity to do a couple of comprehensive file reviews for large files that had been with the Protection unit for a long time. In doing these assessments, I conducted fact specific research, reviewed all of the materials that the refugee had presented to UNHCR and assessments that had previously been completed by staff in Protection, met with the refugees and wrote assessments on the credibility or seriousness of their claimed protection issues.

I also had the opportunity to visit one of Uganda's refugee settlements. When refugees come to Uganda, they are able to either live in a city or to go to a refugee settlement where they are provided with plots of land to farm. At the settlement, I visited the reception area that receives new refugees and the offices of various organizations that provide services to refugees on the settlement. I also toured the "Maka Pad project," a refugee-operated business that manufactures and distributes sanitary pads. This visit helped to give me some perspective on the scope of UNHCR's operations in Uganda.

In light of recent conflict, Uganda has seen a dramatic influx of refugees from eastern DRC since January 2012. Being with UNHCR during this influx period gave me the opportunity to see how UNHCR operates when it is faced with a large increase in the refugee population over a short period of time. For a number of weeks during my internship, I was responsible for drafting the daily and weekly updates on the influx. These updates featured the daily/weekly number of refugees that came into Uganda, the issues that drove them from the DRC and the challenges faced in receiving them in Uganda. Dealing with this information on a day-to-day basis gave me significant insight into the specific factors that drove these refugees from their homes and the work being done on the ground to meet these refugees' needs at a time when they are particularly vulnerable.

While the above describes the activities I spent the bulk of my internship doing, I also had the opportunity to do a number of other things. I was involved in trainings on refugee verification and exclusion assessments. I attended a conference on urban refugees involving Jeff Crisp, from UNHCR's policy division, and Janet Lim, UNHCR's Deputy High Commissioner. For a number of weeks I assisted in managing UNHCR's refugee files. I went on a home visit to meet an at-risk refugee who had been separated from her family. I also sat on the Women-At-Risk panel for the purpose of assessing the files of Congolese women who had been recommended for resettlement.

Overall, I had an incredible experience with UNHCR. I gained significant exposure to an area of great interest to me and had a lot of opportunities to improve my interviewing and drafting skills. More importantly, I learned about the tremendous work that UNHCR and its partners are doing to address the challenges faced by refugees. I also gained an appreciation for the obstacles faced by refugees as they attempt to deal with the insecurities and vulnerabilities created for their families by conflict and persecution in their countries of origin. I was very fortunate to work with the remarkably hospitable and helpful staff at UNHCR. In addition, I am very appreciative of Fasken Martineau's support for this opportunity. My University of Toronto International Human Rights Program internship was an incredibly educational experience for which I am deeply grateful.