

COVID-19 AND REFUGEES IN UGANDA

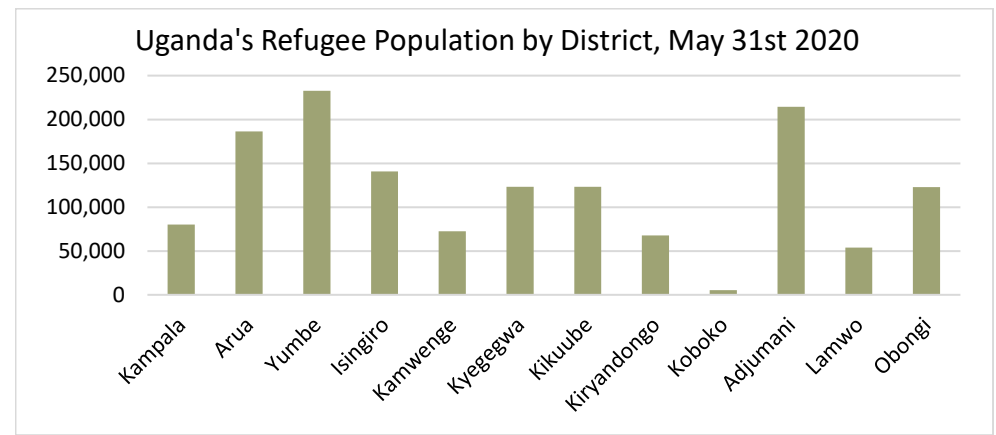
Many poor countries must cope with the COVID-19 pandemic while also hosting millions of refugees in crowded camps. Uganda is one such country.

The 2019 novel coronavirus has caused a public-health emergency around the world. Though poor, Uganda is among the largest refugee-hosting countries in [Africa](#), with over a million refugees. The outbreak has sparked concerns about the capability of low-income countries like Uganda to control the spread of the virus while hosting so many refugees. Most of the refugees in Uganda are from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Burundi, and Somalia.

Refugees in Uganda and Africa, in general, suffer from high rates of illnesses particularly infectious diseases and malnutrition, famine, unclean water, poor sanitation, and lack of shelter. According to the [World Health Organization](#), the African region is witnessing a rapid rise in the number of reported confirmed COVID-19 cases with almost a 31% increase in less than a week (from June 3rd-9th 2020).

Despite efforts by Uganda to close its borders after registering its first COVID-19 case, the number of refugees in the camps has been gradually increasing, as illegal immigrants take advantage of the country's porous borders.

Conditions in camps encourage high exposure to infectious diseases making refugees highly vulnerable when there is an outbreak of a virus such as COVID-19. Uganda, for example, currently has 11 refugee [camps](#) hosting over 1.4 million refugees. These camps are overcrowded with limited access to health care facilities. Despite suspending the reception of [new refugees](#) and asylum seekers in



Source: [Office of the Prime Minister, UNHCR, Government of Uganda](#)

March, when the country registered the first COVID-19 case, refugee camps still expose people to a high risk of infection. According to [UNHCR](#), there are not enough intensive care units and ventilation equipment, in Uganda's refugee camps, to effectively deal with a large outbreak. Fortunately, as of July 3rd the country has confirmed only [927](#) coronavirus cases with [234](#) linked to community transmissions. Among the community transmissions, 51 cases are confirmed among refugees and there are fears that many more could be infected.

In the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak in Africa, the UNHCR launched a global [appeal](#) for \$255 million USD to respond to the coronavirus in refugee camps such as those in Uganda. Since then the UNHCR has appealed for an additional \$490 million bringing the total requested to [\\$745 million](#). Whether donor countries will contribute to such funding drives when they are working hard to contain the pandemic in their own countries remains to be seen. Even so, donor countries may view investments like these as important for re-opening international trade.

The efforts by host governments to prevent or contain the COVID-19 outbreak in refugee camps are an important part of the world-wide effort to contain the virus. To this point testing in the camps has been limited. Donor support would help to expand testing and screening services to refugee camps in Uganda, Syria, Turkey and elsewhere and so increase the capacity for host countries to contain the virus.