By Helen C. Epstein

NEW YORK – When United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres traveled to Uganda earlier this month, his stated mission – to raise billions of dollars for the country's growing refugee crisis – seemed a noble one. Conflicts in the region have driven more than a million people into Uganda, and the country is feeling the strain.

But what Guterres may not realize, or at least doesn't publicly acknowledge, is that Uganda's strongman president, Yoweri Museveni, has instigated or exacerbated many of the conflicts from which the refugees now living in his country have fled. Enlisting Museveni's help to solve the refugee crisis is like hiring an arsonist to lead a fire brigade.

Roughly half of the refugees now in Uganda are from South Sudan, where a civil war has been raging intermittently since December 2013. The war began when troops under the command of President Salva Kiir began attacking and killing members of the Nuer ethnic group, in the South Sudan capital of Juba. Rebels linked to former Vice President Riek Machar then began attacking members of Kiir's tribe, the Dinka.

Much of the army sympathized with Machar, but in January 2014, Uganda sent troops into South Sudan to prevent Kiir's downfall (a claim the Ugandan government initially denied). That intervention greatly prolonged the war, which grows bloodier by the day. In April, Britain's secretary of state for international development, Priti Patel, equated Kiir's "scorched earth policy" and tribal targeting to acts of genocide.

Some 38,000 Somalis have sought refuge in Uganda as well, fleeing a war that is also partly of Uganda's making. In 2007, Uganda supported the disastrous US-backed Ethiopian invasion of Somalia, which nearly flattened the capital Mogadishu, causing more than half of the city's population to flee.

The aim of that intervention was to replace the ruling Islamic Courts Union with a more secular government. But the routing of the ICU, which was led by relative moderates, backfired badly, by radicalizing the group's youth wing, al-Shabaab. Today, al-Shabaab, one of the world's most frightening radical Islamist terrorist groups, controls much of the Somali countryside. The group has also attacked shopping centers, restaurants, and schools in neighboring countries, including Nairobi's Westgate Mall in 2013 and Garissa University in northeastern Kenya, where 417 students were killed in 2015.

Finally, Uganda is home to hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where conflict has been raging since 1996. That crisis began when the Ugandan and Rwandan armies invaded and toppled the aging dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko – and then invaded again two years later, with the aim of toppling Mobutu's successor, Laurent-Désiré Kabila.

Mobutu was no angel; while his people languished in poverty, he decorated his lavish jungle palace with Murano glass chandeliers, quaffed pink champagne, and built a private airport that could land the Concorde. But after his ouster, life for the Congolese people became immeasurably worse, as Ugandan- and Rwandan-backed militia groups, including the notorious March 23 Movement, wreaked havoc on the country. Ugandan military officers, including members of Museveni's family, have also been accused of looting billions of dollars' worth of gold, diamonds, and other natural resources from Congo's eastern provinces. The number of casualties – not just from the violence, but also the collapse of health services and other consequences of state failure – is probably in the millions.

What Guterres and Uganda's donors need to understand is that Museveni is a trickster, like the hare in a classical African folktale. Since coming to power by force more than 30 years ago, he has cooperated with the West's War on Terror, and championed the neoliberal economic reforms pushed by the World Bank. These pro-Western policies have earned him near-total impunity, along with over $20 billion worth of military and development assistance.

Because of corruption, the aid money provided to Uganda has done little to improve the wellbeing of the Ugandan people, whose rates of illiteracy, mortality, and poverty surpass those of many neighboring countries. According to US government surveys, Uganda's children are among the world's least likely to complete primary school, and are nearly twice as likely as children in Kenya and Rwanda to die.

While Museveni and his cronies preside over what one American diplomat has called an "all-you-can-eat corruption buffet," the West's continued support for him prevents the region's people from controlling their own destinies and fuels further crises.

Guterres' decision to co-host the refugee event in Kampala with an author of the calamities in the refugees' homelands dishonored the victims he hoped to assist. Uganda needs diplomatic pressure to stop stoking conflicts, not another opportunity to profit from Western naiveté.

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