Reviewer’s report

Title: Factors associated with post-traumatic stress disorder and depression amongst internally displaced persons in Northern Uganda

Version: 1 Date: 19 March 2008

Reviewer: Margarete Schauer

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Most people living in the Gulu district and in neighbouring districts in Northern Uganda have been affected by ongoing rebel attacks and a significant proportion of the population has been forced to live in camps. In an epidemiological survey, Roberts and colleagues investigated the stressors, with an emphasis on traumatic stress and mental health of these internally displaced people (IDP).

The ms is very well-written. The Introduction is a bit too concise and more of the relevant literature could be added. The Method gives an adequate description of the multi-stage clustering and characterizes subjects and procedures, sufficiently detailed that others could replicate the investigation. Statistical analysis was appropriate (but is in fact quite demanding and in parts beyond my expertise so that a statistician might be consulted). In general, findings were summarized in a way that a reader could understand them. The tables describe the outcome in detail, but Figures could be added to illustrate the main points. The discussion is focussed and leaves the reader with clear conclusions.

The study reports a dramatically high rate of abduction. For outsiders, this may be astounding, but the data fit well with our own, completely independent observations (which are also about to be published). It is less surprising that the cumulative experience of severe and often life-threatening stress leads to mental suffering, especially within the range of the trauma spectrum.

Discretionary Revisions which the authors can choose to ignore:

In terms of etiological factors, it would be interesting, if the authors could sort the stressors in traumatic events (typically experience or witness life-threatening events or threat to the bodily integrity, which will elicit an alarm response and hence fulfil the A criterion of DSM) and other stressors, such as lack of food or the inability to fulfil other needs. It would then be interesting to see, if the “building block” effect (cf. Neuner et al., 2004 - “dose-response” in the sense of different event types) is equally strong for both types of stressors. In this way, the paper could make a valuable addition to the literature beyond the important description of the specific mental health disaster in Uganda.

The HSCL was used to obtain indicators of depression. Subjects above the cut-off point may have depression, but this is not a clinical diagnosis and therefore the authors should talk about depressive symptoms rather than about depression. I don’t think that the >1.75 score is a good cut-off criterion. (My own experience – in Germany and in Uganda – when comparing the HSCL with the
clinical rating of depression or the Hamilton scale would suggest that the cut-off is more in the range of 2.9). For further work, it would therefore be highly desirable, if the authors could present the histogram of the scores.

Publication: Accept after discretionary revisions (which the authors can choose to ignore)

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field