RESEARCH ARTICLE

Protection and Containment: Surviving COVID-19 in Palabek Refugee Settlement, Northern Uganda

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ABSTRACT

Humanitarian assistance is framed around 'protection'. Deciding whom to protect and against what is not straightforward, particularly during a pandemic. In Uganda, policies to protect against COVID-19 embraced containment through the reduction of movement and the securitisation of borders. Refugees in Uganda were described as particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 and therefore in need of protection, whilst simultaneously perceived to be a health security threat. This article critically explores containment and protection by focusing on refugee self-protection. Ethnographic research was carried out during COVID-19 in Palabek refugee settlement in northern Uganda, amongst refugees from South Sudan. In contrast to containment policies that curtailed mobility in order to 'protect', research findings demonstrate that self-protection included dynamic social boundaries around the settlement, and harnessed mobility. The latter drew on social, political, and historical borderland dynamics between (South) Sudan and Uganda. Effective social boundaries around Palabek were only created when policies of containment had legitimacy. Boundaries were circumvented when legitimacy waned and wider socio-economic challenges, particularly regarding food insecurity, came to the fore. If humanitarians and the Ugandan government had understood the essential need to consider self-protection, they might have paid more attention to ensuring the long-lasting legitimacy of COVID-19 containment policies amongst refugees.

KEYWORDS

containment, COVID-19, humanitarian protection, refugee, Uganda

1 | BORDER MONITORING IN NORTHERN UGANDA

In November 2021, in the middle of ethnographic research in Palabek refugee settlement, northern Uganda, I arrived at a small stop sign and a simple road barrier, marking the Ugandan side of the border with South Sudan. Further up the track, I could see a collection of white jeeps, carrying a group of humanitarian staff travelling with employees of The Ugandan Government's Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), who worked across various Ugandan refugee settlements. They were carrying out a week-long program of border monitoring visits at various official crossing points between Uganda and South Sudan and were meeting government officials working at each border crossing. The latter included immigration officers, local councillors, members of the national army—Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF) soldiers, police officers, and Ugandan Revenue Authority (URA) customs officers.

The team from OPM and humanitarian agencies, along with government officials from the border (in this case, soldiers), found some shade under a tree adjacent to the mud huts and temporary brick structures, which were usually occupied by the soldiers. The team leader opened the discussion, focusing on issues referred to as 'security' and 'protection'. The soldiers monitoring the border point described refugees crossing back to South Sudan daily:

People are moving back and forth. Refugees are going back to South Sudan, but we cannot document this. They are under the protection of UNHCR, but they don't bring their refugee cards—they just come and say they are going to funerals or to dig. They cannot be stopped. People then tend to come back [to Uganda], but we don't know how. They go through the bush. The Prime Minister has not opened the borders to refugees… But people pass. We just don't know how….[1]

(Soldier, fieldnotes, 11th November 2021)

Such unregulated movement was seen as a health security issue: COVID-19 certifications of vaccination and COVID-19 testing were both important national containment measures being circumvented by unofficial movement. A senior humanitarian actor summarised the problem:

We need to ensure sufficient protection is given to persons of concern, without moving to also cater to those that usually move as normal migration. Seeing these border points has helped me understand what is happening in Palabek. The border communities share some identity, but they are split by political borders. There are push and pull factors on both sides of the border that we need to understand….

(Humanitarian actor, fieldnotes, 11th November 2021)

This vignette illustrates how the enactment of COVID-19 containment policy amongst refugees became entangled with issues of protection during the pandemic. As highlighted by the humanitarian actor above, however, knowing who to protect and against what is far from simple in borderlands such as this. The need for a border monitoring visit emerged from tensions facing the refugee humanitarian response in northern Uganda. On the one hand, they were mandated to provide refugee protection to those fleeing South Sudan under International Refugee Conventions and Uganda's open-door policy to refugees (Hansen 2018; Government of Uganda 2019). On the other hand, COVID-19 containment measures closed Ugandan international borders and paused procedures for processing new asylum seekers. But refugees, both new arrivals claiming asylum and those already living in settlements, along with Ugandans, continued to move across this border in various ways (Gidron 2022). As the pandemic progressed, humanitarian staff were caught between these two policies. They were required to maintain the Government of Uganda's national COVID-19 containment policies. Simultaneously,

Policy Implications

The following recommendations are relevant to humanitarian and state actors responsible for refugee protection, particularly those that utilise containment during disease outbreaks. This includes international humanitarian organisations, government and non-government organisations, and is particularly relevant for those in public health positions, or those working in outbreak preparedness and response. These actors should:

- Appreciate the agency of refugees in determining their own priorities, which may or may not align with formal policies of contain to protect. Conceptualising such agency in terms of self-protection may help shed light on dynamics that challenge official policies, revealing important social and economic challenges that will undoubtedly shape (dis)engagement with humanitarian agencies.
- Further explore the wider social and economic impacts of containment and consider how policies can mitigate these. For instance, livelihood opportunities and food security may take precedence over outbreak containment or risk of violence. In this way, food security could be considered an essential component of containment policy.
- Be aware of the dynamic nature of legitimacy surrounding policies of containment. Policies, therefore, need to be regularly reviewed, adapted and redefined, otherwise they lose their local legitimacy.
- Understand how historical and socio-political issues such as borderland dynamics, can be used to inform protection policies. This wider understanding can specifically shed light on how people might respond to rapidly changing social and economic challenges surrounding livelihood opportunities and food insecurity.

however, they were also required to provide humanitarian protection to refugees, who were fleeing conflict-affected areas of South Sudan (UNHCR 2023).

To understand the tension from the simultaneous framings of refugees as both a threat to security and also a vulnerable group in need of humanitarian protection, it is necessary to look beyond standard notions of protection, to include forms of self-protection. This article, therefore, poses the following questions: What did self-protection encompass for refugees living close to the border in northern Uganda during COVID-19? How

was self-protection shaped by national policies seeking to contain COVID-19 and global humanitarian policies seeking to protect refugees? How can refugees' perspectives usefully inform future humanitarian policies of protection that rely on containment measures during pandemics?

The article is divided into seven further sections to address these questions. The next section provides a brief overview of containment and humanitarian protection, as well as relevant historical, social, and political literature about the Uganda and South Sudan borderland region. This is followed by a description of the main field sites in and around Palabek refugee settlement and the ethnographic methods deployed. Next, ethnographic research findings are presented to describe the first and second waves of COVID-19 in Palabek. A subsequent ethnographic section describes how refugees turned to mobility for survival. The following discussion and conclusion describe the divergence of approaches to protection and self-protection. In so doing, it becomes clear that whilst official pandemic containment-orientated protection activities quickly became subsumed with national politics and a failure to protect, self-protection for refugees came to the fore. Through this article, it will become clear how this entailed the making of boundaries but also harnessing mobility to circumvent official borders.

2 | BACKGROUND

2.1 | Containment, Protection and Refugees

A large proportion of humanitarian aid is framed around the ambiguous term 'protection'. The term encompasses a broad range of interventions with a view to protecting so-called 'persons of concern' from violence and conflict. Protection may also refer to specific interventions addressing violence against individuals, as well as the international legal framing of protection and issues of human rights (Fast 2018). The term has become almost synonymous with the raison d'etre of humanitarian organisations, emerging in parallel with the popular moral imperative to intervene (Dubois 2009). A growing critical literature has highlighted the need to pay greater attention to how people approach protecting themselves. In other words, self-protection (Baines and Paddon 2012; Carstensen 2016; Jose and Medie 2015; Suarez 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a new wave of interventions framed as protection. The virus was positioned as an unknown foreign threat, with metaphors of 'fighting disease' utilised to rally response efforts and justify draconian containment policies, with national lockdowns considered a normalised response (Allen and Parker 2023). Uganda was lauded for its successful containment of COVID-19, particularly in relation to the first wave, introducing strict restrictions on mobility (including the closure of international borders) and social mixing (Laing, Mylan, and Parker 2024). However, such border shutdowns had hugely detrimental effects on the livelihoods of people living in borderlands (Allen and Parker 2023; Jones and Schmidt-Sane 2020; Parker, Macgregor, and Akello 2020). Furthermore, COVID-19 lockdowns in Uganda significantly worsened food insecurity for both refugees (UNHCR 2021a) and Ugandan nationals (Kansiime et al. 2021).

During COVID-19, humanitarian protection for refugees fleeing violence pivoted to protection from pandemic threat. Multiple discourses emerged regarding refugees and protection from COVID-19. On the one hand, refugees, and particularly their movements, became associated with the disease itself, with forced displacement becoming a health security threat. Migration is often discussed in terms of 'security', but during COVID-19, this was framed as health security. To quote Pacciardi (2023): 'Since the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants' mobility has been increasingly securitised as governments have been adopting extraordinary measures to close both external and internal borders' (p. 176). Security and humanitarian intervention became interconnected in relation to policies concerning the movement of people (Aradau 2004). Tazzioli and Stierl (2021) examined the enforcement of border closures in the EU, particularly in Italy and Malta, during COVID-19. They described the reconfiguration of humanitarian logics, highlighting the 'contain to protect' connection against a global health threat. To quote: 'the security-humanitarian rationale that underpins migration governmentality has been restructured by and inflected in light of hygienic-sanitary borders that enforce racialised confinement in the name of both migrants' and citizens' safety from infection by COVID-19' (Tazzioli and Stierl 2021, 539). In Uganda, the country's well-known porous international borders became a particular focus of concern regarding COVID-19 health security, with specific containment measures directed at refugees and truck drivers that regularly crossed the country's international borders (Moyo, Sebba, and Zanker 2021; Storer, Dawson, and Fergus 2022).

The militarised response to COVID-19 in Uganda has been explored in detail by Parker et al. (2022). They showed how the ongoing securitisation of global health helped to create political space for the militarisation of epidemic response efforts. The authors draw attention to key events in the United Nations Security Council in 2014, in response to the West African Ebola Outbreak: the outbreak was described in terms of a threat to international security, legitimising enforcement action, and normalising the involvement of armies in epidemic responses. However, conceptualising epidemics in terms of health security far predates this. For instance, the notion of pandemic preparedness emerged in Western

nations from defence 'operations research' through the Cold War era. So-called 'emerging infectious diseases' were viewed not only as biomedical and public health issues but also as relevant to national security, with their alignment with biosecurity agendas (Lakoff 2017). Preparedness for bioterrorism and infectious disease outbreaks has now become entangled with the 'informational redefinition of biological life for the biopolitical economy of security' (Caduff 2015, 107). At a time when emerging infectious diseases could have been framed as an issue of global health inequality, poverty, civil war, and lack of basic healthcare (Garrett 1994), the simultaneous evolving concerns regarding (bio)terrorism meant the dominant narrative became one of national security (Lakoff 2008). Conceptualising pandemics in terms of a threat to health security can contribute to the legitimacy of containment policies, with political and institutional legitimacy being described as essential for effective crisis management (Hartley and Jarvis 2020). But legitimacy is about far more. Clements (2014) argued that 'legitimacy is about social, economic, and political rights, and it is what transforms coercive capacity and personal influence into durable political authority. It is the stated or unstated acceptance of unequal political relationships where some are given, assume, or inherit power over others' (p. 13). The author went on to explain the importance of 'grounded legitimacy', when 'the system of governance and authority flows and is connected to local realities' (2014, 15).

In contrast to narratives of health security, refugees were also described as particularly vulnerable to the negative consequences of COVID-19, with public health interventions directed at refugees, framed as protection. Crowded conditions and poor sanitation were considered particularly risky conditions for the spread of the virus, with inadequate healthcare infrastructure unlikely to be able to deal with the high burden of COVID-19-related disease. Oxfam specifically referenced their work involving 'Protecting Refugees from Coronavirus' (Oxfam 2020). Similarly, the United Nations agency for refugees (UNHCR) wrote: 'In coordination with the government, UNHCR and partners continue to provide protection and humanitarian assistance to refugees in Uganda and support efforts towards a comprehensive refugee response. To respond to the pandemic, refugee response partners have redoubled efforts to ensure continuity of life-saving services and mitigate the impact of COVID-19' (UNHCR 2021b).

The dual framing of refugees as a health security threat and a 'risk group' vulnerable to COVID-19 has both been utilised to justify policies that aim to contain the virus with reduction of movement and the securitisation of borders. Much less is known, however, about how refugees responded to such interventions and how the threat of COVID-19 compared to other challenges they faced.

2.2 | Uganda-(South) Sudan Borderlands

This article brings together anthropological, political, and public health scholarship on COVID-19 containment and humanitarian protection described in the subsection above, with historical and anthropological scholarship on borderlands, summarised here. An appreciation of borderland dynamics is essential in order to critique contain and protect policies, and reveals mobility as a central form of self-protection. Goodhand (2013) usefully wrote about 'how detached policy-making and intervention in the twenty-first century…became from the reality of life in the frontier zones' (p. 247). In policies of containment, borders are often mistakenly considered as fixed and knowable boundaries. In fact, as borderlands scholarship has emphasised, boundaries only become real on the ground through the work of borderland inhabitants and border-crossers in imagining, negotiating, and exploiting them (Feyissa and Hoehne 2010; Johnson et al. 2011). Leonardi, Storer, and Fisher (2021), therefore, talk about the need to explore local imaginaries of space and the way these relate to political and economic geographies.

The border between Uganda and South Sudan is known to be highly porous (Hopwood 2015). People move across this region to maintain kin relationships and secure livelihoods (Gidron 2022). The borderlands in this area are known to be fertile, characterised by two rainy seasons and good soil. They are described as 'a surplus agricultural area' (Moro and Robinson 2022, 3). The South Sudan-Uganda border 'cuts across multiple ethnic communities, with significant interlinkages within and between groups on both sides of the border' (Moro and Robinson 2022, 3). It is not surprising then that people on both sides utilise this area for farming in order to feed their families and sell produce. People also cross to Uganda from South Sudan to access education and healthcare. For refugees, cross-border movement, in principle, is illegal, but in practice is accepted or at least tolerated, and it is often circular (Gidron 2022). For those in Palabek refugee settlement, mobility has been described as an important expression of agency in the context of great uncertainty and precarity (O'Byrne and Ogeno 2021) and as a type of 'mobile resistance' in response to humanitarian failure (O'Byrne 2022).

Cross-border movement between Uganda and (South) Sudan has been occurring for generations, including during the decades of conflict from the 1980s between the Ugandan People's Defence Forces (UPDF) and the Lord's Resistant Army (LRA) (Finnström 2008). For centuries, people were mobile (Allen 1996). These stories of movement predate colonial rule, but the major borders in East Africa were drawn up by international treaties and imposed by colonial officials (Hopwood 2015; Khadiagala 2010). During the first Sudanese Civil War (1955–1972), people

travelled from Sudan to Uganda. In response to the civil war following President Idi Amin's rule in Uganda in 1979, many Ugandans and Sudanese fled north of the border to Sudan. In 1983, a second Sudanese civil war began, and many Sudanese were once again internally displaced or travelled south to Uganda, along with previously displaced Ugandans. There was a period of relative peace from 2005. South Sudan became a newly independent country in 2011, but this was followed by a further civil war in 2013 (Moro 2019). Violence during this latter civil war led to most of the journeys made by people to Palabek refugee settlement. However, given the long and complex history of displacement, I draw on Allen and Turton (1996), who wrote '…to focus… on a single movement of people, in one direction and at a particular point in time, would be to give a false, if comforting, impression that one is dealing with a simple and well-circumscribed event rather than with an untidy process, involving multiple, and sometimes overlapping migrations in both directions, and considerable flexibility with respect to nationality and ethnicity' (Allen and Turton 1996, 7).

3 | FIELD SITES AND METHODS

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in and around Palabek Refugee Settlement (also referred to as Palabek), in the border district of Lamwo, an Acholi region of northern Uganda, between April 2021 and June 2022. Depending on the route, the journey from Palabek to the South Sudan border is estimated to be between 45 and 80 km. During fieldwork, the settlement hosted just over 60,000 refugees. Humanitarian personnel described the establishment of the settlement in 2017 in response to a major attack in Magwi in the Eastern Equatoria state of South Sudan, which led to a mass displacement of thousands of Acholi people, many from the town of Pajok. Refugees, however, often made the point that an informal settlement originated prior to this.

The settlement has grown considerably since 2017, hosting refugees from several different parts of South Sudan and a small number from the Democratic Republic of Congo. However, refugees and professionals working in Palabek both described the settlement as having an Acholi majority from South Sudan. The settlement spreads over 53 square miles, with land mainly donated by Ugandan Acholi landowners. There is no fence or spatial indication as to where Palabek settlement stops and other land in the district starts. Across the geographical area of the settlement, Ugandan Acholi so-called 'host communities' still reside, living in homesteads side by side with refugees.

Uganda has a flagship open-door policy to refugees outlined in the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) (UNHCR 2017), which promotes self-reliance, characterised by settlements rather than encampment, with an associated narrative of greater freedom of movement and access to employment (Hovil 2018). Within Uganda's refugee settlements, the term protection is used in association with specific activities, such as those addressing child protection or sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). UNHCR, OPM, and partnering NGOs all employ specific 'protection officers', who provide a variety of roles, including registering refugees and addressing specific concerns related to 'people with special needs' (PSN), such as the elderly or those with a disability. However, the term was often used by humanitarian staff in UNHCR and NGOs, by OPM, and by refugees themselves to refer to the overall humanitarian response, as well as encompassing specific interventions provided to refugees as part of this wider response. The term 'self-protection' was not used by interlocutors but rather has been introduced in this paper in the process of analysis.

Interventions that intended to protect refugees from COVID-19 easily amalgamated with the wider humanitarian apparatus in the settlement. COVID-19 rules merged with general law enforcement: oversight for both was always from OPM, supported by UNHCR, with the resident police officers called upon when required. Soldiers were not commonly seen in Palabek but were present on occasion to enforce COVID-19 curfew or to respond to a significant outbreak of (potential) violence.[2]

Promoting self-reliance, livelihood projects in Palabek provided training in tailoring, salon work, fixing shoes, and making bags. They also focused on farming and food production. Refugees were encouraged to maximise their 30 m-by-30 m plots of land, provided with seedlings and equipment to grow green vegetables. Formal humanitarian livelihood activities provided incentives for refugees to rent larger plots of land from, or farm with, the host community. Other refugees rented land from the host community on an independent basis. NGOs working in the livelihood sector also focused on promoting small businesses. Refugees, however, often considered the land in Palabek as infertile, especially in comparison to the borderlands with South Sudan. Other refugees experienced conflict with members of the host community when harvesting their produce. Indeed, the reality of Uganda's policy of self-reliance has been greatly contested (Hunter 2009; Soudan 2014), with a wide literature documenting its inadequacies in catering to the basic needs of refugees, predating the pandemic (Kaiser 2005; O'Byrne 2022; Ogeno and O'Byrne 2018).

Refugees in Uganda are provided with basic food rations from the World Food Programme (WFP). However, in April 2020 these were reduced to 70% of what they were previously. They were further reduced to 60% in February 2021. These reductions have been a contributing factor to worrying rates of malnutrition in Ugandan

settlements (IPC 2021). Reducing food rations has been explained in relation to substantial international funding shortfalls, with UNHCR consistently reporting huge funding gaps in the required budget for the Ugandan refugee response (UNHCR 2024). In more recent years the problem of food insecurity in Ugandan refugee settlements and associated concerns regarding malnutrition have been compounded by the COVID-19 crisis, during which time refugees experienced significant disruption to both formal and informal livelihood activities (IPC 2021). There have also been reports of large-scale corruption within Ugandan's refugee response, with refugees not receiving adequate food even prior to the reductions in rations (O'Byrne 2022), and COVID-19 becoming another opportunity for food-related scandals (Titeca 2021). Alternative framings of resilience-based refugee policies, such as self-reliance, therefore, question the emphasis on the responsibilization of refugees. Brown and Chiavaroli (2023) highlighted connections with neoliberal logic, problematising the emphasis on individual refugee responsibility rather than addressing significant humanitarian failures such as chronic food insecurity. This has enabled the political abandonment of refugees (Torre 2023a).

In order to survive, many refugees relied on informal work, unrelated to any formal livelihood activities provided by NGOs. This has been described by Torre (2023b) as a form of self-protection in light of inadequate humanitarian support. For example, refugees went to 'dig' on host community land for a daily fee of around 10,000 UGX (approx. £2). Others worked as motorcycle taxi drivers or engaged in commerce. Refugees, along with Ugandans, ran the multiple shops around the settlement, which sold soap, sugar, salt, other food items, electric goods, and clothes. These economic opportunities fluctuated during the pandemic in response to government restrictions. This significantly contributed to the day-to-day challenges faced by refugees in adequately feeding their families. Similar damaging consequences of the pandemic in terms of worsening food insecurity have been described amongst Ugandan nationals (Kansiime et al. 2021).

Health services in Palabek were provided by a combination of three main health centres, plus temporary health posts for new arrivals. Village health teams (VHTs) utilised refugee representatives across the whole settlement. Health services were free at the point of access and provided care to both refugees and Ugandans. The main 'implementing partner' for health supported government health facilities close to the settlement, which also treated refugees. The distance to travel to reach a health centre varied greatly across Palabek, with some refugees having to walk for an hour or more to reach a facility. COVID-19 testing and treatment within government health facilities

and those run by the humanitarian partners were free of charge. In the first wave, most COVID-19 treatment occurred in the settlement health centres, with a remote site repurposed for a COVID-19 isolation centre. In later waves of the pandemic, home-based care for COVID-19 was introduced, in line with national Ugandan policy.

During fieldwork, I moved between the settlement and Gulu, a town in the north of Uganda, with occasional trips to the capital, Kampala. In the settlement I lived with an Acholi family from South Sudan, who had lived in the settlement since 2017. I worked with two Acholi research assistants, one Ugandan and one South Sudanese. In total, 158 semi-structured interviews were conducted, in addition to informal 'chats', with both refugees and professionals working in and around the settlement. The interviews with refugees were mainly conducted with those established on plots of land. I was not able to interview 'new arrivals' whilst they were still in reception centres. In order to understand the processing of new arrivals, however, I was permitted to join humanitarian personnel in their activities registering and screening new arrivals. With settled Acholi refugees already living in their allocated plots of land, I participated in daily life, cooking, cleaning the compound, collecting water, visiting the market, playing with children, and chatting with neighbours.

I spent time with humanitarian actors working in the settlement, attended their inter-agency meetings and training sessions, and joined them for lunch for informal discussions. I interviewed employees working for OPM (the organisation with formal oversight of the settlement), as well as international humanitarian organisations such as UNHCR and non-government organisations (NGOs) known as the 'implementing partners'. I also interviewed district government employees and joined the Lamwo district COVID-19 task force, attending their regular meetings at the district headquarters. Attendance at these district meetings varied, but they were usually chaired by the Resident District Commissioner (RDC) or a member of his team, with significant input from the District Medical Officer. There was usually a collection of representatives from Local Councils (LC), sometimes joined by members of the security forces, such as the police or UPDF. Humanitarian representatives from Palabek settlement also attended. Overall, attendance at these meetings reduced as the pandemic progressed and priorities shifted.

The next ethnographic sections focus on three key issues that had a profound influence on containment as a form of protection from COVID-19 and the evolving forms of self-protection amongst refugees: legitimacy of containment measures, wider socio-economic consequences; and borderland dynamics.

4 | LEGITIMACY OF CONTAINMENT: COVID-19 FEARS, NATIONAL BORDERS AND SOCIAL BOUNDARIES

In response to COVID-19, Uganda's first restrictions were implemented in March 2020. Schools and places of worship were closed, the use of private or public transport was forbidden, and social gatherings were limited. The restrictions banned all businesses not selling food and closed international borders, with the exception of trucks carrying goods, whose drivers required negative COVID-19 tests. Officially, the borders were closed, and a national curfew was implemented (Laing, Mylan, and Parker 2024; Parker, Macgregor, and Akello 2020). Palabek refugee settlement followed the national COVID-19 containment policies, outlined by the Ministry of Health and described in detail by President Museveni in his national briefings. The OPM ensured the implementation of these national Standard Operating Procedures, colloquially referred to as 'SOPs'. All the usual activities conducted by NGOs were interrupted, and many humanitarian personnel were withdrawn from their in-person work in the settlement, instead having to work remotely. With the exception of essential services provided by health partners, food distribution, and some water and sanitation activities, those NGOs that continued their work in the settlement stopped interacting directly with refugees, relying heavily on so-called 'community representatives' such as VHTs and refugee leaders. In general, violent enforcement of COVID-19 rules, as described elsewhere in Uganda (Allen and Parker 2023), may have been less within the settlement, due to its association as a place of humanitarian protection. However, refugees in Palabek did report the violent enforcement of curfews—those outside their homesteads after curfew were often beaten.

Dorothy, a 25-year-old refugee from South Sudan, returned to Palabek in April 2020 during the first lockdown after visiting her brother in Juba. She made the journey back to Palabek using a motorcycle taxi where she could, but also walked some of the way, avoiding any of the official border points. When she approached her compound, her father, who held a position in the formal refugee leadership system, stopped her from entering their home. Keeping his distance, he took her straight to one of the settlement's health centres. From there, she was taken to Lokung, a remote site set up for COVID-19 testing and quarantine.

At the start of the pandemic, all individuals were required to undergo COVID-19 testing before being allowed to re-enter the settlement regardless of any symptoms. There were also strict isolation policies in place, with anyone testing positive being removed from the settlement to either treatment or isolation facilities. In May 2021, Robin, a refugee from South Sudan and a senior member of the refugee leadership committee, reflected on the first lockdown the previous year: 'During that time, it was very difficult to enter the settlement! There was a very tight network–no one entered'. Refugees monitored any movement in and out of Palabek and ensured the quarantine of any new person by escorting them directly to a health centre. I asked Dorothy how she felt about this and what happened next.

> *I was not happy because I was afraid that they may find corona in me…When I got back, the community was keeping their distance from me, and it gave me lots of thoughts…I was worried that I might have brought corona from South Sudan … They told us that there are people entering Uganda illegally, and that's why if anyone comes here, they need to be taken for testing and quarantine…They picked us up from [the] Health Centre III and took us to Lokung…When we reached, they gave us a sheet…to first get tested for Corona.*
> (Dorothy, interview, 16th October 2021)

After staying in Lokung for 1 week and 2 days, awaiting her COVID-19 result, Dorothy was informed it was negative, and she travelled back to her father's compound. After arriving back with her family, she described feeling '*happy because when I got back, I had my result, and people were coming to greet me*'. Despite her difficult time in Lokung, Dorothy thought the COVID-19 response '*did well isolating people there*'.

The first COVID-19 lockdown in Palabek was characterised by a strong commitment from formal authorities and refugees, mediated through local leaders and the settlement COVID-19 Task Force, to the principles and implementation of containment, and a socially monitored boundary to the settlement was created. A senior refugee leader described the whole COVID-19 response in the settlement during the first wave as structured around this task force. In addition to humanitarian agencies and OPM, there were a variety of refugee representatives on this task force, including cultural leaders, religious leaders, VHTs, hygiene promoters, and block, zone, and settlement-wide leaders.[3] There were clear chains of command and routes of dissemination of information from humanitarian agencies and OPM, through the various refugee leadership positions, to other refugees, and vice versa.

When Dorothy reached the settlement, she encountered this clear boundary. Despite international borders being officially closed, Dorothy had managed to make the journey back from South Sudan to Uganda with relative ease, utilising unofficial routes and encountering little restriction until she reached the settlement. This social boundary, along with Dorothy's positive engagement with quarantine, can be understood in relation to

the significant fear regarding COVID-19 in Uganda, including among refugees in Palabek, at the start of the pandemic.

In the first wave, COVID-19 fear in Palabek was often described in relation to information that had been gathered on TV, radio, and social media, which were reporting overwhelmed healthcare systems in high-income countries, with deaths from the new virus increasing daily. Deaths from COVID-19 in Uganda were also clustering in cities such as Kampala, particularly affecting the wealthy. Furthermore, comparing the healthcare infrastructure of nations experiencing such difficulties to the resources available in Uganda or South Sudan, refugees were drawing conclusions regarding the inevitable devastation in East Africa. The idea that refugees and refugee settlements might be especially vulnerable to COVID-19 was felt by those living in such settings, reflecting wider national and global discourses.

In Palabek, and Uganda more generally, COVID-19 intensified fears of cross-border migration, with perceived outsiders becoming the focus of blame and othering (Dionne and Turkmen 2020; Leonardi, Storer, and Fisher 2021; Storer, Dawson, and Fergus 2022). Truck drivers and refugees became a focal point of concern, resonating with the 'long history to the role of epidemic fears and controls in contributing to boundary-making and the pathologization of migrants' (Leonardi, Storer, and Fisher 2021, 1). In June 2022, I spoke to Ronald, a senior public health official in the Ugandan humanitarian response, who described the borderlands as a particular concern.

> *Initially…there was a feeling that South Sudan was not doing enough. Therefore, there could be a problem for us. You know, with the mutation of the virus, of the variants, there was the possibility of one country not doing enough, so you get a mutated variant, that was more virulent, and to some extent the border areas became a point of focus to be monitored closely.*
>
> (Ronald, interview, 1st June 2022)

In the context of the substantial fear regarding COVID-19, particularly in relation to borderlands and the risk associated with those crossing such borders, the first national lockdown was, in general, welcomed by most established refugees in Palabek, who helped to create a strict boundary around the settlement. The stringent containment measures to restrict all movement and implement quarantine were perceived to be a legitimate and a proportional response to protect them from an outside threat (including the threat carried by new or returning refugees).

Simultaneously, there were relatively few COVID-19 cases in Uganda (Laing, Mylan, and Parker 2024), and indeed only a small number of COVID-19-related deaths in rural settings such as Palabek. A narrative of successful COVID-19 containment emerged in Uganda (Cheeseman 2021). The Lancet lauded Uganda as a country whose successful COVID-19 response could be attributed to its historical experience with epidemics (The Lancet COVID-19 Commissioners et al., 2020). This success was also highlighted by interlocutors in Palabek. In April 2022, I discussed the small numbers of COVID-19-related illnesses and deaths with Rachael, a humanitarian actor working with an NGO in the settlement. She described why containment was so successful in Palabek.

> In the settlement…there were strict guidelines from OPM…they were worried about what would happen in the settlement with overcrowding, so all gatherings stopped… all these strategies worked well…community structures were strengthened so they didn't allow outsiders to come, they were sent for screening…it really helped…and screening all new arrivals…and borders were closed…there were porous borders, but still…they were not allowed to mix; the health partner screened them, and if positive, they were taken to Lokung…there has not been so much death in the settlement because OPM was so strict.
>
> (Rachel, fieldnotes, 25th April 2022)

In this quote, low levels of COVID-19 death are attributed to 'strict' containment. I suggest, however, that compliance with containment in Palabek was not determined by the level of 'strictness' or, in other words, securitisation, but rather by the legitimacy of interventions. Containment did not necessarily occur at international border points, as government policy might suggest. Despite a policy of highly securitised national borders, people passed through (Parker et al. 2022). Instead, alternative boundaries were created to enforce policies of containment. In particular, boundaries were created when refugees' perspectives aligned with policies regarding who should be protected and against what. Despite no perimeter fence, Palabek settlement, in the first lockdown, had a clear and socially monitored boundary, enforced by OPM, the police, soldiers when needed, UNHCR, NGOs, and refugees themselves, including members of the refugee leadership system. Dorothy's story, with her return back to Palabek during the first lockdown and subsequent quarantine in Lokung, suggests the boundaries imposed for refugees in Palabek were not related to geopolitical borders (she successfully negotiated the officially closed international border between South Sudan and Uganda through an informal crossing), but rather alternative boundaries were created by refugees within the settlement.

These boundaries adjusted in response to shifting priorities as the pandemic continued and as COVID-19 shifted from an anticipated threat to a lived reality. The next section highlights the way in which people organised themselves and their social worlds, especially in times of great difficulty, which bore little relation to formal national borders that were prioritised in containment strategies. Rather, boundaries were created, broken down, and recreated as contextual dimensions changed and challenges emerged, dissipated, or worsened. People's priorities shifted, influenced by various intersecting precarities (MacGregor et al. 2022), particularly in relation to food and livelihood opportunities.

5 | 'GOVERNMENT RESTRICTIONS WERE A PLAGUE OF SORTS': THE WIDER SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF CONTAINMENT

From 2nd June 2020, national restrictions were reduced. On 21st September 2020, many lockdown measures were lifted. However, political rallies remained forbidden, and the reopening of schools was still limited. Whilst international borders were officially reopened to a degree with COVID-19 screening measures in place, they remained formally closed to new refugees. As with the rest of the country, those in Palabek entered a period within which they attempted to return to a degree of 'normal life' with the easing of restrictions. Some formal NGO activities resumed in the settlement, albeit dominated by talk of 'COVID SOPs'. However, the wider effects of the pandemic on everyday life never really lifted during these periods of relative freedom, with the persistence of food insecurity, limited NGO activity, and high transportation costs interfering with economic and educational opportunities.

A second wave of COVID-19 from May to July 2021 brought a new slew of national restrictions, this time during my fieldwork. All schools and religious gatherings were once again closed, village markets, or 'auction days', were suspended, inter-district travel was halted, and public transport was limited. In Palabek, once again, most formal NGO activities ceased, if they had even restarted, mainly due to the limitations on gatherings. However, the strict monitoring of movement in and around the settlement, as had been the case in the first lockdown, never materialised.

In contrast to the previous year, there was no coordinated COVID-19 Settlement Task Force in the second wave. Testing was focused on individuals presenting with COVID-19 symptoms at health centres, with additional asymptomatic screening of all new refugee arrivals. Reflecting national guidance, home-based care was introduced for refugees, who were advised to stay in their homes in the settlement if they tested positive for COVID-19. All new arrivals were tested for COVID-19, but there was no routine asymptomatic testing of refugees living in Palabek, or their visitors, on entering or leaving the settlement (officially or unofficially), as there had been in the first wave.

There was a considerable shift in attitudes towards pandemic containment measures in Palabek after the first wave, and the clear settlement boundaries that were present in the first lockdown subsequently dissolved. Fiona, a refugee from South Sudan who worked as a VHT in Palabek, described the difference between the first lockdown and the subsequent shifting perspectives.

> *Back then people were living in fear when corona just came, but people are now getting used to the situation…corona was a bigger problem before… The biggest problem that people are facing currently is lack of money… People also worry about food because the food we have is little or there is hunger.*
>
> (Fiona, interview, 2nd October 2021)

Robin, a senior figure in the refugee leadership committee, also described the shifting attitudes towards COVID-19 after the first lockdown: 'People have accepted it is now with us…we live with it…we need to allow life to go on'. These quotes from Fiona and Robin illustrate a number of considerations that need to be taken into account in order to understand the waning legitimacy of containment measures.

The overwhelming COVID-19-related sickness and death predicted at the onset of the pandemic never materialised. By the completion of fieldwork in June 2022, there had only been three reported deaths from COVID-19 in the settlement. There were cases of severe disease requiring hospital referral, but the vast majority of cases were either asymptomatic or were experienced as mild disease. Furthermore, for many people in Palabek, COVID-19 was something they had heard of but never seen. The disease was understood to be affecting mainly people in high-income countries and wealthy Ugandans living in cities such as Kampala or Gulu, rather than something that they, or any of their friends or family, had ever experienced in the settlement. They had all, however, experienced COVID-19 containment measures. It is likely, therefore, that Robin is referring more to living with COVID-19 restrictions than the disease itself.

Whilst fear of COVID-19 waned, other aspects of life became of greater concern. 'Kwor pe yot', life is not easy, was a common response to initial questions about life in Palabek. Invariably, this was followed by a description of reduced food rations. The first COVID-19 lockdown coincided with the reduction in food rations

in April 2020, and by the time of the second lockdown in June 2021, rations were at 60% of their initial quantities (Moyo, Sebba, and Zanker 2021). This curtailment of rations was attributed, by both refugees and professionals working in the settlement, to COVID-19. Evelyn, a refugee from South Sudan, described the connection between COVID-19 and the reductions in food rations.

> Life is hard during lockdown. Food is reduced, schools are closed, all because of corona…food was reduced because the people with lots of money who were supporting WFP [World Food Programme] all died, so they didn't give so much money to WFP…Corona killed the people donating money.
>
> (Evelyn, interview, 16th June 2021)

This was a common explanation given by refugees in terms of the reduced food rations in Palabek. In March 2022, I interviewed Gerald, a senior humanitarian actor, who confided in me that there is *'partial truth in this'*, describing the diversion of international aid, *'as most governments across the world diverted money to concentrate on the pandemic* [in their own country]'. This led to substantial reductions in the support UNHCR, including through WFP, was able to provide to refugees. In February 2022, I discussed the issue with Ronald, a senior public health professional, who expressed his concerns regarding this: 'Life is difficult. Work is difficult. There is not enough money…UNHCR services in Uganda are 70% funded by the USA. But funding is now only 30% of what it was 3 years ago…'. However, as Gerald acknowledged, attributing the reduction in rations to COVID-19 is only a partial truth: funding shortfalls were present prior to the reductions in rations in April 2020, before the pandemic (UNHCR 2019).

In theory, according to the humanitarian partners in Palabek, this reduction of food rations from 100% to 60% was meant to be offset by livelihood opportunities, and in official narratives, could be considered as part of the transition from emergency to development stages of the settlement (Hovil 2018). Indeed, most refugees were not able to survive on such rations alone and so embarked on either formal or informal opportunities to supplement this. COVID-19 complicated matters, however. In March 2022, I was in Kampala and met with Joseph, a senior humanitarian actor. He told me, 'Government restrictions were a plague of sorts'. Policies of containment that restricted movement and interactions made it impossible to run informal small businesses that many refugees relied on for their survival. Humanitarian partners in the settlement were not able to deliver a large proportion of their intended livelihood activities due to strict SOPs. Although some livelihood opportunities managed to 'bounce back'

between periods of the strictest containment measures (e.g., motorcycle drivers returned to work), for many, the restrictions became chronic over a two-year period, and their livelihoods never fully recovered. For example, if a refugee had not had support with farming in the previous season, this continued to affect them as the year progressed, even if the strictest periods of restriction had ceased. This was worsened by the rapidly rising cost of living during this period (United Nations Development Programme 2022).

As life became harder in the settlement, rates of attempted suicide and SGBV rose. In November 2021, I attended the Lamwo district COVID-19 Task Force meeting at the district headquarters. An NGO working in Palabek described their tracking of attempted and completed suicides in the settlement since March that year. They had noted a large increase during periods of lockdown, which subsequently reduced when lockdown was lifted. They described to the Task Force the reasons for the attempted suicides:

> Most clients in the interviews talked about food; people couldn't move; they couldn't do any activities. The triggers for cases were usually SGBV. For instance, food is being sold by the husband to get some small money for drinking, which is worse when food rations are low. So then there is SGBV, plus alcohol, and then a lack of basic needs like food.
>
> (Humanitarian actor, Lamwo district Task Force meeting, 23rd November 2021)

These findings are supported by published material from UNHCR. To quote: 'It adds to UNHCR's own recording of an alarming increase in the number of suicides among refugees, linked to the pandemic's disastrous socio-economic impact' (UNHCR 2021b). This adds a further dimension to Torre's (2023b) description of the intimate relationship between chronic food insecurity and mental health problems amongst refugees in Palabek prior to the pandemic.

In sum, the dominant priority for those living in Palabek became surviving COVID-19 containment measures, which far overshadowed the fear of COVID-19-related illness. COVID-19 containment measures were no longer seen to be protecting people from an outside threat of a deadly disease. The persistence of such national containment measures, despite such disastrous socio-economic consequences, was therefore explained in terms of political and financial gain. In October 2021, I was invited for tea with Pastor John and his wife. John was a refugee from South Sudan residing in Palabek, who was also studying at a university in Uganda. His studies had been delayed by COVID-19. John told me about the pandemic.

COVID is political. It was used by the government to get re-elected and do what they want. There has been more lockdown in Uganda than in other places, and the schools are still not open, so everyone is idle; they are not studying. The government have used COVID to do what they want, whilst other people has suffered.

(John, fieldnotes, 28th October 2021)

The narrative of Uganda's successful COVID-19 containment measures seemed to stick throughout the pandemic, despite a number of other factors likely to be contributing to the relatively low rates of COVID-19 illness and death in the country (Laing, Mylan, and Parker 2024). These COVID-19 containment measures, however, also served other purposes. In the first lockdown, they restricted any political campaigning from the opposition party in a national election (Cheeseman 2021). COVID-19 also raised significant funds throughout the pandemic, both internally generated and from international donors, for specific COVID-19 activities (Initiative for Social and Economic Rights 2021). This money, however, was not seen to filter down to people on the ground, such as those living in Palabek, but was rather seen to 'fall into the hands' of political figures. Furthermore, the rationale for COVID-19 policy was seen by many interlocutors to be based on financial incentives 'of a stakeholder somewhere', rather than health protection. In this context, COVID-19 containment measures, or, in other words, government restrictions, became more associated with protecting political interests and the associated narrative of success, than protecting the health of both Ugandans and refugees. And so, a type of resistance emerged amongst refugees in Palabek, utilising mobility as a form of survival, as has been done for generations.

6 | BORDERLAND DYNAMICS: MOBILITY FOR SURVIVAL IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTAINMENT

This section reveals that as life became harder in the settlement, with reduced food rations and the lack of formal and informal livelihood opportunities, many refugees, as they have done for decades, turned to mobility, negotiating borders in a number of ways. This resonates with what O'Byrne (2022) describes as 'mobile resistance'. Containment measures for COVID-19, intended to reduce movement both within Uganda and across international borders, in practice, may have added to increased mobility, through the removal of essential economic opportunities in the context of reduced food rations. This is supported by an IOM flow monitoring registry that suggested by September 2020, migration to South Sudan from Ugandan settlements was higher than baseline levels in February and March of the same year (International Organization for Migration (IOM) 2021). People from Palabek travelled to the borderlands between Uganda and South Sudan, despite ongoing risks of encountering violence in relation to the conflict in South Sudan or from the militarised Ugandan COVID-19 response (Parker et al. 2022). But as I was told by Robert, a refugee from South Sudan, 'Hunger is more dangerous than Corona…Hunger is more dangerous than a gun…you can dodge a bullet, but you cannot dodge hunger'.

At the time, Robert was in his thirties and had lived in Palabek since 2017. We sat down together to have dinner one evening in March 2022 and discussed the journeys people were making back to South Sudan, particularly to a village called Abuloro, in Magwi County. The border between Uganda and South Sudan is marked by topographical features, like hills and rivers, which Hopwood (2015) described as indicating generally uncontested borders by both Ugandan and South Sudanese governments. However, there are still tensions regarding land ownership in the borderlands. I was told by refugees that where Ugandan soil exactly becomes South Sudanese is contested in various places. Amongst those in Palabek, Abuloro was described as being in South Sudan, just the other side of the border, and hence involved either a formal or informal border crossing of some sort. Michael, a refugee from South Sudan, described why people were making this journey.

> Abuloro is far but we need extra rations of food to feed our families. We are left with no options—so that's why they go … People started cultivating and farming in Abuloro last year when the rations of food were reduced. So, for people who have a large family, they have to do farming so they can sustain their families… Here in Palabek the lands are not fertile because we tried when we just came here…but you hardly harvest anything…
>
> (Michael, interview, 1st March 2022)

Refugees also made these journeys to generate additional income to help with other financial challenges, such as healthcare or education. Grace, a 28-year-old refugee, explained: 'So with this life, it's hard, and for this year, everyone is praying at least that they could get something in Abuloro, so that it can generate something for paying fees…[or] supporting health as well'.

This increase in mobility to utilise farmland in South Sudan was generally accepted by humanitarian actors and OPM in Palabek, even when it undermined official COVID-19 SOPs. There was an acknowledgement that this was a survival method that would be inappropriate

to curtail, despite the rhetoric around the challenges that 'porous borders' posed to the principles and policies of COVID-19 containment. As Gerald, a highly experienced humanitarian interlocutor, described:

> *There was no true containment… Displacement is a natural coping mechanism. Mobility is a way to survive. The restrictions we have enforced to make people stay, did not actually make people stay, it made people pass through unregulated channels…We need to acknowledge…the natural behaviours, of coping, of displaced people. We always think of, preservation of life, self-preservation. This is the key element that drives people to move. It's almost like a maxim…this is the knowledge that has been there for ages.*
>
> (Gerald, interview, 9 March 2022)

As I sat down with Robert for dinner, he gave his own perspective.

> The lockdown has opened the way for refugees to go back to South Sudan. At the border they will ask you where you are going, and you say, 'to dig'. But if you are registered as a refugee in one country, the law says you are not meant to go back to your country. It is illegal. But the Ugandan government are allowing it; they are using the border. There are only three ways [that people from Palabek use]; Ngomoromo, Aweno Olewii, and Waligo—the three checkpoints. And all these checkpoints are controlled by the Ugandan government. By international law, they are saying if you are registered in one country, you are not meant to go back to your country if there is still war. Why are they allowing them to go back then? Because they are allowing people to go and dig.
>
> (Robert, fieldnotes, 27th March 2022)

Going to the farm, or 'dig' as people referred to it, was accepted as a legitimate reason for crossing the international border between Uganda and South Sudan. There were several routes used by people in Palabek to cross from northern Uganda to South Sudan. Some of these were more 'official' border crossings. Ngomoromo, Elegu (which borders with Nimule on the South Sudanese side), and Madei Opei were described as the 'most official' border points, owing to the fact that documents such as visas could be issued by the immigration officers at these sites. Waligo and Aweno Olwii were described as smaller checkpoints, but still 'official' given the presence of immigration officers and soldiers.

Refugees, however, often chose to use the more dangerous informal routes to avoid the official points that were associated with political and state actors and the associated taxation (Moro and Robinson 2022). 'People like short-cuts', Robert added, referring to the more informal crossing points. 'There are many shortcuts that the government doesn't know about…during lockdown, people used these local ones, not the official ones', he explained. Some of these 'short cuts' are located in fairly close proximity to the more official border crossing, such as Ngomoromo and Waligo. 'Like at Waligo' he continued, 'you can take the shortcut before the border point'. This highlights not only the porous nature of this border but also raises a question about the distinction between official and unofficial routes of travel.

This distinction dissolved further, given the way the 'official' checkpoints were used. 'The Waligo border point is for people within the area' Robert confided, 'and if you say you are farming, you can pass. People use this for farming in Abuloro.' He described Waligo as a 'porous farmers' border', and explained that 'if you cross the border, maybe you pay something like five thousand [Ugandan shillings], or get a temporary visa, or maybe they just write your name, and you don't pay.'

Regular passage across this porous international border was part of daily life for farming or buying or selling at a trading centre or market. This was seen, even by the officials tasked with manning the checkpoints, as a legitimate reason for crossing back and forth. Stopping someone from moving across this rather arbitrary border would mean removing a main source of survival. And even during a national lockdown, when the borders were closed, Robert explained, 'The official checkpoints were used to farm. Because the officials were telling people to go and farm. People liked passing through Waligu for this.' Even during strict COVID-19 containment measures, employees of official authorities, such as the soldiers in the initial vignette, acknowledged that people relied on moving across the border for farming in order to survive. Of course, this could easily be manipulated for other means. Robert added, 'During lockdown people just said they were farming, but then they could go further, even like Juba'.

Given the historical context of Palabek and the borderlands between Uganda and South Sudan, turning to mobility is not surprising—people have done this during times of difficulty for generations. This was not only accepted by refugees but also by OPM, humanitarian agencies, soldiers, and government border officials working in the area, whose practices in terms of border control acknowledged the importance of the 'leakiness' of this border for those who relied on farming to survive. But it did, however, cause dilemmas, as discussed in the border monitoring visit.

7 | DISCUSSION

This discussion will foreground the agency of refugees in responding to worsening food insecurity and economic precarity in the context of a global pandemic. They did this through the making and breaking of boundaries and harnessing informal mobility. Adapting to these multiple threats involved the continual search for survival, revealing multiple examples of self-protection. At first, self-protection included respecting a highly monitored border to the settlement and engaging with a settlement-level task force, in response to the potential threat of COVID-19. As time went on, priorities shifted. Whilst fear of COVID-19-related disease waned, legitimacy for public health measures was eroded by the day-to-day struggles of food insecurity and inadequate livelihood opportunities. Self-protection shifted to break previously erected boundaries, with informal mobility building on established borderland dynamics, opening up avenues to access other vital resources.

In the first COVID-19 lockdown, examples of self-protection aligned initially with official containment-orientated approaches to protection. In Uganda, protection against COVID-19 came from national policies of containment, restricting movement and closing international borders, justified by COVID-19 as a substantial threat to health security (Parker et al. 2022). This aligned with fears amongst refugees already living in Palabek of an outside threat. The focus of concern in containment policies, and amongst refugees, was directed towards those entering the settlement from outside. This chimes with the wealth of literature describing the stigmatisation of migrants and refugees in relation to the spread of disease (Pacciardi 2023). Dionne and Turkmen (2020) have explored the connections between pandemics, blame, and othering and write; 'Although othering occurs during pandemics and "normal" times, pandemic othering is more directly linked to the study of international relations due to the nature of pandemics crossing borders' (Dionne and Turkmen 2020).

National containment policies and lockdowns relied on particular understandings of 'state borders' as solid, fixed, and permanent. Migdal (2004) writes that 'borders are impermanent features of social life, dependent on particular circumstances rather than being permanent fixtures of human society…Borders shift; they leak; and they hold varying sorts of meaning for different people' (p. 5). The historical borderland dynamics between (South) Sudan and Uganda show us how borders are not fixed, but rather that boundaries become real on the ground through social lives (Feyissa and Hoehne 2010; Johnson et al. 2011). By paying attention to the local imaginary of space (Leonardi, Storer, and Fisher 2021), it became clear how boundaries around Palabek settlement were created when policies of containment had what Clements (2014) describes as legitimacy.

As the pandemic progressed, the legitimacy of such containment measures and understandings of who needed to be protected and from what, drastically changed, and boundaries were once again reimagined. There was a clear divergence between official policies of protection and examples of refugee self-protection. For refugees in Palabek, circumventing COVID-19 containment was essential for survival. This chimed with other accounts of resistance to epidemic control measures in the 2013–2016 West African Ebola outbreak (Wilkinson and Fairhead 2017). Living near the borderlands, mobility was harnessed by those in Palabek, as people have done in this region for generations prior, in response to adversity. I return to the pertinent point by O'Byrne and Ogeno (2021), who described mobility as a pragmatic response to adversity and uncertain lives for refugees living in Palabek, and as a form of mobile resistance (O'Byrne 2022). In this way, mobility can be considered as a key method of self-protection. This was acknowledged by humanitarian actors working in the settlement, who openly discussed the essential nature of mobility. Although the term self-protection was not used, 'self-preservation' similarly emphasises the agency of refugees in securing their own survival. These humanitarian actors (and also border officials), however, were still constrained by policies of containment that were largely determined by the Government of Uganda.

In Palabek, it was not COVID-19 as a disease itself that worsened the condition of life for people, but rather the pandemic response. As Caduff (2020) writes; 'A virus causes disease, not hunger. It is not the pandemic, but the response to it that threatens the livelihood of millions of people…The poor, marginalised, and vulnerable bear the brunt of the pandemic response' (p. 478). Pandemics highlight and entrench inequalities, disproportionately affecting those already disadvantaged in any given society (Mukumbang 2022). For those already living highly precarious lives, in a context of minimal COVID-19 illness, it was policies of containment that caused the most damage (MacGregor et al. 2022). Self-protection, therefore, is not only a response to displacement and the more direct effects of COVID-19 but also the need to survive containment.

COVID-19 policy did not adequately consider these borderland dynamics and how they were intimately connected to the legitimacy of containment and the wider negative consequences of lockdowns. Bringing together an understanding of the specific borderland dynamics between northern Uganda and South Sudan, with understandings of protection and containment, not only demonstrates the interconnectedness of people living across this region, but also helps to explain why containment lost its legitimacy as a form of protection. Gidron, in his analysis of self-reliance strategies in Uganda, wrote that 'efforts to promote refugee self-reliance should acknowledge

that mobility, interdependency, and horizontal redistribution across transnational networks play an important role in the livelihoods of refugees' (Gidron 2022, 7). This premise is also essential to explain the limits of COVID-19 containment as protection in this setting. For decades, scholars have documented, as Allen and Turton (1996) write, 'the considerable flexibility with respect to nationality and ethnicity' (Allen and Turton 1996, p. 7). Trying to distinguish, therefore, who was a legitimate recipient of refugee protection, as opposed to other forms of cross-border migration (as described in the opening vignette), may be near impossible given such flexibility, interdependency, and transnational networks.

Overlooking these well-established historical and contextual dimensions, the narrative of COVID-19 as a health security threat dominated, evidenced by the persistence of Uganda's COVID-19 containment measures, border closures and the borderlands region as a focus of security concern (Moyo, Sebba, and Zanker 2021). Uganda only officially opened its borders to register new asylum seekers in March 2022. But why did this narrative prevail for so long, when there was clear evidence of people circumventing the rules to cross the well-known porous borders (and they were possibly even encouraged to do so as a means of self-reliance), without any particularly devastating consequences for COVID-19 illness and death? According to people in Palabek, the policy of containment became less about protecting refugees and more about protecting certain political and financial incentives related to COVID-19 containment. Protecting people from COVID-19 became a valuable narrative during the pandemic, mobilising specific COVID-19 resources, which were important at a time of decreasing international aid (Moyo, Sebba, and Zanker 2021). Furthermore, the narrative of COVID-19-related hunger also worked to obfuscate the longstanding humanitarian failures of worsening food insecurity in Palabek, adding to literature pointing to the institutional neglect, or political abandonment, of refugees (Torre 2023b).

8 | CONCLUSION

Knowing who to protect, and against what, and with what consequences, is far from simple. In northern Uganda, there was a central tension between policies of COVID-19 containment as a form of protection from a health security threat on the one hand, and refugee (self-) protection and their right to move on the other hand. The ethnographic data presented here have explored this tension and revealed three main findings. Firstly, boundaries were created in line with COVID-19 containment policy when such policies had legitimacy. Secondly, waning legitimacy in combination with significant unintended consequences of COVID-19 policy created a situation where containment drove increased mobility. This could have been predicted by established social, political, and historical scholarship in this borderland area. Lastly, there was a failure of containment policies to adjust to evolving dynamics. Instead, government COVID-19 policy in Uganda maintained misleading narratives. Ultimately, this led to a situation whereby COVID-19 containment became little more than rhetoric as a means of health protection. This clearly demonstrates the diverse ways in which policies of protection and containment play out in different contexts and the vital need to look beyond formal approaches to better understand forms of self-protection during pandemics.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Research data are not shared.

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ENDNOTES
[1] Quotes are included from fieldnotes and from interviews. Italics are used to indicate verbatim transcription from recorded interviews. All interlocutors have been anonymised, using pseudonyms and generic terms such as 'humanitarian actor', rather than revealing a specific organisation. When an interlocutor's name was not known, an alternative descriptive feature, such as their profession, is included.

[2] For example, during fieldwork there were clashes between children and soldiers at the secondary school, following accusations from the students against the headteacher.

[3] Elections were held amongst refugees for leaders that represented different areas of the settlement, divided into blocks, zones and a settlement-wide leader. These leaders constituted the Refugee Welfare Committee (RWC), mirroring the Local Council (LC) structure in Uganda.

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