

EMERGENCY RELIEF

“One of the greatest tragedies of our time”

As the conflict in South Sudan enters its fifth year, millions of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) lack basic necessities such as shelter, food, medicine and basic education. Aid agencies reckon they need \$ 1.4 billion until the end of this year.

By Okello Ciro

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the World Food Programme (WFP) and 57 other humanitarian agencies are involved in providing aid for refugees and IDPs. They want to mobilise some \$ 1.4 billion by the end of this year. Fighting and hunger are driving ever-greater numbers of desperate people to flee South Sudan. Accordingly, the UNHCR and its partners have been appealing to donors for quite some time.

According to the 2017 UNHCR report on South Sudan, 2,800 men, women and children are fleeing each day. They want to escape worsening violence and looming famine. Many arrive in neighbouring countries pinched by hunger, with nothing but the clothes on their back and traumatised by horrific experiences. Filippo Grandi, the UN high commissioner for refugees, speaks of “bad stories” and “a very long list of evils” including extortion, forced recruitment, rape and murder.

In May last year, Grandi told a donor conference in Geneva: “Besides being the largest refugee crisis in Africa, South Sudan is one of the greatest tragedies of our time.” He was launching an appeal for emergency aid. South Sudan is also the world’s fastest escalating refugee crisis, according to the UNHCR report.

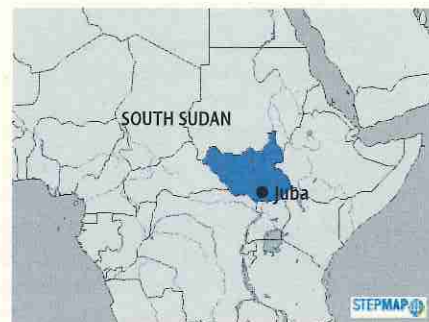
About 1 million children are among those seeking safety in Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR). Some 2 million IDPs are living in South Sudan, and over 2 million people have fled to neighbouring countries. Uganda alone has accepted about 1 million

of them. The UNHCR is coordinating the overall response with governments, humanitarian agencies as well as with refugees and host communities.

Additional resources are required. “If we get the funding, we can stave off the danger of famine spreading,” says David Beasley, the executive director of the WFP. His agency alone reckoned it needed \$ 300 million to help fight hunger and food insecurity in the country. That is what it stated in a report in July 2017.

To curb food insecurity, in March 2018 the government of South Sudan launched an ambitious programme in Yambio, one of the country’s traditional bread baskets. Onyoti Adigo Nyikwec, the minister of agriculture and food security, is cooperating with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the WFP. He has emphasised the importance of the planting season for improving food security in South Sudan. The idea is to fight hunger by encouraging the local people to cultivate enough food.

The lack of food has several reasons. The most important one is the violent con-



flict. Because of it, farmers cannot cultivate their fields and take care of their livestock. The drought that has been haunting east Africa is relevant too, but to a lesser extent than in neighbouring countries. Experts estimate that up to 7.1 million people will suffer acute food insecurity at the peak of the hunger season from May to July this year. Care International South Sudan warns that half of the population is affected. According to this agency, 1 million children under the age of five are severely malnourished.

The FAO emphasises the need to continue enabling farmers to produce their own food. “It is critical that we continue helping vulnerable farmers, fisher folk and herders to build stronger, more resilient livelihoods and become more self-sufficient in food production,” says Pierre Vauthier, an FAO staff member. “Agricultural livelihoods play a critical role in ensuring national food security, economic growth and contributing to future peace and stability.”



Aerial view of Bentiu settlements.

The scenario is depressing however. "The food security situation in South Sudan continues to deteriorate," says Simon Cammelbeeck of the WFP.

"It is critical for everyone from the farmers to the private sector to take advantage of the upcoming main planting season if we are to meet the food needs of the country and ultimately defeat hunger." The situation in South Sudan and neighbouring countries has long escalated into a full-blown humanitarian emergency. Cammelbeeck expects things to get even worse "until a political solution is found".

Nonetheless, attempts are being made to improve rural livelihoods. Greater Equatoria is one of South Sudan's regions. It once accounted for 17% of the country's cereal production, but it has been affected by years of conflict. Masses of people were displaced, and agricultural production has been affected considerably. In 2017, an FAO emergency programme supported 860,000 vulnerable households with vital agricultural inputs to ensure that fields could be cultivated.

The WFP and partners have taken a different approach in Western Equatoria, a neighbouring region. Its cash-for-assets programme supported 3,000 households, so they could improve infrastructure such

as wells and roads. Moreover, it is helping school-meal programmes source food from local farmers.

Such measures are relevant. However, they cannot solve the real problem. As long as the war drags on, food security will remain a mirage.

CAMP LIFE

Masses of people now live in refugee and IDP camps. The majority of them are women and children. Typically, they arrive there weak and malnourished. When the rainy season comes, flooding and diseases compound their suffering.

"I need blankets. It is cold at night and I don't want my children to get sick," worries Rebecca Barnaba, 23 years old, who lives in Doro camp in Bentiu. She says that the tent she was given does not withstand heavy rain, so the family gets wet. Patrick Riek is living in an IDP camp in Juba, the capital city. He says that the residents are not getting sufficient food rations.

Kon Gabriel, a resident of another camp in Juba, complains about health problems: "The health centre here is not well-equipped, medicines are lacking and we are forced to buy from pharmacists outside the

camp." In his eyes, the international community should do more to help the suffering people – and to ensure that the conflict ends.

Arnauld Akodjenou of the UNHCR says that it is important to restore hope: "However, without further funding and support, we will struggle to provide even the most basic assistance." According to him, the scale of displacement is "unbelievable".

The UN in South Sudan (UNMISS) is supposed to protect civilians as well as monitor and investigate the violation of human rights. Its official mandate is to create the conditions for the delivery of humanitarian assistance and to support the implementation of the peace agreement. The problem is that the agreement is not being implemented. The fighting keeps escalating. South Sudan's people keep dreaming of education, proper health care and reliable food supply, but the civil war has reduced the status of millions to depending on charity.



OKELLO CIRO

is a freelance journalist and senior reporter for the Dawn Newspaper. He lives in Juba, South Sudan.

journalistokello@gmail.com



Follow us on
Twitter!
To stay in touch with what is happening on our website, follow us on twitter.

