

**SPECIAL ALERT**

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**Food security concerns rise in Abyei mainly because of escalating conflict**

Intensified civil conflict in Abyei has resulted in fresh waves of population displacements and exposing thousands of people to severe food insecurity. Abyei town is reported to be largely deserted with the market area burned to the ground. Earlier violent clashes in December 2007, January and March 2008 have already resulted in several deaths and displacements of people. These renewed hostilities are expected to worsen the humanitarian needs in the region and could affect aid operations. So far, humanitarian interventions have focused on an estimated 100 000 persons who fled to other parts of Abyei and Warrap state. UN and NGOs have deployed to meet the basic needs of the displaced.

The Abyei region has a fragile natural resource base with low crop productivity. Households generally depend on livestock, crops, wild foods and fish as their main food sources. The majority of the local population is living at subsistence level, with occasional remittances from relatives working in other parts of Sudan and abroad. The main farming systems in the region are based on opportunistic dry sowing with minimal cultivation. This means that only a fraction of the sowed areas are usually harvested. Sorghum is grown on the heavier clay soils and provides the more reliable output. Millet, grown on the sandier soils in the northern zones of the region, is subject to huge fluctuations depending on rainfall distribution.

As elsewhere in southern and western Sudan, years of civil strife have dealt a serious blow to the local economy and damaged much of the limited infrastructure that existed. Economic and agricultural activities, as well as traditional trading and exchange patterns, have been seriously disrupted. Agriculture has suffered from physical damage to infrastructure, population displacement and disruption of marketing networks. Frequent weather hazards have also hampered production. The risk of insecurity and the limited existence of basic infrastructure and public services continue to aggravate the vulnerability of large numbers of people. Since Abyei is located along one of the main north-south transport routes, it is a significant point of return for IDPs and refugees. This has placed an additional strain on the scarce natural resources.

Prospects for the 2008 main season food crops, to be harvested from late in the summer, will depend largely on rainfall in the next two to three months. However, the recent flare up in conflict and displacements pose a serious threat to crop cultivation. Plantings, which normally take place in May/June, may be disrupted. Reports from adjacent areas indicate that land preparation for crop cultivation is taking place and in some cases plantings have started. FAO and NGOs have distributed inputs in safer areas but there are reported instances when some FAO staff were caught up in the fight during the distribution of inputs.

Donors are urged to provide assistance in seeds and tools for the next cropping season. Emergency assistance to the affected populations is also needed.



**FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS, ROME**

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