

Uncertain return to southern Sudan

by Graham Wood and Jake Phelan

Western Equatoria is a focal point for Sudanese refugees returning from neighbouring Uganda, the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Arriving with very little, they inevitably compound the poverty of their hosts. Without greater sensitivity, aid could exacerbate deep divisions.

A report from UK NGO Ockenden International investigates the current and potential impact of returns to Western Equatoria, the effects of returns on physical resources, how 'stayees' perceive returnees and the potential fault lines between those who stayed, those who fought and those who left.

The region's recent history is one dominated by movement. Fighting for towns such as Maridi garrisoned by the Government of Sudan (GoS) was particularly destructive and led to the separation of many families. When the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) took over, relative stability ensued. Yet looting, fear of conscription or abduction by the SPLA, and aerial bombardment by the GoS displaced others. Some people may not have been 'forcibly' displaced but moved to join family or left in anticipation of approaching conflict.

The massive extent of population movement complicates any attempt to define 'returnees' and 'stayees'. People's movements are not one-off, neatly measurable events. A returnee may be an IDP, refugee, combatant or abductee. Although the terms 'returnee' and 'stayee' are fluid and of no analytical value, they can be potentially divisive for those categorised as such by relief agencies, government authorities and local leaders. Notions of 'return' and 'reintegration' are far from straightforward when so many are 'returning' to a new place.

Maridi town is set to attract large numbers of returnees and ex-combatants, placing great demands on very scarce resources. Maridi has large numbers of long-established IDPs, particularly the Bor Dinka. The presence of these Nilotic pastoralists among the agriculturalist Bantu population has been a source of conflict for many years.¹

Cattle belonging to the Dinka cause severe damage to crops and water sources. Ethnic divisions between the 'Bantu' and 'Nilotic' were one cause of the slide back to war in the 1970s. More recently, there has been serious conflict in neighbouring counties between the local population and Dinkas.

Several thousand refugee returnees from the DRC have settled in Ibba, many forced to return by insecurity in the DRC. Returnees have settled peacefully but have placed a huge strain on existing shared resources, and cannot be said to have 'reintegrated' and become self-sufficient.

To date, only a small proportion of refugees have returned to Sudan. There are many threats to stability:

- Small arms are plentiful.
- Water is in short supply as resident populations rise: queues are growing at water points and frustrations between different groups could boil over.
- Those who fought, who were forced to carry military supplies or who suffered from aerial bombardment are unlikely to welcome those who 'ran away', especially if better-educated former refugees are felt to have a disproportionate benefit of

- the dividends of peace.
- HIV/AIDS rates are likely to rise: stigmatisation of returnees could add to tensions.

Returning populations may bring about the impetus for positive social changes. Yet such changes may be seen as foreign impositions and thus be ill-received. The return of displaced people will inevitably bring about profound changes that are likely to raise tensions amidst the confluence of changed identities and social values.

Projections of return numbers drawn up for planning purposes are useful but arguably flawed and there is reason to question assumptions about the scale and timing of anticipated returns. The two main constraints on return identified by a survey carried out by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) – lack of money and of transport – are unlikely to be quickly overcome.

Reintegration is a lop-sided concept, the emphasis firmly on the returnees: the fluid category of the displaced needing to be absorbed by the static, somehow sponge-like host community. Stayees' perceptions of returnees have not received sufficient attention either in academic or policy circles. Yet it is crucial to understand their expectations and concerns in

order to aid the reintegration of displaced people.

If people in receiving communities see tangible benefits of a peace for which they have waited so long, then return and reintegration will be that much simpler. This will particularly be the case if benefits are felt before the population starts to significantly increase and if the ground is prepared in advance for returnees. However, on current trends, this seems unlikely to happen.

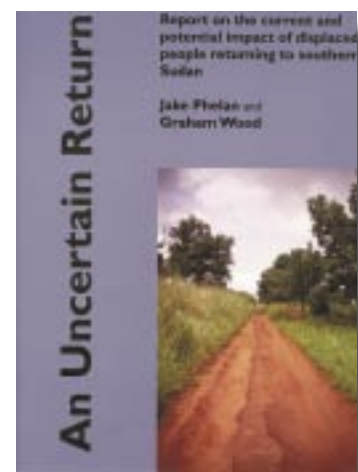
Our research indicates the need for:

- massive external investment in infrastructure
- recognising that homecomings are never straightforward
- abandoning simple categorisations
- supporting local authorities and civil society to develop an environment in which peace is sustained
- providing formal and non-formal educational opportunities for all
- remaining aware of potential for localised conflicts to flare up and have wider ramifications
- ensuring adequate protection for all and ensuring that all displaced people are afforded the choice of if and when to return
- shedding the idea that 'return'

means an end to movement: many retain transnational social and economic links which are vital components of livelihood strategies.

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*This article is a summary of their January 2006 report, *An Uncertain Return*, online at www.ockenden.org.uk/temp/UncertainReturnPDF1.pdf*



For latest information on Sudan, see www.reliefweb.int

1. See: 'Assisting the return of displaced Dinka Bor' by Paul Murphy, FMR 24. www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR24/FMR2417.pdf

Sudan: uncertain prospects

by Tim Morris

Khartoum's refusal to allow Jan Egeland, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, to visit Darfur – and the expulsion of the Norwegian Refugee Council from the troubled region – is further evidence of efforts by the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) to contain international engagement in Sudan.

The Darfur conflict erupted in early 2003 when the Sudanese Liberation Movement/Army and the smaller Justice and Equality Movement took up arms against the Arab-dominated government in Khartoum. The NCP

responded by backing Arab militia known as the Janjaweed. Humanitarian workers estimate that more than 180,000 people have been killed in the violence and nearly two million forced to flee their homes.

Even before Egeland was denied permission to visit Khartoum or Darfur in April 2006, the long-awaited transfer of peace-keeping responsibility in Darfur from the African Union to the UN appeared to be on permanent hold. The 7000-strong African Mission in Sudan (AMIS) has lacked the resources to halt a steady deterioration of the security situation and widespread banditry and human rights abuses from all combatants. UNICEF estimates that in North and West Darfur around half a million people in need of humanitarian assistance cannot