

Epic trek of Mabilia IDPs

by William Lorenz

The intensive support given by the international community to assist the spontaneous return of IDPs from the camp at Mabilia highlights the enormity of the task of providing similar humanitarian assistance to the hundreds of thousands also on the move home.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) - with support from the World Food Programme, OCHA, UNICEF, World Vision, MSF Spain and the Camboni missionaries - assisted some 5,000 IDPs from 10 different tribes on a 350-km return route through the

forests and rough terrain of western Equatoria to their homes in western Bahr el Ghazal. The initiative to return began with the IDPs and international assistance was provided only after the start of their journey. The returnees, who had fled their homes four years earlier, began their

journey from their camp at Mabilia, south of the town of Tambura. The group followed a route along the border with the Central African Republic in a bid to cross the Busseri River before the onset of the rainy season.

It was mentally and physically draining for the returnees (many from female-headed households), the SPLM soldiers who provided security and the IOM team who accompanied them. Soon after their departure the group found they had to hack their own road through the forest.

They had to contend with mines, mosquitoes, guinea worms, tsetse flies, swamps and swollen rivers, negotiate with rebel militias not engaged in the peace process and forage for food when planned food drops were delayed. For much of the route, food, plastic sheeting, mosquito nets and medical kits could only be delivered by air. Fuel shortages and mechanical breakdowns meant that only the most vulnerable could be transported by truck, forcing most to move on foot. Diarrhoea, dysentery, malaria, acute respiratory infections and injuries took their inevitable toll. Planned medical evacuations could not take place. As the rain came down, trucks became stranded and access to air transport was complicated by the emergency which followed the death of Dr John Garang.

On 7 August the group finally arrived at an interim camp in Bile, near the town of Deim Zubeir, where they were welcomed by officials from the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission and the Government of Sudan garrison commander. Many returned with their heads held high, wearing new clothes and shoes they had put on after laboriously carrying them wrapped up during their ordeal.



Despite considerable international commitment, a journey planned to last 30 days had taken three and a half months. While 43 had died en route (before the IOM team arrived, 23 IDPs were crushed to death when a truck turned over on a makeshift bridge), 34 children had been born. The IDPs will stay at Bile for a couple of months before finally returning to their former homes across the districts of Raga and Wau. During their stay in Bile, they will receive food

and reintegration assistance such as seeds and agricultural tools.

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