Assisting the return of displaced Dinka Bor

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 Mabia, 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.

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

Epic trek of Mabia IDPs

by William Lorenz

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Tragic recent events have drawn attention to the neglected issue of IDP settlements in the Khartoum metropolis, now home to five million people. In May 2005 Sudanese security forces arrived in the squatter area of Soba-Aradi, 30km south of Khartoum. Their attempts to demolish IDPs' shelters and load people onto trucks led to clashes which resulted in the deaths of 15 policemen and an unknown number of IDPs, including children.

An estimated 325,000 IDPs live in four official IDP camps, established in 1991, with an additional population of at least 1.5 million IDPs scattered in unauthorised squatter settlements. Mobility between settlements, whether as a result of forcible relocation by the government or voluntary movement, is high. Most IDPs were primarily displaced by conflict in the south and the Nuba Mountains or by drought in the mid 1980s. They are discriminated against and have unequal access to jobs, education and basic services.

The official IDP camps were established outside urban boundaries but the pace of urban growth is so great that the camps are now integrated into the outskirts of the city. Providing water and electricity is an enormous challenge which the state has not addressed. In squatter areas and in IDP camps only a handful of residents have electricity, provided by privately-owned generators. Water is generally obtained from wells drilled by NGOs and managed by community-based organisations. Water is a major household expense, especially for those living far from wells.

During the 1990s international NGOs were active in the camps, providing IDPs and urban planning in Khartoum by Agnès de Geoffroy

Urban planning policies – which have led to demolition of IDP housing in and around Khartoum – highlight the need for Sudan to adopt specific IDP legislation and to find durable solutions for those displaced southerners who do not want to leave Khartoum.

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.

William Lorenz led the IOM team accompanying the IDPs. Email: wlorenz@iom.int. See his BBC online diary at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/10834230.stm] and photo gallery at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/picture_gal/05/africa_sudan_trek_revised.html].

This article is written in a personal capacity and does not necessarily reflect the views of IOM.

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IDPs and urban planning in Khartoum