

Challenges facing returnees in Sudan

by Judy McCallum and Gizenga Yemba Willow

Fellowship for African Relief (FAR)¹ is working to address the needs of IDPs at key points along the returnee route.

Provision of services along the whole returnee route is critical to the return process: at points of displacement (such as Khartoum and Kosti IDP camps and squatter areas), at key transition points which IDPs will pass through to return home (Kosti ferry embarkation) and at destination points (such as Northern Upper Nile and the Nuba mountains).

Most of the IDPs have been displaced for 20 years. Many who have grown up in Khartoum can no longer speak their native language – potentially problematic for reintegration in their home areas. In addition, through isolation from their communities and interaction with other ethnic groups and cultures, they have lost knowledge of traditional customs and have adopted new traditions and customs. One prime example of this is food. Many IDPs returning from the North may not have had access to foods grown in the South and no longer know how to prepare them. To remedy this, one of FAR's activities is organising cooking demonstrations – especially for young girls who have grown up and married in the North – focusing on foods grown in southern Sudan.

Transition points

At the Kosti riverfront, where returnees gather to await the barges going south to Malakal and Juba, FAR is working with other INGOs and NGOs to provide essential services and health education. The departure times of the barges can be erratic and returnees can wait for up to a month for a barge, when they may have been anticipating a wait of just a day or two. Road transportation has not yet been possible due to the presence of landmines.

The unpredictable nature of the return process and the erratic barge schedule pose considerable obsta-

cles, with numbers of those requiring assistance varying widely – up to 1,000 families at a time – and putting a huge strain on shelter, sanitation and washing facilities. In addition, the barge trips can also vary in length of time depending upon variables such as water level and security. At the Kosti wharves FAR and ADRA (Adventist Development and Relief Agency International) are providing shelters, latrines, washing areas, food, basic health services and health education. On the barges themselves, FAR provides further health and nutrition education training sessions (including cooking), as well as shelter.

In the areas around Kosti FAR is working with NGOs and community-based organisations to help provide much needed services – including those with a peace-building component. Peace-building activities have included holding inter-community festivals, assisting the communities to set up local arbitration for minor disputes and training civil society organisations to provide leadership in their communities.

Support for returnees

In Northern Upper Nile State, FAR – as part of a five-organisation consortium – is currently focusing on providing immediate emergency support to returnees as well as household food security services.

The emergency support activities, funded by ECHO, include providing 'returnee kits' to households arriving in the area and – in collaboration with Medair – emergency health in case of disease outbreaks. The returnee kits contain basic household items: two saucepans, one tray, two water cups, two water jerry cans, mosquito nets and one blanket. FAR also plans to distribute farming implements in the planting season. In addition, with support of the

Food and Agriculture Organisation, FAR is implementing a pilot poultry project in Renk town, with plans to replicate this activity in rural areas should the market prove sufficient. Our future plans include providing much needed agricultural training, agriculture extension services, assistance with setting up community 'seed fairs', distribution of seeds and tools, livestock restocking, introduction of animal traction for improved agricultural production and micro-credit services for income-generating activities.

Some of the key obstacles to FAR's work in this area include the distance between the communities served and the difficulty accessing some of them during the rainy season. In addition, the communities in these areas have received hardly any humanitarian assistance for over 20 years and lack representative institutions. It therefore takes much longer to get the communities organised around longer-term goals, as they are currently focused on day-to-day survival needs. FAR and its partners need to strike a careful balance between providing much needed emergency and relief support while building communities' capacity and initiative to address their own priorities and development needs.

As the international community seeks to support the Sudanese community in rebuilding their country and establishing a lasting and sustainable peace, it is vital that we work to help strengthen civil society and provide an environment where local community initiatives can flourish.

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