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SUDAN: Food crisis looms as bombs drive farmers from their fields



Photo: Peter Moszynski/IRIN

Tall pillars of smoke rise in the distance after an air raid as seen from these burnt houses in Dar, South Kordofan

DAR, 22 March 2012 (IRIN) - Driving north across the border from South Sudan into the warring Sudanese state of South Kordofan, the landscape abruptly changes from the swamps and seasonal grasslands into the fertile foothills of the Nuba Mountains, rising gently from the plains. Each hill is topped by a village, with acorn-shaped clusters of huts perched on rocky outcrops.

In the picturesque village of Dar, women in brightly-coloured 'taubs' gather around the communal pump chatting and exchanging gossip in a scene typical across rural Africa. But on closer inspection, none of the houses have roofs: most of the village has been burned to the ground. The area is littered with spent cartridge cases, unexploded ordnance, and several wrecked tanks.

Since fighting between the Sudan Armed Forces and the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army - North (SPLM-N) broke out in June 2011, spreading later to neighbouring Blue Nile State, more than 400,000 people have been displaced.

Women in Dar said they had taken advantage of the lull in fighting that followed SPLM-N's recent capture of Dar, descending from the caves where they had sought shelter to fetch water and try to salvage their belongings from their wrecked homes.

During this reporter's visit, the sense of security was shattered by the growing roar of an approaching Antonov plane, sending residents fleeing. The aircraft passes by this time, dropping its rudimentary bombs elsewhere, leaving tall pillars of smoke rising in the distance.

"This is why people are going hungry," says Mubarak Ahmed, from the Nuba Youth Association. "You can see how everyone is terrified by the bombing, so nobody is able to plant or tend their crops."

Over a million people now live in rebel-controlled areas, cut off from the outside world, as was the case in the 1983-2005 civil war, when many in South Kordofan sided with southern rebels.

Time running out

With the rainy season due to start in a few weeks, humanitarian agencies are warning that time is running out to bring in life-saving supplies.

Local officials say the conflict has severely affected agricultural production, and estimate that the next harvest will be only 20 percent of normal, leaving most of the population dependent on outside aid. They warn that unless supplies are brought in within the next few weeks, the onset of the rains will make it virtually impossible to distribute the relief, just when the annual pre-harvest hungry season reaches its peak.

A small proportion of the war-affected population has managed to cross the new border into South Sudan. Even here the refugees find little safety. Close to the border, Yida refugee camp is home to over 20,000 Nuba refugees. The camp is pitted with foxholes, rough shelters scraped out of the red earth by frantic civilians to provide protection against cross border air raids.

One nine-year-old girl had broken her collar bone whilst diving for cover in one of the many air raid shelters, incongruously placed all around the supposedly safe refugee camps.

A disabled old woman, struggling to care for five visibly traumatized grandchildren, described how they had to flee their village in the Nuba Mountains after the children's parents had been killed in a bombing raid.

Another old woman had broken ribs, and said she had been beaten by soldiers after being arrested on suspicion of attempting to flee to rebel-held areas.



Photo: Peter Moszynski/IRIN

International aid agencies are attempting to relocate the refugees from Yida, which was bombed in November, to a new site some 70km further south.

Although war returned to the Nuba Mountains in June 2011, the UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) wound up its operations when South Sudan gained independence the following month, and its successor mission only operates in the new state, not in Sudan.

Abandoned by the UN?

Everywhere people complain they have been abandoned by the UN whilst being attacked by their own government. They ask: "Why has the international community left us in the hands of an indicted war criminal?"

Ahmed Mohammed Haroun, who was declared the winner of disputed gubernatorial elections in May 2011, is wanted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes he allegedly committed in Darfur.

In February, the UN, the African Union and the Arab League drew up a plan to deliver humanitarian aid to the region, but Khartoum has yet to endorse it.

President Omar al Bashir is expected to visit South Sudan in the coming weeks to finalize this and other outstanding matters, including the issue of oil revenues and a new framework agreement on citizenship and border issues.

Mukesh Kapila, who headed UN operations in Sudan in 2003 and 2004 and now works for the Aegis Trust, a group which campaigns against genocide and war crimes, recently visited South Kordofan.

While with the UN in Sudan "I saw what genocidal violence was doing in Darfur. When I asked the world to heed my warnings, it looked away until it was too late," he said.

"From what I have seen in the Nuba Mountains, I fear that much the same scenario is unfolding there. Will the world listen this time around?"

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Photo A fisherman in Lomé harbour, Togo

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