



UN 'withholds' aid from camp on Sudan border say refugees, ex-UN official

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By Daniel van Oudenaren – The United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) is deliberately withholding humanitarian aid from more than 16000 Nuba refugees in Yida Camp in South Sudan, according to refugee leaders and a former senior UN official who visited the camp. The UN agency justifies its policy on the basis of security concerns and it says it is offering expanded services at another site where it intends to resettle the refugees.

Dr. Mukesh Kapila, formerly the top UN aid official in Sudan, accuses UNHCR of 'conditionalizing' aid in order to pressure refugees to relocate farther from the border with Sudan.

Yida Camp in northern Unity State of South Sudan is only a few kilometers from Sudan's South Kordofan State, where the Sudan Armed Forces and Sudan People's Liberation Army-North have been fighting since June 2011. Most of the Nuba refugees at Yida refuse to relocate to UNHCR's Nyeel site, which is 40 km from the border.

In an interview March 4 after a 4-day visit to Unity State and the far south of Kordofan, Dr. Kapila said: "The international community's humanitarian policy led by UNHCR is to severely restrict aid going in to needy civilians in Yida, pressurizing them to move by not giving them enough food, water, and other needs. Now, that is immoral, unethical and anti-humanitarian."

UNHCR denies withholding assistance to the Nuba refugees, saying that it and "other agencies" provide Yida Camp with food, water, sanitation, nutrition and health services. But according to Samaritan's Purse, an aid group working in the camp in the fields of water, sanitation and nutrition, UNHCR has not funded any of its work in Yida, despite funding its projects elsewhere in South Sudan. "UNHCR prefers that Samaritan's Purse provide only basic necessities in Yida rather than programs that encourage long-term residence of refugees," a spokesperson for the NGO stated.

Questioned about the policy on Yida Camp, UNHCR acknowledged in an e-mailed statement March 10 that it "cannot undertake interventions that fix refugees in dangerous locations through, for example, establishing formal schools or supporting agriculture. Such interventions are being undertaken at a more secure distance from the border. Those refugees from Southern Kordofan who have relocated already have access to these expanded services."

'SECURITY OF REFUGEES IS PARAMOUNT'

UNHCR emphasized that "the security of refugees is paramount." A spokeswoman for the agency pointed out that Yida is close to Jau, "a border town which has been subject to heavy fighting on repeated occasions."

"Due to its location and proximity, Yida has in the past been subjected to aerial bombardment. It remains constantly under serious threat of direct or accidental attack. Yida is also within shelling range by ground forces; shells landed close to the camp in December 2011, creating terror among camp residents. Over a week ago, renewed fighting in Jau caused panic in Yida; many refugees ran into the bush in fear," read the statement.

On the other hand, Dr. Kapila contended that, although it is generally 'good practice' to move refugees out of front-line areas, "such norms have to be applied in local contexts, they have to be sensitive to local circumstances rather than blindly imposed by theoretical considerations from Geneva or wherever." He also questioned whether even the alternate site, Nyeel Camp, would be safer, given that Sudan's warplanes have allegedly bombed fairly deep into Unity State.

Samaritan's Purse, for its part, stated that it agrees with UNHCR that Yida is not a safe place for refugees. It noted, though, that it intends to continue supporting "the most vulnerable people in the most difficult place -- and right now that is Yida."

CHILDREN OF YIDA

Huda Hudali, a Nuba Tumba refugee who stays at a girls' hostel in Yida Camp, said children lack sufficient clothes, books, notebooks, beds, mattresses, latrines, and tents. Another girl, speaking to the shortwave broadcaster Radio Tamazuj, said that the children suffer from stomach aches from eating only 'baleela,' a dish of boiled sorghum.

Dr. Kapila, a medical doctor, said that the physical condition of people was deteriorating. "We saw many pregnant women who were in terrible condition. They could not breastfeed because they were hungry. And we saw children with the full spectrum of infections – some of which would be normal at that age – but with others including malnutrition which they should not be having."

Despite the poor conditions, refugees in Yida have built thatch-roofed schools for their children. Some classes are also held outside under trees.

School children at Komolo Primary School in Yida attend classes taught by 24 volunteer teachers, according to headmaster Daniel Al Nur Ahmed. There are not enough teachers for the 1418 students, he told Radio Tamazuj.

The headmaster noted that the UN registered children and gave them food and soap. "But it has been two months now since they were given soap. And they have not been given any clothes." Students also lack electricity or lamps to study by – a problem particularly for girls, since they typically have to fetch water after school, leaving them no time to study before nightfall.

Another concern is security for the students. A girl at one of the student shelters said their most important need was a fence for their hostel. Another explained: "We have no guards, so we are afraid of drunkards because many of them enter the hostel, and also some of the soldiers. We don't know where they're coming from but most of them come to scare us."

Hamad Mamur Al Basha, education coordinator of Yida Camp, said that he had asked support from aid organizations including UNHCR but was refused because "education is not a first priority." The refugees received only some school materials from UNICEF last November, he said.

Schools have plans to build wooden seats for their students. "I hope the camp will be stable now, and there will be new organizations to oversee education," said the headmaster of Komolo school.

NYEEL SITE

Nyeel, UNHCR's intended destination for refugees, is situated on a flat treeless grassland. A planning document from the agency's regional Nairobi base describes the 55-hectare site as "partially surrounded by swampy areas and farming land," spare of trees and bushes, with "sandy – clay soil/swampy."

The refugee agency says the camp's capacity, 9000 people, can be doubled if necessary to absorb the entire Yida population. UNHCR's own figures, however, taken from a re-registration exercise that began in mid-February, indicate that only 574 refugees have opted to move to Nyeel whereas 16,022 preferred to remain in Yida.

"They are not accustomed to living in flat lands and prefer the hilly Yida landscape," acknowledged an UNHCR spokeswoman. "We are trying to mitigate the refugees' concerns by deploying all efforts to ensure the alternative sites meet their expectations."

Nyeel currently has facilities to provide food, healthcare, shelter and education, as well as available land for agriculture, according to UNHCR. As of early March, some water points had been completed and a barbed-wire fence around the camp was under construction.

'THE GOVERNOR ORDERED PEOPLE TO GO TO NYEEL'

UNHCR has coordinated with South Sudanese officials to advocate for the relocation of Nuba refugees. UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres reiterated security concerns when he met refugee leaders in January, while Unity State Governor Taban Deng Gai and Pariang County Commissioner Mabek Lang likewise "conveyed the same sentiments," said a UN spokesperson.

Yida Camp Education Coordinator Hamad Mamur Al Basha described the interaction differently: "The governor came and ordered people to go to Nyeel. We did not come here to be given orders. We are not going to Nyeel."

"It would be better for people to go back to stay with the jellaba," said Al Basha, using a pejorative term for Sudanese Arabs. "We are waiting for the UN to tell us their opinion and if they are accepting the order of the governor or not."

Another refugee leader, Hussein Al Qombala, likewise rejected the relocation proposal: "In the field of development, it's the development that looks for the man, and not man that looks for development. I hope that the international community tries to come and deliver services to the refugees living in Yida."

'ABSOLUTELY AGAINST HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES'

Many soldiers of the Sudan People's Liberation Army-North (SPLA-N) have families in Yida Camp and some troops are reportedly based near the camp. SPLA-N relies on military supply corridors through Unity State, according to Sudanese officials – a charge the Government of South Sudan officially denies.

Although some sources suggested UNHCR may be under external pressure in relation to such political circumstances, this could not be confirmed. The agency says that its position on Yida is simply the result of applying standard policy guidance from its Executive Committee. The UNHCR spokesperson in South Sudan pointed to "fundamental tenets" including relocating refugees away from borders and "preserving the civilian and humanitarian character of refugee sites."

Dr. Mukesh Kapila, for his part, questioned whether giving textbooks to children or providing better food to pregnant mothers would contribute to militarization of Yida Camp.

"It is absolutely against humanitarian principles to conditionalize the provision of life-saving aid on the grounds of pursuit of another objective, in this case pressurizing the people to move away from this place. And the coerced movement of people is a crime. Ironic if this is being aided and abetted by the international community here. If this were to be happening inside Darfur and Nuba, as it has happened, we would be accusing (and we are accusing) the Sudan government of crimes against humanity," he added.

Mukesh Kapila, who previously headed the British Government's humanitarian department, worked in Sudan in 2003-2004 as UN Resident Humanitarian Coordinator. He was outspoken over the Darfur conflict and was removed from his post. He went on to become Under Secretary General of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

Photo by Samartin's Purse: Nuba refugee children in Yida area.

Juba