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Contacts:
Andrea Lari and Erin Weir

South Sudan: Returning Sudanese Need More Help to Restart their Lives

After years exiled in bordering countries, or displaced within Sudan, hundreds of thousands of Sudanese people are returning home to rebuild their lives, but more help is needed for their reintegration into communities.

The laudable work of the humanitarian community doesn't meet the immensity of the need. Almost every part of Sudan lacks adequate clean water, health care, schools and sources of basic livelihood. The Government of Southern Sudan must begin to provide greater planning and leadership in the recovery process; coordination among stakeholders must improve, and financial resources need to be disbursed more quickly to provide a long awaited peace dividend. Failure to reintegrate returnees properly will create communal tensions, re-ignite localized humanitarian crises and ultimately doom the promises of peace.

The signing - in January of 2005 - of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), brought Southern Sudan into a delicate political transition from war to peace. The Sudanese people, eager to enjoy peace, have not been deterred by localized insecurity and delays in the implementation of several political and security related provisions of the CPA. As many as 500,000 people of the more than 4 million displaced by 21-years of civil war have spontaneously returned to Southern Sudan to reclaim their homes and land.

The Government of Southern Sudan (GOSS) and the United Nations Mission in Sudan Return, Reintegration and Recovery unit are responsible for the coordination of returns. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migrations (IOM) together with a number of non-governmental organizations have assisted tens of thousands of Sudanese in their journey home.

Since 2005 more than 110,000 Sudanese have received free transportation, three months worth of food rations, and

non-food items like tarps, kitchen tools and jerry cans. Still, while these organized returns have been largely successful, they represent only 10% to 20% of the total returnees. Serious coordination faults characterize returns of other groups helped by State Authorities and churches, and there is no organized system yet to help the largest portion of returnees who have come home on their own initiative, receiving little assistance either in transit or in their destination community.

Although Refugees International recognizes the challenge of responding effectively to spontaneous returns, there is a clear need for better coordination and greater effort has to be made to provide those who intend to return with some kind of identification to ensure that they benefit from humanitarian assistance available.

Many who originally came from rural villages opt to settle in urban areas upon their return to Southern Sudan. This is due to the combination of insecurity, lack of access to services, particularly water and education, and - in many cases - years spent in urban areas and well resourced refugee camps. Some returnees simply lack transport to take them from drop off points in large towns, or find themselves stuck due to the impassible roads during the half year long rainy season. Many returnee families interviewed by RI, however, indicated a strong preference for re-settlement near large towns in order to continue to access what few services remained available. While the GOSS has expressed a clear preference that returnees go to their villages, it seems likely that this trend towards a more urbanized population is going to persist.

The concentration of returnees in urban areas is already resulting in overcrowding and greater pressure on the

already weak services. Although host communities have shown a great deal of acceptance, the scarcity of resources and the rapidly declining quality of existing services has led to isolated cases of discrimination against returnees. At water points residents are sending returnees to the back of the line, and local residents complain of crowded schools, with more than 100 pupils to a teacher in some cases.

Overcrowding and poor sanitation are increasing the risk of disease. A humanitarian worker told RI that “the rainy season coupled with the congestions of newly built shelters in existing plots are likely to exacerbate the spread of epidemic diseases such as cholera and tuberculosis.” Land problems are also starting to surface around highly valuable urban plots occupied by returning and local landless households. A humanitarian worker told the RI team: “In towns like Juba and Yei local authorities have enforced selective evictions with no provision of alternative location for the affected families. With no clear mechanism of land allocation, and considering the trend of returns, we are expecting more cases of evictions in the next few months.” During the rainy season, RI believes that returns organized by UNHCR and other agencies should be limited to places where the capacity of recipient communities is being expanded for greater absorption.

Humanitarian personnel assured RI that agencies are prepared in the likely case that localized humanitarian crises arise and are confident that an ad hoc multi-agency mechanism can be activated to assist those spontaneous returnees on route. But ferrying people to drop off points is just the beginning of the process. RI found that economic and social reintegration and recovery phases often lack adequate planning, staff and resources. Even in areas of high return, the lack of leadership from local authorities is glaring and the recently formed central government is still struggling to take hold. Central and local authorities urgently need to map the substantial gaps in services, establish priorities, and allocate existing resources and assistance accordingly.

The international community, however, cannot expect the GOSS--established only two years ago--to cope independently with such massive and complex tasks. Foreign donors should provide greater technical assistance for government officials in key social sectors like health and education, as well as economic areas such as finance, infrastructure development, and the promotion of livelihoods. Funding and technical assistance for the immediate future should focus on the swelling urban areas where the number of people in need is the highest and the risk of humanitarian crisis is currently the greatest. The logistically difficult rainy season should also be used as a planning period to determine priorities and prepare for intervention in more

rural areas so that village level project implementation may begin just before the end of the year at the onset of the dry season. This will allow for the longer term de-congestion of urban centers, as returnees begin to see an incentive in moving beyond the cities.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

The Government of Southern Sudan

- ❑ Take leadership in devising comprehensive reintegration and recovery plans from the national level, right down to payam [cluster of villages] level, particularly in those areas with expected higher returns.
- ❑ Work more closely with UNHCR and IOM to provide spontaneous returnees with identification documents so that assistance can be planned for and more easily provided upon return. State authorities should urgently prepare emergency response plans to assess the humanitarian needs of spontaneous returnees and assist them as required.
- ❑ Allocate more resources to increase the absorption capacity in areas of high return, in particular water points, health care facilities and health worker training and primary and secondary education, including teacher training.

The UNMIS Return Reintegration and Recovery Unit

- ❑ Lead, in collaboration with UNHCR and IOM, the implementation of a coordinated and comprehensive monitoring mechanism of the levels of vulnerability and degree of reintegration of returnees. This would ensure that gaps are identified and addressed.

International Donors

- ❑ Increase funding to provide technical training and support for national and state structures in handling the expansion of basic social services.
- ❑ Urgently increase levels of quickly accessible bilateral donations to support programs for the reintegration of returnees and the expansion of basic community services.
- ❑ Ensure that funding be made available not only for programs but also to cover the high cost of logistics required to operate in remote and poorly served areas.

Andrea Lari and Erin Weir completed an assessment in Southern Sudan in June, 2007