
RI BULLETIN

A POWERFUL VOICE FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTION

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Chad: Inadequate Response to Child Protection for Sudanese Refugees

In the refugee camps in eastern Chad, programs for children and youth are almost non-existent. Non-governmental organizations identified child protection programs as a critical need, but there are few NGOs with the expertise needed to implement these programs. Separated and unaccompanied children, orphans, and youth are particularly vulnerable. According to an aid worker, “Sadly, there is currently not much going on in terms of child protection and a great deal of work needs to be done to sensitize NGOs on child protection and make it more of a priority.”

By their own admission, UN agencies and NGOs were extremely late in responding to the refugee crisis in eastern Chad. Several NGOs complained that until recently neither child protection nor gender-based violence were priorities for UN agencies and most NGOs. As a result, child protection was not integrated into the emergency response and child protection activities are currently underdeveloped. UNHCR now has a temporary child protection advisor on staff, and there are plans to implement additional child protection programs, although there are few NGOs in eastern Chad with experience implementing these programs. An aid worker explained, “In August, the child protection response was chaotic, but at least now, there are regular sectoral meetings and at least education has improved. But the child protection response has been too slow to pick up. The same problems that stood out six or seven months ago—separated children, inactivity, lack of programs for youth—have still not been dealt with and we are not sure when they will be dealt with.”

Staff with expertise in child protection and NGOs with experience implementing child protection programs are few and far between in eastern Chad. NGOs explained that many Chadian staff lack awareness of basic human rights principles, much less how to protect children. Every NGO staff member needs to be trained on the Convention of the Rights of the Child, and UNICEF needs to conduct training for humanitarian staff working with children in how to interact with children and identify vulnerable ones. Given the vulnerability of refugee children, as well as the overall lack of awareness of child rights, there is a risk of sexual exploitation in the camps. Refugees International did not hear of any reports of sexual exploitation or of transactional sex, but it is critical that NGO staff, especially those involved in distributions, be monitored to ensure that sexual exploitation does not become a problem.

Education, one of the most basic child protection activities, has only recently started to function properly. UNICEF has come under a great deal of criticism for their slow response, but NGOs acknowledge that there have been improvements. School construction has only just begun, but school enrollment is high, and education, which was unavailable to most children in Darfur, is now a priority for many parents.

When refugees fled from Darfur into Chad, many families were separated. The International Committee for the Red Cross has started to register separated and unaccompanied children. There are few unaccompanied children in the camps, and most children who are separated from their families are living with relatives or neighbors. There are roughly 300 separated children in the camps where ICRC has conducted registrations. Family reunification has not started yet. RI interviewed a 14-year-old girl who is separated from her immediate family. She is living with her grandmother and great-grandmother. She explained, “I don’t know if my parents and my four brothers are even alive. This makes me sad. I worry about where my family is and what happened to them.”

Separated and unaccompanied children are considered to be vulnerable groups. Community services workers in most camps have been trained to identify vulnerable groups and refer them to the appropriate services. Community services programs in all of the camps that RI visited are underdeveloped, and at present, there are few services to which to refer them. In four camps, Christian Children's Fund has started child-centered spaces where children can come to play, and these are the only programs specifically targeted to children that RI observed.

Many refugee parents expressed concern about the mental health of their children. According to a community services worker in one of the camps, "The children hear a loud noise or hear the wind and think it's an Antonov and they run and hide." A father explained that his children all have nightmares and have trouble sleeping. Often, providing children with normal activities—school and recreation—is the best way to assist them in overcoming their trauma. Recent improvements in education are a step forward, but recreation activities, particularly for pre-school children, should be a priority.

There is also a lack of programs targeting youth. Many NGOs that RI interviewed expressed concern that youth, in most cases, were idle all day with few opportunities for training or education. The lack of opportunities places youth at risk of recruitment by the various armed forces in Sudan. There is no evidence to suggest that recruitment is a large problem at this time, but if there are no activities to occupy youth, recruitment could become a bigger problem. Secondary education is not available in the camps, and this was the biggest concern of the youth that RI interviewed. Vocational training programs will start in all the camps, but not all youth will be able to participate.

Some NGOs are also concerned about the future of the babies resulting from rapes committed in Darfur. Most women do not admit that their pregnancy is a result of rape. RI heard of three cases in which mothers tried to kill their babies, but for the most part the mothers and the larger community accept the babies. This is an issue that needs more analysis and monitoring.

Refugees International therefore recommends that:

- Donors make child protection programs, particularly programs for youth, more of a priority and encourage additional child protection agencies to begin operations in Chad
- Donors fund pre-school programs, child-centered spaces, recreational activities, including for girls, activities for youth, particularly vocational training and literacy classes, and child-to-child programs.
- Donors fund education activities, as one of the best child protection tools. Education activities in host communities should be supported as well.
- UNHCR work with the Government of Chad to identify secondary education opportunities for refugee students.
- UNHCR recruit a permanent child protection advisor to be based in Abeche who will continue to coordinate with UNICEF on all child protection activities.
- NGOs, UNICEF and UNHCR conduct training for all humanitarian staff on the Convention of the Rights of the Child. Teachers should receive ongoing training on interacting with children with mental health problems. Community services workers and community health workers should receive training on interacting with children.
- UNICEF facilitate improved information sharing between child protection agencies in Chad and those working in Darfur.
- UNICEF strengthen its leadership on child protection and assist NGOs to ensure that child protection is integrated into all programs, and that all programs are coordinated.
- NGOs and UN agencies develop stronger monitoring mechanisms for recruitment of children by the various armed forces.
- Peace education, conflict resolution, and gender-based violence be included in both the refugee school curriculum and in local schools.
- NGOs working in community services address the need for clothing for children, and consider combining women's income generation programs with the production of children's clothing.

Senior Advocate Michelle Brown and McCall-Pierpaoli Fellow Yodit Fitigu recently completed an assessment mission in eastern Chad.