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Field Dispatch: Journey into Uncertainty

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The escalation of the conflict in South Kordofan between the Sudanese Armed Forces, or SAF, and the Sudanese People's Liberation Army – North, or SPLA-N, is continuing to force many residents of the region into displacement. Over 70,000 people are estimated to have been displaced since the first days of clashes in early June.ⁱ While the majority of people have moved north, many others have moved southward into the newly independent state of South Sudan. The Yida refugee settlement, which emerged in South Sudan's Unity State following the start of the crisis, offers at least some feeling of safety and shelter, yet the journey for many of these people will not end there.

Yida village is in the northernmost part of Unity State in South Sudan, around 11km from the border with the north, and is now home to around 10,000 people displaced from South Kordofan. The latest OCHA report, which was based on registration figures by the UN Refugee Agency, or UNHCR, estimated the number to be 9,200. Only in recent weeks, this number has reportedly risen by a few thousand people and is continuing to grow as more people arrive in search of safety.ⁱⁱ

Yet the Yida settlement is considered by some to be in an unsafe area. At only 11 km away from the Sudanese border at its closest point, it is too close to the conflict zone by UNHCR's protection standards.ⁱⁱⁱ International agencies share the belief that the settlement's location near the conflict zone is a serious issue, though the displaced individuals are willing to remain in proximity to the border, according to INTERSOS's Country Director. Antonov bombers from the Sudanese Air Force have been seen flying over Yida on reconnaissance missions at very low altitudes, some as low as 1,000 feet, according to a relief worker who spoke on condition of anonymity. Adding to the overall feeling of unease by international relief workers is the fact that the nearest SPLA base is only 2.5 km from the settlement. UNHCR and the government of Unity State have therefore identified an alternative location for a refugee camp 75km from the border that the UN argues would be more accessible to relief agencies, far from potential threats. Its location would also allow for the allocation of arable land for farming to the displaced individuals,^{iv} thus lessening their future dependence on relief operations. The humanitarian agencies, led by UNCHR, recently assembled a six-member committee made up of displaced individuals to take part in a 'go and see' visit to the new location, which is located north of Bentiu.

Mahdi, a Nuban and community traditional leader was one of the six-member committee. He went through a tremendous struggle to get his family to safety, out of the conflict zone in South Kordofan. In fact, he and his family found themselves in Kadugli when the clashes erupted and his recollection of events during the first days of the fighting is very disturbing. Mahdi recalls, for example, seeing people shot in the streets for being alleged SPLA-N

supporters. He and his family quickly decided to hike alongside some 150 people who were moving toward the town of Al Hamera. After sixteen days of long walking, SAF Antonovs started bombing the convoy of people, forcing them to run for cover. Mahdi says that in the flurry of activity, the families in the convoy were scattered across a wide area and it took days for some of them to reunite and resume their walk, which finally ended three days later in the town of Reqa. Mahdi's hopes of finding safety in Reqa were short lived, however, as SAF was continuously shelling the town with Antonov bombers and MIG fighter jets. After weeks of fear and desperation he made a resolution to take his family across the border into the territory of South Sudan, and finally arrived at Yida in Unity state. With a glimpse of a smile on his face, he said, "we are finally safe". Yet he and his family may soon have to undertake yet another journey.

There is no unanimous decision among the displaced on UNHCR's plan to relocate the refugees to Nyll, though some have admitted that it may be the only way to improve living conditions and access to services. Some 600 youth and teachers will voluntarily relocate to the site within a month, which the UN hopes will encourage others to follow. UNHCR and its implementing partner INTERSOS are working on providing the conditions for them to settle down and continue attending school, as some 900 children and youth are now attending makeshift schools in temporary structures. According to one Enough Project source, opposition to the relocation idea is very political in nature, as many of the displaced are unwilling to move far from the border for fear that it will not only make eventual return more difficult but will also open the door for those who would rather see the Nuba remain in the South. Others in Yida, who have family members still in South Kordofan, do not wish to move even further from their relatives. Also, according to some Enough Project sources, life in Yida settlement has gradually developed into a routine—there is small marketplace set up and some traders have managed to find ways to bring food and other items to sell, though often at soaring prices.

There is an acute need for better services in Yida settlement. While food is being provided by WFP, water is being shared by local Yida residents who, while welcoming, have been quite overwhelmed by the large number of the displaced. Water and hygiene both remain problematic, with women and children having to wait up to one hour to get water. Alternative sources of water are being planned, but limited access and threats of water contamination are still serious concerns. Additionally, levels of malnutrition among new arrivals are increasing. As OCHA's humanitarian bulletin reports, "Humanitarian assistance therefore focuses on providing food, inclusive of therapeutic feeding, when needed."^v Despite these efforts, the situation continues to be uncertain.

Given the current situation, all parties must urgently find a sustainable solution to the displacement crisis caused by the conflict in South Kordofan. Relocation seems to be the preferred option of the Unity State government and UNCHR, but many of the displaced continue to resist the idea for various reasons. According to the latest OCHA humanitarian bulletin, leaders of the displaced are negotiating with humanitarian agencies while UNHCR is setting up wait stations along the route to the new site in preparation for movement. Whether the displaced will ultimately choose to move again, however, remains to be seen.

ⁱ OCHA, “Statement on south Kordofan by Under-Secretary –General for Humanitarian Affairs Valerie Amos,” 21 June 2011, available at <http://ochanet.unocha.org/p/Documents/South%20Kordofan%20ERC%20statement%2021%20June%202011.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ Enough Project interview with representatives of the displaced and UNHCR, Bentiu, Unity State.

ⁱⁱⁱ Norwegian Refugee Council, *Camp Coordination and Camp Management Handbook*, 2008, p. 193, available at http://www.nrc.no/arch/_img/9293559.pdf.

^{iv} Bonifacio Taban, “Over 5,000 Refugees from South Kordofan Arrive in Unity State for Settlement,” 06 August 2011, available at <http://reliefweb.int/node/439415>.

^v OCHA, *Weekly Humanitarian Bulletin*, 22 September 2011, available at <http://reliefweb.int/node/448878>.