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The project to end genocide and crimes against humanity

Humanitarian Needs Assessment in Sudan's Blue Nile State

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December 2013

Editor's Note:

Given the limits on access to rebel-held areas of Sudan's Blue Nile state, there has been little information made public about the situation civilians face. In an effort to document the scope of their needs, an international non-governmental organization conducted a series of verification missions to rebel-held parts of the state in mid-2013. Due to security concerns, the organization wishes to remain anonymous. However, to raise awareness about the situation, they have requested the Enough Project make public their findings.

Since September 2011, civilians in Sudan's Blue Nile state have suffered a systematic campaign of collective punishment characterized by aerial bombardment and ethnic cleansing.¹ Following disputed elections, a failed attempt to disarm rebels in Blue Nile quickly developed into a full-fledged armed conflict between the Sudan Armed Forces, or SAF, and a coalition of rebel groups, the Sudan Revolutionary Forces, or SRF.² Many sought refuge in neighboring South Sudan and Ethiopia. Those remaining, particularly civilians from Malik Agar's Ingessana Hills were subjected to the SAF's ground offensive in early 2013, leading to another wave of displacement.³ As of June 2013, according to the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, there were approximately 119,220 internally displaced persons, or IDPs, in Blue Nile.⁴ Now, as a renewed dry season campaign begins, at least 2,000 more have already sought refuge in South Sudan.⁵ As a result, at least 121,000 refugees from Blue Nile are currently in South Sudan's Upper Nile state, and 38,000 have found their way to Ethiopia.⁶

The ongoing conflict has created a critical humanitarian situation. During the first half of 2013, there was a significant opening of access to government-controlled areas in Blue Nile state. The World Food Programme delivered food assistance to 84,000 people across five localities, and the United Nations refugee agency delivered emergency shelter and non-food items to 5,000 people.⁷

However, the Sudanese government still denies humanitarian aid organizations access to rebel-held areas of the state. According to the U.N., an estimated 185,000 people needed relief assistance in Blue Nile as of September 30, 2013.⁸ Heavy flooding in August further complicated the tenuous food security situation in the area. According to the October 2013 report from the Famine Early Warning Systems Network, or FEWS Net, displaced populations in areas of Blue Nile state controlled by Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North, or SPLM-N, face "crisis" levels of food insecurity.⁹ Anonymous researchers working in Blue Nile state found:

- A dry spell in June and July of 2013 burnt the first seeds that were planted in large swathes of SPLM-N controlled areas, affecting the harvest of 75 percent of the population. Local markets also lack essential commodities, and widespread poverty among host communities makes them unable to stimulate the market.
- Internally Displaced Persons, or IDPs, and host communities have been using a variety of coping mechanisms to deal with food insecurity. Families have reduced the number of meals they consume to just one per day. Many interviewed families confirmed that they have only been eating porridge. Other common coping mechanisms used include feeding on wild fruits, leaves, and roots; families with livestock are selling or slaughtering their animals. General observations of hair and skin color indicated malnutrition among all ages, particularly for children below five years of age.
- Food instability has improved for people with access to fishing opportunities, cattle, seeds, or refugee camps and local markets along the border. Households with access to seeds and tools are employing small-scale agricultural activity by cultivating kitchen gardens.
- IDPs and host communities lack essential emergency shelter materials and non-food items. As a result, they are living in collapsing buildings, under sheds, and in forests with vegetation that provides the necessary cover from being spotted by bomber aircraft. The most vulnerable populations, including children, the elderly, and the sick, are sleeping in the open, exposed to cold and harsh weather.

- While international actors have occasionally conducted field health visits to accessible areas with reported critical health conditions, consistent access to health facilities is largely limited or nonexistent. Private health service providers lack resources to meet the needs of the community, and their services are often unaffordable. Some must travel roughly 65 kilometers to either Doro or Jammam camps, in South Sudan, to seek medical attention. The most common ailments observed during the field research missions include malaria, diarrhea, eye infections, cough, abdominal cramps, asthmatic attacks, skin rashes, and tetanus.
- Existing boreholes are not functional due to a lack of spare parts and technical expertise needed to maintain them. In addition, 40 to 50 percent of water points are broken due to a lack of maintenance. As a consequence, women and children are forced to walk distances of three to five hours, or more, to find water sources.
- Due to the absence of latrines at IDP sites, there are signs of open defecation. The risk of contamination of unprotected water points and community water sources is high. A lack of clean water sources has resulted in skin infections and poor personal hygiene.
- Children do not have access to any form of education as schools have remained closed since September 2011, when they became targets for aerial bombardments.

Continued violence is placing greater stress on households. While the Blue Nile population has shown exceptional resilience, the small harvest and the inability of aid organizations to access rebel-controlled areas could place these communities at even greater risk. However, the following interventions could mitigate the suffering:

- Unimpeded humanitarian access to the region, including rebel-held areas
- Increased access to medical assistance
- Dispatch of skilled technicians for borehole and water source repairs
- Distribution of seeds and tools

Endnotes

1 Architects of Atrocity (Satellite Sentinel Project and Enough Project, Washington: March 2013) available at http://www.enoughproject.org/files/Architects_of_Atrocity.pdf.

2 Sudan's Spreading Conflict (II): War in Blue Nile, (International Crisis Group, Brussels: June 2013) available at [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/204-sudans-spreading-conflict-ii-war-in-blue-nile.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/204-sudans-spreading-conflict-ii-war-in-blue-nile.pdf).

3 Matthew LeRiche, "Sudan's Bloody Periphery: The Toll on Civilians from the War in Blue Nile State," (Washington: Enough Project, 2013) available at http://www.enoughproject.org/files/SudansBloodyPeriphery_FieldDispatch.pdf.

4 Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, June 30, 2013, Second issue, six monthly report <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCoQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fdata.unhcr.org%2FSouthSudan%2Fdownload.php%3Fid%3D611&ei=4LGSURPOH6vLsATo-YHoDw&usg=AFQjCNGswre3hL9zeGRY0zeyx6-Rc3FXVg&sig2=h8F3I2yIE8MFC3b4QJxlyQ&bvm=bv.56988011,d.cWc>.

5 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Humanitarian Bulletin Sudan, Issue 46 | 11 – 17 November 2013, available at http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OCHA_Sudan_Weekly_Humanitarian_Bulletin_Issue_46_0.pdf.

6 U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, "Sudanese Refugees in South Sudan, Upper Nile," <http://data.unhcr.org/SouthSudan/region.php?id=25&country=251> (last accessed November 2013); UNHCR, "Sudanese Refugees in Ethiopia," http://data.unhcr.org/Sudanese_Refugees_in_Ethiopia/region.php?id=23&country=65.

7 U.N. OCHA, "Sudan Humanitarian Update: January – June 2013," available at http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OCHA_Sudan_Humanitarian_Update_Jan_Jun_2013.pdf; Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, "Humanitarian and human rights situation of the IDPs and war affected civilians in the SPLM/A-North controlled area of South Kordofan and Blue Nile States," June 2013, p. 4.

8 U.N. OCHA, "Sudan: Humanitarian Bulletin," September 30, 2013, available at http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Sudan_Dashboard_30_Sep_2013%20%281%29.pdf.

9 U.N. OCHA, "Sudan Humanitarian Bulletin: 28 October – 3 November 2013," available at <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Humanitarian%20Bulletin%20Sudan%203%20Oct%202013.pdf>; Famine Early Warning Systems Net, "Estimated food security conditions, 3rd Quarter 2013," available at <http://www.fews.net/pages/country.aspx?gb=sd&l=en> (last accessed November 2013).