



Sudan: The Journey Home

Mayo Camp, Khartoum

March 2006

Khartoum, Sudan—Tomorrow is a day of hope for Nyanluba Daw. After 18 years in a camp for the internally displaced on the outskirts of Khartoum she is finally headed home to South Sudan. Her decision is a voluntary one. Everything she owns is packed up. The bigger items have already been taken to the bus stop. A few suitcases are scattered on the floor, tightly closed and laying one on top of the other.

With the exception of a couple of chairs, probably borrowed from a neighbor, there is nothing left in this small mud dwelling that has hosted Nialuba's family of six for almost two decades.

"I have been waiting for this day to come for years. I want to be sure to get to Panaru, my village, before the rainy season starts so that we can plant some crops and start making a living for ourselves," says Nialuba, while her four children gather around and listen carefully to her every word.

They were all born in Mayo camp, one of the many settlements for the internally displaced around the capital that hosts about 15,000 people from all over Sudan. Life in the camp is all Nialuba's children know. CARE is one of the few agencies that provide basic humanitarian relief in this camp, primarily supplemental feeding for pregnant women, child care centers and monthly food rations.

The conflict in Darfur is drawing most of the aid away from these camps in and around Khartoum where, according to surveys by UNOCHA, about two million people live. Overall aid cuts to Sudan have forced many agencies to close down programs for the internally displaced.

With the exception of their father, Nialuba's family will leave tomorrow morning at the crack of dawn. "My husband wants to stay behind so that he can resign from his job next month and collect his pension," explains Nialuba. "He has worked as a baggage handler at

CARE is one of the few agencies that provide basic humanitarian relief in the camps

the national airport for the last 15 years. He deserves to be recognized for that and get what he is owed."

Her eldest son, Nyok, is standing to the right of Nialuba. Like the majority of Sudanese, he is tall and slim. His stern look betrays his relatively young age of 18.

As the eldest son he knows that he is going to be responsible for the family until his father can join them. Unlike many other young men

in the camp, Nyok has pursued his studies and is currently enrolled in secondary school.

"I want to be a lawyer," he says when asked about his future. "I want to know about the rights of my people and be able to defend them in court." Nialuba looks at him proudly and smiles, her gaze drifting to the floor.

Nyok says that he is determined to continue his studies. "He will go to university either in Bentiu State or Juba or he will come back to Khartoum," says his mother. They seem undeterred and incredibly optimistic despite the many challenges that Sudanese returnees face when they go to the South.

Those who have voluntarily gone and come back to Khartoum talk about the lack of services and the continued insecurity that people face in certain parts of South Sudan, even though there is a Comprehensive Peace Agreement in place between the North and the South.

Nialuba and her family must surely have heard about these issues. Word of mouth travels fast among refugees and internally displaced. No one heads home unless someone else has done it before or they get news from a relative that things are OK and the journey is worth undertaking. But staying put in the camps may also mean forced relocation and increased insecurity.

According to UNOCHA, at least 665,000 Sudanese Internally Displaced living in camps and squatter areas in Khartoum have had their homes demolished and have been relocated at some point over the past 16 years. Demolitions and relocations have been on the increase since 2003.

Over the past year more than 300,000 IDPs have had their homes



After living for almost two decades as a displaced person, Nyanluba is heading back home with her family

demolished and have been relocated by government security forces to El Fateh, a desert area 38km north of Omdurman, where basic services are not available, and job opportunities are non-existent.

Money for transport is the first big challenge returnees face. Because the conditions are still precarious, international NGOs and UN agencies do not want to encourage a mass exodus by providing free transport.

On the other hand, international aid is also not being sufficiently directed at host communities who have often not fared any better and yet are expected to absorb the flood of returnees. This situation leads to increased tension between returnees and host communities.

“It is a bit of a catch 22 because the international community does not want to encourage people to go back to South Sudan until basic services like schools and health are in place,” explains Ibrahim Eldukheri, Program Manager for CARE in the Kurdofoan region, one of the transit areas in the returnees’ journey home.

“On the other hand, services will not be provided until people start heading home. We need to advocate more strongly about these issues so that people will want to go home because they have something to go home to.”

In the meantime, returnees take their chances and choose to either go by bus, depending on how far their final destination is, or make it to Kosti, a transit town in the Kurdofoan region from where they take the steamer down the White Nile.

“I am ready to go back to my village,” says Nialuba. “I am tired of washing clothes in the homes of the Arabs. I know that the soap I use is going through my veins and reaching my heart and making me sick. This is why I must leave together with my family. We have stayed here long enough.”

In areas of South Sudan, including Unity State where Nyaluba is headed to, CARE is setting up livelihood programs aimed at promoting better integration of the returnees and decreasing tensions between them and the host community.

Indeed, there are limited options for making a living in the camps around Khartoum. Because Mayo camp is the closest to the capital, the men have a better chance to land a job in or around the city. Nialuba’s husband is one of the lucky ones.

Women, on the other hand, either wash clothes in people’s homes or brew home-made beer, an activity that is illegal in Islamic North Sudan but that yields far more cash than any other available choice. The risk is getting busted in one of the periodic police raids into the camps and spending a few days in jail, in addition to seeing your house being looted and your property destroyed.

Apart from these meager activities, the people in the camps live off monthly food rations given by organizations like CARE and are entirely dependent on the goodwill of the donor community and the Government of Sudan to address their needs. Most of the current international aid to Sudan is earmarked for the victims of the conflict in Darfur.

Health services in the camps around Khartoum are practically non-existent though a few international NGOs do their best to pro-



Nyanluba knows that the future in South Sudan is still uncertain but she is determined to go back anyway and to try her luck

vide the basics, when funding is available. Nialuba herself lost four girl children in Mayo camp. One died of a heart complication, the rest from Kalazar and typhoid.

According to the World Health Organization, the main causes of morbidity and mortality in Sudan are infectious and parasitic diseases like tuberculosis, diarrhea, malaria, measles and acute respiratory infections.

Life conditions in the camps are appalling and it is no wonder that Nialuba will try her luck by heading South despite the uncertainty. “If we can cultivate our own plot of land, we will not go hungry and in a year’s time we shall have enough crops to sell at the market,” says Nialuba. “I desperately want a better future for my children.”

BACKGROUND DATA

- 4 million estimated Internally Displaced People in Sudan (IDPs)
- 2 million additionally displaced in the Darfur region alone;
- 2 million displaced in and around Khartoum;
- An assessment led by IOM and released at the end of June 2005 that surveyed almost 45,000 IDPs in and around Khartoum found that closer to two thirds of all IDPs in Khartoum would return;
- Of these 32 % stated that they would return within a six-month period and another 35% said that they would return after 2005. About 53% of IDPs will return to Nuba Mountains and 48% to South Sudan. 22% of IDPs said that they would not return, while 11% were unsure as of yet;
- Maternal mortality per 100,000 childbirths is an average of 504 in the northern part of the country and 1,700 in the South;
- Reproductive health in the north faces many constraints, only 12% of deliveries occur in a health facility, and only 57% of all deliveries are attended by trained health personnel. In the transitional areas less than 40% of women receive any antenatal care and fewer than 5% of births take place in a health facility;
- In Sudan there are still less than two doctors for every 10,000 people (against a regional average of 11.7) and even fewer nurses and midwives with only 8 per 10,000 (against a regional average of 22.2);

Sources: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the World Health Organization 2006 consolidated appeal and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).