

Thousands Left Destitute in Sudan Border Dispute

As politicians wrangle ahead of an early December deadline over the still-disputed status of the oil-rich region of Abyei, straddling the border of Sudan and South Sudan, local church leaders appeal for help in the face of a potential humanitarian crisis.

Both governments have been asked to approve an African Union proposal to resolve the status of the Abyei region. Sudan is stalling, keen to avoid the proposed referendum next year on self-determination for an area the size of Lebanon, a referendum which has already been previously postponed.

While arguments over nationality drag on, thousands of people face near-starvation in villages devastated by the conflict—particularly since May 2011 when a combination of northern militias, led by tanks and 5,000 Sudanese Army troops, destroyed roughly 90 percent of Abyei town.

Now a major humanitarian crisis is unfolding as people displaced by fighting start to return to desolate villages, where even water boreholes have been badly damaged, following the withdrawal of Sudanese government troops in June 2012.

Displacement camps en route, already home to thousands and hugely over-stretched, are unable to feed them. Many are left to dig for roots and forage for edible leaves.

In Abyei town and its surrounds, a frequent flashpoint for violence, people are returning to find there is nothing left of their villages—as occupying Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) destroyed almost all buildings and infrastructure. Abyei is still a “no-go” area for most aid agencies, due to tight

restrictions imposed by Khartoum and security concerns.

Humanitarian needs grow worse by the day, according to church leaders. They estimate that up to 20,000 people have arrived in the Abyei area already, with 2,000 reportedly arriving in Abyei town in a single week recently.

One of the most appalling situations is to be found in 60 km from Abyei town in Agok, a major staging post for returnees and the biggest centre for internally displaced people (IDPs) in the area.

With their own church premises and compounds almost completely destroyed too, church leaders formed an Inter-Church Committee (ICC), representing Roman Catholic, Episcopal Church of Sudan and Pentecostal congregations, to coordinate relief. Their work recently received a boost when international partners managed the difficult logistics to deliver a convoy of 40 tons of sorghum, 1,500 mosquito nets and medicine to Agok.

A team member involved in this delivery in late October described the situation as “shocking.” “Occupation by the SAF has left the area in complete shambles,” he said. “The infrastructure is completely destroyed. Is Abyei important only because of its oil ... and not because of its indigenous people?”

The ICC is providing food, water, shelter and education, as well as peace-building initiatives and trauma-healing; in the longer term, it wants also to extend its areas such as healthcare and rebuilding livelihoods.

Church leaders say the few aid agencies still working in Agok, such as the World Food Programme, give IDPs priority over returnees in food distributions; even then, they say only half of IDPs are receiving food. Many of the IDPs in Agok have been there since the Sudanese troops invaded in May 2011,

displacing up to 150,000 people. Many had also been displaced in earlier violence between SAF and Southern troops, in 2008.

People still shelter under emergency plastic sheeting and grass mats—and now it's the rainy season, which brings rampant malaria and other water-borne diseases. One of the model church schools in Agok caters for up to 4,000 children – in space intended for 400.

The team member said he was struck by “a pervading sense of despondency. A great injustice has passed almost unnoticed before us. Displaced people feel they have been deserted by their own, and failed by their government who are there to protect them and create stability, and to uphold their word and promises.”

The ICC says local churches have been one of the few organisations to offer consistent support to IDPs since 2011, opening up their homes, building and compounds. ICC Chairman Father Biyong says: “They lost all their worldly belongings in the carnage that took place there. Due to the nature of the conflict, they were targeted because of their ethnic identity and religious affiliation.”

An independent advocate for Abyei's population Tim Flatman, who's visited the area several times, reports: “I doubt whether the community could have survived during the period of displacement without the influence of the Church. It gave people hope when it would have been easy to lose hope, and for the community to be scattered across South Sudan. When INGOs failed to get assistance to Agok, where 90,000 of the community were based, the Church was the vehicle by which surprise donations were made which replenished supplies for the most vulnerable as they were running out.”

There's been widespread praise for the mainly Ethiopian peacekeeping troops with the UN Interim Security Force for

Abyei (UNISFA), tasked with verifying the demilitarisation of Abyei, protecting the oil infrastructure and facilitating the delivery of humanitarian aid for six months from June. Yet, even UNISFA's presence has not prevented pro-government of Sudan militias in Abyei from intimidating returnees, according to the ICC.

The churches are keen to preserve a strong Christian witness in an area so close to Sudan, where President al-Bashir has promised to extend Sharia law. The aid delivery included bibles and three motorbikes to enable church staff to travel between Agok and Abyei.

For now, the church's efforts are focused on meeting urgent humanitarian needs, says ICC, but its witness is strong. Pastor Santino of the Episcopal Church of Sudan reports: "The church has grown in Agok, with more coming to faith as they realise God is the only one they can rely on."

Abyei was described as a "historical bridge" between North and South Sudan in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement which ended decades of civil war, yet it has become a political football. Its strategic location and mineral deposits make it important to both sides.

Tensions between Sudan and South Sudan brought them to the brink of all-out war earlier this year, prompting the UN to set a deadline for both sides to reach agreement on all outstanding issues.

On Sept. 27, both sides ratified agreements on trade, oil and security, facilitated by the African Union High-level Implementation Panel (AUHIP). Yet, there is still no agreement on Abyei and five other disputed border areas, which most observers see as vital for securing lasting peace between the two nations.

South Sudan has agreed a Sept. 21 African Union proposal by chief mediator Thabo Mbeki to resolve the Abyei question. Sudan, however, has so far rejected it, due to ongoing concerns about the proposed referendum in Abyei and associated voting rights. Sudan was dismayed that Arab Misseriya nomadic herdsman, who are loyal to the North, were not included as eligible voters; these nomads graze cattle for part of each year on land that is home to the Ngok Dinka, who are mainly Christian and closely linked to the South. Khartoum insists a political solution is preferable to a vote.

The AUHIP has given both sides six weeks from Oct. 24 to reach consensus on the status of Abyei. If they do not, the AU will endorse the proposal as "final and binding" and will seek endorsement by the UN Security Council.

ICC also has made an urgent appeal to the worldwide church for prayer. "Pray for the security situation, for peace and stability. Pray that those who make decisions will make them in favour of the people of the land, that those who sit there will remember we are a people as they are."