

Briefing paper on Humanitarian Situation in Eastern Sudan

October 2009

General Context:

For almost four decades, Sudan has been the scene of intermittent conflict. An estimated 2.5 million people have died in the past two decades from war-related causes and famine, and more than four million others have been displaced¹. Economic disparities, social factors and power sharing are major contributors to the Sudanese conflict.

The Sudan Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement have formally ended the 21-year old civil war and triggered a six-year Interim Period. While the ongoing conflict in Darfur has led to a major humanitarian crisis with serious political repercussions, it has also negatively affected the implementation of the CPA. This is having an impact on the whole of Sudan, including the especially unstable East of the country. Efforts to find a political solution continue, but the Darfur peace process is likely to be very slow. This situation has been exacerbated by the failure of the 2009 rainy season. There is an emerging food gap between consumption needs and cereal production; the size of the gap will become clear on December 2009 after completion of the post harvest assessment².

The stock of vegetation in North Sudan is being depleted for a number of reasons: (i) most of Northern Sudan lies in the sahelian belt which is characterized by low and variable rainfall with increasing incidence of drought; (ii) increasing competition over the already limited natural resource base; (iii) live trees are cut for fire-wood, charcoal and timber for construction. The result of all of this is continuous pressure on natural resources, in turn putting pressure and forcing change on the livelihoods of pastoralists and subsistence farmer groups.

Eastern Region Context:

Some of the world's most abject poverty, suffering and greatest levels of inequality can be found in the rural areas of Red Sea State. Most of the population are dependent upon agriculture and/or pastoralist production, but their livelihoods are threatened by hostile environmental conditions created by increasing pressure on the natural resource base³. Women are often the most affected by poverty and inequality. It is a challenge to

¹ UN News Centre and Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre IDMC, update April 2009

² Statement made by the federal Minister of Agriculture in Al ayam News paper in 21 Oct 2009

³ The urban population in the East is estimated to be 35% while the rural population represents 53% and nomadic pastoralist groups represent 12%³. The population is characterized by cultural and ethnic

overcome the unequal patriarchal structures, and associated attitudes and beliefs that result in discrimination against women. Beja women are famously disenfranchised in this way.

The region has also received great numbers of internally displaced people (IDPs) from different parts of Sudan eg following the drought of the 1980s that hit the western part of the country, as well as the conflict displaced from within the region. IDPs have settled in what have become slum areas of towns and around the main villages. In addition, throughout the last 30 years the Eastern region of Sudan has been the main destination for refugees from Eritrea and Ethiopia. The recent outbreak of war between Eritrea and Ethiopia has resulted in a further large influx of refugees into the region. Official figures estimate the refugee population to be 180,000. The presence of such large numbers of displaced and refugees in the state create pressure on the limited and already eroded social services, especially health and education. It also puts pressure on the saturated informal economy leading to high rates of unemployment in the various related sectors⁴.

Overall, access to government services is very limited if not completely inaccessible. The recently decentralized system of government has not been accompanied by an allocation of resources to marginalized localities. Meanwhile, the expulsion of several INGOs following the ICC's arrest warrant against President Bashir has left big gaps in development, rehabilitation and humanitarian aid in this highly sensitive and poorly served region. The INGO presence served a secondary purpose of international 'witness' and watchdog. Following the departure of Oxfam GB and IRC, two major players in Red Sea State, there is now a heavy burden on SOS Sahel UK, ACCORD and MSF Belgium, the only three INGOs left in the region.

In short, livelihoods are under great stress. Community coping mechanisms are very weak, partly due to the physical isolation and poor infrastructure, but also because one of the main income generating activities, production of charcoal, generates very little if any revenue, due to high government taxation. Another new economic activity in this area is manual gold mining, but with very high transportation and processing costs this generates an insignificant profit. All these factors combine to lock these rural communities into a vicious cycle of poverty⁵. At a recent planning meeting between INGOs and UN agencies in Kassala in September 2009, there was consensus amongst the NGOs that the problems of the Eastern Region are chronic and require long-term development assistance and commitment.

diversity. The indigenous Beja is considered as the dominant ethnic group in the region. The Hadendowa group is the largest of the Beja tribe. The second largest Beja group is the Beni Amir tribe occupying the area along the Sudan-Eritrea borders.

⁴ SOS Sahel exploratory report November 2008

⁵ SOS Sahel assessment report, July 2009, rural port Sudan

Current situation:

The Eastern Sudan Peace agreement is now 3 years old (signed in October 2006) yet its implementation has run into many problems and the most important parts have not yet been implemented. These include incorporation of the agreement into the Sudan Constitution, the establishment of a coordination council for the Eastern states and the rehabilitation of the war-affected areas and removal of landmines. Senior politicians from the Eastern Front describe the agreement as not having brought real benefits for the people in the east.

On top of this fragile political situation, the Eastern Region has suffered drought and consequently a poor agricultural season in the last two years. Widespread failure of the sorghum harvest in the high productive areas (El Gash, Gadarif and Tokar) in 2008 and again in 2009 has resulted in high levels of food insecurity within the pastoralist communities. Grain prices have increased from SDG 70 to SDG 97 from the second half of 2008 and continue to rise⁶.

WFP and FAO are preparing to carry out their annual assessment, but it is already clear to agencies on the ground that the situation is alarming and could easily develop into an emergency against the backdrop of the now limited INGO presence. Yet donor interest has shifted away from the eastern region just at the time when it is accelerating towards a serious food security crisis. SOS Sahel is calling for donors, especially DFID, to re-engage with the fragile eastern region of the Sudan.

⁶ Community livelihoods strategies and 2009 food security expectation in Kassala State, By HAC, WFP & FAO, January 2009