

SUDAN: 75 killed, thousands displaced as southern clans fight

NAIROBI, 12 May (IRIN) - At least 75 people have been reported killed and thousands more displaced in southern Sudan's Lakes State since interclan violence, sparked by cattle rustling and disputes over pasture and water, erupted on 24 April, aid workers said on Wednesday.

"About 4,000 people, mostly women and children, fled when their villages in Yirol and Awirial [counties] were attacked," Rene McGuffin, spokesperson for the UN World Food Programme (WFP), told IRIN. "It was reported by local villagers that at least 75 people were killed."

"On 24 April, we assisted the wounded in whatever way we could and evacuated six wounded people to our facilities in Yirol town [east of Rumbek, the provisional capital of southern Sudan]," Paul Conneally, communications coordinator for the International Committee of the Red Cross in Sudan, told IRIN.

On the same day, unidentified men looted 23 mt of food from WFP facilities in the town of Bunagok, southeast of Yirol, as the organisation prepared to start distributing it.

"WFP is very concerned about the growing unrest in Yirol County over the past two weeks and the increased cases of insecurity and displacement as a result of interclan fighting," McGuffin added.

The hostilities started as households in the region began to experience food shortfalls as stocks from the previous harvest started to run out and the June-August hunger season approached.

The USAID-funded Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS Net) said in its April food security update for southern Sudan that the influx of returnees, most of whom arrived with nothing, had increased competition for locally available food sources. The report also stated that this year's hunger season "may be much worse for many households than in the past five years".

Households in Lakes State had reportedly started rationing available sorghum and had increased their reliance on wild fruits for food, according to FEWS Net, which also reported grain shortages in the main market centres.

As a result of the heightened interclan tensions over grazing and water and cattle-raid disputes, the report added, livestock were forced to stay in areas with less pasture, resulting in reduced milk production.

"In [the villages of] Apang and Anyang, people lost their cattle, their seeds and many of their possessions during the fighting," McGuffin said. "Many had already prepared their fields for cultivation."

A number of people took refuge in the town of Padak, across the Nile from Yirol. An international assessment team that visited the town on Sunday found about 2,000 women and children with no shelter and very few possessions, and provided them with emergency food rations.

The WFP spokesperson said an interagency food-security assessment carried out in April found that the hunger gap was starting earlier than normal this year, as poor rains in 2004 had led to reduced harvests. The gap was expected to last until August or September, depending on when the new harvest became available.

"Incidences of insecurity and displacement add to the challenges faced by relief agencies," McGuffin noted. The start of the seasonal rains in the southernmost part of Sudan had complicated arrangements for food distribution, she added.

Lack of funding was another impediment, McGuffin said. WFP had only received 25 percent of the estimated US \$302 million required to feed an average of 3.2 million people a month in the south, east and transitional areas of Sudan in 2005.

The war between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and the Sudanese government erupted in 1983 when rebels in the south took up arms against authorities based in the north and demanded greater autonomy.

The fighting has killed at least two million people, uprooted four million others and forced another 550,000 to flee to neighbouring countries.

On 9 January the Sudanese government and the SPLM/A signed a Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Nairobi, Kenya, ending 21 years of civil war, but progress in the implementation of the agreement has been slow.

[ENDS]

Copyright (c) UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2005