

Sudan Project on Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) Abyei Center for Peace and Humanitarian Action

The Brookings Institution Project on Internal Displacement

BACKGROUND

The United Nations Secretary-General's Special Representative for Internally Displaced Persons, Dr. Francis M. Deng, on December 14, 2000 received this year's City of Rome Prize for Peace and Humanitarian Action, for his services to the cause of the internally displaced. The award includes a cash component to be used to promote the cause of displaced people in Africa. Dr. Deng would like to see these funds utilized to assist displaced persons in his own country of the Sudan, the worst hit in the world.

The scale of internal displacement in the Sudan as a result of both armed conflict and natural disasters, such as drought and famine, with numbers broadly estimated at over 4 million, is the highest in the world. Not least because of the numbers involved, conditions in many of the IDP camps are dismal, with many people struggling to survive at the margins of existence.

Resettlement, integration with host communities, and return to areas of origin, are all seen as essential components of longer-term solutions, and the international community stands ready to work with, and assist, the Government of the Sudan and counterparts in pursuing these objectives.

RETURN TO PLACES OF ORIGIN

Notwithstanding patterns of endemic conflict in some parts of the country, there are many areas, including in Southern Sudan, where peace has prevailed for some years now and where the people are striving to achieve a return to normal life-styles.

This combined with the poor prospects of those remaining in IDP camps around Khartoum and elsewhere, has sparked a visible process of spontaneous return to areas of origin over the last two years or so. Movements of populations have been both within areas controlled by forces in opposition to the Government of Sudan, and cross-line from areas controlled by the Government to areas controlled by others. In his report on displacement in the Sudan, following his mission to the country in 1992, Dr. Deng wrote that "as much as possible people be given the choice and assisted to go back to their areas of origin or to settlements close to them. They should also be accorded the protection and assistance necessary to resume normal, self-sustaining rural life. Those who choose not to go back should be assisted to move freely anywhere in the country, including urban centers, and given the necessary assistance to become ordinary integrated citizens. Those who choose to remain in the camps should not only be given the services of the kind described to me but should be assisted with materials to build more comfortable and healthier accommodations to help compensate for their isolation."

At the recent meeting in Geneva in early November 2000 of the tripartite Technical Committee on Humanitarian Assistance (TCHA), both the Government of the Sudan and the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) reaffirmed their commitment to the freedom of movement of the citizens of the Sudan within the territory of the State of the Sudan.

A particular movement of displaced peoples returning to areas of origin over the past two years has been that from the IDP camps around Khartoum and elsewhere in Government-controlled areas, to northern Bahr El Ghazal in SPLM-controlled territory. Numbers are indeterminate, but could be as high as 30,000 so far.

The transit crossover point for these particular returning IDPs has to date been the town of Abyei in South Kordofan, which is situated on the dividing line between Government of the Sudan and SPLM military forces. UN and NGO's have already provided some ad hoc emergency relief assistance at Abyei for the IDPs in transit. In recent years, Abyei has been a cross-roads to IDPs from the South moving northwards and IDPs returning to the South from camps in the North.

Abyei, also the home town of Dr. Deng, has historically been a bridge of peace and harmony between the South and the North. Indeed, Dr. Deng has written extensively on the historical role of his area as a symbol of peace and national reconciliation. By the same token, Dr. Deng sees the Prize as an opportunity for revitalizing the strategic significance of this area as a model of peace, coexistence and national reconciliation.

OUTLINE OF THE PROJECT

It is envisaged that the international humanitarian community would assist both the Government of the Sudan and the SPLM in the establishment of a properly-resourced transit center at Abyei which would cater for the immediate needs of the IDPs before the final stage of return to places of origin or a search for alternative settlement. This could include, for example, the provision of emergency food, decent shelters, seeds, and tools, and vaccinations for children. It could also include infrastructural improvement such as clinic, potable water, sanitation facilities, and a properly developed and regulated crossover point. Beyond these relief and survival activities, the center will assist in capacity-building for self-reliance and conduct activities aimed at fostering respect for human rights, peaceful coexistence and harmonious interaction among the various ethnic groups that meet and interact at this national cross-roads.

Dr. Deng has endorsed this broad approach, and it is thus envisaged that the funds which he receives from the City of Rome award would be matched by contributions from elsewhere. Several United Nations agencies have so far undertaken to explore immediately prospects for identifying matching funds and resources, among them UNDP, UNICEF, WFP, FAO and UNHCHR. Donor Governments and organizations may also wish to contribute. The Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator, Mr. Roger Guarda, will explore the prospects for additional funding in Khartoum, as well as initiating a process of consultations both with the Government of the Sudan and others. The full project will

then be developed in the light of contributions and pledges received to add to what has been pledged by Dr. Deng.

In his acceptance statement on the occasion of the award, Dr. Deng had this to say about the relevancy of the Prize in addressing the crisis of internal displacement among his people: "When the Secretary-General first asked me to assume the position of his Representative on Internally Displaced Persons, I told him that I was honored, but wanted to know from his people the details before giving him my final response. He responded by saying: 'Francis, this is a problem that is not only a global crisis; it is one that affects your continent the most; and in Africa, it affects your country, the Sudan, the most; and in the Sudan, it is your people in the South who are the worst hit. I cannot see how you can say no!' With this prize today, the City of Rome has met all the aspects of the challenge as the Secretary-General outlined them: You have recognized the global crisis, focused on the continent of Africa and, with the prize money, supported my people, the worst affected in the Sudan, and indeed in the world."