

South Sudan in Uganda

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Imagine...in fear of any strangers who could rob, shoot or rape you, you have walked for several days, carrying what few possessions you could, with little or no food or water. You have left your home, your animals, your land and crops behind. If you do have any money, it's in South Sudanese pounds, which have been reduced to minimal value by economic chaos. The chances are you are a woman or a child... you manage to walk across the border and are taken to a reception centre, and from there are allocated a place at a Refugee Camp. They take no notice of you trying to explain that you have family at a different camp. You try to say you have been separated from your children/mother but no-one seems to understand... You are traumatized by what you have witnessed and what you are having to endure. Where is God in all this? And yet it is only faith in God which sustains you and gives you strength to continue.

This is a situation replicated thousands of times, as **refugees continue to pour** from war-torn and famine-ridden South Sudan into neighbouring Uganda. And 85% of these refugees are women and children. Near Moyo, where we live, there is a settlement called Palorinya, the second largest refugee camp in Uganda after Bidi-Bidi, with a population of about 185,000. It's divided into camps and zones, overseen by UNHCR and a Camp Commandant. It is near the river, which is why no-one else wanted the land, and many families, having already undergone the trauma of having to leave their home, have subsequently been flooded out of their allocated space, and had to move to another plot with their meagre possessions.

There are now **over a million refugees in Uganda**. Initially, the Uganda government allocated 60 square metres to each family, with the UNHCR providing "carpets" (tarpaulins) and materials to create a poor shelter and some basic equipment. However, with the increased refugee population, this has now decreased to 30 square metres (not enough to plant sufficient food). The Kuku people, who are the majority tribe in Palorinya, are cultivators and hard workers and used to providing for their own needs, so this increases their despair at their situation. Yet, the Uganda government, to their credit, unlike their Western counterparts, maintain an open policy. When speaking during the visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury to our local camp in August, the Uganda Minister for Refugees asked himself the rhetorical question "What is our breaking point?" – and answered by saying – "There isn't one: as long as our neighbours and brothers are in need, we welcome them."

There is supposedly a **food allocation** by WFP every month – 12kg grain and 6 kg beans per person, plus cooking oil and salt. However, in October grain was scarce and the rains delayed access, so the distribution wasn't started until October 26th, and it takes two weeks. What do you do when there is no food and your family is hungry? Unfortunately, out of desperation, some travel back to South Sudan where their own cultivated food is going to waste – and at least eight from Palorinya were killed in the

attempt. The allocation of food, even when it happens, is not sufficient – refugees talk of having to sell 1 kg grain in order to pay for grinding the rest into the flour which is needed, and another being sold for soap, which decreases the amount of food. And sometimes the beans are not in good condition and are inedible.



Jerry cans lined up for a water delivery

Water and health are also huge problems. Tankers deliver water to the water tanks in the different zones (divided into areas/villages by tanks – i.e. you live Tank 4, Zone 2, Morobi, etc). In the rainy season access roads become almost impassable. The alternative is getting water from the river. And neither source is healthy. There is a lot of disease, especially malaria, and medicines can be scarce, or very expensive. And yet, ask a parent on the camp what is the greatest need, and generally they won't say shelter, food, water or health – but **education**. For children and youth to be idle and not be occupied, not to have the opportunity for education, increases problems and does not bode well for their future. Those children fortunate enough to get a place at a local Ugandan school find themselves in huge classes, as numbers are now inflated by incoming refugees, making education almost untenable – yet this is only for those who manage to afford the school fees – beyond the means of most.

Yet some enterprising and dedicated teachers have responded to this need in their area, and set up “**under tree schools**”. Early in our time in Uganda, we visited one of these. The first impression was just being surrounded by hordes and hordes of children – the physical evidence of the level of need. They were well organised by an ex Inspector of Schools in South Sudan who had taken on the role of Headteacher. Each child had to bring their own seat – responses ranged from plastic chairs to home-made structures to food tins – and was allocated a class (and a tree!). There were 3 nursery groups and 7 primary classes, each with a teacher (& the inevitable stick), a blackboard and chalk. No text books, no visual aids, none of the sophisticated provisions in a Western school, but nevertheless an impressive attempt to address a

problem too large for the highly-stretched resources of the UN to supply. Subsequently, some overseas partners have provided funding for temporary buildings, more resources, small salaries for teachers, etc – but the need continues to exceed supply.



School 'under a tree'

In addition, for many of these people, it is not the first time they have been forced into exile. They have already had their hopes dashed at least once, returning to their homeland only for conflict to resume. When confronted by the level of need, it is easy to feel helpless. But there are positive initiatives which are making a difference for a few at a time, in different locations – and that has to give hope. The Diocese of Kajo-Keji, now relocated to Moyo, Uganda (and supported by the Diocese of Madi & West Nile) is involved in various initiatives on the camps near to Moyo:

- In collaboration with overseas partners, building temporary schools and equipping them with basic resources.
- Holding Youth conferences and training to encourage Youth
- Holding Trauma Healing conferences – so many people are in need of counselling and healing
- Several Prayer and Fasting days, praying for peace in South Sudan and the opportunity to return home
- The Mothers' Union, with overseas funding, is supplying training in making disposable sanitary pads to enable teenage girls to have uninterrupted education.

In addition, many NGOs are involved in supplying specific needs, for example, MTI is doing medical work, World Vision is working to reunite separated families.

“By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.... How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137). Yet many of these exiled South Sudanese people **do** continue to praise God, and churches on the camps are growing. Such faith in the midst of so many struggles, such belief that God will deliver them and enable them to go home, must surely draw us all to our knees to cry out with them for reconciliation between the warring parties and the restoration of peace in South Sudan.

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