THE REPATRIATION AND RESETTLEMENT OF THE SOUTHERN SUDANESE

by Louise W. Holborn

While the world press has focused over the past year on problems surrounding the creation of still another refugee population in Africa — that of Uganda’s Asians — far too little attention has been directed to the remarkable though still fragile process of repatriation and resettlement of hundreds of thousands of Southern Sudanese. This population of displaced persons includes both refugees who fled to other countries and large numbers of homeless who hid in the bush during the civil war that wracked the Sudan for seventeen years, from 1955 through the first months of 1972. Responding to the initiatives of President Gaafar al-Nimeiry of the Sudan, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (HCR), under an explicit mandate from the Secretary-General of the United Nations, has been raising funds, organizing activities on behalf of the most pressing needs and working closely with all local interests to meet overwhelming problems. While no one can predict with certainty how the program will cope with the continuing stream of former refugees and homeless Southern Sudanese, it presently demonstrates a close and creative partnership between the Sudanese government and the United Nations.

The resettlement program is located in the Southern Region of the Sudan which occupies about one-third of the total area of the country. This region comprises three provinces — Bahr-Al-Ghazal, Equatorial Nile, and Upper Nile — all of which remain undeveloped, their inhabitants dependent on a subsistence economy and handicapped by an almost total lack of technical knowledge. Recently, the Sudan was included in a list compiled by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) of the twenty-five least developed of the developing countries and was earmarked a country in need of priority assistance.

Bordering on Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, the Central African Republic and Zaire, the Southern Region is landlocked, as is most of the rest of the country, and depends for its internal and external communication and contact on the Nile. Traffic on the Nile, the only link between north and south, is erratic, however. The fast-growing water hyacinth, a common scourge in Africa and in the United States, tends to clog the waterway, and the boats and tugs available are badly worn and lack spare parts. During the civil war, road networks deteriorated to the point where the area was left with a few washed-out, rutted paths. Although a railroad penetrates as far as Wau, the capital of Bahr-Al-Ghazal, it stops hundreds of miles from the other provincial capitals of Malakal (Upper Nile) and Juba (Equatorial Nile). Since the closing of the Suez Canal, the closest seaport for international shipping is Port Sudan on the Red Sea, but goods marked for the South take twelve months to travel from the Port and necessitate a combination of rail, river and road transport. Air transport is greatly restricted by the small number and size of the few airfields in the area, none of which are equipped to handle modern cargo planes.

Approximately 6 million of a total Sudanese population of 15.3 million live in the Southern Region. The religion practiced by most Southerners is animist, but of the quarter million or so who are not animist, only 23,000 are Muslims (the predominant faith in the North), while 200,000 are Roman Catholics, and 30,000 are Protestants. The history, life-style, and culture of the sub-Saharan people of this tropical area are distinctively different from those of the Arabs who inhabit the North. This distinctiveness has been preserved and confirmed by the relative isolation from each other in which the two groups have lived, by the prevailing lack of economic development in the South, and, in the past decades, by the hostility shown by the Southerners toward government troops.

Seventeen years of war have left the South devastated. Housing and school facilities are lacking, there are few hospitals, and the dispensaries and health centers that do exist date back to the period before 1955 when the Sudan achieved independence. Many of those still functioning were damaged during the war. To complicate problems in the region, the population of the chief provincial capital, Juba, doubled during the war. Troops had ravaged the countryside, causing a tremendous influx of homeless persons into the capital.

It is estimated by the Sudanese government that during the civil war some 500,000 persons hid in the bush. Another 180,000 Southern Sudanese took refuge from the fighting in neighboring countries: 74,000 in Uganda; 60,000 in Zaire; 20,000 in Ethiopia; and 20,900 in the Central African Republic (CAR). In these surrounding countries, the refugees were gradually ab-
sorbed into rural land settlements which the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees helped to plan and finance. There were four settlements in Uganda (Onigo, Agago, Acolpi, and Nakapiripirit), two in Zaire (Amadi and Kpyo in Oriental Province), one in Ethiopia at Gambela, and one in the Central African Republic at M'boki. Over time, most of these settlements became self-sufficient with their own roads, houses, schools, hospitals, dispensaries, water supply, tools, and seed. During the emergency period which followed the arrival of the first groups of refugees, they were supplied with food through the World Food Program (WFO), while the United Nations Specialized Agencies assisted the projects. These agencies included the World Health Organization, Food and Agriculture Organization, the International Labor Organization, UNESCO and UNICEF, and various international voluntary organizations. The HCR not only acted as a coordinator and stimulator of activities, but also contributed $8.5 million between 1967 and 1970.

The basic cause of the protracted civil war lay in the determination of northern, Khartoum-based governments to dominate the South, and in the determination of the South to establish the autonomy of the three southern provinces. The first genuine move to break the deadlock came with President Nimeiry's speech on June 9, 1969, following the May Revolution in Khartoum in which a Communist coup had been foiled.2 Pointing to the historical and cultural differences between North and South, the President maintained that

the unity of our country must be built on these objective realities. The Southern people have the right to develop their respective culture and traditions within a United Socialist Sudan,

Amnesty was offered to all who had engaged in fighting against Northern troops or had fled the country. A Minister for Southern Affairs was appointed as a sign of ultimate regional autonomy, and a program was drawn up to facilitate the economic, social, and cultural development of the South, and to train personnel from the South for these tasks. Details were discussed at a conference convened in Juba by the University of Khartoum in January 1970. The conference was attended by both Northerners and Southerners, as well as by visitors from neighboring countries and from Great Britain, the former administering power. The recommendations submitted by the conference to the Minister for Southern Affairs emphasized the problems of resettlement of returning refugees. The government also sent a delegation to Geneva and the Scandinavian countries to explain their objectives and to seek aid, particularly from voluntary organizations.

No significant advances could be made, however, until peace had been secured. Many factors went into this effort, including behind-the-scenes discussions by and through the World Council of Churches whose good faith had been confirmed in the minds of the Southerners by the contributions made earlier by the WCC to the liberation forces. The final peace agreement was signed in Addis Ababa on February 27, 1972, by the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Sudan and the South Sudan Liberation Movement. The agreement specified the political, administrative, and legal safeguards under which the Southern Sudan would exercise regional autonomy within a united Sudan. The long and tragic war was over.

Just before the agreement was signed, a Relief and Resettlement Conference was held in Khartoum from 21 to 23 February. Attended by Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, as well as by officials from a wide range of UN Specialized Agencies and representatives of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and some thirty voluntary agencies including the League of Red Cross Societies and the Danish Red Cross, the conference was addressed by H.E. Abel Alier, Vice President and Minister for Southern Affairs. M. Alier delivered a detailed report on the situation in the Southern Region and on the needs for which international assistance was required.3 These included town and village planning and housing, electricity and water, transport and communications, health, education, local government, and social affairs. He also outlined short and long-term projects for development in agriculture, irrigation, animal production and fisheries, industry, cooperatives, rural development and forestry.

Shortly after the peace agreement went into effect, the Sudanese government established a special fund (through Presidential Order No. 43 of 3 April 1972) to meet initial expenses of the repatriation, resettlement, and rehabilitation of Sudanese refugees.4 Recognizing the magnitude of the problems facing his country, President Nimeiry had already appealed directly for help to the Secretary-General of the United Nations and to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Following a session in London of the Administrative Committee on Coordination of the United Nations, on May 2, 1972, the Secretary-General requested the HCR to assume responsibility for coordinating the UN Emergency Relief Program for the Sudan. This charge amounted, in practice, to the coordination of a large-scale program of relief and reconstruction whereby both returning refugees and the displaced within the Sudan would be resettled more or less permanently in the South.

The Office of the HCR had already had valuable experience in coordinating two sizeable programs of repatriation and one smaller one. Under the flexible concept of extending good offices on the request of home governments, the HCR had been involved in 1962, together with the International Committee of the Red Cross, in the repatriation of more than 180,000 Algerians from Morocco and Tunisia under the Evian Agreement. In 1971-72 the HCR acted as "the focal point" in the repatriation of 8 to 10 million East Bengalis to Bangla-
desh following the armistice between India and Pakistan. Following the Nigerian civil war, the HCR had assisted in the repatriation of 5,000 Biafran children from the Ivory Coast and Gabon. In each of these cases, however, the High Commissioner — in his role as fund raiser, coordinator, and distributor of public information — had only been involved in operations in the countries of asylum. In the Sudan he has still broader responsibilities.

The mandate of the HCR as coordinator in the Sudanese situation extends not only to “helping refugees but also displaced persons inside the country.” He is thus involved not only in bringing families back to the border, as in the earlier repatriation efforts, but also in re-establishing them, along with those who became homeless as a result of the war, in such circumstances as may lead to long-term stability in the Southern Region. Provision is being made so that neither group will swell the already large number of unemployed in the region’s principal city, Juba. The resettlement is being organized outside existing towns and cities, a sound policy but one that necessarily involves a great deal of planning and a vast network for the import of materials, which is being complicated by the lack of adequate transport and communication referred to above.

The principal objective of the repatriation and resettlement program for the Southern Sudanese is the establishment of normal conditions of life for the hundreds of thousands of homeless who need help. Another prime objective is to facilitate the kinds of economic and social development that will enable the region to respond more effectively to the needs of all its inhabitants. In this process, the efforts of the Sudanese government and the personal determination and leadership of President Nimeiry are crucial. Without them, the program can grind to a halt, with old bitterness and hostilities reappearing. With determined efforts on the part of the government, however, and with contributions from a wide range of international, national and voluntary agencies, there is hope of slowly but steadily coming to terms with the immediate problems caused by the continuing influx of refugees and displaced persons and of instituting more permanent facilities.

The HCR is the chief international coordinator of external efforts to provide aid and is responsible for correlating external and internal efforts to achieve agreed purposes. He is also involved in the essential effort to raise funds. At the opening of the Economic and Social Council on 3 July 1972, the HCR launched an appeal for $11 million to support the first year of the Emergency Relief Program which had been designed to provide a basis for re-establishing normal life in the Southern Sudan. At earlier meetings of ECOSOC and its Social Committee, a unanimously approved appeal had been made to all states for support for the program, an appeal echoed in Rabat when the OAU met there last June, and later issued by the General Assembly.

Practical arrangements were worked out by the UNDP, the HCR’s special representative, Mr. Thomas Jamieison, members of a special unit set up under him at UNHCR headquarters in Geneva, and by an Inter-Agency Working Group on Relief Assistance for the Southern Sudan set up in May. At the beginning of August 1972, the operations coordinated by the HCR had begun. By October, the HCR reported that just over $10.5 million had been collected, but that $4 million of this amount had already been spent and more was needed. Because of its previous experience in the administration of such operations, and because the Sudanese government was contributing more than the anticipated amount out of its own resources and through bilateral grants, the UN budget necessary for the first year of the Emergency Relief Program was reduced from the original estimate of $22 million to $18 million.

The Protocol on Interim Arrangements of the Addis Ababa Agreement provided for the establishment of a Special Commission for Relief and Resettlement under the President of the Interim High Executive Council, with headquarters in Juba and with provincial branches. This Commission has overall responsibility for the planning, coordinating and implementing of all services related to resettlement and rehabilitation of refugees and displaced persons in the Southern Region. The resettlement of displaced persons within the Sudan was given priority, and during the first eight months following the signing of the peace agreement some 250,000 Southerners emerged from the bush.

Special repatriation commissions composed of at least three members (one each from the central government in Khartoum, the Southern Region, and the UNHCR), are responsible for all measures relating to the voluntary repatriation of citizens from the Southern Region residing abroad, especially the refugees living in neighboring countries. Where these commissions operate outside the Sudan, a representative of the host government is included, and the representative of the Sudanese government is, in this case, the ambassador or his representative. Both types of commission work closely together to try to space out the return of refugees from across the borders so that they can be adequately coordinated. The Joint Representative Commission comprises representatives of all countries bordering on the Southern Region, as well as the ICRC, the WCC, the All African Conference of Churches, and the UNHCR.

Reception centers have been set up at the borders for the refugees who live in the neighboring countries away from the borders. The refugees are vaccinated in these transit camps and fed until they can be transported to their final destination. Since the influx of returnees coincided with the beginning of the rainy season, which ends in December, their movement has been particularly difficult to regulate.
There are plans to build forty new villages, each to accommodate 500 families of approximately five persons each. These will accommodate a total of some 100,000 persons and are to be situated near the border. In the meantime, temporary accommodation is the primary concern, particularly since the transport of building materials presents enormous difficulties. Roads and bridges must also be constructed, and there is a pressing need for a pontoon bridge near Juba to serve as a crucial link in the route from Kenya’s port of Mombasa to the Southern Sudan. This route takes on added importance if goods must go through northern Kenya - itself barren and ill-developed - for the route through Uganda is becoming increasingly hazardous. Some international agencies are considering rerouting the lorries through Kitale, Lodwar, and Lokichoggio in Kenya’s Turkana territory. There is no road to speak of, but there are no Ugandan troops looting and pilfering the supplies.

In light of the communication difficulties, the HCR has from the beginning stressed the indispensability of air transport. As he told the press:

the airlift is our number one priority; it alone will cost $4.8 million, but it is absolutely essential in order to provide food in the coming months for the population of the South, including returnees.

The first airplane chartered for this purpose, a DC-4, flew from Geneva to Khartoum on 28 July 1972. The two pilots had previously operated a relief transport for three months in Bangladesh as part of a UNICEF charter agreement. By September, four more planes were operating - three of them put at the disposal of the UNHCR by Sterling Airways of Denmark, and the fourth chartered from Kar Air of Finland with funds made available by the Finnish government. Subsequently, a Fokker Friendship aircraft was made available by the Netherlands. Towards the end of November 1972, the first three air shipments consisting of medical supplies and equipment, food stuffs, electrical supplies, and a nine-man team of social workers left the Cologne-Bonn Airport in West Germany bound for the Southern Sudan. The two other airplanes followed in early December. The UNHCR airlift had reached its peak in September, making eight flights a day to carry urgently needed food and relief materials from the north to the cities of Juba, Malakal, and Wau.

It is not the intention to detail further the specific needs of the Southern Sudanese, or to discuss how these needs are being met through the efforts of governmental and/or international agencies. Enough has been said to indicate the magnitude of the task. It should be pointed out, however, that the HCR is not only the coordinator of this program; under the agreement between the Sudanese government and the UNHCR, the latter shares responsibilities for seeing that the rights of full citizenship are accorded to those who voluntarily return to the Sudan.

This continued responsibility for the protection of returning members of a community after a civil war is another new and distinctive feature of the innovative partnership that exists between the Sudanese government and the United Nations. It marks a further stage of acceptance of the indispensable role of the UNHCR both by a national government and by the international community. Another dimension of the Sudanese experience is that it now stands as a model for countries whose ethnic and cultural divisions have created or threaten to create violence and division. Only with acknowledgement of the validity of local autonomy in the Southern Sudan was the long civil war terminated. And only with the full implementation of pledges made during the peace negotiations can progress be assured in the slow rebuilding of confidence and replenishment of material resources in the Southern Sudan.

FOOTNOTES


3 The Democratic Republic of the Sudan, Relief and Resettlement Conference on Southern Region, 21-23 February 1972, Ministry of State for Southern Affairs, Khartoum (Sudan), 1972.
