

Running on empty, Sudanese refugees urged to leave unsafe border site



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UNITY STATE, South Sudan, December 30 (UNHCR) – Bombs fell from the Southern Kordofan sky and Zahara* could hear them as they crashed into her village. The 20-year-old heard the explosions and she grabbed her two children and ran. She ran from her home in Lehemid in the Nuba mountains and to the next town.

They arrived in the town of Al Reika and still explosions could be heard in the distance. And so they ran again, from Al Reika to Tamanya. When the bombs arrived in Tamanya they ran to Angola village and eventually crossed the South Sudan border into Yida, where they found thousands of other refugees settled in huts among the trees. "We had nothing," Zahara says. "We'd run and then fall down then get up and run again."



More than 20,000 Sudanese refugees from Southern Kordofan live in Yida, a temporary site in Unity state, South Sudan.

They thought they were safe. But then on November 10, another Antonov bomber came. The plane made three turns around Yida before it released its payload. People scattered in every direction. Two of the bombs landed on the runway next to the camp's perimeter. Two others fell further away. But one bomb landed in the middle of a temporary school. The children had been evacuated but Zahara remembers the fear everyone shared. "People ran into the market and into the forest," she says. "Some of us stayed in the bush for hours." In fact some 600 pupils and students ran away after the bombing and some are still missing.

When she thinks of those moments, Zahara can feel the fear rise up inside of her. There was more fear than there was food to eat and she worried for herself and for her children. A few days ago she and her children left Yida, found a passing lorry and moved south to the UNHCR transit centre in Pariang. "Of course we feel safer here," she says. "If we felt safe in Yida we wouldn't have come here."

UNHCR and its partners have consistently expressed trepidation over the fate of more than 20,000 refugees currently in Yida settlement. The major concern is that proximity to the border with nearby military confrontations and escalating insecurity could put innocent lives at risk. While UNHCR continues to provide Yida with emergency assistance, it has pleaded with refugees to move further south to various relocation sites that are ready to assist them.

Just getting to Yida has proved to be a challenge for UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies. Initially food could not be flown into the site but had to be air dropped. During the rainy season, the region was essentially swampland. In order to reach the area, humanitarian teams flew by helicopter or small planes to the village of Kuinger about 50 kilometres from the Sudan border. From there they ferried supplies on the backs of motorcycles or tractors. While access to the site has since improved with the establishment of a rudimentary airfield, reaching these refugees during the rainy season that starts in April will prove to be difficult.

But cross-border conflict is the big worry. In a sweltering hut UNHCR's South Sudan representative Mireille Girard speaks with a group of refugee leaders in Yida. They sit on plastic chairs and straw beds where a delicate negotiation takes place. The leaders say they

feel comfortable closer to their homeland on the other side of the border. But Girard knows that while the local community in South Sudan welcomes them, they will not be able to protect them if fighting spills across the border and into their settlement. She reminds them that Yida should be a temporary stop for them but ultimately they will need to seek out settlements that have been prepared for them in safer areas.

"We'll continue to provide basic assistance such as water or medicines," she says. "But we fear for your safety in the weeks to come. Please don't wait until it's too late. Let's move now so we can organize better."

Slowly refugees are beginning to trickle away from danger. In Pariang some 56 tents housing more than 150 people have appeared along the landscape. A nearby water tower serves their needs and UNHCR partner Intersos has taken on the task of managing the camp. There is a hall that can accommodate up to 800 people and tents are ready. Experts on education have arrived.

Soon a group of more than 2,800 boarding school students will be settled in the relocation sites. They fled fighting in Southern Kordofan with their teachers and initially settled in Yida. Relocation sites will include facilities for education, water and sanitation installations and medical services. There will also be land for cultivation and other livelihood activities, so that the refugees will be less dependent on aid and be able live a more normal life until they are able to go home.

* Name changed for protection reasons

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