

UNHCR South Sudan diaries

Humanitarian workers share stories about their experiences and the people they meet

Friday, June 8, 2012

We just had to leave

as told to Pumla Rulashe in Dore camp, Upper Nile state

Banat Umar is relieved that tonight, she and her family of six will, for the first time in weeks, have a place to call their own—a tent in Doro refugee settlement. Her youngest child is just 10 weeks old. Her family now has a regular supply of food and water, as well as access to health services.

Umar is one of 1,500 newly arrived Sudanese refugees who fled Dereng, a village situated between Kurmuk and Damazin in Blue Nile state nine weeks ago. Community leaders had decided that people should start to leave as the spreading conflict came closer their village. Umar and her husband decided to go.

"We couldn't continue living that way," Umar says. "There was hunger. I had just had a baby. How was I to feed my children?"

But her parents and siblings chose to remain behind; the elderly folks were too old to make the journey. The villagers spent weeks hiding in Jebel Mugum, a mountainous zone in Blue Nile state, well out of the firing line between the warring sides. That time in the wilderness took its toll on the young and infirm. Soon enough they were down to the last of their staple, sorghum, with which they prepared *Kisra*, a wafer like bread on which they sprinkled salt to eat.

"I worried about my children," she recalls. "The bombardment came closer to where we were hiding. We could not go deeper into the mountains. We moved through grassland and forest until we reached Elfoj."

Umar rocks baby Zainab thoughtfully. The journey was fraught with uncertainty. By the time they crossed the border at Elfoj, they were exhausted, hungry and dehydrated.

In Doro camp, concerns about food and safety are a thing of the past. But Umar is not at ease. She is deeply worried about the parents and siblings who remained behind. She does not know if she will ever see them again. She has no means to communicate with them.

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Som Komdan, 80, thought he would die during the escape from Blue Nile state. [Photo: UNHCR/P.Rulashe, May 2012]

Som Komdan's story offers a different perspective. He grins toothlessly as he recounts the events that led him to escape his homestead.

The rheumy eyed old man recalls watching his 25 year old son flee into the sorghum fields, as bullets whizzed through the air. That time the soldiers drove off the family's herd of 10 goats, leaving them traumatised, humiliated and destitute.

"Soldiers surrounded our village a number of times. They looted our food, burnt our *tukuls* (huts) and destroyed our way of life, leaving us with nothing."

"I could not take it anymore," says Komdan's son, Denka. 'I told my father we had to leave. We would go the same way Sudanese from other villages had gone before us.'

Father, son, their spouses and children began a journey from Mugum to Sama on foot. The seven day trek was too much for the eighty year old. His ankles swelled. He got diarrhoea from drinking water that they skimmed off murky pools and drying streams.

"When we reached Sama, I felt the time had come to meet my Maker." Komdon swallows, fighting tears as he recalls the ordeal.

As he composes himself, Denka interjects, 'I refused to let him give up. We would stop for as long as it took for him to recover, and then we would continue, slowly.'

Komdom is calm now. 'I am grateful that my son forced me to come this far. Here we have a place to sleep peacefully.' The family's worldly goods lie scattered around stuffed in sorghum bags.

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These are stories of thousands of families who had no choice but to leave their homes because of conflict and hunger. It was a matter of life and death.

Women still recuperating from childbirth endure the exodus. Others give birth on the way. Elderly persons are egged on by anxious relatives, who risk their own lives by slowing down. Will we ever know how many perish along the way.

These are the stories of thousands of Sudanese citizens who are starting a new life as refugees in South Sudan, not knowing whether they will ever see their homes and loved ones again.

They just had to leave.

<http://hcrstaffdiaries.blogspot.co.uk/2012/06/we-just-had-to-leave.html?spref=fb>