

UNECA Executive Secretary visits South Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia

Gambella, Ethiopia, 5 March 2015-(UNHCR)-Dr. Carlos Lopez, Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), visited Tierkidi refugee camp in western Ethiopia, home to nearly 50,000 refugees who fled the ongoing war in South Sudan. He held focus group discussions with refugee representatives and toured some key camp amenities including a health center, a child-friendly space and a grinding mill managed by different agencies in the camp.



Mr. Carlos Lopez (in dark eye-glasses) visiting a health center in Tierkidi camp run by GOAL Ethiopia. UNHCR/K.G.egziabher

He later told representatives of the humanitarian agencies on the ground that despite their good efforts, refugees told him that there were still gaps in important supplies and services including shelter, education and water.

“You should feel proud of the work you are doing,” he told humanitarian

workers he met at the UNHCR office in Gambella. “But with all the wealth South Sudan has, the condition of the refugees is completely unacceptable.” Urging the parties to the conflict to end all hostilities so that the refugees can go back home, the Executive Secretary remarked, “I wish the politicians had a sense of the reality in the refugee camps.”

Mr. Lopez, who at the level of United Nations Under Secretary General, is in charge of UN-wide security issues in Ethiopia, thanked the government for its open door policy to refugees. “Ethiopia is the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa today precisely because it’s a very stable country”. He said this is evident in the fact that the government not only provides effective protection to refugees but also good security for humanitarian agencies to do their work.” He observed that Ethiopia is today receiving attention more for its role as a stabilizing agent in the region and less as the largest refugee-hosting country in the continent. “This visit has saved me from speaking about the refugees in abstract terms and I’ll not fulfill my role if I don’t bring what I saw today to the fore”.

Visibly frustrated by the slow pace of the peace process, he advised UNHCR and its partners to prepare for all exigencies.

UNHCR’s Representative in Ethiopia, Mr. Valentin Tapsoba, who is the incoming Director of the UN refugee agency’s Regional Bureau for Africa, said he was privileged to host the UN Under

Secretary General in Tierkidi camp. “Now that you have seen the situation for yourself, I’m confident that you can advocate on behalf of the refugees from a position of experience and authority.”

Mr. Tapsoba thanked Ethiopia for its generosity to refugees and announced that the authorities have just granted a new site to UNHCR to develop it to a refugee camp. “The new site has the capacity to accommodate up to 50,000 refugees”, he said. “But given the fact that we have about 60,000 refugees around the border that need to be relocated and another 110,000 people who may freshly arrive in 2015, we call up on the government to grant additional sites.”

Ato Ayalew Awoke, Deputy Director of the government’s Administration for Refugee and Returnees Affairs, ARRA, appreciated Mr. Lopez for making time to see how the refugees were faring. “In just one year, we have received nearly 200,000 refugees,” he said, adding “The way things are going in South Sudan; it’s not unlikely to expect a fresh influx of refugees both as a result of war and food insecurity. Ato Ayalew reiterated the government’s open doors policy but stressed that the government and its humanitarian partners need support to be able to discharge their responsibilities well.

Mr. Samir Wanmali, Senior Deputy Director of the World Food Programme in Ethiopia echoed the Executive Secretary in appreciating the work of the humanitarian agencies in Gambella. He urged them to tell their stories better so that the international community can support them better.



UNHCR’s incoming Director of the Regional Bureau for Africa, Valentin Tapsoba (blue baseball cap) introduces the Under Secretary General to UN staff in Gambella. UNHCR/K.G.egziabher.

Home to more than 676,000 refugees mainly from South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrean and Sudan, Ethiopia remains the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa. More than 260,000 are South Sudanese-most of who arrived since conflict erupted in the world’s youngest nation in December 2013. ARRA and UNHCR opened four refugee camps in Gambella in 2014 to accommodate South Sudanese who fled war and shortage of food in their country. More camps need to be set up to be able to relocate thousands who are already in the country and many more that may arrive in 2015.

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