

SOUTH SUDAN

A revolving door of displacement

SPOT
LIGHT

After three years of sustained conflict, more than 1.8 million people were internally displaced in South Sudan as of December 2016, an increase of around 230,000 since November 2015.¹⁹⁶ Many report being displaced various times as they flee the shifting violence in search of protection and assistance, and in response to seasonal flooding.

The southern Greater Equatoria region has become a significant new area of displacement in the country's ever expanding and deepening crisis. It alone was hosting more than 414,000 IDPs as of the end of the year.¹⁹⁷ More than one in four South Sudanese people are now displaced either inside or beyond the country's borders, and some have been caught up in circular, cross-border displacement patterns.

South Sudan's refugee population became the largest in Africa in 2016, with more than 1.5 million people estimated to be living in the neighbouring countries of Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan and Uganda.¹⁹⁸ Around 760,000 people sought asylum during the year, almost 50 per cent of them under the age of 11.¹⁹⁹ It has tended to be women and children who flee, while young men stay behind in an attempt to safeguard their families' livelihoods. In doing so, they risk being recruited by armed groups or being displaced to avoid that fate.

The spread of conflict into Greater Equatoria created new waves of displacement during 2016, with the majority of new refugees from South Sudan fleeing into Uganda. Around 16,000 people did so between 16 and 22 July alone, and Uganda is now the largest host of South Sudanese refugees.²⁰⁰ The movements echo the displacement of people from what was then southern Sudan into Uganda during the civil war of 1983 to 2005.

As with displacements into Ethiopia from Jonglei and Upper Nile states, they also continue the pattern seen in the past of IDPs moving to areas where they have ethnic links. Despite the high number of people from Greater Equatoria who became refugees in 2016, between 70 and 80 per cent of the displaced population fled into

the bush. Those that did cross the border into Uganda had lived there before.²⁰¹

The triggers and push factors for people to flee both within and beyond the country's borders vary, but insecurity is cited as the main reason for displacement. The activities of groups such as the Sudan People's Liberation Army and Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition, armed ranchers and bandits have heightened tensions and pose a significant threat to civilians.

There are repeated reports of rape and forced recruitment, including of children, and the wanton destruction of civilian property. The situation has fuelled speculation about ethnic cleansing among the country's 64 ethnic groups, and the UN's special adviser on the prevention of genocide, Adama Dieng, recently reiterated his concern about the potential for such an atrocity in South Sudan.²⁰²

Food insecurity is also a major issue, and the situation continues to deteriorate with 4.9 million people, or about 42 per cent of population, estimated to be severely food insecure in early 2017. The figure is projected to increase to 5.5 million by July. These numbers are unprecedented, and farmers face significant challenges in planting to ensure a harvest later in 2017.

For others schooling has been a factor. Fifty-two per cent of people moving from Akobo in Jonglei state into Ethiopia in early 2017 identified a lack of education opportunities as their main reason for doing so.²⁰³ More than 30 per cent of South Sudan's schools have come under armed attack at least once.²⁰⁴

The increasing fragmentation of the conflict, shifting frontlines and ethnic segregation make the provision of assistance difficult, and there is a growing need to negotiate access with various groups at the local level. The same factors also make it more dangerous and unpredictable for people to access markets and livelihoods. Traffic on many of the country's transport arteries, including river routes and the main road to Uganda, are prone to attacks by armed



Three years on, internally displaced people remain at the UN Protection of Civilians site in Juba, South Sudan. Photo: NRC/Albert Gonzalez Farran, November 2016

groups and bandits. Such attacks have disrupted commercial traffic and humanitarian access in the south of the country significantly.

OCHA estimates that 7.5 million people in South Sudan will require assistance in 2017, and the humanitarian community faces extraordinary challenges to reach them before the rainy season begins in May and populations become cut off.²⁰⁵ Armed groups tend to step up their activity before the rainy season, looking to make territorial gains before it sets in and vast swaths of the country become inaccessible by road for up to six months.

The flow of people out of South Sudan, including those already internally displaced, is likely to continue and may increase in 2017 unless at least some of these issues are addressed. At the same time, there are concerns that some of the most vulnerable groups such as elderly and disabled people and those with no material assets are unable to make the journey across the border or access the assistance they need inside the country.

Others have returned from Uganda because the significant devaluation of South Sudan's currency has reduced their assets and the value of their

remittances to the point that their situation was no longer sustainable. Others still have gone back to reunite with family members or for security reasons.

South Sudan also hosts almost 300,000 refugees from neighbouring countries. Ninety per cent live in the northern states of Upper Nile and Unity, which continue to be two of the worst affected by conflict and displacement. The vast majority of the refugees, 92 per cent, are from Sudan, and the remainder from CAR, DRC and Ethiopia. In June 2016, assistance was provided to Ethiopian refugees in Jonglei state for the first time since 2009.

As the conflict escalates and spreads South Sudan continues plummeting to new depths of violence, displacement and food insecurity, and people are likely to resort to ever more desperate measures to seek safety and assistance. Increasing numbers are continuously on the move, and their high degree of mobility combined with the lack of humanitarian access make their situation difficult to monitor. It is clear, however, that the country's borders have become a revolving door of displacement.