



News - In Depth

East Sudan: a forgotten crisis



Freweiny Terdesa, whose husband was paralysed in an accident, is one of many women who find themselves in the role of breadwinner in the camps of eastern Sudan

East Sudan, 15 June 2006 - Ask most people where the crises are in Sudan, and they will say Darfur and the south. But the east of the country is also living its own silent crisis, which has been largely ignored by the world. WFP spokesperson Mohamed Amasha meets some of the refugees in the camps of east Sudan.

Mariam Ramadan, 28, is one of the world's most forgotten people – and has been for more than a quarter of a century.

Living in the Wadsharifeya refugee camp in Eastern Sudan, Mariam is part of what is officially described as a protracted refugee situation – a situation that the United Nations this year described as one of the 10 most under-reported stories on earth.

In 1982, when she was just two, Mariam left Aqurdad town in pre-independence Eritrea in the arms of her mother and, along with her four elder sisters, they headed for Sudan. Her father joined them there in 1984.



"My father used to work for an Ethiopian company as many did in Eritrea," Mariam explains.

"When relations worsened between the two countries, my father was put in jail for nearly six months," she says.

Competing for funding

Mariam and her family are now living in a camp with tens of thousands of other refugees from Ethiopia and Eritrea in East Sudan.

WFP has been assisting some of these refugees since 1967.

The agency's support depends on donor funding, but the refugees' plight competes for attention with a multitude of other crises around the world requiring donations.

Over the past several years, various dips in funding have meant rations have been delivered late or in reduced quantities – leaving families to cut down on meals to stretch out their food stocks.

Surviving in the camps

Although a few of the camps are land-based, with refugee families

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East Sudan

Civil wars, droughts and famine in Ethiopia sent huge numbers of people trekking into Sudan in the 1970s and 1980s.

More than 95,000 refugees from Ethiopia and Eritrea now live in 12 camps in eastern Sudan.

Although many were repatriated in the late 1990s after Eritrea became independent and the war with Ethiopia ended, many people are still in Sudan.

WFP has been assisting some of these refugees since 1967.

The agency has fed 1.6 million people in collaboration with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Government of Sudan's Commissioner for Refugees, over the past 25 years.

WFP's emergency operation for Sudan is targeting more than 6.1 million people in 2006, including the east of the country. The operation also covers the needs of Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees in Sudan.

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allocated a small plot to cultivate, there is not enough land for everyone, and a cycle of poor seasons and droughts have meant low harvests.

For new arrivals in particular, making their way in the camps can be a difficult and bewildering business. Many are young people, wanting to avoid military service.

Using her experience from a lifetime living in the camps, Mariam Ramadan works with the Sudanese Red Crescent to ease the path for those who continue to arrive in a slow but steady trickle. Her work includes organising workshops on violence against women, hygiene and HIV/AIDS.

One such new arrival is 25-year-old Rukia Woldu*, who left Eritrea to escape military service.

She spent three days jolting towards Sudan in a donkey cart, then crossed the desolate border terrain on foot.

Found not far from the boundary by a Sudanese border patrol, Rukia was guided towards the nearest of the 12 refugee camps in eastern Sudan.

"I felt lost in Eritrea," Rukia says. "My family wanted to leave as well but they were afraid my father could be put in prison if they were caught on the border."

Although lonely and worried about finalising her papers, she was hopeful about the future.



Mariam Ramadan

"I heard that international organisations such as WFP are helping refugees with activities, and in return they receive monthly food rations. I want to learn skills to earn my living and make a better life for myself. I want to be self-reliant," she says.

Women

Like Rukia, almost half the women in the camps must make their own and their families' livings.

A 2004 assessment found that 48 percent of camp households were headed by women. Although divorce rates were relatively low, a high proportion of these women were widows, who had lost their husbands to the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

For them, earning an income to supplement food rations is vital.

Freweiny Terdesa, 37, must support her family, even though cultural traditions in the region often limit women's mobility and the kind of work they can do.

Freweiny's husband was paralysed in an accident on a building site, and Freweiny became the family's sole breadwinner.

WFP training

With only a basic education and few marketable skills, at first, she went to work selling coffee, but with five children, the family's needs far outstripped her earnings.

Life began to change when she joined a training programme supported by WFP.

"The sewing and cooking courses helped me earn more, and life doesn't seem hopeless any longer," she said.

Freweiny, who settled in East Sudan as a child in 1976, is another of those who have lived most of their lives outside the country of their birth.

Self-reliance

Now, Freweiny also uses her skills to teach others: "I earn my living by working as a teacher in the Sudanese Red Crescent (SRC) to train and encourage other women."

Providing that the funding continues, the newly arrived Rukia may meet Terdesa in the classes.

WFP emergency coordinator for the east and central region, Sarah Longford, says the training programmes and other schemes that boost self-reliance and offer opportunities to access an income are a priority.

"Together with our cooperating partners, including the Sudanese Red Crescent, we're working on linking more of our food assistance to training programmes, and other similar measures, so that we also build self-sufficiency. Otherwise the outlook is extremely bleak for these people."

"At the same time, we are also working to assist Sudanese people in the eastern regions who are displaced or for other reasons can't meet their families' food needs."

Hard hit

Longford says the east has been hit hard by repeated droughts and a long-term decline in rainfall, while sporadic conflict has also uprooted families and communities.

The region is experiencing a chronic livelihoods crisis and malnutrition rates have soared.

Longford says WFP is trying to encourage other agencies to focus on eastern Sudan to aid development.

"Like other refugees in protracted circumstances, the Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees are often forgotten – and they are living in a region of Sudan that is itself often overlooked. Attention tends to focus on people in Darfur and the south, but people in the east are also in dire need," she says.

**Not her real name*