



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

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UNHCR resumes repatriation of Sudanese from Ethiopia’s Bonga camp

With the dry season back in position, the UN refugee agency, in collaboration with IOM, today repatriated 500 Sudanese refugees from the western Ethiopian camp of Bonga, marking the resumption of the return operation that was started in March but had to be suspended later in May due to the advent of the rainy season which rendered the roads impassable. UNHCR assisted the return of more than 2,500 Sudanese refugees from Bonga and Sherkole camps before heavy rains prevented any further major movement by road.

This group of returnees which is heading for Chali El Fiel and Nyille villages of the Blue Nile State in south Sudan will spend three nights on the road-covering 820km- before finally entering Sudan through the border crossing point of Kurumuk on the fourth day.

“We had to take this long and apparently tiring route because the other options are either not suitable or unsafe, or both,” says Mr. Wella Kouyou who heads UNHCR’s Sub-office in the Gambella National Regional State where Bonga is located. “They spend the three nights in way-stations which we have set up inside Ethiopia at an average distance of 270km.”

This latest convoy of buses and trucks took home refugees who had previously been declared medically unfit to travel. Many have since recovered and have received medical authorization to make the long journey home. Three more convoys of 500 people each are scheduled to be sent to Sudan over the next two weeks.

Most of the Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia had been in exile since 1987, and the fact that 311 (62.2 %) of today’s returnees belong to the age bracket of 18 years and below shows that the majority of them were born and brought up in Ethiopia. “With the resumption of the return movement at this point in time, we, together with our partners, particularly IOM and the Ethiopian government refugee body-ARRA, expect to assist the return of more than 11,000 Sudanese refugees over the next six months,” says Mr. Ilunga Ngandu, UNHCR’s Regional Liaison Representative for Africa. He even expects to close Yarenja, a camp of 2,000 refugees, in 2007.

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Mr. Ngandu added, “Subject to the availability of adequate funding, logistical preparedness, as well as absorption capacity in South Sudan we ultimately expect to help return the nearly 70,000 Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia during 2007/2008.” Before leaving Bonga, a camp of 17,000 refugees, the returnees received a re-integration package consisting of blankets, jerry cans, sleeping mats, a water filter and a sanitary kit for girls and women. Additional supplies of soap, plastic sheeting, mosquito nets, plastic buckets and kitchen utensils will be distributed to the returnees before they cross the border in to Sudan. These supplies have been stock-piled at Kurmuk in order to reduce the amount of domestic supplies carried by refugees from Bonga.

Upon arrival in Sudan, a re-integration package comprising three-months of food, seeds and agricultural tools will be provided by the World Food Programme (WFP) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Sudan’s 21-year-old conflict ended in January last year when a peace agreement was concluded between the SPLA/M and the government of Sudan. UNHCR, together with other UN agencies and partner NGOs, has been struggling to lay the ground inside Sudan to receive returnees.

At the moment Ethiopia hosts close to 69,000 Sudanese refugees in five camps namely, Bonga, Fugnido, Dimma, Sherkole and Yarenja. The country also plays host to 16, 387 and 12, 444 refugees from Somalia and Eritrea respectively. Close to 700 others originating from 13 different countries also exist in the country.

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