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UNHCR needs more funds to help Southern Sudan refugees go home

GENEVA - The UN refugee agency has a US\$11.9 million shortfall in funding for its Southern Sudan repatriation and reintegration operation which could undermine efforts to repatriate refugees who wish to go home in the second half of this year.

“If the current return trend is anything to go by, we could complete repatriation to Southern Sudan by the end of 2009 or the first quarter of 2010, provided we get funding on time for the rest of this year and next,” said Mengesha Kebede, UNHCR Africa Bureau Deputy Director for the region.

Earlier this year, UNHCR appealed for \$63.1 million for the programme but has received only \$47 million. UNHCR was able to carry over \$4.2 million from last year’s contributions, leaving a \$11.9 million gap.

The funds are needed for UNHCR to continue transporting refugees, mainly from camps in neighboring Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia, back to their war-ravaged communities across the vast Southern Sudan territory. It will also pay for the provision of basic services – such as clean water, health and education facilities as well as agricultural assistance so returnees can grow their own food once back home.

“Now is the best time to allow us to be ready to respond to the huge demand for repatriation at the end of the rainy season around October,” said Kebede. “Once again we would like to appeal to our donors for their generous support to help refugees return to their homes.”

Nearly 290,000 Southern Sudanese refugees have gone home since UNHCR launched the repatriation operation three years ago. The number of returns has consistently grown in that time, with the record 60,000 in the first half of this year exceeding by 14,000 the total returns for all of 2007.

Refugees’ strong interest to repatriate this year was partly spurred by a desire to take part in the April census, as well as growing confidence in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that ended the 21-year North-South civil war. As general elections approach in 2009 - another CPA milestone -the repatriation momentum is expected to continue. Already some 30,000 Southern Sudan refugees have requested UNHCR assistance to repatriate during this year’s dry season.

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In preparation, UNHCR and its partners are gearing to pre-position non-food items such as shelter materials and household goods while expanding reintegration activities and repairing critical facilities at border crossing points.

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