

TRAIL OF TEARS: THE HARROWING PLIGHT OF SUDANESE FEMALE REFUGEES

Our writer, Brian Mutebi, undertook a field trip to Bidibidi Refugee Settlement in Yumbe district, at the Uganda-South Sudan border. The settlement is home to thousands of refugees from South Sudan who fled their country after the outbreak of civil war. In this article he compiled the harrowing stories of refugee women in the encampment.



Mothers in refugee settlements need good feeding – Asozo

My name is Asozo Lilli. I am 26 years old. I am a South Sudanese refugee in Uganda. I currently live in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement. I fled my country due to the outbreak of a civil war. Many people were killed, especially men. My brother was killed. I had to flee for my life. We jumped over dead bodies on the way.

I was pregnant and did not have energy yet there was no one to help me. I had to keep walking nevertheless. I arrived in Uganda on August 27, 2016. The situation wasn't any better. I had to fetch water and collect firewood by myself, in addition to cutting grass to build my house (hut).

Here (in the refugee settlement), we depend on food rations supplied by an NGO (Action Against Hunger), which is never enough. We receive one and a half kilograms of beans, eight kilograms of maize grains and a litre of cooking oil a month. Since I never have money on me, to make ends meet, I sell some maize grains supplied to me to pay for grinding to make maize flour; otherwise what else would I do? It means, though, that the food ration given to me reduces. It is a difficult life for a mother.

Women refugees need good feeding, and for expectant and breastfeeding mothers, they need good nutritious food so they can get strength and be healthy. The lack of food also leads to conflict in the homes. My husband quarrels every time he finds no food at home. Women like me need money. What will make me happy is having money and starting a business so I can earn an income. If I had money, I would not be quarrelling with my husband over food. I would not hear that nonsense from my husband. I would not be stressed.



Living with HIV as a refugee is terrible – Candia

My name is Rose Candia. I am 47 years old. I am a South Sudanese refugee in Uganda. I stay here in the camp (refugee settlement) alone, very helpless. The events that happened in South Sudan prior to leaving my home are horrible. There were gunshots all over and people were killed.

I am disabled and I was staying alone. When the war broke out, I had to run for my life or I die. It was terrible! I scampered into the bushes. After moving through the bushes for days, I heard the sound of a motorcycle. I pushed myself near the road. I stopped the boy who was riding it and pleaded with him to take me to Uganda. That's how I arrived at the South Sudan-Uganda border at a place called Elegu. Later, other refugees and I were transferred here.

Every day I depend on food rations given to us by (humanitarian) organisations. One and a half kilograms of beans, eight kilograms of maize grains and a litre of cooking oil is what is given out for a full month, which is never enough.

It is difficult to feed on maize every single day, so I sell part of the grains to be able to buy some other food and change the diet. And being disabled with no one to help me out, I am unable to fetch firewood, so cooking is difficult. I only crawl around collecting sticks that I use to cook. I am only lucky that a borehole is found just across my compound; otherwise I would not be able to cook at all.

The problems I have are several. If you look into my house (hut), there is no mattress, but a mat. I sleep on a mat with nothing to cover myself. The walls (covered by a tarpaulin) have holes as is the roof; so when it rains, I get wet. When the rain is too much, I have to get up because everything on the floor becomes soaked in water.

There is no door on my house (hut), so it is not possible to lock it at night. Drunken men come at night and rape me. And what can I do about it? I am helpless! I told my neighbours about my horrible experiences but they could not help me. The solution probably was to go to the complaint desk but it is three kilometres away; I am unable to move over that long distance.

That is the same scenario concerning access to ARVs. I gave my book (patient records book) to my neighbours and asked them to bring me ARVs but the service providers want me to go there by myself. I am unable to walk, so for the last three months (interview was done 5 April 2018) I have not taken my medicine.

If someone was to help me, maybe life would be better. I had children and sisters but as we ran from South Sudan for our dear lives, the children dispersed in different directions. I settled at a place called Pagirinya from where other refugees and I were forced by the (Uganda) government into this camp (refugee settlement). During that scuffle, my sisters too went in different directions. I do not know where they are. I am here alone – a poor woman, living with HIV and feeding poorly. Sometimes I feel I should cease to exist.



I take soil for food and drink water – Adiyi

My name is Regina Adiyi. I am a refugee from South Sudan. I fled my village of Moli when fighting in the area became unbearable. I walked on foot in the bushes. After many days of walking, I got on the road and that's when I saw a car moving in the direction of Uganda. I stopped it and begged the driver to take me to Elegu at the Uganda checkpoint. It was from there that I was transferred here.

I did not come with anyone. In my home back in South Sudan, I was staying alone. My job was to collect firewood and sell it in the market. That is the same work I tried to do when I got here but it is not easy getting firewood here. Besides, I am very old (doesn't know her age). Sometimes I force myself to go cut firewood to sell in the market but it is very hard.

Life is very difficult here. Getting food is a major problem. The food rations are small. I go for days without anything to eat. I resort to prayer, praying that the following day my neighbours will have mercy on me so that when I beg for food, they will give me something to eat. When that doesn't happen, I take soil for food and then drink water.

I also have problems with my sight. Because of old age, my sight is almost gone. You can imagine the trials of an old blind refugee woman! My situation is exploited by some men who rape me. I do not have any idea of who is responsible; I am a helpless old woman!

I have many problems. I do not even have utensils, except one bowl and a small saucepan. My prayer is that I will have a proper house and money so I can buy firewood or charcoal and food.

I wish someone was here to help me out. I had one daughter but we were separated at Pagirinya. We took different directions. If there was a vehicle, I would board it and go and see my daughter. I heard she was sick but still alive, somewhere. But when I contemplate that, I wonder how I can possibly make that journey when I do not even have clothes to wear.



Soldiers cut my cousin's belly open before my eyes – Amana

My journey from South Sudan in August 2016 was dreadful. I was moving in a group of three persons, two men and me. We fell into the soldiers' ambush. The two men were killed. They were slaughtered using a knife. The soldiers do it openly, they fear nothing. They said if I make noise they would slaughter me too. Fear gripped me.

The soldiers commanded me to return home. When I got home, my mother and sisters decided that we flee in the direction of Uganda. All the days we walked towards the Uganda border, we did not eat anything. There was no food. Yet I had a child, and so did my mother. My girl was five years old. It is difficult to walk while hungry.

There were many cases of violence I witnessed with my own eyes. Many women were raped and others killed. The soldiers either rape or kill you. What then do you choose – rape so you can spare your life? Yet even rape is no guarantee that you will be spared. My cousin sister was killed. Her death was horrible. She was heavily pregnant. They raped her and then cut her belly open and removed the baby. They put the baby on her chest and both mother and baby were left to die. Who does such a thing!

Somehow, we managed to reach the Ugandan border. That's where UNHCR picked us up and brought us here to Bidibidi Zone 1, village 14, cluster T. We came with nothing though, not even utensils.

Here in the settlement it is a little safe but by the time I got here, I was so traumatised. I almost ran mad. I used to get nightmares and run about wildly in the night. I almost committed suicide, but through prayer, God has helped me recover. Several women go through similar experiences. Women and girls who have experienced or witnessed atrocities need psychosocial support.

Many women are widows. They need economic support and education for their children. Fortunately for me, a sympathiser took my child so she can go to school. There are many things one may want to do but one is unable to. It is stressful. Life has not been easy.