

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL

**Testimony of Ann Hollingsworth, Senior Advocate for Government Relations
Refugees International
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International
Organizations
“Africa’s Displaced People”
July 9, 2015**

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, and the members of this subcommittee for holding this important hearing today. Refugees International (RI) is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people in some of the most difficult parts of the world. Based here in Washington, we conduct 12 to 15 field missions per year to research displaced populations, most recently in locations such as South Sudan, Myanmar, Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey. RI does not accept any government or United Nations funding, which allows our advocacy to be impartial and independent.

I am here today to describe the current situation for the longstanding Sudanese refugees in Chad. Like many of the displacement crises facing Africa today, the only real solution for the Sudanese refugees is to end the conflict and persecution that forced them to flee. But until that happens, governments and the United Nations have a duty to protect and assist these refugees to the fullest extent possible.

My colleague, Michael Boyce, and I went to Chad in May and June of 2015, visiting the capital N’Djamena and then to the east to meet with refugees, host communities, humanitarians, development actors, and government officials. Our new report, released today, goes into greater detail of RI’s key areas of concern: **food ration cuts and a self-reliance approach with little funding or leadership.**

The Situation in Chad Today:

The Sudanese refugee population in Chad is an underreported story – a hard thing to imagine ten years ago, when the Darfur crisis took center stage. The essential humanitarian support that both the United States and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) have given to this refugee population over the years is well-documented. But there are currently 360,000 Sudanese refugees in Chad, struggling to survive in a harsh environment with few opportunities available for them or for their host communities. Ranking 184th out of 187 countries in the United Nations Human Development Index, Chad is one of the poorest countries in the world.

The price of oil, the country’s main export, has fallen roughly 40 percent since last year, and

trade routes into Nigeria, Central African Republic, and Libya have been largely cut due to conflict. And regional counterterrorism efforts, particularly with respect to Boko Haram, remain a primary focus of the Chadian government. The June 15, 2015 suicide bombings in N’Djamena, which targeted both the police academy and the police headquarters, were a tragic reminder of the security threats the region is facing.

Today, new refugee flows into Chad from both the Central African Republic and Nigeria are shifting the focus of the international community away from the Sudanese refugee population. The ongoing conflict in Darfur has caused the Sudanese refugees’ exile to become protracted. And though all of the refugees we spoke with want to return to Darfur, they realize that this is unlikely any time soon.

Despite appearances of being an unchanged population, the number of Sudanese refugees in Chad continues to increase. We met a female refugee named Aishe who had arrived in Chad just one week prior, having never been displaced before. When her village in Darfur was attacked by a militia, she was separated from her seven children, and had to travel for 15 days to reach the refugee camp in Chad. Aishe managed to find shelter with a sister who lives in the camp. But her family is scarcely able to support themselves, leaving her wondering how she would survive.

Given the topic of today’s hearing, I think the Sudanese refugee crisis underlines two major challenges that we see today in many parts of Africa. The first is that the most basic needs of too many vulnerable families are not being met – in large part because humanitarian funding has not kept pace with historic levels of demand worldwide. The second is that protracted displacement is not just a humanitarian problem – it is a development problem. Yet development actors are still reluctant to provide the leadership, coordination, and multi-year funding that could give displaced people a chance at long-term self-reliance.

Food Ration Cuts:

In early 2014, the World Food Program (WFP) made a dramatic 50 percent cut (up to 60 percent in some areas) in food rations for Sudanese refugees in Chad: from the previous allotment of 2,100 kilocalories a day to around 800. We saw first-hand the effect of these cuts at a food distribution inside Am Nabak refugee camp. In addition to reductions in legumes, sorghum, oil, and cereals, no sugar or salt were available to the refugees. Soap happened to be part of the distribution that day but that had not been included in months, according to the refugees.

In Touloum refugee camp, we spoke with two female refugees who said it was difficult to get their children the necessary nutrition, particularly since the food rations began, as local food is expensive and items such as fruit or meat are not provided by WFP. Humanitarians that RI spoke with said women often cannot afford essentials such as milk for their children. One local NGO spoke to RI about malnourished children having to share their nutritional supplements with their families since the ration cuts began, prolonging their recovery time.

Both refugees and aid workers told RI that refugees – particularly women and children – had responded to the cuts with **worrying coping mechanisms**. Women RI spoke with left camps to find what little work they could, often farming or making bricks. Sometimes these trips would last for days or weeks at a time, with children being taken out of school either to work or care for

younger siblings while their parents were gone. An operational NGO worker that RI spoke with noted an increase in cases of sexual violence and exploitation against the Sudanese refugee women since the ration cuts began. Petty crime has increased in some areas as well. It was clear to RI that the consequences of food ration cuts for the most vulnerable households have been unacceptable. An immediate increase in food assistance for those households is absolutely essential.

In the longer-term, WFP and UNHCR are in the process of executing a new approach to food assistance for the Sudanese refugees – one in which aid is targeted on the basis of need. The two agencies are conducting economic assessments that will divide households into four groups, from very poor to better off. Full rations would only be provided for poorer households – roughly 60 percent of all refugees, according to preliminary data. Wealthier households would receive more limited amounts of food or non-food assistance (such as food-for-assets and access to microcredit) according to their means. UN officials project that the transition to this new approach will be completed by the end of 2015.

Self-Reliance Approach:

It is important to note that these food rations cuts are just one example where cuts to humanitarian assistance are having an immediate impact on the refugee population. At the same time, these cuts are occurring as the humanitarian community in eastern Chad has begun to move toward a self-reliance approach for the Sudanese refugees. This self-reliance approach involves giving refugees opportunities to support themselves financially, trying to strengthen ties between refugees and their Chadian neighbors, and incorporating the refugees into Chad's domestic health and education systems.

In principle, this transition is laudable. It follows years of research suggesting that displaced people lead more dignified lives if they are self-sufficient and integrated with host communities. However, in eastern Chad this transition faces a major – and potentially fatal – obstacle: the communities that refugees are meant to join are some of the poorest in the world, with extremely weak institutions, markets, and social services. In the words of one humanitarian whom RI spoke to, “Everybody is talking about socio-economic integration...but how do you integrate refugees into an area where people are starving?”

Humanitarian organizations like UNHCR do not have the staffing, the funding, or the mandates to fix these problems. Development donors and organizations do have the mandate, yet they are virtually non-existent in eastern Chad. That is the reality on the ground.

The future for health care access is problematic. UNHCR and the Chadian authorities decided that Sudanese refugees would no longer receive healthcare at separate facilities but would instead be served through the Chadian national health system. Though a fine idea in principle, in fact health services in the east's refugee-hosting regions have been critically weakened by a lack of state healthcare workers. Aid agencies told RI that in many parts of the east, Chadian state clinics are almost entirely staffed by NGO workers paid by UNHCR and its partners. These aid agencies claim that many state-funded healthcare posts at these clinics remain vacant.

In refugee-hosting areas, donors and development agencies must prioritize efforts to improve water management, agricultural inputs and techniques, land management and dispute resolution, and women's empowerment. Many of the Sudanese refugees are skilled in agriculture and farming. To acknowledge this existing resource, development projects should focus on water management solutions.

A final priority for development donors and agencies must be women's empowerment. Sudanese refugee women and girls suffer from a low social status, with limited rights and economic power. This contributes to gender-based violence (including rape, domestic violence, and early or forced marriage), poor maternal health, and the vulnerability of women-headed households.

Immediate and Medium-Term Recommendations:

- Donors and the WFP must immediately increase food rations to 2,100 kilocalories per day for vulnerable Sudanese refugees, until such time as assistance can be adjusted in line with region-wide household economic assessments.
- UNHCR and the WFP should closely monitor the food security situation of Sudanese refugees after food assistance is adjusted. After 12 months, UNHCR and WFP should commission a full Joint Impact Evaluation to identify any necessary adjustments and to more fully understand and address coping mechanisms.
- Donors – including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the World Bank – should provide dedicated funding for development and resilience initiatives in eastern Chad that benefit both Sudanese refugees and Chadian host communities.
- UNHCR should freeze its budget for core refugee protection and assistance in eastern Chad. Further cuts should only be considered once refugees begin receiving long-term support from development actors.

Conclusion:

I left Chad with profound stories and images of Sudanese refugees, both of despair and of strength. I watched elderly women in the hot sun chopping what limited firewood was available. I listened to a female refugee who grabbed my hand to tell me about her struggles to find resources to take care of her mother and the three orphan children in her home. I heard many stories about fears for their future, including how they will find enough food to eat. The vulnerabilities of this population are very real and the international community must return the spotlight to them now.

Thank you very much and I look forward to your questions.