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Juba, 18 June 2012 – This weekend UNHCR launched a new air bridge to Upper Nile state linking Juba with Paloich airport in Melut county.

"I would like to extend my deep appreciation to the Government of South Sudan for authorizing the use of Paloich airport for this critical emergency operation," said UNHCR country representative, Mireille Girard.

Girard remarked that the air bridge has accelerated delivery of critical life-saving aid to refugee settlements. "We needed a much swifter delivery system, as the number of refugees in Upper Nile rapidly surpassed our original planning assumptions. Whereas we had planned for 75,000 refugees, we are already counting some 105,000 – with several thousand more reportedly about to cross the border from Blue Nile state."

Speaking at Juba airport UNHCR Senior Supply Officer in Juba, Farah Omer said that since Saturday the chartered Ilyushin 18 aircraft has delivered 3,270 plastic sheets, 3,070 blankets, 4,500 jerry cans, 1,588 kitchen sets, 48,080 pieces of soap, 4,375 sleeping mats and 4,050 mosquito nets as well as materials for borehole drilling operations, such as PVC pipes, casing and gravel bags."

Omer, who is overseeing the airlift operation noted that, "There will be 28 rotations in all from Juba, delivering non-food items for up to 50,000 refugees. In addition, we are launching a second bridge from Nairobi to Paloich to bring 5,000 tents and other items."

He recalled that this year UNHCR set up new supply routes through Ethiopia to complement long-established routes by barge on the River Nile and by road from Juba. "With the arrival of the rainy season, grueling road conditions have slowed down long-haul ground transport operations considerably. Our main challenge now is to maintain the road network to and within the refugee settlements as well as border areas to facilitate relocation of new arrivals to safer locations. This undertaking will require substantial investment in heavy equipment."

In Paloich, UNHCR and camp management agency, ACTED, put in place a fleet of trucks to immediately transport the airlifted goods from the airport to the three settlements. The airport is located 90km by road from Jammam settlement and 150km from Doro settlement. Yusuf Batil settlement is situated between the other two.

South Sudan is currently hosting well over 150,000 refugees from Sudan.