

UNHCR concerned about refugees safety as border tension escalates

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September 26, 2012 (JUBA) - The United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) on Tuesday expressed concerns over the increasing numbers of refugees fleeing Sudan's Southern Kordofan state into Yida settlement camp in South Sudan's Unity state.

Most of the refugees, a UNHCR official said, were arriving in poor health conditions and without any belongings.

"Reports from those arriving said they had come to set up a shelter in Yida Camp and then would return to Sudan to retrieve their families. They were fleeing not only the terror of the bombings and the presence of ground troops, but also an acute lack of food as it became impossible to plant crops," said Melissa Fleming, a spokesperson for agency.

South Sudan, according to UNHCR, currently hosts over 200,000 refugees, while up to 80,000 people are expected to arrive into the young nation as the rains subside or if fighting escalates in Southern Kordofan.

UNHCR, Fleming noted, remains concerned, as tension builds in border areas, about the safety of refugees in Yida settlement, located in close proximity to the border.

"The presence of a refugee settlement in highly militarized border areas close to a conflict zone hampered efforts to preserve the civilian and humanitarian character of asylum," said Fleming, adding that the safety of the refugees in this location could not be guaranteed.

The refugee agency, she said, is continuously working with the refugee community to advocate for the relocation of the settlement to a safer location as soon as roads re-opened.

In addition, UNHCR has reportedly supported South Sudanese authorities in their efforts to ensure there were no arms or combatants in the camp and that the practice of recruitment was prevented.

Recently, a search for weapons in the settlement, it said, led to incidents of arbitrary detention and abuse of refugees. However, UNHCR with the help of its partners, have reportedly been monitoring the situation and intervening to secure the release of those detained.

Last week, the British charity group Oxfam, warned of a "ticking time bomb" in refugee camps in South Sudan's Upper Nile state county of Maban. Heavy rains, Oxfam said, have not only cut off main road, but could lead to serious disease outbreaks.

An estimated 100,000 refugees, according to UNCHR, currently live in various camps within Upper Nile state.

The UN Security Council (UNSC) on 21 September issued a statement on Sudan and South Sudan, expressing concern of its members about the humanitarian situation in Sudan's South Kordofan and Blue Nile States.

The statement, also, strongly urged all parties to expedite all necessary steps to immediately commence humanitarian relief operations in accordance with the Memoranda of Understanding the parties signed with the Tripartite partners.

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