

## **FAR Assessment of Returnee Situation in Melut Town, Upper Nile County**

*An assessment was conducted by FAR staff on Friday December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010, to determine the needs of the recently-arrived returnees in Melut Town. This took the form of interviews with returnee families at the FAR way station, meetings with the SSRRC Coordinator and the Melut Commissioner, and a meeting with Medair staff. The information collected was combined with information obtained through interviews by FAR staff with returnees from December 2<sup>nd</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup>, and the results are summarized below. To further supplement this information, a nutritional assessment is in the process of being organized by Medair with assistance by FAR.*

Between December 2<sup>nd</sup> and December 7<sup>th</sup> 2010, five buses full of returnees arrived at the way station in Melut Town, Upper Nile County. These government-sponsored buses, originating in Khartoum, carried a total of 692 individuals: 64 men (many of whom are elderly or disabled), 132 women and 496 children. The five buses returned to Khartoum, where they will collect more returnees and make the trip to Melut again this week with approximately 700 more returnees.

The families were initially met at the way station by members of the government who had vans waiting to take them immediately to be registered to vote in the referendum. After registration they were returned to the way station with no further assistance from the local government representatives, who then approached FAR to provide for these families. One government representative remarked to a FAR staff member that he was pleased with the large numbers of women on the buses, because “women make the best voters”.

The way station was built by FAR as part of a recently-ended ECHO funded project. There is one shelter, latrines, and water taps that are connected to the town’s water supply, so the water and sanitation needs of the returnees at the way station are being met. The station is fenced and FAR has hired a temporary guard.

Although the returnees had officially been promised only transportation and land, many were under the impression that there were NGOs present who were going to provide for their immediate needs. A few of the women told one of FAR’s team that had they known there would be no assistance and so few services in the town they would not have come because there is nothing for them in Melut.

### *Coping Strategies*

For the first few days, the returnees were able to use their savings to purchase food. However these savings lasted for an average of 2-3 days, and then most of the returnees were left with nothing. FAR was able to make \$2300 USD available for small amounts of food, which have been left each evening with the way station guard, and those with nothing have been able to access small rations of sorghum flour, oil and fuul (beans).



The families arrived with very few belongings, although these arrived within hours for some, and within days for most, on lorries which followed the buses. However, the belongings are still quite minimal and are not appropriate for the Melut setting. Very few families brought blankets with them, and it is now the cold season, and some women have resorted to using dried grass to protect their children from the cold nights.

By December 10<sup>th</sup> the numbers at the way station had decreased to 85 individuals, as returnees took up temporary residence with relatives and acquaintances in Melut town. The 85 who did not leave were unable to find family members who could afford to house them, even for a temporary period. This dependence on relatives and acquaintances is by no means ideal, as these host families are themselves quite vulnerable, and the additional financial burden of caring for extra people will further increase their vulnerability and push them further into poverty.

#### *Land Allocation*

The local government has land prepared for these returnees, but is refusing to allow families to access their plots until they have some form of shelter. Materials to build a traditional 3x3 metre *tukul* cost 680 SDG, which is an unimaginable number for most of the women FAR interviewed. In some areas of Upper Nile it is possible to collect wood and other naturally-growing grasses and twigs for building, but Melut is quite barren, making this a very difficult task.

FAR has secured funding from Tearfund for 500 kits of 2 plastic sheets, 1 bundle of bamboo poles, and one blanket. These should arrive in Melut by December 18<sup>th</sup>, at which point the government has agreed to allow the recipients to access their land. These kits should only be viewed as a temporary intervention, as the returnee land is situated on open ground, and it is highly unlikely that the plastic sheets will withstand the heavy winds for very many days.

#### *Protection Concerns*

The land which has been allocated for these returnee families is situated on the way out of town, very close to the military barracks and the UNMIS compound. This raises serious protection issues for the large



numbers of single women and children who will be surrounded by so many soldiers who have regular access to alcohol. The area does not have electricity so it will be very dark at night, and although the Commissioner of Melut assured FAR staff that “rape does not happen in Melut”, FAR is concerned that the potential for such violation is quite high.

There are very few job opportunities in Melut town for these returnees, and given the location of their land, there exists the risk that many of these women may engage in commercial sex work as a

means of securing an income to feed their children. This in turn will further increase the vulnerability of these women, and heighten their chances of being sexually assaulted.

#### *Main Needs*

Based on discussions with the returnees and the local government authorities, FAR has identified the following needs:

- 1) **Blankets:** The winter season is just beginning in Melut and the region faces a 10-degree-Celsius drop in temperature between day and night. When FAR staff asked returnees why they didn't bring blankets with them, they responded that they didn't have blankets in Khartoum, so did not realize they would need them in Melut. Both the way station and their new plots of land are located quite near to the Nile, and the strong winds make the night time very difficult without blankets. As a coping mechanism, some women are covering their children with pieces of grass while they are sleeping. Blankets are the most requested resource among those still residing at the way station.
- 2) **Food:** The returnees are currently relying on relatives and FAR for their food needs because their meagre savings have run out. The food situation in Melut is already precarious as many of the northern vendors have moved north of the border, and transportation costs of food from the north to Melut have risen by two thirds in the past four months (from 5175 SDG/lorry in August to 8625 SDG/lorry in December). This in turn has caused a spike in food costs as well as a shortage of key staples in the market. FAR conducted a rapid market assessment and found sugar, sorghum and flour in very short supply, and on December 11 there was no bread at all in the town due to insufficient flour supplies.
- 3) Family-sized **tents** (made of canvas): These should replace the plastic sheeting shelters provided by FAR and allow the families a decent-sized living space on their own plots of land until they can find money for *tukul* materials. FAR is concerned that when the plastic sheeting begins to rip, the families will return to the shelter at the way station, and a camp-like setting will form.
- 4) **Flashlights/torches** and batteries: These will be an important protection mechanism for the women once they move onto their land, as there is no electricity and therefore no light between the hours of 7pm and 7am.
- 5) **Jerry cans:** Jerry cans are in short supply in the Melut market, and these families require a way to collect – and if possible treat – water, both from the taps at the way station and from the Nile, once they are relocated.