

172. Tragic Victims

Last year, the SPLA rebels several times came through the peaceful rural community of Riimenze in South Sudan where we have our large agricultural project and other pastoral ministries. They were forcibly trying to recruit new members. The people would run to the bush to avoid them. This year, on New Years day just before mass, the Government soldiers attacked the people, apparently acting on the false assumption they were sheltering or supporting the rebels. As usual, the victims are innocent people living in very simple circumstances who want peace not war. I lived happily in Riimenze for more than two years and know personally many of these people. It is so sad to see this suffering imposed upon them.

One visitor to Riimenze in mid-January was moved to write,

'I do not have words to describe what we saw and witnessed. How this could happen in South Sudan is beyond me. On 6 January I went to the village and saw about 1000 people camped around the church compound under the mango trees. Some had tarpaulins strung up and others had makeshift structures that did not look in any way permanent. Today, there are more than 4,000 people around that compound! The structures begin from the side of the Solidarity fence at the left side of the church and stretch behind the church across the area under the mango trees to the priest's small compound. We have bought all the tarpaulins available in Yambio and there are not enough for the families in Riimenze. The nights are now cold and people are suffering. Those with no tarp are putting up palm branches which give a little measure of privacy but no protection from the weather.

As people arrive they register at the church. They are sent to different areas with their own village people. Leaders care for their groups. There is a shortage of water. It is shocking to see the people having to resort to living like this. The people have been told clearly the rebels are to surrender, and no one is to harbor a rebel. Anyone found outside of the restricted area may be killed. They 'must be a rebel or supporter' if they are not at the church. A couple of the young men told me they had never witnessed anything as bad as this before. They are horrified and frightened. No one knows what to do. While we were there some soldiers came. Apparently the soldiers come anytime they want and do what they want: loot, destroy, kill animals and beat up people. The government is doing nothing to help. It is as if the people are not being considered at all. No-one cares. It is horrible...'

Solidarity with South Sudan, through Sr Rosa, leader of our Agriculture Project, has been the main provider of food, water and other assistance for these people but a few NGOs are now becoming involved. Rosa recently provided a comprehensive update in which she said, inter alia, The number of IDPs increasing every day is counted on 26 Jan 1,075 households= 5056 people. Medicine has been given enough from NGOs.... There are 4 local people are working at the clinic: 1 nurse, 1 midwife, 2 helpers. The tukuls, inside our gate, are now used for the mothers and babies after delivering or for those who are very sick needing drips. 16 bathrooms have been built with cemented floor and iron sheets around - and 4 toilets. Drinking water has been provided every day in plastic containers as much as we can. Porridge is provided by us every day to more than 1000

children and 300 elderly. Cups of milk are given to around 70 old and very weak elderly. Sometimes bananas and papaya are given to them too. One pig was slaughtered and a good meal was prepared for them. Rice, soap, salt, cooking oil were given to them once. An estimated 8 tons of sweet potato have been given to the people. There are around 5 tons more on the ground, plus mixed flour from maize, soya, sorghum, beans for the porridge (from Farm). Papaya, banana, pineapple and cucumber have been giving to the elderly, some mothers and children around...

There is still lot of fear as rebels and soldiers sometimes come or pass the IDPs camp. MSF have been visiting to give the people powder to purify the water, and vaccinations. Many families lost their harvests as crops have been spoiled on the ground. Every evening smoke is blowing to every corner in and outside the camp like light clouds. The fear is that the camp might be burned as most of the shelters are made of palm leaves and they are crowded close to each other. And people have been cooking nearby.

All these people want is to return to their simple homes and live in peace. We support that.

– Br Bill