

Fleeing the horrors of South Sudan fighting

At least 25,000 displaced people have gathered on the northern border, with more on the way trying to escape attacks.

[Ashley Hamer](#) Last updated: 29 Nov 2014 06:39



South Sudan has among the highest infant and maternal mortality rates in the world [Ashley Hamer/Al Jazeera]

Calek, South Sudan - Four-hundred families arrived in the baking, dusty village of Calek recently after they fled in two waves from Abyei, a contested fist of land on the border of Sudan and South Sudan.

"I had five children," young mother Achol Dhieu, 30, told Al Jazeera. "I ran away with two babies because the other three were hiding in a church and died when the rebels burned it down. My husband too was killed in August."

The first wave of families were displaced in September by violent raids from the Misseriya - Arab cattle-herding militia rumoured to be armed by Sudan's government to the north.

The second came running from clashes in eastern Abyei between South Sudanese government forces and the Sudan People's Liberation Army In Opposition - fighters formerly part of the national army until the government fractured in December 2013. That's when Vice President Riek Machar launched a violent opposition to President Salva Kiir, setting his loyal Nuer tribesmen against Salva's Dinka people.

The new families in Calek - all a sub-tribe of the Dinka - left with nothing in October and walked south for a month through the bush into South Sudan's Northern Bahr el Ghazal state, their ancestral homeland.



The displaced population in Aweil North has received little state and international support [Ashley Hamer/Al Jazeera]

There is limited humanitarian aid presence in this scorched corner of South Sudan. The roads are terrible where they exist, and most people live in isolated hamlets scattered far across the dry, flat landscape.

Achol Dhieu and the others she travelled with made for Calek because of its reputation for strong community support in the absence of state

or international relief structures in the region.

The village system is well organised for new arrivals, explained Chief Marwien Wal Marwien.

He said the displaced have been given a large space of cleared scrubland on the outskirts of town and told to build their own new homes.

They build basic huts from sticks and grass and while they do so, they are sheltered and their children fed by the resident host community, many of whom have previously fled violence themselves.

"Food is a problem," Chief Marwien told Al Jazeera, "there is not enough. But the little things that we have, we are happy to share."

The chief is also an internally displaced person (IDP). He fled to Calek from conflict on the border last year and represents the refugee community living in the village.

He said the IDPs in Calek number several thousand and more people are expected to come as the dry season begins, meaning armed groups and refugees can move more easily.



Northern Bahr el Ghazal is the poorest state in South Sudan [Ashley Hamer/Al Jazeera]

Zeratha Amou has been in Calek for two weeks and arrived with eight of her family. She is tiny and so old she has long forgotten when she was born.

Amou has a deep gash on her foot and limps. "We ran from Abyei," she said. "I cut my toe on a log during the walk to Calek."

The Misseriya militia attacked her village. "They killed us, they burned houses, and they looted things," she said. "They also took five of our girls."

Amou said her group did not receive any help from aid organisations until reaching Calek. Doctors Without Borders (MSF) is among the few groups running consistent humanitarian projects in the entire state.

They operate maternity and paediatrics wards in the main hospital in

state capital Aweil, and a primary healthcare clinic and outreach community services in the region of Aweil North, which includes Calek.

Yet Northern Bahr el Ghazal is the poorest state in South Sudan, itself among the least developed countries in the world.

"Daily life is an emergency here, the need is massive," Andrew Zadel, field coordinator for the MSF project in Aweil North, told Al Jazeera.

"Firstly state structures are non-existent, secondly other humanitarian actors are largely absent and thirdly, all the resources are going to more interesting places of active conflict in South Sudan."

Their small clinic and outreach programme were established in Pamat, Aweil North, in March 2013, to cater to mothers and children escaping aerial and ground attacks along the border with Sudan.

The displaced population in this region is at least 25,000 with that number growing as new IDPs arrive fleeing continued fighting on the Sudanese border and as far as Bentiu in Unity state.



The Dinka are South Sudan's most populous tribe and as cattle herders cows are of utmost value [Ashley Hamer/Al Jazeera]

Additionally, Northern Bahr el Ghazal saw catastrophic rates of malaria this year. Sixty-six percent of people screened by MSF in Pamat in October tested positive for the disease - four times the rate in the same month last year.

MSF provides free screening and treatment. Ministry of Health clinics often don't have the drugs, and malaria treatment on the local market can cost as much as \$40 for people with no income whatsoever.

Yet this MSF programme in Pamat may not continue next year.

"Our budget is for only seven months," said Zadel. "The idea was never to replace state health structures but we're now running the only fully operational health centre in the whole county."

The Ministry of Health keeps their own vaccines in the MSF clinic's only fridge because they lack the facilities.

Government health officials and some NGOs are around, but MSF has not seen an improvement in the health of the population in the last year and demand for their services is increasing dramatically.

The people of Northern Bahr el Ghazal are extremely vulnerable.

A potentially lethal hunger gap is coming because the rains were poor this year, according to Santino Dut, assistant to the field coordinator at MSF Pamat.

And while the state itself is quiet right now, none of the surrounding conflicts and the border dispute that has raged since 1983 have been resolved.

"These people want a state that works. But it is too precarious," said Zadel.

"The displaced cannot go back, there is major food insecurity and no transport or health infrastructure. They live in a politically and militarily unstable situation."

One reason Northern Bahr el Ghazal has been neglected for so long may be that there are so few resources - no oil, timber or gold - to attract interest, investment and greed.

A driver recently told Zadel his view of his own land: "He told me that in rich Unity state they fight over oil, whereas here in Northern Bahr el Ghazal we fight over water and grass."

The IDPs of Calek are clearly being organised, sheltered and supported by their host community with or without help from outside. The region is Dinka heartland and there are strong traditions of community cohesion.

But without commitment, consistency and investment from outside as well as inside, the circumstances for the people of this state are likely to deteriorate.

"I'm afraid for my people, if this MSF project closes and nothing comes to replace it the community of Aweil North will completely collapse," said Santino Dut.



400 families arrived in the Aweil North village of Calek recently, fleeing violence from armed groups [Ashley Hamer/Al Jazeera]