

Sudan

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Warnings not heeded

Part of the tragedy is that the current situation might have been averted if the government had heeded warnings.

On Feb. 15, the bishops who serve in the troubled areas of Sudan issued an appeal for help, and a request that the government lift a ban on humanitarian flights to contested areas in southern Sudan.

"There is already a severe food shortage which was expected to increase in the coming months," the bishops warned. "The influx of displaced (from battle areas) will make the situation deteriorate even faster than expected and real famine will start in a matter of a few weeks."

But, Msgr. Mazzolari said, the government dismissed the warning, claiming the bishops "were paranoid" and that they were trying to help the rebel forces. Moreover, the government controlled media access to the region, helping to keep news of the famine from getting out.

Meanwhile, the monsignor said, people in the outside world essentially said, "there's always been hunger in Sudan, we're just making a lot of noise."

"Sudan has always been in a corner as far as being known and people being aware of the problems," he added.

Nor have the bishops been alone in issuing warnings — and in being ignored.

"We try to tell the people what is going on there, but it is like it is not understood," observed Jordan Long, president of Rochester's Sudanese Community Association, Inc. "It was not attracting the attention of the people we were talking to."

Even as late as May, and despite the warnings from church workers that the situation was worsening, the World Food Program estimated that only 350,000 people were affected by the famine.

But then the effects of the drought began to hit home.

"(Sudan) was on the brink of collapse because of the war," acknowledged Father Pasquino Panato, now of the Comboni Missionaries' justice and peace office in Montclair, N.J. "The drought gave the final blow," added the priest, who served as headmaster of Comboni College in Khartoum, Sudan, from 1970 to 1988.

The government lifted the flight ban, a cease-fire was declared, and relief supplies began to flow. But by then it was too late, Msgr. Mazzolari said.

"By the time people became aware of the tremendous number of people who were

hungry, they were fading away," the monsignor reported.

Tom Price, communications associate with Baltimore-based Catholic Relief Services, witnessed the worsening situation first-hand during a visit to the Diocese of Rumbek in late July.

Price described Rumbek in the embattled region of Bahr al Ghazal as a "shattered town, populated by ghosts."

Relief supplies are coming in, Price said, but noted that, "access to southern Sudan is ridiculously difficult. Even to aid efforts, it's terribly expensive."

"The landing strips are grass or mud, and rain can close them for days," he explained. "Only smaller planes can land on these strips, so cargo space is in short supply."

Roads are practically impassable due to the current rains and dangerous due to fighting that breaks out periodically despite the cease-fire and talks between the government and the leading rebel group, the Sudan People's Liberation Army. The combination makes it hard to get even food on hand to those who need it.

"It's one matter of getting it into Rumbek Diocese," Price said. "It's another matter of spreading it around the Rumbek Diocese."

Even when the people do get food, Msgr. Mazzolari said, "some of the people are so bad they are not physically able to cook their own food."

The monsignor said one of the most difficult aspects of working with famine victims is "the helplessness you feel when you're faced by hundreds, hundreds of people sitting outside your door. We can only do so much. It's not the physical work, it's the stress that comes over you by having to witness this all day long."

Troubled past

The ongoing civil war pits the central government in Khartoum against several rebel groups seeking independence for southern Sudan.

Northern Sudan is a desert region in sub-Saharan Africa. It is inhabited primarily by people of Arabic ancestry, and the major religion is Islam.

Southern Sudan is devoted to agriculture and cattle, and its southernmost parts experience a six-month rainy season. It is inhabited primarily by black Africans. Most of the people follow traditional tribal beliefs, but the region also is home to a sizable Christian population.

Sudanese Arabs largely control the central government, which has repeatedly attempted to impose Islamic law over the entire nation. This has led to many uprisings

in the south.

"The split is cultural, political and religious," acknowledged Dan Gatkek, a Sudanese native who now works as a bilingual job counselor and caseworker at the Catholic Family Center's refugee and immigration department. Gatkek fled Sudan in the mid-1980s because of the fighting.

These divisions have helped to keep the rebellion going. The only period of relative stability came after 1972, when the military government and southern rebels negotiated a peace settlement that granted a great deal of autonomy to the south. Peace reigned for the next decade, Father Panato noted.

"For 10 years, I enjoyed the old Sudan," Father Panato observed.

The peaceful respite allowed southern Sudan to begin rebuilding from damage experienced during the many years of fighting, he said. "The southern region was really coming back strongly," the priest remarked.

But in 1983, the government announced that it would enforce Islamic law. Fighting in the south resumed, and the economy collapsed. In the years since, nearly a million refugees have fled Sudan, most living in camps in such nations as Ethiopia and Kenya. Some — such as Gatkek, Long and the approximate 70 members of the Rochester Sudanese community — ultimately fled to Europe or the United States.

"They were deceived," Gatkek said of the rebels who negotiated the 1972 peace settlement. "The government violated an agreement."

But, Gatkek acknowledged, both sides have violated agreements over the course of the civil war, and now neither side trusts the other.

A drought in 1987-88 offered a chilling prophecy of the current famine. An estimated 500,000 people starved to death in 1988-89, and several hundred thousand others died in subsequent years due to hunger and disease.

But the situation today is worse, Long contended.

"What is happening this year is the war is more serious than it was five years ago," Long said. Earlier, "we fought only in key towns. It is being fought everywhere now."

In the past, Gatkek explained, people were able to flee to safe areas to get away from the fighting. But because fighting is now so widespread, they can no longer do so.

"What makes the situation worse is the people; they have no place to go," Gatkek said.

Further, he contended, "Each faction is

using the famine as a weapon to make the other side surrender."

The future

As the famine has become more widely known, relief efforts have begun to increase.

The World Food Program and Operation Lifeline Sudan, for example, are shipping in massive amounts of food daily.

Catholic Relief Services, meanwhile, is working in a number of regions. In particular, it is cooperating with the Diocese of Rumbek to distribute food at both the main feeding centers and at missions in less accessible areas, Price noted. CRS is working directly with the diocese — rather than the government — to ensure that the food actually gets to those who need it. On July 31, CRS announced it is committing an additional \$4 million to its Sudan-relief efforts.

Still, Price warned, "The diocese is running out and needs more, and there's just not enough food in that area. Not enough food is getting in, and the demand is huge."

In the long run, the only way to end the ongoing problems in Sudan is to end the war, Msgr. Mazzolari said.

"The only real cure for the hunger would be peace, or at least a convincing cease-fire," Msgr. Mazzolari observed.

But Father Panato is not optimistic about prospects of the current peace talks.

"It will be difficult, because both sides are stubborn," Father Panato said.

He predicted that if the current government says in power, "There will be no hope. Zero."

"To my understanding, it seems it's going to be an unsolvable war," Long acknowledged. "Any political means that can separate the north and south, that's the only solution."

Gatkek believes that more pressure needs to be put on the government of Sudan to break the deadlock in the talks — and to prevent further problems for the people of southern Sudan. But he also recognizes that only the Sudanese can resolve their problems.

"Somebody has to stop it," he declared. "But it's not going to be outside Sudan."

Despite the years of failed efforts, Long expressed hope that some sort of solution will eventually be found to end the war — and the cycles of famine.

"I think God did not create us to be in this situation forever," Long said.

EDITORS' NOTE: Donations to help fight the famine in Sudan may be sent to Catholic Relief Services, 209 W. Fayette St., Baltimore, Md. 21201-3443. This story contains reporting by Catholic News Service.

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