

CAN ANOTHER FAMINE IN SUDAN BE PREVENTED?

Using the lessons of 1998 to minimise suffering in 1999

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In 1998 much of southern Sudan suffered widespread famine. A massive response by numerous aid agencies supported by government donors and the general public around the world saved many lives. Recent malnutrition rates indicate there has been a substantial improvement in the nutritional situation in most areas. Thousands of lives were lost however, and the population remains extremely vulnerable. As fighting continues and the most optimistic estimates predict the next significant harvest will be in October 1999, another catastrophic year is feared.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has been providing health and nutrition humanitarian assistance in the northern and southern sectors of Sudan for over 10 years. **With little hope of an end to the conflict in sight, we believe it is now imperative to address the weaknesses in the relief system in order to try to ensure that the humanitarian aid system responds more effectively when catastrophe threatens again.**

Through early warning systems a food shortage was predicted for 1998, but the scale of the famine in Bahr el Ghazal and some other parts of southern Sudan was not. The famine response revealed the severe limitations of humanitarian relief in the Sudan context. While the parties to the conflict must be held responsible for creating the conditions that allowed the famine to take place and for interfering with or obstructing the aid response, the international community (UN agencies, NGOs and donors) can and should be held responsible for the manner in which aid was provided.¹

There are a number of complex inter-related reasons why the situation in Sudan spiralled out of control. By examining the contextual issues and shortcomings of the humanitarian intervention, we aim to identify ways in which future humanitarian response can be improved in a constructive attempt to limit further catastrophe for the people of Sudan.

We urge all parties to the conflict to respect humanitarian principles. We also recommend that the structure and operations of OLS be urgently reformed so that OLS can separate the political

¹ The principal UN agencies in OLS are UNICEF (lead agency) and WFP (responsible for general food distribution). About 40 international NGOs within OLS and a number outside OLS provide food, nutrition, health and other relief assistance. The main donors supporting the relief programmes in Sudan in 1998 were the US Government (34%), the European Union (22%), the British Government (14%) and the Dutch Government (6%).

and the humanitarian and ensure the independence, impartiality and neutrality of the aid programme.

OPERATING PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE

International humanitarian law and conventions, and the principles they enshrine, apply to all parties and actors in wars and disasters. The neutrality, impartiality and independence of humanitarian action are key guiding principles, which must direct any humanitarian response. Applied in practice, this means humanitarian agencies must:

- have free access to people in need
- assess humanitarian needs neutrally and impartially
- provide humanitarian assistance strictly according to the needs
- monitor the assistance provided to ensure it is reaching those in need.

Humanitarian agencies are obliged to ensure they work according to these operating principles and governments and other authorities are obliged to allow humanitarian agencies the freedom to do so.

To address the emergency needs of the people in the civil war in Sudan, a coalition of UN agencies and NGOs known as Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) was established in 1989. It was mandated to initiate constructive change by negotiating access to the most vulnerable and interfacing this access with the delivery of humanitarian aid. It operates under a tripartite agreement signed by the Government of Sudan, the rebel movements and the UN, which provides for humanitarian response according to humanitarian principles. These are elaborated in subsequent agreements: the Ground Rules signed by the SPLA, SSIM and OLS; the TCHA agreements including the Minimum Operating Standards and Security Protocols signed by the Government, SPLA and UN.

Despite the efforts of humanitarian agencies within and beyond OLS, enormous suffering has continued to recur because of fundamental weaknesses in the application of humanitarian principles at the heart of the UN's co-ordination mechanism.

Assessment, provision and monitoring of relief

International humanitarian law and the OLS agreements provide that independent aid agencies should be allowed to assess needs freely, provide assistance on the basis of need alone and monitor assistance without hindrance. This has often not been the case in practice.

The most serious example of abuse of these basic principles in the 1998 famine was the diversion of food aid by the warring parties. In August 1998, a joint OLS/SPLM/SRRA task force investigated the problem and concluded that food diversion was taking place. Because of a lack of consistent post-distribution monitoring, it has been impossible comprehensively to quantify the scale of diversion and its impact on the population.

However, MSF nutrition surveys showed that malnutrition rates in Ajiep, Bahr el Ghazal, for example, remained extremely high for many months despite major food relief supplies into this SPLA-controlled area. In July an MSF nutritional survey revealed that Ajiep was a famine pocket in which over 80% of children under five years were malnourished and mortality was almost 30 times higher than the internationally recognised critical level. By October, after more than five months of emergency food relief, more than half the children in Ajiep were still malnourished; it is estimated that at least 3,000 people died in Ajiep over this period.

As WFP reported, 'the poorest and most marginalised received very little food through the general distribution process and many of the problems identified by the Task Force in August persisted'.² The extent of food diversion varied considerably from area to area; however it is clear that in some areas a significant amount of food aid did not reach the people most in need because fundamental operating principles were not respected by local parties or consistently ensured by aid agencies.

Food was diverted and fundamental operating principles not respected in various ways: by military parties and their humanitarian wings with whom OLS operates in partnership; by community chiefs charged with distributing rations who favoured residents over the huge numbers of internally displaced people; and within families according to the value placed on the life of different family members.

In the initial phase, post-distribution monitoring appears to have been grossly inadequate. It is now taking place in a number of locations, but its introduction was late and inconsistent. Responsibility for distributing general food rations was partially given to local parties and committees who often failed to ensure rations reached the most vulnerable (catastrophically so in Ajiep, where over 90% of the population were displaced people and excluded from food distributions). It was not until August that a significant number of independent monitors were put in place to try to ensure principled and effective general food distributions.

Access to people in need

While international humanitarian law and the OLS agreements provide that relief should be able to reach people in need without hindrance or obstruction, in practice access to populations in danger is severely limited in Sudan. For example:

- In Bahr el Ghazal in January 1998, over 100,000 people were displaced by fighting in Wau, Gogrial and Aweil (Bahr el Ghazal). Their suffering was exacerbated by a ban on relief flights in Bahr el Ghazal imposed by the Government: from 4th to 24th February, no relief flights were allowed. Following this ban, only four sites were cleared until the end of March. This eventually led to massive malnutrition as food relief arrived late and people were further displaced due to the concentration of services in a few locations. By June, malnutrition rates had soared in different places to between 28% and 79%.³

- In Wau town in August, as malnutrition rates soared to over 70%⁴, aid agencies' famine response was delayed for several crucial weeks by Government delays in the issue of visas and travel permits needed by international aid staff to enter Sudan and the town of Wau itself.

- Humanitarian access to other regions has also been restricted. The Government allows no access to the Nuba Mountains and since July 1998 has refused permits to allow MSF access to provide essential health services in Blue Nile State.

Access to people in need is also limited by **security constraints**. Both in areas covered by the cease-fire and areas not covered by it, fighting and insecurity hindered or prevented relief operations and reduced the effectiveness of the famine response. For example:

² EMOP monthly review, November 1998.

³ Global malnutrition according to weight for height nutrition surveys, cf. UNICEF Nutrition Report, June 1998.

⁴ UNICEF survey, August 1998.

- In June 1998 insecurity forced MSF to evacuate from Leer in Western Upper Nile. In May, a nutritional survey had revealed global malnutrition at 32.5% and at the time of the evacuation over 500 children were being cared for in MSF's supplementary and therapeutic feeding programme. The MSF centre was looted, health facilities burnt to the ground and subsequent efforts to trace the children have been unsuccessful. The risk of ongoing intra-Nuer fighting and lack of respect for humanitarian relief continues to threaten the implementation of services.

- Frequent evacuations of aid teams have been necessary in Bahr el Ghazal, hampering humanitarian assistance and limiting the impact of programmes. Although a cease-fire has been agreed by the Government and SPLA, it applies only to Bahr el Ghazal State and only to those two parties, leaving other areas and warring parties uncovered. Moreover, there are serious signs that the Bahr el Ghazal cease-fire is not preventing insecurity in the region. Without adequate security and humanitarian access, the risk of famine in 1999 is significantly increased.

RECOMMENDATIONS

With the aim of ensuring a principled, effective humanitarian response in Sudan, MSF makes the following recommendations:

To the parties to the conflict

Various agreements are in place to allow the provision of aid to the most vulnerable, but they are violated regularly by the parties to the conflict. The fact that these violations of humanitarian principles occur when the population is most vulnerable, e.g. during a famine, calls into question the concern of the conflicting parties for the welfare of their people.

The signatories to the Ground Rules and the TCHA protocols must re-commit themselves to these agreements and the Government of Sudan must adhere to the minimum standards agreements. All sides should respect basic humanitarian principles.

To OLS

Responsible for applying fundamental operating principles, OLS has not consistently ensured that needs are assessed neutrally and impartially and that aid is provided strictly according to humanitarian needs. OLS should strengthen its independence and capacity to enforce the various agreements to ensure that humanitarian assistance reaches those most in need.

The complexity of the OLS structure limits its efficiency and effectiveness. As pointed out by the 1996 OLS Review, there is an urgent need to separate the political responsibilities of OLS from its humanitarian co-ordination role in order to safeguard, and place more emphasis on, humanitarian principles.

To the implementing UN agencies

The implementing UN agencies were not sufficiently responsive to the famine as it emerged, basing plans and budgets on available funds rather than identified needs. They were also not

sufficiently strong in addressing abuses of humanitarian principles and ensuring that adequate aid reached the most vulnerable people.

WFP food assessments predict another year of significant food needs. Current strengthened capacity must be maintained to enable a timely response in 1999.

WFP should expand its system of post-distribution monitoring to all sites to ensure that food reaches the most vulnerable. Successful examples such as the WFP distributions in Panthau should be evaluated as a potential model for other areas to limit diversion.

To NGOs

As with the UN implementing agencies, between March and July 1998, lack of capacity in NGOs and slowness to adapt to the evolving needs severely hampered the effort to provide adequate relief to those affected by the famine. NGOs must strengthen and improve their efficiency and general performance.

NGOs have not been sufficiently strong and consistent in following up abuses of humanitarian principles and have thus contributed to a tendency towards acceptance of these violations - a trend which must be reversed. Violations of the humanitarian principles agreed in the Ground Rules, TCHA protocols and minimum standards should be systematically recorded and reported.

All NGOs running feeding programmes should ensure that post-distribution monitoring is done. Where possible, NGOs should assist WFP in this activity and other others such as food basket monitoring.

To donor governments

Although significant funding was made available at the peak of the famine, during the initial phase sufficient funds were not available for OLS to build up its capacity in time. Future negotiations with OLS should allow for funding needs to be articulated so that operations are dictated by needs rather than resources.

Most importantly, governments and donors should hold OLS accountable to humanitarian principles in the implementation of its mandate in Sudan.

There has been little serious effort on the part of the international community during this long-lasting civil war to engage with the warring parties to address the underlying causes of the conflict or bring about a peaceful resolution. Humanitarian agencies cannot undertake this role. Political commitment and action by governments are urgently needed to promote and support genuine high-level mediation and negotiations for peace in Sudan.

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