

Full Length Research

Security Impacts of South Sudanese Refugees on the Host Communities of Gambella Region of Ethiopia

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This paper examines the security impacts of south Sudanese refugees on the host communities' Gambella region of Ethiopia. The findings are more emphasized and analyzed qualitatively in light of primary sources gathered by interviewing of informants from refugees, host communities and officials from the camp and field observation. On the other hand, secondary sources were used in order to address the basic objectives of the research. To this end, the study used snowball sampling technique for collecting data from the study area. The refugee population in Gambella is significantly matches the size of the local host community which has brought many impacts on the host communities. The findings of this study indicate that the presence of refugees in the region has both negative and positive impacts. As the findings show, the presence of South Sudanese refugees are having negative environmental, health, sanitation, socio-cultural and security impacts on the host community. On the other hand, economic impacts have been positive such as new job opportunity, small business activity and availability of market for local farmers around the refugee camp. Finally, the study comes up with the conclusion that the negative impacts of refugees are found to be greater than its positive impacts and this put the region in unstable situation, and potential threat for the people of Gambella region of Ethiopia.

Key words; Refugee, Host Community, Chursa, Gambella, South Sudan

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of migration lately tends to be seen as a new stream, usually evoking a negative attitude in people, who often associate it with illegal migrants, high rates of unemployment or overall dependence. This attitude is fairly wrong and migration nowise can be considered as a modern trend. Grinvald (2010:18) states that People migrated for different reasons: looking for a permanent source of water, pushed by weather conditions or running away from enemy tribes. Presently, reasons for migration have slightly changed, but the aim has stayed the same: a wish for a better tomorrow in

places which have something to offer more job opportunities, higher salaries, better health care and so forth. On the other hand, UNHCR notes that there are people whose migration is often not of free will, who are forced to move due to their life in danger, ethnical conflict, wars and poverty (UNHCR, 2015:4).

At the systemic level the world refugee problem is caused by a variety of reasons, factors and forces. Among other things these include massive violations of human rights, especially the practice of colonialism, direct and structural violence, war, internal conflicts, external

aggression, ethnic and religious strife, direct political persecution, and economic and national disasters. The contemporary conflicts are mostly of an internal and inter-communal nature (Boamah-Gyau, 2008:1). As a result, the size of refugee flows in recent years has generated urgent global concern. Currently as of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimation, approximately there are 16 million refugees globally (UNHCR, 2015:4).

The magnitude of refugee influx in African countries in recent years has generated concern throughout the world. The eruption of violence in South Sudan in December 2013 placed an additional burden on an already volatile region of eastern Africa, which continues to suffer from conflict and displacement (UNHCR, 2015:5). Between December 2013 and October 2014, nearly half million South Sudanese crossed borders to become refugees in neighboring countries. The countries hosting these refugees include Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda and Sudan should be commended for keeping their borders open to people arriving from South Sudan despite the pressures that this inevitably places on their own populations, environment, and land and stretched public services (International Rescue Committee, 2014:19).

More than 128,000 refugees from South Sudan have arrived in Uganda since December 2013; UNHCR projects this number to increase to 150,000 refugees by the end of 2014. In 2012 approximately 20,000 refugees arrived in Kakuma from South Sudan. Since December 2013 there has been a further to 43,000 new arrivals from South Sudan, bringing the number of refugees in Kakuma to its current total of 177,000 people (International Rescue Committee, 2014:18-22). The highest influx of South Sudanese refugees has been in Ethiopia. Currently there are 245,000 refugees in the Gambella region; more than 190,000 have arrived since December 2013. The size of the refugee population almost matches the size of the 300,000 strong host communities of Gambella region (International Rescue Committee, 2014:18-22).

Host communities are the most affected by the refugee influx having less access to services than refugees which in turn leads to tension and potential conflict between refugees and host communities (International Rescue Committee, 2014:20). However, the influx and presence of refugees has also been shown at times to have negative impacts on individuals within a hosting community or even on the community as a whole particularly cause for environmental degradation and natural resource depletion (International Rescue Committee, 2014:25). The impacts of refugees on the lives of the host community as expressed above can be varying both positive and negative depending on many factors. The mass influx of refugees will influence and shape the relationship between the refugees and the hosts: the combination of factors differs greatly in each

refugee situation.

Being relied on the above arguments, the focus of this study was to investigate how the influx of South Sudanese refugee impacts the host communities of *Itang special Woreda* in Gambella region. Therefore, this paper intended to assess the impacts of South Sudanese refugees on the economic, socio-cultural and security impacts on the host communities of *Itang special Woreda* in Gambella Region, with a particular reference to Tierkidi refugee camp.

Refugees Impact on the Security of the Host Community

The presence of large number of refugees in different parts of Gambella region, both in urban and rural areas who were mixed freely with the local inhabitants, are shown to have had adverse security impacts in certain cases. Several refugees are being involved in domestic politics, leading to political tensions, violence and attacks against others ethnic groups. With the political instability of South Sudanese resulted a lot of insecurity in the area is more prevalent. A lot of resources have been diverted to attending refugees and in staking the problem of insecurity. Complicated weaponry have found their way into the area promoting banditry, cattle rustling and violence in the area is more common.

According to Selam reported in HOA affairs, the Gambella region of Ethiopia is facing renewed ethnic conflict along its western border. Since late January 2016, what began as a dispute over land rights between Nuer and Anuak ethnic groups has spread, claiming dozens of lives. As she reported the clash is, in part a result of influx of thousands of ethnic Nuer South Sudanese refugees who have been displaced in the civil war in South Sudan and were forced to move into the Gambella region of Ethiopia.¹ As information gathered from the local people, the conflict that arises between the Anuak and the Nuer ethnic groups at Gambella expanded to its surrounding and to the Tierkidi refugee camp. This conflict highly affected the innocent women, children and the aged at the refugee camp and also affected other people outside of the camp. This is highly intensifying the security and stability of the camp and also affected the security and safeties of the small size refugees of Anuak people in the camp and the surrounding areas. These complexities have resulted in higher than the usual police presence in town, revision at check points, restriction on UN staff travel and accompanying travels.²

According to Regasa (2010:134) after the mid 1980s hostility towards the refugees/SPLA grow among the

¹Selam Solomon is a Journalist and a Web Producer at VOAs HOA Affairs, February 18, 2016 at 9:14 pm.

²Interview with Local people, 01 March 2016, at 9:00am.

Aniak due to the arrogant behaviors of SPLM/A refugees. There were military activity of SPLM/A, its soldiers atrocities against the host community, the facilities that build for refugees. This creates a sense of jealousy. As some informants explained: The presence of refugees is a source of tensions in their day to day relations between the Aniak and Nuer ethnic groups. Due to the suspicion from the refugees organized by the Nuer host communities and providing support for attacking other groups of people. Some local people agreed that refugees pose security threat for the host community.³ Respondents explained that, some local officials use refugees as a political force as a country of their residence and react equally with other people as a native citizens of Ethiopia.⁴

Most of the informants were clarified that the security impacts of refugees are negative on the host community. They are a political force for their country of residence and the way they react to the politics of the host country and poses insecurity risks on the local administrative structure. According to some of informants' explanations, in the recent conflict that took place in Gambella region some of the refugees in Lare on the border of *Itang woreda*, were waving the South Sudanese flag and expressed their sense of belongingness to their home country of South Sudan.⁵

As Dereje (2014:2) tried to explain some of the refugees didn't settle in the refugee camp and they are started life with Ethiopian Nuers and some Nuer political elites are using the refugees to gain political advantage by issuing Ethiopian ID cards to Nuer refugees. The same issue was explained and raised by the local people indicates that some of the refugees who lived in Gambella region, take identity card from the local officials indirectly and this pave the way for acquiring dual citizenship. This helps the refugee to have equal right to get job opportunity with host community, because they know each other and most of the refugees are communicate in one language across the Gambella region of Ethiopia. Additionally, the majority of refugees are Nuerethnic group and it has strong ties with the host communities and some residents live in the refugee camp for the purpose of obtaining aid from the donor organization.⁶

The other informants were also explained that, the political problem in the area is manifested in terms of ethnic groups. In the area there is manipulation of ethnicity by those in a position of government power was seen refugee as a tool for holding government office.⁷ An

informant described the way in which some local officials use refugee as a primary tool to hold government office by facilitating different conditions for refugees.⁸

The security situations in Gambella region continue to deteriorate both in camps and in different locations across the region. Inadequate border security also poses a big security threat on the host communities of Gambelle region. According to the informant's explanations, insecurity is widely spread among the refugee population, which obviously had a significant spillover effect in the host communities. As the local people explained there are cases of refugees coming with arms and army uniform to the area. Sometimes there is inter- ethnic tensions which are being witnessed and the recent clashes have left a number of people dead and injured. Movements and presences of illegal weapons have been observed in and out of camps, with shooting incidents being witnessed in different areas.⁹

According to the information obtained from the Southern Sudanese refugees, small and medium size arms in the possession of refugees were used, but it was for 'self-protection' against their coworker refugee enemies. Even some refugees often consider each other belonging to different warring factions or political groupings back in their home countries based on the conflict that provoked their mass departure.¹⁰ According to the security officer of the camp, the presence of some armed refugees flow creating serious security threats for refugees, host communities, local authorities and humanitarian workers. The task of identifying rebel refugees within a mass influx of refugee is made difficult by the humanitarian workers. As per the official, some rebel's refugee groups rarely identify themselves, and often hide their weapons in order to mix together in with the host population. As per the officials explanations: the main difficulties are separating the honest/ real refugees and war displaced people from combatants and criminals means that rebel forces or criminal often live among refugees. In addition other difficulties in the camp are crimes go unpunished because there is no officially appointed body to back up what rule of law does say.¹¹

The other security problems of the area are the majority of those refugees are women and children. As refugees explained, most residents of this refugee camp are women and children so who are at risk in defending themselves and there is no adequate police or military personnel there to minimize the threat and take any

³Interview with Local Woman, 02 March 2016, at 11:00am.

⁴Interview with local women, 02 March 2016, at 11:00am.

⁵Interview with Teacher informant, 09 March 2016, at 2:10pm.

⁶Interview with Local People, 10 March 2016, at 8:40am.

⁷Interview with Local People, 10 March 2016, at 8:40am.

⁸ Ibid

⁹Interview with Local People, 11 March 2016, at 11:15am.

¹⁰Interview with Refugee, Tierkidi Camp, 07 March 2016, 3:15pm.

¹¹Interview with security officer of the camp, 08 March 2016, at 8:50am.

action whenever necessary.¹² As UNHCR (2014:2) report that the *Itang* detainees do not have access to legal counsel, there is no division between the men's and women's areas, and there is no secure area for private counseling. According to the report indicated, 17 refugees were detained, the majority of whom had been detained for fighting and disorderly conduct on a public road. Among the 17 refugees, four (4) of them are detained for theft at a store in Tierkidi refugee camp.¹³

According to UNHCR (1997:7) the presence of a large number of refugee populations in host communities inevitably also means a strain on the local administration. Host country, national and regional authorities divert considerable resources and manpower from the pressing demands of their own development to the urgent task of keeping refugees alive, alleviating their sufferings and ensuring the security of the whole community. As one of the camp watchmen explained, the UNHCR and its key partners have established the Area Security Management Team (ASMT) structure and recruit some refugees from the camp and provided training in order to serve as "Chursa"¹⁴ (Community Police) in the refugee camp to protect the securities of the camp and its surrounding from different illegal acts such as thief, insult, sexual harassment, stolen of ration card, handle incidents of gender-based violence and identify the refugees from non-refugees by their identity card.¹⁵ The role of "Chursa" is providing immediate medical care, psychosocial support and legal counseling not to isolate themselves from others, if a woman is raped by other refugees.

Generally speaking conflict occurred between refugees and their hosts as well as among refugees themselves. Refugee-host conflict arises as a result of competition over resources as well as from socio-cultural disparities among the Nuer and Anuak ethnic groups. Conflict among refugees tends to cause anxiety and insecurity in the refugee camp as well as the host communities. The attitude and behaviors of refugees whilst in camp mostly reveal a relationships to the warring factions even though they lived within the same camp as refugees. Insecurity therefore, played a negative role in the psychology of the local host community.

¹²Interview with Refugee Women, 06 March 2016, at 1:30pm.

¹³ Ethiopia: UNHCR Operational Update, 26 September-1 October 2014. Available at www.unhcr.org

¹⁴Chursa (community police) is the Nuer language of South Sudanese refugees which is called militia/police who handle different problem within and around the refugee camp

¹⁵ Interview with watchmen of the camp, 04 March 2016, at 10:50am.

CONCLUSION

The evidence from a voluminous body of sources indicated that the presence of large number of refugees in *Itang* has negatively affected the securities of host communities. The majority of host communities in the study area felt that the security impacts of refugees significantly varied. The number of refugees in *Itang* area were informally mixed with local people, are witnessed to have adverse security consequences in certain areas. Additionally, the refugees have been manipulated by the local political officials for electoral and partisan purposes by issuing identity card indirectly on the basis of their ethnic similarities. Some of the refugees have involved in local politics, leading to tensions, violence and attacks against other groups. The favoring of one group over another group is the allegation that they engage in criminal activities and contribute to aggravating the security situation of the region.

The study revealed that the frequent border insecurity of the area have gravely affected the lives of the host community in Gambella region. On the other hand the presences of illegal guns on the hands of refugees have been increasing the violence around the refugee camp which seriously affected the stability of the host community in *Itang Woreda*. The porous nature of the border is caused for the insecurity and instability of the area. The presence of massive South Sudanese refugees in *Itang* inevitably also meant to strain on the local administration. The local and national government diverted extensive resources and police force away from the normal activities to the task of keeping refugees and ensuring the security of the host community.

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