



Fording the floods in South Sudan

After floods, an early ‘lean season’ awaits South Sudan

‘There will be serious food shortage as early as January 2020.’ South Sudan in the midst of all its political turmoil must brace itself for food shortage the result of raging floods reports ***Okech Francis**.

Aid groups are predicting a sharp increase in food insecurity in South Sudan after weeks of torrential rain destroyed thousands of acres of cropland, washed away livestock and grazing pasture, and disrupted markets and trade.

South Sudan’s lean season, or hunger gap – the period between harvests when households run out of stored food

– typically falls between March and August. But after the substantial crop losses, it is now expected to come as early as January.

Food distributions will need to be stepped up in the coming weeks and months to cope with the almost one million people affected, Meshack Malo, country representative at the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO),

told The New Humanitarian.

More than 420,000 people have been displaced by the unusually heavy rains – many in areas where humanitarian needs were already sky-high following five years of conflict.

Aid groups say fragile gains made since a September 2018 ceasefire deal risk being reversed, with the rains forecast to continue through December.

A resurgence of conflict that prevents populations from accessing food sources or humanitarian assistance would likely now lead to famine conditions in areas where food insecurity is already severe, according to US-funded famine monitor FEWS NET.

In a sign of the lingering insecurity, the UN peacekeeping mission deployed Nepalese blue helmets last week to Western Lakes State – which has not been affected by the floods – after fighting between the Gak and Manuer communities left 79 people dead and more than 100 injured.

The floods, which began in June, have been driven by a weather phenomenon called the Indian Ocean Dipole. Almost three million people have been affected across East Africa, including Kenya – where at least 120 people died in recent landslides – and Somalia, where roughly 370,000 people have been displaced.

Access to some flood-battered communities in South Sudan remains a challenge, according to Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which said whole villages are still underwater or have been turned into swamps.

Crops flooded, livestock lost

South Sudan often experiences seasonal spikes in food insecurity, but poor harvests in 2018 coupled with delayed rains in early 2019 and the lingering impact of conflict, left a record seven million people hungry this year.

“People were unable to put food on their tables even before the rains and floods,” said Tomson Phiri, a communications officer at the World Food Programme (WFP) in South Sudan.

Roughly 74,000 hectares of cultivated land have now been damaged – equivalent to a 15 percent loss in production in affected areas that will have “expected consequences on food security of the vulnerable population”, said Malo, of the FAO.

Grazing pastures have also been flooded, and widespread livestock deaths – reaching as high as 80 percent in some households – have been recorded, alongside an increase in animal diseases such as Rift Valley Fever and East Coast Fever.



Aerial photo of South Sudan floods

The loss of crops and livestock means people who would generally face shortages during the lean season – when their harvests are depleted – are already finding it hard to get by.

“Where somebody was going to harvest their crops in October or November to carry them through the Christmas period, January, and maybe up to February, that person needs assistance now,” said WFP’s Phiri. “Their lean season starts now.”

There are a lot of areas we can’t reach because the level of the water is still high. Describing food needs in the near future as “very dire”, Santino Bol Muoter, deputy chairman of South Sudanese government’s Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, predicted “there will be serious food shortage as early as January 2020”.

Refugees hit hard

More than 150,000 Sudanese refugees hosted in four camps in Maban – one of the worst-affected areas – have been hit particularly hard, according to the UN’s refugee agency, UNHCR. Homes have been destroyed and washed-out roads have disrupted humanitarian operations.

“There are a lot of areas we can’t reach because the level of the water is still high,” said Eujin Byun, a UNHCR

spokesperson in South Sudan, adding that airstrips have been destroyed.

MSF has reported an increase in water-borne and vector-borne diseases like acute watery diarrhoea, malaria, and respiratory infections, and fears possible outbreaks of cholera and measles.

Aid agencies have estimated that \$61.5 million will be required to meet immediate needs. Money and resources originally intended for next year’s dry season are currently being spent while responders wait for more funds to arrive.

Despite a recent decrease in violence, peace remains fragile in South Sudan, where an estimated 400,000 people were killed and more than four million displaced over the course of the five-year civil war.

The government and opposition groups signed a peace deal in September last year but have been unable to finalise negotiations on core elements of the agreement such as a unified army.

President Salva Kiir and opposition leader Riek Machar agreed to delay the formation of a unity government by a further 100 days, after missing a 12 November deadline.

** Okech Francis is a freelance journalist based in South Sudan.*