

Deteriorating Security Situation Disrupts JRS Activities 7 April 2009

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According to a recent UNHCR media release, a deteriorating security situation in some parts of Southern Sudan, including nearly a week of protests by unpaid war veterans, has forced UNHCR to temporarily halt its repatriation programme from Uganda.

One of the places these protests occurred was in Yei, with roads being blockaded, some public buildings being attacked, injuries being caused to several police, and one person reported killed. For JRS's Yei project, the protests coincided with a 4-day workshop for the county's primary and secondary exam board members on examination principles and practices, facilitated by two experts familiar with Uganda National Examination Board procedures. The workshop was temporarily disrupted when armed veterans entered the hotel where it was being held. It was allowed to continue, and did so, but under strained and difficult circumstances.

The protests by war veterans were preceded a couple of weeks earlier by an incursion one night of a small group of LRA into an area only a few kilometres from Yei, very close to the JRS office and residential compound. During this incursion, some 8 men, women and children were murdered, and thousands of people fled in panic from their homes to take refuge in the heart of Yei. Many have drifted back in the weeks since, but areas in the immediate vicinity of the attack, including behind the JRS residential compound, remain largely deserted.

Apart from the fright it gave JRS staff, and a resulting increased vigilance at night by both staff and local militias, this LRA attack has also disrupted JRS activities. For example, it led to the postponement of a workshop for catechists and other local community leaders under the project's pastoral programme, and a temporary halt in the construction of houses for teachers at a small rural primary school some 10 kilometres from Yei, where the LRA also murdered some people. Following the attack the attention of anyone who remained in the area became focused on security rather than construction. Only now, with no further incidents, is attention slowly returning to normal activities.

Most locals - many having returned from exile or internal displacement only in the last 2 to 3 years - want nothing more than to be able to rebuild their lives and go about their business in peace. The JRS Yei project is seeking to help them do so, especially in the area of education.