

South Sudan: amid security challenges, aid workers delivering 'against the odds'

Mayen is South Sudanese. He was forced to flee his home when the conflict started in 2013. Five years later, his voice is resonating in one of the conference rooms of United Nations Headquarters in New York, on the margins of the 73rd General Assembly.

In the [video](#) shown at the high-level event on South Sudan, Mayen is holding a book that he says was given to him by the UN. "It contains the rights of internally displaced persons, all those who had to flee from one city to another city. When I read this book, I realized that not even 10 per cent of my rights are met. So tell me, am I not a human being? Am I not a displaced person?"

"[The people of South Sudan] are the same as us in every respect – they want health care, they want schools, they want to have hope in their futures, and the single thing they want most is peace," said UN relief chief Mark Lowcock.

Five years of conflict have left South Sudan in the grips of one of the world's worst humanitarian crises.

Currently, according to the UN [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#), more than 7 million people need life-saving assistance to survive; one in two people don't know where their next meal is coming from; 40 per cent of the entire population is displaced in and outside of the country; two in three pregnant or breastfeeding women suffer from acute nutritional deficiencies; more than 2 million children are out of school; and only one in ten people has access to basic sanitation.

The event gathered donors, Member States, and senior humanitarian officials, including the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for South Sudan, [Alain Noudéhou](#); the Assistant Executive Director of the [World Food Programme \(WFP\)](#), Valerie Guarnieri; and the President of International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), Peter Maurer.

"We deliver against all odds in South Sudan," said Ms. Guarnieri, referencing the major challenges faced by relief workers in terms of accessing conflict-affected communities. The lack of infrastructure, she explained, with only 300 km of built roads across the country, renders delivering aid during the rainy season, when 60 per cent of the road network is flooded, an almost-impossible mission.

Thanks to mass prepositioning of goods ahead of the rainy season, and the use of a complex combination of air, road and river delivery systems, which

required careful negotiations with the various warring parties, humanitarian workers are able to reach affected populations, even in very remote areas. In 2017, aid groups supported nearly 5.5 million people out of the 6 million targeted with food, shelter, nutrition, medical, protection and other forms of assistance.

Despite the signing of a peace agreement between the various parties to the conflict this September, insecurity remains a massive challenge for the humanitarian response. South Sudan is one of the most dangerous places to be an aid worker. More than 100 aid workers have been killed since the conflict broke out in December 2013, including 13 in 2018 alone.

“I call on everybody who works in South Sudan to respect humanitarian workers and international humanitarian law,” said Humanitarian Coordinator Noudéhou, who explained that between February and May of this year, there were several incidences of aid workers detained by armed groups for days or weeks. “We are not a target,” he added.

Much of the event focused on the need to “localize” the response, which entails empowering the South Sudanese non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

“People who are on the frontline of the response are the national NGOs and they have done a tremendous amount of work and they are courageous,” said Mr. Noudéhou.

Angelina Nyajima is the Director of Hope Restoration, a South Sudanese NGO that works to empower women. At the event, she pleaded for more mentoring and more direct funding for national NGOs, as laid out in the localization agenda that came out the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit.

“We are on the front lines, we are with the communities... In case of crisis we don’t get evacuated,” she said, adding that one day, the presence of international organisations will be reduced. “If we are not mentored right now, if we are not funded right now, we are not going to be able to stand on our own.”