One million threatened by suspension of Sudan's relief lifeline

Peter Moszynski *London*

Aid for millions of civilians in southern Sudan is in jeopardy after the United Nations suspended flights operated by Operation Lifeline Sudan in the wake of bombing raids against relief facilities.

The aid lifeline, established for 11 years and one of the largest relief operations, assists people on both sides of the 17 year civil war in Sudan. In the current year it aims to deliver 100 000 tonnes of food to 2.4 million people.

Aid workers fear widespread famine could occur. Now is the time of the greatest food deficit—the “hungry” season between planting and the harvest in October. A senior UN official, Kevin Kennedy, told the Security Council on 11 August that if relief flights remained suspended for long, the impact would be serious and life threatening, adding: “Easily a million people will be at risk.”

Operation Lifeline Sudan is organised by the United Nations (and coordinated by Unicef and the World Food Programme) but also involves other humanitarian non-governmental organ-

isations. Other relief agencies—such as Médecins Sans Frontières and the International Committee of the Red Cross—work outside the UN umbrella.

The United Nations secretary general, Kofi Annan, said on 8 August that he was “deeply concerned over the security of humanitarian personnel and facilities belonging to Operation Lifeline Sudan.” UN spokeswoman Rosa Malango explained: “We were assured by the Sudan government in late July that our flights would be safe. Just as we received the assurances on 27 July, Sudanese air force planes bombed another five relief locations. We again went and requested the Sudanese to provide assurances. Again, after we were given those assurances, our planes were bombed on the ground.”

Almost half the population of southern Sudan depend on food brought in from outside the country. Roger Winter of the US Committee for Refugees estimated that some two million civilians have died as a result of famine and from

Villagers of Akon in southern Sudan return home after receiving donated food. Further aid is now under threat

ALESSANDRO ARONIZIO/AF

war related causes over the years of conflict. He claimed: “Food is the new weapon of mass destruction. The UN cut off of aid flights only serves to kill more. These bombings are clearly deliberate. The Sudanese government is targeting southern Sudanese civilians and relief workers who seek to save the lives of those civilians by providing food and medical services.”

Unicef said: “[Sudan currently] hosts some four million internally displaced people [IDP], the largest IDP population in the world. There is widespread abuse of human rights, including denial of access to humanitarian assistance, attacks on

civilians, and abductions of women and children.”

The air raids followed a series of intemperate articles in the Sudanese press alleging that aid agencies have been helping to arm and feed the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army. The government, in Khartoum, insists that no more aid flights come from outside the country.

As virtually the entire food supply to southern Sudan originates in Operation Lifeline Sudan's base in northern Kenya, any disruption to the supply chain is likely to have catastrophic consequences for a population entirely dependent on outside supplies. □

French men invited to become “vasectomy tourists”

Susan Mayor *London*

French men are being invited to visit the United Kingdom for a vasectomy to circumvent an archaic Napoleonic law that deters doctors from offering the operation in their own country.

The birth control charity Marie Stopes International has offered a “vasectomy tourist service” on its website.

Julie Douglas, marketing manager of Marie Stopes International, explained: “Vasectomy is a safe, permanent, and extremely effective form of contraception, which should be

available to all couples, wherever they live. Our French neighbours will be able to have it done on a day trip to the United Kingdom if they wish.”

The website features information on how vasectomies are carried out. They can book on line to have a vasectomy carried out by a doctor at a Marie Stopes clinic in the United Kingdom.

Vasectomy is considered to be an illicit procedure in France under the 19th century “Napoleon code,” which proscribes acts of so called “self mutilation.” Doctors who perform vasectomies in France risk criminal charges, although there have been no prosecutions on the issue for more than 40 years. The United Nations list the number of vasectomies carried out in France as “nil or negligible.” □

Marie Stopes International website can be found at www.mariestopes.org.uk

Toys can turn hospital cots into “reservoirs of bacteria”

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

Toys given to sick newborn babies could be placing the infants at risk of infection, a new study has said.

It is well recognised that nosocomial sepsis of infants in intensive care units can originate from equipment as well as from the hands of staff or parents. The concern with toys in intensive care cots is that they may be a reservoir of potentially pathogenic bacteria. In the current study Dr Colin Morley and his colleagues at the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne, Australia, studied 19 infants in

neonatal intensive care and their toys. The toys were cultured weekly for four weeks. Over the four weeks nearly all of the toys given to babies became contaminated with bacteria.

Over the same time, 42% of the babies got infections. The report appears in the online edition of the journal *Pediatrics* (www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/106/2/e18).

Dr Morley said it was unknown whether the toys were the source of infants' infections. He added “My concern is that everything in the incubator gets cleaned except teddy, which may stay there for weeks.”

However, the humanising effect of having toys in neonatal intensive care units outweighs any theoretical risks, Dr Morley believes. □

Full story in News Extra at bmj.com