

IOM supports water and sanitation for South Sudanese refugees

When I ask Jackson Yakani where he comes from, his answer surprises me.

“I am also a refugee!” he declares, sounding like he, too, is surprised by his situation. “I am also from South Sudan”

Yakani is the assistant in-charge at Luru health centre III in Moyo district’s Palorinya settlement for South Sudanese refugees. He has been expectantly guiding his “visitors” around the health centre, explaining the many challenges health workers faces catering for up to 200 outpatients a day.

“These ones were only put last week after the old ones filled up,” Yakani says, waving his open palm in the direction of two smooth, grey blocks of two-stance latrines. “So certainly your coming will be very good because the people are very many.”

Luru – like two other health centres in Palorinya, was hurriedly set up in January, as refugees poured into Moyo from South Sudan’s war and its attendant crises. Luru’s wards, lab, staff quarters – and even the latrines – were erected with tarpaulin.

Having studied at Maridi health institute in Western Equatoria province, Yakani had been doing internship at Harvesters hospital when the war cut him off from his home area last August. He ended up a refugee at Rhino camp in Arua, and four months later, he was called for an interview by Medical Teams.

Today, Yakani’s visitors are from the United Nations Migration Agency (IOM Uganda) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). IOM and LWF are two of the agencies partnering to aid between 160,000 and 170,000 South Sudanese refugees in Palorinya settlement. Under coordination by the Office of the Prime Minister and UNHCR, their humanitarian action is also being implemented in Bidibidi settlement in the neighbouring Yumbe district, which has at least 270,000 South Sudanese. The interventions are funded by the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations Department (ECHO) and the UN’s Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF).

In Palorinya, the projects will facilitate construction of 6,000 latrines and sanitation facilities for households and institutions such as schools, health centres and market areas. Efforts will also support hygiene promotion campaigns, including Skilling of women and youth groups to manufacture sanitary pads, soap and briquettes.

In Bidibidi, IOM Uganda is working to motorize a high-yielding borehole for a piped water supply and distribution network for the refugees and their host communities.

Speaking in his office in Palorinya on May 30, Deputy Settlement Commandant Mawa Bashir thanked the project donors and IOM, but pointed out that more help was needed. He specifically highlighted the plight of female-headed households, saying they need more help to be able to sink proper latrines. According to some estimates, 86% of the more than 900,000 South Sudanese refugees in Uganda are women and children.

“I also think, the number IOM has taken to benefit from latrines should be increased, if the funds allow,” Bashir said. “Most of these people are women and [young] children, so we need more support.”

One area where Bashir says humanitarian agencies have excelled is water. On any day, an almost endless stream of trucks can be seen carrying water from Obongi on the river Nile into Palorinya. This has ensured there is good coverage of fairly clean water. But Bashir is worried that the settlement is over-relying on water trucking, which he says is too expensive.

At Luru health centre, Jackson Yakani, who fled from Yei in South Sudan's Central Province, is reminded that the hand-washing jerrycan is empty.

"Oh is it?" he says as he walks towards the latrines to shake the blue container. "Maybe the workers just did not put, but at least we have the water. If only we can get more latrines."