

Children of conflict: Helping them survive

ACROSS Africa, civilian populations are caught in the crossfire of conflict, and women and children are all too often among the casualties. Of the estimated 3.6 million people affected by the ongoing crisis in the western Sudan region of Darfur, for example, 1.8 million are children.

The conflict in Darfur continues to displace large segments of the indigenous population, and more than 240,000 Sudanese – 85 per cent of them women and children – have found refuge in neighbouring Chad.

What the world may not be hearing about are the 173,000 Chadians who have also been displaced as a result of internal conflict and violence in their country – 30,000 of them in the closing months of 2007. Funding to support the internally displaced and the communities that have borne the cost of hosting them has been much harder to come by than assistance for Darfurian refugees.

At the beginning of 2008, more than 100 international non-governmental organizations and United Nations agencies were working on behalf of the Sudanese in and around Abéché, in eastern Chad. Much of their work focused on public health and other interventions that enhance the chances for child survival among the refugees and displaced.

At each of 12 refugee camps, 10 litres of water are provided per person per day and the same coverage is extended to communal latrines.

Teams of camp youth are assigned to clear out stagnant water that threatens to flow into a nearby feeding centre. The same group also cleans rubbish from the common areas of the camp.

Children attend temporary schools and prepare for exams. Given their number, two teaching sessions are held every day, in the morning and afternoon. Teachers are mainly volunteers who have completed one month of training. A parent-teacher association takes responsibility for working with the children to clean and maintain the schools.

In camp discussion groups, mothers talk about the importance of breastfeeding their newborns for the first six months, while health workers remind them of a forthcoming measles vaccination campaign for children six months to four years old. Children play in places set aside for them. Community-based networks have been set up to look after the welfare of Sudanese and Chadian children in both the camp and the community.

A high-protein, high-energy peanut paste is distributed to undernourished children under five, and mothers say it is easy to get their

children to eat it. Children showing signs of acute undernutrition are transferred to a therapeutic feeding centre.

Outside the refugee camp, native Chadians live a different kind of life. They are reluctant to work in this part of the country, where life is hard and unstable. Chadian teachers, already paid irregularly by the state, have left their posts to work in the refugee camps, where salaries are better. Meanwhile, five doctors and midwives staff the only hospital in Abéché town.

International and local support for both the internally displaced and the host communities has been growing. The population's essential survival needs – water, food, health care, protection, shelter and education – are being covered. Here, as elsewhere in Africa, there is a concerted effort by all humanitarian actors to recognize a critical link between these emergency interventions and development support for affected local communities. This, in turn, may allow the internally displaced to become self-sufficient and integrated into the host communities, as well as provide all those affected – displaced and host communities alike – better access to life-saving services and support.

See References, page 50.