

Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs – Sudan – David Regan

The current conflict in Sudan has been going on for 542 days. People live in constant fear of bombardment are suffering horrific sexual violence and experiencing famine and hunger. This situation has happened before.

In 2004, twenty years ago, Darfur made global headlines, followed by global outrage, celebrity support and political interest. The world swore we would never tolerate again.

Concern has worked with the people of Sudan since 1985, through the war of partition with South Sudan, internal conflict, widespread food insecurity and famine.

Throughout that time, Irish people and Irish Aid have supported our work and millions of Sudanese people have been supported at times of need in their lives.

This current humanitarian crisis is as bad if not worse than anything we have ever seen. **Severe hunger is widespread and famine has been declared in parts of Darfur.** Children are eating wild plants leading to poisoning and for these children who do fall ill, there is little help, as an estimated 70% of an already weak health care system has been destroyed. Looted, bombed or simply without any drugs or medicine.

Violence within Sudan is continuing to escalate, **more than 10 million people have fled their homes in search of safety, including 4 million children.** Hundreds of thousands of people are fleeing to the Central African Republic, Chad and South Sudan, countries which are themselves facing startling rates of malnutrition and crisis.

Women and girls are disproportionately affected. The scale and impunity with which sexual assault and rape is happening is frightening. **Concern colleagues and our partners are doing their best in health clinics and in refugee camps to support women and girls whose stories would honestly make you cry and should make us all very angry.**

With the ongoing conflict, and the wettest rainy season on record, the food situation is now catastrophic. **In addition to those suffering famine, another 25 million people, more than half the population of Sudan, are facing acute hunger.**

Over the last twenty years, Sudan had rebuilt itself. People had invested in their country, strengthened their resilience, and invested in their futures. Now, however, economically, Sudan is devastated with half the population unemployed, and 19 million children out of school.

Behind every single statistic are real people I would like to highlight one of those today, named Amani.

Before this crisis, Amani and her family were living in South Darfur. She worked as a housekeeper while her five children attended a local school. Her husband was a retired soldier. When the conflict reached her town, Amani and her family were subjected to horrific abuses at the hands of the occupying troops. The family were forced to flee and made their way eventually to Wedweil refugee settlement, in neighbouring South Sudan, a country already dealing with multiple crises and extreme poverty. With her husband unable to find work, Amani started a very small restaurant selling meat, beans, lentils and porridge. She is now able to use the profits from her small business to support not only her five children and some family back home in Sudan, but also some of the community of Wedweil refugee settlement.

Amani has overcome so much but she, along with thousands of other Sudanese who are internally displaced in Sudan or refugees in neighbouring countries, should not have to live in fear. In her words: *'We are really suffering, Our problems are many, we want to solve them; but we cannot solve these problems alone.'*

Last December, my colleague, Dominic MacSorley, briefed this Committee from Sudan.

Concern's message then highlighted the resilience of the Sudanese people which is remarkable but not inexhaustible; the determination and courage of Concern staff and the local community-led Emergency Response Rooms, ready, willing and wanting to respond.

And although it is nearly a year later and the crisis has escalated and the number of people in need has grown, **that network of people wanting to respond, to deliver aid to their fellow people, still exists. Concern is continuing to support communities who are supporting their own communities.**

In the 38 years that Concern has worked in Sudan, our programmes have adapted and evolved. Before April 2023, our programming focused on development, meaning we were working with the

ministry of health to strengthen health systems; working with, local ngos and communities to build more sustainable lives and developing climate resilient initiatives.

In the last 18 months, we have shifted our programming from strengthening resilience to emergency response—we now focus on helping people *to survive*. Providing essential emergency kits, distributing cash transfers so that when markets are open people can buy the goods they need for their families. In health facilities, we are providing emergency nutrition support to women and children. We continue working with staff of the Ministry of Health, rehabilitating health centres with Irish Aid support and Concern mobile health clinics across the country are providing rapid response primary health services in remote and isolated communities.

Ireland has a deserved reputation for addressing global hunger and Ireland’s voice is heard at the highest level. Last week, during the high-level week of the UN General Assembly, Ireland did just that. In his address to all members of the UN General Assembly, Minister Fleming stated clearly, and I quote,

“We demand a ceasefire, humanitarian access, protection of civilians and accountability for human rights abuses. We must do whatever it takes to pressure the parties to come back to the negotiating table and bring to an end this destructive cycle of violence.”

We must follow through with concerted action. We cannot accept with silence what is going on in Sudan.

- **Concern and other Irish NGOs have the capacity to do more.**

Last week’s budget allocation for ODA was an increase in percentage terms but little more than the percentage increase of our planned overall expenditure. Ireland is now a wealthy country, at a time when the world is facing rapidly increasing levels of humanitarian need. **We need increased and more flexible funding to address this escalating crisis. Irelands support has been valuable and must continue.**

- **The EU must use its diplomatic weight to work for a cessation of hostilities and recovery support.** Even if the fighting stopped tomorrow, the devastation this conflict has already had on the country and its future is beyond measure.

- Concern programme teams are in country; but their response is restricted due to limited access across conflict lines. **For Concern and all humanitarian organisation to deliver to those most in need, safe humanitarian access is essential to be able to reach more people and get aid to them.**

- Finally, Ireland must continue to stand up for International Humanitarian Law. There must be a true sense of accountability for the disregard we are witnessing in the world today to such an extent it is becoming normalised.

Thank you.