

## Returnees Complain of Harsh Treatment in Israel

19 June 2012

Juba — The first batch of 700 South Sudanese have returned to Juba from Israel, as part of a policy to deport Africans and protect the state's Jewish identity.

Israel and its military ally South Sudan, which gained independence in July 2011 after decades of civil war, both claim that the process has been one of "voluntary repatriation".

While some among the first planeload of 124 people were very guarded about their feelings of returning to their new but still extremely impoverished nation, several people said the South Sudanese are being forced out.

"We had a problem with the minister of interior saying that South Sudanese should go back to their country," said Paul Ruot Wan at a transit site outside Juba where the returnees were registered on 18 June. Ruot worked in hotels across Israel for five years before being told he had to go back to his new country.

But as returnees stepped off the plane at Juba international airport, South Sudan's minister of humanitarian affairs, Joseph Lual Achuil, repeatedly called this a voluntary process. "People are not being deported. We have agreed with the Israeli government for our people to be peacefully and voluntarily repatriated," he said.

Migrants who leave voluntarily are being offered US\$1,000 each, and Israeli employers are required to pay all wages owed to the migrants before they leave. The country has roughly 60,000 African migrants, mainly from Eritrea, South Sudan and Sudan. Growing tension has seen protests against Africans and attacks on African-owned businesses in recent months.

Bol Duop, 25, also spent five years working in hotels before finding himself on the fringes of society. "It was a very beautiful time, but at the last [in the end] they kicked us out. They said that we have to go back home and they don't need us anymore," he said.

Duop said the Interior Ministry planned to rid Israel of black people by paying them off and by ordering police to enforce the option of jail or registering for repatriation. "They say we are the disease, the cancer of Israel."

"They were telling us we are AIDS and that we are a disease, they were telling us a lot of bad things," said Mayuol Juac, who worked as a waiter in hotels in the coastal resort town of Eilat and in Tel Aviv.

"A lot of people right now are in jail - they were arrested, and those who didn't register, they have to be arrested and put in jail before they can do their process" of sorting out back taxes, clearing bank accounts and receiving government money to leave, Duop says.

"They say if you register, we will take you and you can prepare yourself in jail... that's why we accepted to come right now," he added.

Some are less unhappy with being home than they are about the way the process was handled. Standing by his wife Buk and surrounded by piles of luggage, Kueth Miyual said they spent five years working as cleaners and waiters in hotels in Jerusalem. They say they are happy to come back now that they have

some money, but that they were not given time to empty their bank account of 3,000 shekels (US\$780) after their visas were revoked.

Juac said the South Sudanese are not getting what they are supposed to in terms of back taxes and government rewards. "Many people, they remain in Israel because they need their money," he said.

### **From jail to Juba**

Juac said that after five years working in Israel, in recent months he was stopped numerous times and even put in jail for a day before the police verified that he was registered. He said he had no choice but to leave, after going to extend his visa three months ago only to have the authorities confiscate it, leaving him without the ability to continue to work and pay his rent.

"They took it from me and they said: 'You have just one week to leave, one week to leave the country'. They said: 'If you don't leave our country, we will put you in jail or otherwise you will be in insecurity' with no visa and no home," he said, adding:

"They say: 'You are non-Jewish, this place is a place just for Jews'. And they say also: 'You are black. This place is a place for Jewish and white people. Any non-Jews and non-white people have no place to stay in Israel.'"

South Sudan's government spokesperson Barnaba Marial Benjamin rejected claims by Israeli officials that 300 South Sudanese had been arrested.

"No South Sudanese have been arrested. Many people are claiming to be South Sudanese when they are not," he said. Benjamin said Darfuris from Sudan's war-torn western region were passing themselves off as Southerners.

"This is why a delegation [from the government] went over - to identify our people. The South Sudanese are not the target," he added.

### **Hard homecoming**

Angelo Wello, the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs focal point for the transit site outside Juba, said the next flight was expected in a week's time. "This place already holds over 3,000 returnees, mostly from Sudan, not from Israel. These people just arrived today and we are registering them and we will send them home, or they can go if they have their relatives here, which as you can see many of them do," he said.

Dressed in the latest fashion, sporting laptop bags, designer prams, large headphones, and with large suitcases, the returnees from Israel contrast starkly with those from Sudan whose barefoot children wear worn and simple clothes. The latter are among some 14,000 people who spent months in makeshift camps at a way station in Kosti.

Almost 400,000 South Sudanese have returned home since October 2010. Around half a million more South Sudanese are thought to be in the north, waiting to see if a deal on citizenship will prevent them from being deported and having to head south.

The Miyuals say they will take their family back to Malakal, a town in Upper Nile State which remains desperately poor and lacking proper roads, electricity and basic health and education services despite the huge oil wealth there. "I haven't been in South Sudan for 10 years, so I don't know what has happened here. But this is my country," said Buk Miyual.

"Life [in Israel] was good but after our country got independent, they changed and they pressured us to leave their country," Juac said, adding that the return of skilled people could help build his country from the ruins of war.

"I see of course the country needs a lot of work. I don't see any progress, but we are to make the progress," he said. "We took independence to stay in it, not run away from it."