

“Africa’s biggest road race”

South Sudanese refugees end Great Ethiopian Run with new dreams



The Great Ethiopian Run, described as “Africa’s biggest road race,” took place on Sunday,

January 11, 2015 in Gambella, Ethiopia. UNHCR.

Gambella, Ethiopia, January 14 - Two dozen South Sudanese refugees were on the run again over the weekend, but not for their lives this time. They were taking part in a five-kilometer fun run in western Ethiopia’s Gambella region to mark the completion of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) program.

The refugees who had been forced to run away from their homes participated in Sunday’s race in high spirits and with new dreams. The refugees were among 2,500 runners including Ethiopians, UN staff and other aid workers who took part in the Great Ethiopian Run also referred to as “Africa’s biggest road race.”

Wearing T-shirts with the inscription “MDG Race 2015,” the refugees from Pugnido, Tierkidi and Kule refugee camps demonstrated a high level of energy and enthusiasm as they made their way through the streets of Gambella to the finishing line. Hundreds of onlookers cheered the runners.

“I am very happy to be here,” says Anangatho Ochalla, 18. “I have always been looking forward to taking part in great events – I want to go international,” she adds.

Her fellow refugees shared the same dreams. “People will listen to me if I am a star,” comments another 18-year-old, Nyaduoth Lul.

“We want peace in South Sudan,” says Akidi Ojil Kwan, deputy chairman of Pugnido Refugee Camp. “I play football and basketball, but my real love is athletics. I want to be a great marathon runner,” he adds.

Established in 2011, the Great Ethiopian Run is an independent event management company with the mission of staging mass-participation running events in Ethiopia. The company has been

collaborating with the UN to promote messages, including the MDGs, using sports and community outreach programs throughout the country.

The theme for this year's Great Ethiopian Run is "Empower Women, Empower a Nation," a message that promotes the third Millennium Development Goal: Promote gender equality and empower women. Nine female refugees took part in the race.

The UN is working with governments, civil society and other partners to build on the momentum generated by the MDGs and continue with an ambitious post-2015 development agenda.

"This is a great way of raising awareness on critical issues that especially affect Africa and refugees," says UNHCR Gambella Sub-Office Officer-in-Charge, Alex Kishara, who joined the Gambella city mayor to flag the race.

"Bringing people from all walks of life, including children and adults, for a common goal is amazing," says UNHCR Senior Protection Officer, Marti Romero, ending the run smiling.

Although refugees were not among the winners, they are hoping that more runs will be organized for their dreams to come true. UNHCR assisted the refugees with transportation, accommodation, shoes, and a subsistence allowance.

Before returning to her Pugnido camp, Anangatho tells me that she was born in Ethiopia as her parents fled South Sudan more than 20 years ago. "I have never been to South Sudan and don't know when I will go there," she wonders. "What I know for sure is that I will always remember the Great Ethiopian Run and will keep on running."

The Gambella region currently hosts nearly 250,000 South Sudanese refugees of whom nearly 192,000 arrived over the past year.

Sulaiman Momodu in Gambella, Ethiopia