Press release

For immediate release

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The Leprosy Mission’s bid to spare a community from starvation in South Sudan

The Leprosy Mission has launched an appeal to bring emergency food aid to a newly-discovered leprosy-affected community in South Sudan.

The community has been based on land in Malek for generations. Its people have always lived in extreme poverty but have survived despite their leprosy-caused disabilities providing an additional obstacle.

But just two years after South Sudan became an independent country in 2011, the leprosy community in Malek is being forced to eat tree leaves in order to stave off hunger pangs.

Civil unrest means it is no longer safe to go into the bush for firewood and vegetation to eat. The community cannot even access wood to make fencing to prevent the cattle from trampling over their struggling crops.

The Leprosy Mission’s appeal aims to provide emergency food aid to this hungry and deeply troubled community and sustainable farming solutions for the future.

National Director of The Leprosy Mission England and Wales, Peter Walker, said: “The humanitarian crisis in South Sudan receives little press coverage.

“Yet the situation in Malek has deeply upset members of Leprosy Mission staff who are accustomed to working in extreme poverty situations. It is one of the most desperate scenes we have witnessed and we know if we don't help, people will starve.

“This community has nothing. New legislation on land allocation means that they can even be thrown off the land on which they have lived for generations if
they don’t legally register their land, something they are unable to do because of lack of knowledge of the process and the money for registration fees.

“We are lobbying to the government on their behalf so that we can help secure the land for this desperately poor community ahead of providing sanitation and help with livelihoods. But first of all, we need to feed them to keep them alive.”

For more information visit: www.leprosymission.org.uk

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About The Leprosy Mission England & Wales:

The Leprosy Mission is an international Christian development organisation, transforming the lives of people affected by leprosy. Our goal is to eradicate the causes and consequences of this disease.

We are currently focusing on 11 countries where leprosy remains both a chronic disease and a social challenge. These are: Bangladesh, Ethiopia, India, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Sudan and South Sudan. Issues centre on disease, disability and discrimination. They also include: neglected tropical disease; housing; poverty; social exclusion; micro-loans; education and employment opportunities.

About leprosy

- Leprosy is a mildly-infectious disease caused by a bacterium called Mycobacterium leprae (a relative of the tuberculosis bacterium or ‘TB’ germ). It can stay in the body for up to 20 years without showing symptoms.

- Leprosy causes nerve damage and, if left untreated, can lead to a loss of sensation in the hands and feet. This can lead to disability and the amputation of limbs. Leprosy also damages nerves in the face causing problems with blinking, eventually leading to blindness.

- It is not hereditary and it cannot be caught by touch.

- It is most common in places of poverty where overcrowding and poor nutrition and housing allow people to become more susceptible to leprosy infection.
The last case of indigenous leprosy in the UK was diagnosed in 1798 and although it can no longer be contracted in this country, around 12 new cases are diagnosed in the UK each year.

Leprosy is curable with multidrug therapy (MDT), which was developed in the 1980s. Within one day of starting MDT there is no risk of the disease spreading to anyone else. Lack of education, however, means that many people affected by leprosy are still stigmatised, even after they have been cured, especially if the disease has caused disability.

There are around three million people worldwide disabled as a result of the late treatment of leprosy. In 2012 there were 232,857 new cases of leprosy diagnosed. That is approximately one every two minutes. More than half of these were found in India. (Source: World Health Organisation).

In 2012, five countries where we work, which have more than 1,000 new cases of leprosy diagnosed each year, reported an increase in the number of new cases detected. These were India, Nepal, Nigeria, South Sudan and Sri Lanka.

**Leprosy is a disease. Those affected deserve dignity not discrimination.**