

South Sudan, After Independence: “Post Conflict” Famine and Despair

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Flying into Bentiu, a town in northern South Sudan, is unnerving. The front of a broken plane, cockpit windows smashed, sits close to the dusty airstrip; long green grass sprouts around the cracked fuselage. Soldiers of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), a former guerrilla movement and now the country’s official army, live in tin sheds around the rocky runway. The young men, some in uniform and many not, are armed with AK-47s. They loiter, looking bored. Gunfire can be heard in the background. The sky is heavy with grey clouds.

Bentiu occupies a grimly unique position within recent South Sudanese history. In 2014, the town was the sight of a massacre, one of the worst atrocities of the civil war. Rebel forces killed hundreds of civilians and used public radio broadcasts to encourage the rape of women of different ethnicities, later releasing a statement that boasted of ‘mopping and cleaning-up operations’.

It’s July 2015, just a month before the signing of the peace agreement. I have been living in Juba, South Sudan’s capital, for most of the year, working as a freelance journalist; my partner is employed by an international NGO. Juba is a challenging place to be based; our existence was defined by security concerns, a collapsing economy, nightly curfews and growing crime. Temperatures in summer are regularly over forty-five degrees and water shortages are common.

South Sudan is land-locked, sharing borders with Uganda, Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Kenya, Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan. Like its neighbours, the country continues to endure the after effects of colonisation, having been occupied in the twentieth century by British interests. Much of the land is swamp or tropical forest, and the country hosts one of the largest wildlife migrations in the world.

I travelled to Bentiu by a slow-moving Russian UN helicopter. From the air, burnt-out buildings dot the swampy land. Tens of thousands of cattle are scattered among them, guarded by locals. Cattle-raiding is endemic in South Sudan, a brutal tactic used by government forces and militias to starve various groups of people. Cattle are the heart of the nation – cattle is not only used for food, but also for cultural practices, such as marriage (as bride price) and compensation after disputes – but years of war have left many without this precious commodity.

The trip from Juba took three hours and I was accompanied by Indian and Rwandan peacekeepers. There are over 12,500 uniformed UN peacekeepers in South Sudan – from a range of countries, including Cambodia, Australia, Zimbabwe and Yemen – making it one of

the largest UN missions in the world.

A single muddy road littered with abandoned trucks and cars leads from the airport to Bentiu town and onto the sprawling UN base for internally displaced persons. The number of people seeking protection at the camp has swelled over the last two and a bit years of fighting; now, around 120,000 civilians live in a site originally built to house less than half that number. Almost every imaginable UN agency, international NGO and humanitarian group is involved in feeding, housing, rehabilitating and providing medical care.

The UN camp was established in December 2013, soon after violence erupted in Juba between President Salva Kiir's faction, drawn primarily from the Dinka ethnic group, and those loyal to Riek Machar, Kiir's former deputy, mainly from the Nuer ethnic group. At independence in 2011, both sides had been publicly committed to the new nation. But it didn't last: tensions escalated, with both Kiir and Machar wanting more power. South Sudan is suffering today because these military men – both of whom spent decades fighting for independence – are unable to transition from combatants to democrats. Since it began in late 2013, the conflict has engulfed vast swathes of the state, destroying any hope that was felt locally and internationally in the first years of independence.

Indeed, the world's newest nation has collapsed. 'There has been so much killing, abuse and destruction of property here. It's immense,' an anonymous senior UN official at the refugee camp tells me (few UN authorities in Bentiu are authorised to speak openly to the media). Tens of thousands have been killed, and millions have been displaced internally and externally. Of the around twelve million people who live in South Sudan, 70 per cent face severe hunger. The economy is in freefall, with government forces and rebels fighting regularly over desperately needed oil reserves. Education and healthcare facilities have been unable to cope under the strain of the conflict. In 2014, the government hired former Blackwater CEO Erik Prince and his new firm, Frontier Services Group, to help boost oil output, but there is little evidence it's working.

Bentiu heaves with broken humanity. The camp looks similar to those that have sprung up in response to other African conflicts, from Central African Republic to Congo. But things were supposed to be different in this new nation. South Sudan was born nearly five years ago amid so much hope – something much of Africa can't claim. Yet the country has disintegrated. Many of the refugees in Bentiu are exhausted and confused, unsure how their country is again unsafe for them and their children. They can't plan more than a few days ahead, and their hopes of a better future have been extinguished by fighting and ethnic strife. But this time things are different: the tensions, I am told, aren't historical or cultural, but rather fuelled by leaders with grim agendas.

The Bentiu camp stretches as far as the eye can see. Flimsy houses made of bamboo and plastic sheets are positioned near little stalls selling flip-flops, baby formula, dresses, broken mobile phones, bags of sugar and glucose biscuits. During the rainy season, April to November, vast parts of the camp overflow with mud and debris. In the camp's early days, flooding was common; some residents lived in water up their waists, and children drowned in their own homes. The UN was unprepared for the sheer numbers of arrivals: one official says the situation was 'unforeseen' because few expected the war to escalate so quickly. The UN has also been accused by Canadian Megan Nobert of ignoring her rape and not taking responsibility for the attack at their Bentiu base in 2015. The alleged attacker was subcontracted by the UN, but agencies failed to properly investigate.

I have looked at photos of the early days of the camp and can see that much has changed. The UN and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has spent millions of dollars and thousands of hours on improving conditions. There is clear evidence of raised land, water channels and new wooden structures that are incomparably less dirty and cluttered than the old ones.

In one of the homes I meet Julia John, a 25-year-old woman who shares the space with her husband and three young children, as well as with her sister, her sister's children and her mother. Their tidy space has just two single beds, a small table and rug, plastic chairs and dresses hung as wall decoration. Julia tells me of her desire to return home, but also of her fear of living alongside her 'enemies'. She fled the fighting in January 2014 and has been in the camp ever since. 'I hope for peace, but am not hopeful,' she says.

Julia's old property is only a few kilometres from the camp, but to her it feels so much further away. Every day when she leaves the UN base to search for firewood, she faces the threat of rape; soldiers routinely abduct, assault and disappear women. Julia has asked the UN and NGOs to provide firewood inside the camp to avoid the treacherous journey – so far they have not complied.

As a result of ongoing fighting in the region, around 200 new arrivals flow into the Bentiu camp each day. I hear testimony from survivors of horrific acts of violence committed against the Nuer by government soldiers and its militias. There are stories of boys being castrated and of women and girls being publicly gang raped. Nyaduop Machar Puot, a mother of five, explains that she recently witnessed 'women and kids [being] burned alive in their *tukuls* [traditional South Sudanese huts]' in her area of Koch county. She had to flee with her family because her own house was burned down and her cattle stolen.

In July last year, Human Rights Watch released a report that featured interviews with more than 170 victims and witnesses of government and militia enforced violence in Unity (one of South Sudan's twenty-eight states). The report concludes that the mass rape, beating, killing and dislocation were the result of 'decades of impunity' in the region and a lack of accountability, trials or proper investigation. It predicts that this legacy will continue to fuel further crimes in South Sudan.

Back in Juba, the crowds gather for South Sudan's fourth anniversary celebration. Locals sing and dance in colourful dresses and formal suits that glisten in the sun. Some listen as Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, the only major international dignitary to attend, ominously warns of 'outsiders' meddling in South Sudan's affairs. He blames former colonial powers, such as Britain, France and Portugal, for African woes and argues that 'tribalism [and] sectarianism are wrong ideas' that should be dismissed.

Uganda has provided thousands of troops to back the South Sudanese government since the 2013 conflict erupted. Most of these were withdrawn in 2015, though a handful remain. Israel and China also arm and back government forces, while Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir assists the opposition. South Sudan has become a proxy war. Sudan continues to destabilise a nation it never wanted to be independent (much of the valuable oil sits within South Sudanese borders), Israel has a long history of supporting African dictatorships and China wants access to South Sudan's resources. Everybody has dirty, meddling hands. This is the modern face of imperialism. Foreign troops don't need to occupy a nation for it to be controlled by outside forces.

Museveni's speech is followed by President Kiir thanking his 'fellow citizens' for their years of struggle. He offers few practical solutions to the problems now facing the nation.

The mood at the event is muted – there is little to celebrate. People look forlorn, perhaps unsure why they have come, apart from loyalty to the independence cause. Not even the marching band can rouse the masses. I am looked at with suspicion; zealous security guards in sunglasses ask foreigners wearing sunglasses to remove them. Entrepreneurial women sell nuts and national flags, many of which wilt in the sun. Thousands of discarded, plastic water bottles litter the dusty ground.

South Sudan's current crisis is entirely man made and yet the nation's international backers chose to ignore the warning signs. There was a gaping democratic deficit at the heart of the liberation movement; its leaders' known corruption was overlooked for geopolitical reasons.

Sovereignty wasn't simply given to the South Sudanese by benign powers. The South Sudanese spent decades fighting for independence against an oppressive northern neighbour, and did so with international backing. I haven't met any South Sudanese who don't support separation from Khartoum. Decades of blood and pain were spent gaining freedom and this is why so many South Sudanese are today despairing at their country's disintegration. 'Everybody's a loser in war,' one man tells me when I visit Bor, in Jonglei state. 'We're all losers. We want peace.'

Sudan gained independence from Britain in 1956, but subsequent decades saw Khartoum's leadership apply a similar mindset to its southern section as its former colonial rulers. In his classic 1966 novel on colonialism *Season of Migration to the North*, Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih eloquently encapsulates this attitude: 'They have left behind them people who think as they do.'

There were decades of civil war between Khartoum and its southern population over land, oil, dignity and prestige. Between 1983, when then President Jaafar Nimeiri introduced Sharia law, and 2005, when a peace agreement was finally signed, two million people died and four million were displaced. Both the SPLA and the Sudanese forces committed widespread abuses. Human Rights Watch released a report in 1994 that was eerily prescient in its predictions, warning that 'the leaders of the SPLA factions must address their own human rights problems and correct their own abuses, or risk a continuation of the war on tribal or political grounds in the future, even if they win autonomy or separation.' The SPLA and its backers never undertook this necessary accounting.

Today, due to the war, some South Sudanese survive on a diet of roots, water lilies, grass and leaves. Whole families have been forced to hide in dirty marshes, sometime for days, to escape violence. While in Bentiu, a number of women recount to me the brutality of militias, describing how babies were killed before their eyes. These women don't expect justice or compensation, though they want both. I ask whether they dream of soldiers facing trial for war crimes when the country eventually finds peace – the idea is dismissed as fanciful.

Last August's peace agreement includes provisions for a hybrid court staffed with South Sudanese and African nationals. It's a bold initiative that shuns the more traditional route of the International Criminal Court (ICC), a body treated with suspicion across Africa because it rarely investigates crimes by Western nations. But there is little political will to establish this court for South Sudan because the organisation tasked to deliver it, the African Union, is made of leaders who are themselves facing warrants for arrest. This includes Sudanese

President Omar al-Bashir, who is charged with alleged genocide in Darfur.

In a tragic historical irony, South Sudan's leaders are now mimicking its northern neighbour's fraught relationship with the UN, the West and humanitarian groups. Government forces are stealing food from civilians, blocking the delivery of aid and studiously responding to allegations of abuse by claiming a Western and African conspiracy against their sovereignty. It's an absurd suggestion, not least because the nation is only independent on paper; without foreign aid, the country and its population would not survive.

It's an uneasy time for free speech in South Sudan. At least seven reporters were murdered in the country last year. None of the culprits have been found. In 2015, President Kiir threatened journalists critical of his leadership with death. Francis, a Juba-based reporter, tells me that he has to self-censor his work or he would not have a job. He doesn't fear for his life, but knows his ability to be a critical journalist is severely curtailed.

As a state, South Sudan struggles to function in any capacity. Habib Dafalla Awonga, Director General for Programme Coordination at South Sudan's HIV/AIDS Commission, explains to me how the war has hampered his ability to get reliable data on infection rates. He estimates that around 2.7 per cent of the population are HIV-positive, but has no way of sourcing definite numbers. It's probably way higher, especially among soldiers sleeping with sex workers. Despite these concerns, Awonga accuses the West of 'pushing a gay agenda' because international HIV/AIDS bodies demanded protections for men who have sex with men (MSM) and sex workers.

This view that Western films, music and popular culture lead people towards sins such as homosexuality and sex work is commonly held across the continent. There are no publicly known gay groups in South Sudan, and being openly gay is impossible. Edward Ernest Jubara, Acting Director General for Culture and Heritage in the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport, told a local newspaper in July that 'a relationship between a man and a man is unacceptable in our society'. He was responding to comments made by President Obama during his July visit to Africa, when he urged the continent to abandon anti-gay discrimination. These attitudes are why American evangelical churches view South Sudan, as they do neighbouring Uganda, as prime territory for spreading their anti-gay and anti-abortion agenda. Though exact numbers are unknown, a growing number of American evangelical groups are operating in South Sudan, and they're finding a receptive audience to their message.

South Sudan's issues manifest in a range of other hurdles, too. Only 2 per cent of the nation's roads are paved, making it near impossible to access remote communities in the rainy season (aid groups are forced to rely on expensive UN flights). This year the UN is trying to raise US\$1.3 billion from governments for humanitarian efforts. It's a tough call when there are so many other pressing crises. Because Africa is largely ignored in the international media unless there is an Ebola outbreak or genocide – Black lives don't matter here – South Sudan can't compete with a sectarian, proxy war in Syria or post-US invasion chaos in Iraq and Afghanistan. Africa is still easily framed as the dark continent: uncivilised, violent, savage. Yet South Sudan joins a long list of dysfunctional African states, from Burundi to Guinea-Bissau, that are crying out for peace.

Being based in South Sudan has forced me to examine the uniqueness of the country's crisis and how it compares to other, equally horrific situations in nearby countries. The most media-savvy citizens in Juba know that their nation is mostly ignored by the international

media, that the conflict is not deemed important enough to warrant serious attention – the victims are non-people, nameless and disposable. But they have learnt that the ‘international community’ – a generic term that usually means what Washington and its allies want – has been unable and unwilling to pressure the warring factions. They also know that President Obama’s focus has been on the various conflicts in the Middle East. And while no South Sudanese express a desire for American military intervention, many wish for Washington to be more assertive in resolving the current conflict.

There is no doubt that the level of brutality in South Sudan is worse than almost any other conflict I’ve reported; depraved attacks against Palestinians and Afghans are not uncommon, but the scale and intensity in South Sudan is particularly harrowing. The remoteness of the conflict and the lack of accountability for war crimes has exacerbated extremism against civilians. I hear again and again vivid descriptions of rape and murder that shock me to my core.

South Sudanese leaders and military chiefs understand little about governance and that has led to endemic corruption. Between the 2005 peace agreement with Sudan and independence in 2011, Juba obtained over US\$13 billion in oil revenues; a significant amount of this went to security expenditure and salaries. Development was largely forgotten.

But what is often ignored in the just-ified criticisms of state officials is the complicity of self-interested outsiders. For example, the China National Petroleum Corporation was keen to establish firm ties with Juba both before and after independence, in order to become a major political player in East Africa. But flowing oil has done little for the local population.

In 2015, to protect its economic interests, China deployed 1051 combat-ready troops to bolster the UN mission in South Sudan. The other, less publicly discussed agenda was to protect its financial position in an unstable nation. This signals a significant shift in Beijing’s thinking towards Africa. There are now at least 3000 Chinese soldiers, sailors, engineers and medical staff stationed across the continent.

According to Eric Olander, chief editor of the *China Africa Project*, China’s long-held ideology of non-interference is being tested in South Sudan. ‘At what point,’ he asks,

‘does a peace process where China is actively immersed in Juba’s domestic politics along with Beijing’s first deployment of combat-ready troops in Africa cross the line from peacekeeping to intervening in another country’s internal affairs?’

These geo-strategic manoeuvres have no relevance for the millions of South Sudanese civilians suffering due to the conflict. In Wai, for instance, around 25,000 people live under trees and in a few mud shelters. There are no tents. Women and children sit on the ground almost motionless, mosquitoes buzzing around them, waiting for basic medical care and food handouts of oil and sorghum. It reminds me of the infamous images from Ethiopia in the 1980s. There are tens of thousands of others like this across South Sudan: communities left to fend for themselves because they cannot be accessed by aid groups. Nobody knows how many have died in the last few years due to starvation. No-one is counting the numbers.

These gruesome realities are at least condemned by the Obama administration, though it’s

mostly lip-service. During Obama's visit to Kenya and Ethiopia in July, he accused Kiir and Machar of dragging their nation into the 'despair of violence'. But the Obama years have seen significant – largely ignored – expansions of the US' military footprint across Africa, including deepening relationships with some of the continent's most brutal dictators. This has contributed to instability and abuses in Libya, Mali, the Gulf of Guinea and elsewhere.

In his book *Tomorrow's Battlefield: US Proxy Wars and Secret Ops in Africa*, Nick Turse notes that at least forty-nine of Africa's fifty-four countries have had some US military presence or involvement in the last decade. It's arguably one of the greatest colonisation projects of the twenty-first century and virtually nobody knows about it. South Sudan was supposed to be central to this plan: a reliable client state in the heart of Africa, a base from which the US could challenge China's growing military and political power on the continent. Its strategic importance for Washington, after years of losing influence to Chinese infrastructure and funding projects, has withered since the outbreak of the civil war. The failure of the US to assist in building infrastructure or to respond to human rights violations and state corruption has been critical in South Sudan's ongoing instability.

But almost as soon as conflict erupted in 2013, Washington was distracted by the civil war in Syria, the disintegration of Iraq and the rise of ISIS. Uncritical praise for the South Sudanese regime soon became more circumspect, despite the billions of dollars being spent on propping up the government. One unnamed US official was recently reported as saying that 'the parties have shown themselves to be utterly indifferent to their country and their people, and that is a hard thing to rectify'.

Accountability for this catastrophe is difficult to find, especially from the high-profile American backers who spent years pushing for South Sudan's independence. Few questions were asked on the suitability of South Sudanese leaders, their human rights record or their ability to manage a new state. This is hardly unsurprising: Beijing and Washington traditionally prefer partnering with reliable autocrats.

In the mid 1990s, a small group of American activists and officials began a campaign to push for South Sudanese independence. The three key individuals were Susan Rice (then assistant secretary of state for Africa, now Obama's national security advisor), Gayle Smith (then at the National Security Council and now administrator of USAID) and John Prendergast (then at the National Security Council, soon the State Department and now co-founder of the Enough Project). Actor George Clooney later became active over Sudan's abuses in Darfur. Arguably, South Sudan became a cause célèbre because helping build a new state seemed romantic and justified in a post-September 11 world.

Very few of these individuals looked too closely into who they were backing in South Sudan. Alex de Waal, executive director of the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University and a leading Sudan expert, tells me that

'South Sudan's leaders believed that they had the backing of the US administration, with celebrity activists as their enforcers, to defy the rules of that club. The SPLA was permitted to get away with murder because they had a chorus of supporters who would unflinchingly chant that the other side was worse.'

Thankfully, some have recognised the need for change. Last year the Enough Project launched 'the Sentry', a project targeting the financial enablers of violence in South Sudan,

Somalia and elsewhere across Africa.

Meanwhile, in the southern town of Yei, near the borders with Uganda and Democratic Republic of Congo, there is an illusion of tranquillity. Many refugees fleeing Darfur and the Nuba Mountains reside here, and the dusty streets feel relatively peaceful. American and Australian evangelicals operate His House of Hope – Bet Eman Hospital for Women and Children and the Reconcile Peace Institute. Both organisations do important work, but nowhere is safe for long because of the sporadic outbreaks of violence. Civilians are scared, not trusting the words of politicians.

In South Sudan more generally, the hope that went with independence has largely evaporated. There is currently no indication that a comprehensive and sustainable peace deal will completely stop the violence and allow the country to develop its infrastructure and resources. A UN report from earlier this year concludes that both Kiir and Machar should face sanctions for their roles in the war. Without concerted international pressure to cease the violence and to establish accountable trials and a South African-style truth and reconciliation commission, South Sudan is destined to remain mired in conflict. Its determined people deserve far better from the major global powers that, just a few years ago, promised them the world.

***Antony Loewenstein** is an independent journalist and Guardian columnist. His latest book is **Disaster Capitalism: Making a Killing out of Catastrophe** (Verso, 2015).*

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