



11 August 2010. Bir-Diak cattle camp, Rumbek North County, Lakes State. Boys from the Dinka tribe are expected to go on cattle raids to prove their masculinity

PHOTO ESSAY

A long walk

South Sudan may be a brand new country, but it's fighting the same old war

Photography by Cédric Gerbehaye

Words by Nesrine Malik

Wrapped in a dirty old tunic, the boy stares out of the frame, his gaze hard and fierce. Around him, piles of cow dung are being burned; the smoke provides some respite from the biting insects that feed on the cattle.

These photographs by the Belgian journalist Cédric Gerbehaye show the fragile situation in South Sudan. In the cattle camps, the only signs of modernity are clothes and Kalashnikovs. "People walk barefoot, they have no mobiles, no electricity, no cooking pots," the photographer says. "They don't use any currency except cattle. Most only drink milk."

Gerbehaye has travelled to Sudan five times in the past 18 months with the help of a Pulitzer Centre grant. On his most recent visit, he slipped illegally into the Nuba Mountains of South Kordofan, on the border between Sudan to the north and its newly created neighbour, South Sudan. The looming crisis in the mountains – which has been compared with that of Darfur – captured the world's attention in March when George Clooney was arrested for trespassing at the Sudanese embassy in Washington, DC. Clooney wanted to publicise the plight of "tens of thousands of people [who] are going to die from starvation" if the Khartoum government continues to blockade the area.

The Nuba peoples are the forgotten victims of Sudan's decades-long civil war. The mountains where they live have been sealed off, and the civilian population is subjected to aerial bombardment, house-to-house raids and torching of entire villages. As far back as June 2011, UN reports were stating that "human rights abuses are commonplace and part of the strategy" to ►

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► drive out the ethnic-minority Nuba. Gerbehaye tells of watching as a little girl who had lost an arm in a bombardment quietly prepared breakfast for her family.

The whole of Sudan has been marked by conflicts over resources and grazing rights since it gained independence from Anglo-Egyptian rule in 1956. Nowhere is this more apparent than in South Kordofan. The Nuba are the largest group (between 1.2 and 1.7 million), an amalgamation of central highland tribes, not unified by language, faith or ethnicity but sharing a common heritage.

In the 1990s, the Nuba, marginalised and discriminated against by successive governments, sided with the southern Sudan People's Liberation Movement, seeing in the SPLM a natural ally against the northern monopoly on power and resources. They took up arms when those grievances became politicised. To counter this, the government co-opted the region's Arab tribes in the ensuing civil war.

Eventually, in 2002, a ceasefire was negotiated and in March 2005 the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed, heralding the end of the civil war. The SPLM negotiated on the Nuba's behalf but agreed to defer the most pertinent issues – including self-determination – to a post-election popular consultation, without any guarantees of fair implementation. Most crucially, the Nuba Mountains were to remain part of the north; and once South Sudan had negotiated its essential needs, they were no longer a priority for the SPLM. Exacerbating an already volatile situation is the trade in oil: the south has most of the known petroleum reserves across both countries, but the pipelines for export run through the north.

The Republic of South Sudan came into existence on 9 July 2011. What happened next in the Nuba Mountains is hard to untangle. The SPLM candidate for the governorship of South Kordofan, Abdelaziz al-Hilu, had lost delayed elections in May and cried foul. He was soon joined by residual Nuba troops in the region, toting weapons left over from the civil war. The Sudanese Armed Forces demanded that the tribesmen surrender their arms; when the Nuba rejected their ultimatum they responded with characteristic scorched-earth tactics, bombarding the mountains from the ground and the air.

Now there are frequent skirmishes, adding daily to the toll of 5,000 people killed or abducted – and 400,000 displaced – since the reignition of the conflict in South Kordofan. Over the course of his visits to the region, Cédric Gerbehaye has seen the mood deteriorate. He believes the joy of the South Sudanese at independence overshadowed the horrors their northern neighbours faced. "They said it was the end of the final walk to freedom, the end of the longest African civil war. As everyone looked at Juba, at the newest country in the world, a new war was already starting." ●

Nesrine Malik is a Sudanese journalist based in London and Khartoum

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(Left) 15 February 2012. Waiting for water at the Jamam refugee camp in the remote Upper Nile State, South Sudan

(Below left) 15 February 2012. View from the Médecins Sans Frontières clinic in Jamam camp

(Below right) 16 February 2012. Men wait for aid at Jamam. After walking several days to flee bombings by the Sudanese Armed Forces, they have just arrived at this camp, where more than 30,000 people have taken shelter





(Left) 7 February 2012. Sinas, from Soda in the northern Blue Nile State, Sudan, prepares sorghum at the Doro camp in Upper Nile, South Sudan. A lack of food drives women and children to return north to harvest their fields despite the bombings

(Top) 12 February 2012. Asha, 25, arrived alone with her daughter at the southern Jamam camp. They come from the village of Kamer in Blue Nile State, just over the border

(Middle) 11 February 2012. Crossing the border to Doro camp, a mother feeds her child after two days of marching

(Bottom) 21 February 2012. At the Yida camp in oil-rich Unity State, a woman who fled bombing in the Nuba Mountains waits to register in a hut taken over temporarily by UNHCR

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(Above) Children gather to fetch water from a pool in Jamam camp. Access to water is a huge problem for the refugees, who have fled bombing over the border

(Right) 7 February 2012. Roughly 45,000 people, mainly of the eastern Uduk ethnic group, have taken shelter at the Doro camp in South Sudan. New refugees arrive daily from Blue Nile, fleeing attacks by the northern army and air force





11 August 2010. A cattle camp in Lakes State. This man is carrying a home-made version of the flag of the southern Sudan People's Liberation Army. The printed pattern on his clothes mirrors a traditional animal skin