

Juba, Sudan: A woman who returned to South Sudan after living in the north carries her baby along with her ration of food aid at a camp in Juba on July 7, 2011 two days before South Sudan secedes from the north and becomes the world's newest nation.

PHOTO: PHIL MOORE/AFP PHOTO

# *Sunrise over South Sudan*

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*Last year, the world welcomed its newest nation: the Republic of South Sudan. It was a long-awaited dream for many South Sudanese people who have endured decades of civil war. KARISHMA RAO ERRABALLI reflects on the past and future of the world's newest country.*



**A**s Abuk Tong, a refugee from South Sudan drives up to her home in Sydney on a warm spring day, in her white Toyota sedan, with the sun setting behind her, she looks like anyone driving home after a hard day.

The scars woven above her brows, from her days in Sudan, are slowly being re-etched with new lines, re-writing her story.

Abuk started her long journey from Aweil, a city of about 100,000 people, more than 800 kilometres northwest of South Sudan's capital Juba, in 1988, when her village was attacked by government forces. She first left the city, which she says is "a water-side town, much like Sydney", carrying her 18-month-old daughter on her back, her six-month-old baby on her front, and leading her three-year-old boy by the hand. She had a little milk and rice so that they wouldn't starve during the long nights in the bush.

When she came back home she found livestock missing, homes burnt down and everything worse than she had left it. A few days of peace and the attackers would be back. And she would have to run again.

"We had no security, little food and no sleep. Every day we spent in fear of what was going to happen to our family", Abuk says matter-of-factly, as someone who has been through too much to let emotions get the better of her.

Sudan has been a theatre of conflict for more than four decades and has been described by the United Nations as 'one of the world's worst humanitarian crises'. The numbers are staggering: two million deaths in two decades and four million displaced after the second civil war broke out in 1983.

These figures however are just figures, until you

meet someone like Abuk, one of the displaced. She finally left by train with her family, with no food and little water, surrounded by fear. The journey to Khartoum in Sudan took three days because they had to keep stopping and checking for mines.

In her words, she was one of the "lucky ones". She made it to Australia. In Australia, there are now more than 20,000 people of refugee background from South Sudan. It is the fastest growing emerging community in the country and most of them consider themselves 'lucky', like Abuk, to be given a chance to start life on a fresh page.

On 9 July this year, her home became known as the Republic of South Sudan, the world's newest country, and the question now on everyone's minds is whether this chance for peace will bring development and stability.

In the late 19th century, before Sudan became a colonial state, it was a place of relatively non-hierarchical, politically organised social communities.

Following its independence from the British in 1956, the region has been in a state of unrest, with a natural fault-line forming between the Arab-Muslim state in the north and a predominantly African-Christian and animist south.

The root causes of these conflicts are multi-dimensional and have evolved according to economic and political circumstances.

During their rule, Britain and Egypt could not bring the region together, resulting in a step-motherly treatment of the south, which was regularly raided for economic gain while the development of its infrastructure was ignored.

Education was neglected, reducing the opportuni-



[SPLA/M], was created in 1983, the same year that another civil war began.

The image of thousands of malnourished people carrying little bundles and babies across a parched red earth or young men strapped with machine guns and blank eyes are not very different from what Abuk remembers. SPLA/M represented the people until the 2005 ceasefire.

But the men who had

once taken up arms have now transformed themselves from a guerrilla group into a national political party. Today the top leaders are in key posts in the new government, the most prominent of whom is President Salva Kiir Mayardit.

SPLA/M has an estimated 180,000 soldiers who are all being absorbed into the armed forces of the country they fought to create.

But such unity has also seen many internal divisions in the past, with rifts between the different factions leading to fighting and the formation of more rebel groups.

These internal differences meant ongoing violence and instability, and severe consequences for those touched by the hostilities.

Even after signing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005, the number of people killed is estimated to be between 200,000 and 400,000, with more than 2.5 million people displaced.

Indeed, Save the Children, a prominent NGO that has worked in the region for decades, gives us

ties for southern Sudanese to hold positions in the post-independence Sudanese government and further marginalising the community and reducing their chances of integrating with the ruling political class.

Sudan was unable to form a strong central authority that could control its territories and deliver the pre-requisites for a stable nation-state, such as a capable administrative arm to collect taxes, build infrastructure, and provide health-care and education. The de-legitimisation of the state led to a string of unstable governments who manipulated the resources of the south and exploited the sentiments of people by fostering the spread of Islam in an attempt to dominate the Christian South resulting in more violence and underdevelopment.

The first civil war between the government and the armed groups in the south took place between 1955 and 1972, in which more than half a million people were killed.

The Sudan People's Liberation Army, and its political wing the Sudan People's Liberation Movement



Lost Boys were separated from their families and forced to flee their homes during the civil war in South Sudan. Lokichokio Transit Centre, Kenya. PHOTO: P. MOUMTZIS/UNHCR

*“I am glad that we have our own country. It is a symbol of the sacrifice of the lives of my brother and father”.*

the harsh facts: South Sudan has the world’s worst maternal mortality rate, one child in every nine dies before turning five; 30 per cent of those who survive are underweight or suffer from acute malnutrition. Two thousand of every 100,000 mothers die during childbirth because health workers attend only 15 per cent of births. A fifth of children are acutely malnourished and only 10 per cent of children complete primary school.

Seventy two per cent of the population is under 30 years old and more than half are under 18. About 45 per cent of South Sudan does not have access to clean water and 85 per cent of the people have no access to sanitation.

The chances of a young girl dying during pregnancy or childbirth are three times more likely than her completing eight years of basic education. About 50,000 children have been orphaned in the last 20 years and 170,000 have lost contact with their biological parents.

At the height of the conflict 17,000 children took up arms and were directly involved in warfare. A large number of these children have been psychologically damaged from witnessing violence, or from the effects of the conflict being so close to home.

Ask Adhieu, another South Sudanese refugee living in Sydney. Dressed in a light-brown satin dress, with daring blue eye-shadow, her smile froze when I

asked her about her parents. Adhieu cannot remember how old she was when her father was murdered in front of her eyes. She lost two brothers to the war and at the time didn’t know where her mother was.

After the killing, she ran as hard as she could, with the people who were crossing the border en masse into Kenya, leaving everything behind, only looking forward. She lived in the refugee camp there for 10 years before she came to Sydney.

Today she holds a plump little baby boy, Bior, on her hips and says, “I will only take him (to South Sudan) when it is safe. There is fear. Someone can just come and kill you for no reason. First, I will go and see; only if it is safe, I will take him. But only to visit, this is his home now”.

She is, however, happy that the years of struggle have had a tangible result, “I am glad that we have our own country. It is a symbol of the sacrifice of the lives of my brother and father”.

South Sudan is a rich country lush with fertile farmland, timber, copper, uranium, other minerals, and much of the world’s gum Arabic, or acacia gum, a key ingredient in making soft drink and ice cream, but still 98 per cent of its domestic revenue comes from oil.

The third largest producer of oil, it generated about 490,000 barrels a day, and with independence, South Sudan now owns about 75 per cent of it. However, in the last six years about \$6.8 billion of oil revenue has been unaccounted for.

Experts say that if this precious resource were used effectively, it could be the answer to the country’s poverty. Depending on the rate of extraction it could last between eight and 22 years. This means that the government has a very short time frame to diversify its economy.

Landlocked and underdeveloped, South Sudan is dependent on Sudan to transport and refine its oil. Despite the dismal state of hunger, malnutrition and disease only four per cent of the budget is dedicated to health and only 5.6 per cent allotted to education compared to almost 50 per cent on security, the lion’s share of South Sudan’s rather large pie. Presently, it only seems to be protecting the strong.

Southern Kordofan, a contested border state in north Sudan, witnessed the displacement of 200,000 people after daily bombardments, arbitrary arrests, extra judiciary killings and a long list of human-





Nimule, South Sudan: A recently returned southern Sudanese refugee family of the Madi tribe standing outside a hut on the outskirts of their home town of Nimule in Eastern Equatoria State on the border with Uganda.

PHOTO: TIM MCKULKA/AFP PHOTO/HO/UNMIS / OCTOBER 2008

rights violations by the Bashir government.

In South Sudan alone there are 52 tribes who have wound an intricate web over time, struggling for limited resources. This seems further enhanced “by a perceived inequality in access to political, social and economic opportunities,” according to Save the Children.

Seeking engagement with all ethnic communities on an equal footing, disarming all tribes without discrimination, protecting minorities and allocating resources equally is the obvious answer.

A solution, argued for by Pascal Zachary, author of *Married to Africa* and former foreign correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*, is that traditional borders

are not relevant to the African context. Historically borders have been fluid, determined by tribes and evolving as the situation demands and may have continued that way without the West’s influence.

He believes that, “Letting these (African) countries reform into smaller nations might actually reduce conflict, increase economic growth and cost less foreign aid.”

There has been a start with South Sudan, and we can hope that more lines are created, towards peace, before many more lives are destroyed.

The Kiir government must focus on its immediate problems. South Sudan has seen the influx of about two million displaced people going back home, some

victims of internal warfare. Finding their way back is not going to be easy. Not least because although the state covers a distance of 650,000 square kilometres, making it bigger than England and Germany combined, it has only 30 miles of paved roads.

*Time* magazine says that aid workers and development experts are coining a new word for what could become of the world’s newest country: ‘pre-failed state’. Given the grim figures emerging it could well be true, unless it capitalises on its rich and deep well of oil.

Evidence of a functioning state with infrastructure being built – roads, schools or a hospital – can give people hope for a future. It can give them reason to lay down their weapons and share President Kiir’s dream, “to give our children what the war took away from us”.

Eighty per cent of South Sudanese are farmers, but agriculture accounts for only two per cent of the national budget. Investing in the sector could reap huge benefits from the fertile land, help diversify the economy and make people feel rooted and secure in their land. This could bring up the average wage of 80 cents a day, which most South Sudanese have to live on.

South Sudanese in Sydney have changed the destinies of their children. Abuk’s son works as a mechanic and her daughter is a nurse. She has three more sons who are in school, awaiting a bright future and living a fearless life. Adhieu has found her mother in Kenya after 10 long years and now only wishes for a safe and happy life for her boy, “as long as he smiles, it’s good,” she said.

People back home in South Sudan must feel the same way. As long as fear and hunger is a thing of the past, people can look towards the future with hope. They have been given the right to rebuild their own country and come together as a democracy. And there is some good news. Since 2005, four times more children are being educated than before. The sun is rising over South Sudan’s fertile earth and the government should harness this moment of hope amongst the people and write a new and better chapter in their conflict-ridden story.

Sharing the spoils of their land and bringing prosperity can make everyone feel like they are fighting together for peace, not for war. **R**

## SOUTH SUDAN: AN OVERVIEW

### Population of about eight million

A landlocked country, the Republic of South Sudan has a population of about eight million, has a predominantly rural, subsistence economy and has been affected by civil war for all but 10 of the years since independence in 1956.

### As a result of the war...

More than two million people have died and more than four million have been internally displaced or became refugees as a result of the war. However, on the 9th of July, 2011 South Sudan seceded from the north and became an independent state.

### South Sudan’s economy

South Sudan’s economy is one of the world’s weakest and most underdeveloped, with little infrastructure and the highest maternal mortality and female illiteracy rates in the world, as of this year.

### Exports

It exports timber and has many natural resources such as petroleum, iron ore, copper, chromium ore, zinc, tungsten, mica, silver, gold, and hydropower. The economy, as in many developing countries, is heavily dependent on agriculture.

### Sudanese independence in 1956

South Sudan and Sudan were part of Egypt under the Muhammad Ali Dynasty, later being governed as an Anglo-Egyptian condominium until Sudanese independence in 1956

### Second-largest wildlife migration

South Sudan includes the protected area of Bandingilo National Park, which hosts the second-largest wildlife migration in the world, and the vast swamp region of the Sudd formed by the White Nile.