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## The Lost Children of Nuba

### A refugee camp in South Sudan overflows with orphans fleeing bombs and starvation.

by [Trevor Snapp](#) (</contributors/trevor-snapp.html>) | May 14, 2012 1:00 AM EDT

Rose was in the middle of an English lesson at her school when the bombers arrived. Hearing the buzz of old Russian Antonov cargo planes, the students scurried outside, peering into the sky. At that moment, high above the children's heads, airmen rolled bombs out the planes' cargo bay, sending a firestorm toward the remote village in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan.

"That day many of us died," 14-year-old Rose said of the day earlier this spring when the Sudan Army attacked. Unable to find her parents in the chaotic aftermath of the bombing, Rose fled with a group of students and teachers. For two weeks, they walked south, with no food and little water to sustain them. "Many children died on the way," said the girl, who eventually found her way to the Yida refugee camp across the border in South Sudan, home to almost 30,000 people, many of them children like Rose who have lost their parents in the fighting between rebel forces and Sudan's central government in Khartoum. During the last five weeks, the size of the camp has exploded, with more than 7,000 people arriving last month alone.

The conflict started last summer as South Sudan prepared to secede after a two-decade-long and bloody civil war with the north. The Nubans fought alongside the South Sudanese rebels, but the South Kordofan region, where the Nuba Mountains are located, wasn't included in the newly formed South Sudan, and Nuban rebels have continued to strive for greater autonomy. The Khartoum government has taken brutal steps to suppress the insurgency, bombing villages and pursuing a campaign of starvation.

Even as Sudan President Omar al-Bashir shook hands with South Sudan President Salva Kiir on a scorching hot grandstand in July in South Sudan's new capital, Juba, bombers from Sudan were already decimating villages in the Nuba Mountains. According to surviving witnesses, Bashir's militias and secret police were also assassinating Nuban leaders and civilians in the streets of the South Kordofan state capital of Kadugli.



The Nubans are dark-skinned and most are Muslim, though Christianity and Animism are also common. (Trevor Snapp / Pulitzer Center for Newsweek)

Sudan says it was responding to an attack by Nuban soldiers on a police station, while the Nuban general and rebel leader Abdel Aziz al Hila claims Bashir's government started the war by attempting to wipe out political opposition. After 10 days under siege, Hila and his forces escaped into the hills. In an exclusive interview with *Newsweek*, Hila said the Nuba people and other minority groups in Sudan are fighting for greater rights and a share of the oil and mineral resources on their land.

With South Sudan gaining its independence, much of Sudan's oil reserves and the most fertile land can be found near the Nuba Mountains, which is located at a crossroads between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa and remains, despite its resources, one of the most underdeveloped regions in the world. "We need to get rid of Bashir so we can finally have democracy in Sudan," Hila said.

Unable to wipe out the rebellion, government forces have targeted civilians instead, bombing villages and razing towns they capture. Because it is difficult for independent observers to access the region, accurate estimates of the toll are hard to come by. According to the United Nations, as many as 400,000 people have been displaced or in other ways affected by the fighting. Mukesh Kapila, the former top U.N.

humanitarian official in Sudan, describes the government's attacks as "literally a scorched-earth policy" and warned against "the first genocide of the 21st century."

During the negotiations that led to the 2005 peace deal between the north and the south, the Nuba people say they were promised more development, a popular consultation, and democratic elections. None of this has happened, however, and some observers believe the Nubans were betrayed. Like the people of Darfur, the Nuba people are dark-skinned and most are Muslims, though Christianity and animism are also common. "The Nuba people were sacrificed in order for South Sudan to gain independence," said Ryan Boyette, an American NGO worker turned journalist, who has lived in the mountains for nearly a decade. Boyette believes the U.S. and the U.N. have allowed the government in Khartoum to starve out villages in the Nuba Mountains. "They have done almost nothing and now thousands are fleeing—not because of bombs, but because of starvation."

On a bed of sticks in one of the many straw huts in Yida, Younam, a 14-year-old boy, told the story of how his family fled bombings of their village. When his family and other refugees reached Jau, a town on the border with South Sudan, Bashir's soldiers attacked. Hiding under a tree, Younam witnessed the rampage. "They cut the babies; then the young people," the boy recalled. "Then they stoned my parents until they died." Days later, Younam arrived at Yida—naked, hungry, and scared. "I'm worried there is no one who will ever be able to love me like my parents did," he said, rubbing his eyes to hold back tears.

History, sadly, may be repeating itself. During Sudan's civil war, fighting displaced nearly 20,000 children from the Nuer and Dinka tribes. Separated from their parents, they became known as the Lost Boys of Sudan and wandered across the battle-torn countryside for years; those who survived ended up in a refugee camp in Ethiopia. Eventually, many were resettled in the U.S.

Valentino Deng, a Lost Boy whose journey was chronicled in *What Is the What*, a book by American writer David Eggers, said that because many civilians sympathize with the rebels, the government is cracking down hard. "They attack the civilians and subject them to hunger or anything that will make them suffer," Deng said. "They are being bombed into submission."

Recent arrivals at the camps are fleeing starvation, not bombs, according to Gabriela Ovington, a young American aid worker. Ovington said girls in the camp constitute its most vulnerable population. "Several of the girls in the camp have died because of sanitary issues, complications from normal things." After funding to pay a guard to protect the girls' compounds was cut, men broke in late one night, brandishing knives. Families nearby who heard the girls' screams woke up and intervened. "We don't have enough resources to deal with the children," said Ovington. "The children have been here for eight months and still there are no showers. No latrines. No security."

Adding to the desperate situation, the Yida refugee camp itself has become contested territory. U.N. officials believe that the camp, which was bombed last year, is insecure, too close to the border, and militarized by Nuban soldiers visiting their families. The U.N.'s refugee agency has refused to recognize Yida as a formal refugee camp, setting up two smaller rival camps to the south. Refugees say the other camps are built on swampy, treeless land and that they are unsuitable for living. Refugees, meanwhile, keep pouring into Yida.

In an email response to *Newsweek*, a U.N. official downplayed the situation of unaccompanied minors, stating that many actually have parents in the settlement. The email also stated that the organization is helping build latrines, improve shelter, and give out supplies. But a week in the camp evidenced little such action, and aid workers in the camp said they had seen little U.N. help.

When children like Rose or Younam arrive, they are matched up with a volunteer in Yida who acts as a parent, often for a hundred or more children at a time. They are placed in grass huts and given a small ration of food to share.

Oum Juma, a willowy Nuban with a round, open face, takes care of many of the unaccompanied girls in the camp. In the last Sudan war, Oum Juma herself was separated from her family for more than a decade. When fighting broke out this time, she fled south with her mother and her newborn baby. Her husband, however, disappeared during the fighting. When he came up during an interview, she held her baby close and looked away before changing the subject. "I just focus on these children; I take care of them as a mom and help them forget their parents," said Oum Juma, who believes that learning offers the only way out of this seemingly never-ending conflict. With other teachers in the camp, Oum Juma has started informal schools, and in one compound, she has rigged up a volleyball court. "I met an 8-year-old at a hospital wounded by a bombing. All he wants is to join the Air Force to kill those who killed his mom," she said. "But that thinking just starts another war."

On a recent afternoon, dust shimmered in the orange light as a gaggle of girls hit a half-deflated ball over the torn net of the volleyball court, and for a moment, Yida felt like a summer camp, not a place of desperation. In the branches of a small tree, three girls sang softly, shaking a rattle pounded out of a USAID food tin. "What are you singing?" Oum Juma asked. One of the girls answered: "Songs to forget our parents."

*Trevor Snapp, a photographer and writer, has lived for years in East Africa.*

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