God ran with us: Caught between two Sudans

text and photos by Paul Jeffrey in the May 29, 2013 issue

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Kuol Deng Kuol remembered a time when there was no war between his tribe, the Ngok Dinka, and the Misseriya nomads who come to Abyei every year to graze their cattle.

“When they came to the houses of our parents, we knew them as guests, as needy people whom we helped. They came every year in the dry season to find water for their cows and to catch fish and harvest gum and fruits. If there was a famine, some families would stay here for the year, and our parents divided these families among their own families so the people could feed their own cows until the following year,” said Deng, the paramount chief of the Ngok Dinka.

The peaceful coexistence of Deng’s childhood started unraveling during the 1960s, he explained to me. We were walking through the charred ruins of his office in Abyei, which was looted and burned by Misseriya militia in 2011. Although the Misseriya were responsible, he didn’t blame them and was careful not to characterize this as a “tribal conflict,” a shopworn phrase that’s used too easily to describe African conflicts. Instead, Deng described the situation as a political conflict manufactured by the ruling elite in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan.

I spoke with Deng in March. On May 4 he was killed by Misseriya militia who fired on his vehicle, part of a UN convoy.

For decades the Sudanese government has waged war on its own people, attacking communities on the country's periphery, places such as Darfur and the Nuba Mountains, where local populations have grown tired of the exploitative and repressive practices of the urban elites along the Nile River.

In the case of Abyei, a contested region on the border of Sudan and Africa's newest country, South Sudan, the Khartoum government decided to exploit the natural tensions between nomads and farmers and converted the Misseriya into a proxy force against the Ngok Dinka, who supported the secessionist movement in the South.

"In the time of our fathers and grandfathers, there were no clashes between us. But when people in Khartoum decided to take our land and drive us from Abyei, they gave guns to the Misseriya and told them to attack us and burn our houses and take our cows," Deng said.

Abyei is often described in press reports as an "oil-rich region," as if Africa's infamous resource explains all the violence. Yet much of the oil is located near Heglig, which the Permanent Court of Arbitration took out of Abyei in 2009 and awarded to the government in Khartoum. Today Chinese companies there are pumping crude as fast as they can, thus funding Khartoum's military. According to a March report from George Clooney's Satellite Sentinel Project, Khartoum's military is amassing tanks and other heavy equipment at Heglig, possibly in preparation for another assault on Abyei.

Water—an increasingly common denominator of conflict in many parts of the world—may be a more likely motivator for Khartoum's behavior, or it could be just a reflexive response by Omar al-Bashir, the Sudanese president who's been charged with genocide by the International Criminal Court. Bashir faces criticism in his own ranks for having "lost" South Sudan, so he may be ordering increased attacks on Abyei as a way of appeasing hardliners within his own party's ranks.

Under the 2005 peace accords that ended the civil war in the South, the people of Abyei were supposed to vote in a 2011 referendum on whether to align with the North or the South. Yet Khartoum kept blocking the proposed vote, insisting that the Misseriya participate too. The Ngok Dinka insisted that only full-time residents

should vote. That debate came to an end when Khartoum invaded, using the Misseriya as proxies.

Late last year the African Union drew up plans for another referendum in October. It doesn't allow the Misseriya to vote, but it does avoid zero-sum outcomes by offering financial incentives to the Misseriya and Khartoum. The Ngok Dinka and the government in Juba, the capital of South Sudan, welcomed the proposal. Khartoum rejected it.

Deng said his people are tired of waiting. If Khartoum refuses to allow a vote this year, the people of Abyei may unilaterally decide their political fate by joining South Sudan. Should Khartoum respond militarily, he says, it won't be a repeat of 2011, when Juba refused to send in troops so as not to derail its own independence process. Thus Abyei remains a flashpoint in a voluble region.

A few thousand Abyei residents have ventured back to their home villages, but some 100,000 remain camped in Agok, at the southern edge of the region. They get help from a variety of UN agencies and NGOs, but those who are returning to their burned-out villages are largely on their own. Most international aid agencies are afraid of repercussions from their work in the North and have either stayed away or kept a low profile. Aid workers in the region told me that if one of their vehicles is spotted in the town of Abyei, their agency's representatives in Khartoum immediately get a visit from the government's Humanitarian Aid Commission, the agency responsible for kicking out more than a dozen international NGOs. In order not to lose their access to Darfur, aid workers have steered clear of Abyei, even though thousands of people who want to go home could use their help.

The Abyei Catholic parish is an exception. The church has accompanied the people returning to their burned villages. With support from the international Caritas network, the church is drilling new wells to replace those that were destroyed by the North when it withdrew. Volunteers have swept up the ashes and rebuilt clinics in towns to which people are hesitantly returning. The church is retraining teachers—who are switching from teaching in Arabic, the language of Sudan, to English, the language of South Sudan—to staff schools that people hope will reopen. Amid the makeshift huts in Agok, the church maintains its pastoral presence, encouraging hope.

“People want to go home. Agok is crowded. The ground turns to mud when it rains. Back home everyone has a plot of their own to farm. But they’re afraid of another attack from the North, so they remain here. And as long as they are here, the church will be here with them, even if the rest of the world doesn’t seem to notice,” said Father Biong Kuol.

Some 4,000 Ethiopian soldiers are posted in Abyei, charged with keeping a peace that doesn’t exist. Although they win kudos for having provided water in some areas, they’ve been unable to stop an increase in livestock theft by Misseriya militias this year.

Father Karlo Kaw, another priest serving Abyei, says the peacekeepers are afraid.

“The Ethiopian troops won’t go out at night. But that’s when the men with guns arrive to steal the goats and cattle, and in the morning, when the UN troops wake up, the animals are long gone,” Father Kaw said. “You cannot follow someone with a gun unless you are willing to die yourself. And these Arabs will shoot even the UN troops. They don’t care, they are very crazy.”

The frustration with the Ethiopian peacekeepers is part of a larger sense that the world has not taken seriously the suffering in Abyei.

“The international community has been too flexible with the government in Khartoum. No one responds to the crimes committed here in Abyei,” Father Kuol said.

“Perhaps the international community has been silent because Abyei has become a business for many of them, including the UN. If there is no conflict anywhere, then where are they going to get jobs? We should review their mandate. How can they watch people being tortured and yet don’t do anything? What’s the role of the UN? They are living the good life. If they came and lived the life of the people, who are forced to sleep on the ground with nothing, then things would change,” he said.

One of the few who have returned to Abyei town is Bruna Maloal, a 63-year-old Catholic catechist. After a year living under a plastic tarp, she went home last year within days of the North’s withdrawal. She set about cleaning up the church compound, which had been looted and burned for the second time in a decade. As she picked through the rubble of her own mud-walled hut, she gathered other Catholics to pray.

“We prayed the rosary as we ran from here. We prayed for the bullets to miss. God ran with us, and were it not for the power of God, we couldn’t have come back,” Maloal said. “As a catechist, I gather the people, pray with them and preach the word of God to them. The church is always with the people. They have survived because the church supports them.”

Maloal’s five children and their families remain living in Agok where they have access to food from the UN World Food Program. In this ghost town there is almost no help, so Maloal harvests wild greens that she uses to supplement what’s left of two bags of sorghum she received last August from Ethiopian peacekeeping troops.