

New Wave of ‘Lost Boys’ Flee Sudan’s Lingering War

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YIDA, South Sudan — Thousands of unaccompanied children are streaming out of an isolated, rebellious region of [Sudan](#), fleeing a relentless aerial assault and the prospect of famine.

Sent by their parents on harrowing odysseys across battlefields and malaria-infested swamps, the children are repeating one of the most sordid chapters of Sudanese history: the perilous flight of the so-called Lost Boys during the civil war in the 1990s, who wandered hundreds of miles dodging militias, bombers and lions.

Now, a new generation of Lost Boys, and some Lost Girls, too, is emerging from a war that, despite a peace agreement, has never completely ended.

Haidar Musa, 14, recently trudged into the muddy, mushrooming refugee camp here in Yida, which is growing by 1,000 people a day, turning a lush green jungle into a squalid sea of white United Nations tarps. With him were eight other boys with shredded clothes and bellies full of grass, their only sustenance for several days.

They stood barefoot in the dirt, eagerly watching an enormous vat of beans come to a boil, ready for a real meal and a new home: a crushed cardboard box to sleep on, in a rat-infested hut.

“We don’t talk about our parents anymore,” Haidar said, fumbling with the broken buttons of a donated shirt. “Even if we go back, we won’t find anybody.”

John Prendergast, co-founder of the [Enough Project](#), which fights to end genocide and crimes against humanity, worked closely with the Lost Boys 20 years ago. “Those survivors seemed to have a one-time story, never to be repeated,” he said. “But here we are again.”

Sudan, perhaps more than any other country in this region, seems to have a destructive capacity to sink back to the worst days of its past.

So many other African nations have plunged into civil war but eventually pulled themselves out. Even [bullet-riddled Somalia is finally shaking off chaos](#). But the Sudanese have essentially been at war with themselves for 56 years, with few respites. Today, this war grinds on in many of the same old places, in many of the same old ways.

A hallmark of the Sudanese government's counterinsurgency strategy is an unsparing assault on civilians, unleashed in the south in the 1980s, the Nuba Mountains in the 1990s and Darfur in the early 2000s.

Now, it is the Nuba Mountains again, where bombing by the Sudanese air force has forced entire villages to retreat to mountaintop caves, leaving fields unplowed, markets empty and people on the brink of starvation.

The bloodshed in Nuba is directed by some of the same officials responsible for previous massacres, like President Omar Hassan al-Bashir, in power since 1989, and Ahmed Haroun, governor of the state that encompasses the Nuba Mountains. Both [are wanted by the International Criminal Court](#) on charges of crimes against humanity for the bloodshed in Darfur, and Mr. Bashir has also been charged with genocide.

The current offensive seems to be putting Nuban children square in the cross hairs, and often there is nowhere to run.

A caretaker in the Yida camp said 14 boys trying to get here were gunned down at a Sudanese Army checkpoint. Bomb shrapnel has sliced apart countless others. Disease is sweeping the countryside, and many infants who make it to Yida on their mothers' backs are so skinny and sick that they are immediately treated in a field hospital with feeding tubes up their noses.

Since even before independence in 1956, Sudan has been dogged by center-periphery tensions often expressed in exploding shells. Just as the central government has a tradition of brutality, minority groups in the hinterland have a tradition of heavily armed insurrection.

Today, tens of thousands of Nuban soldiers, equipped with artillery, rockets and tanks, are refusing to disarm until the government falls in Khartoum, Sudan's capital, saying that they have been marginalized and oppressed, partly because many Nubans are non-Arab and Christian, while the Khartoum government is dominated by Arab Muslims.

The [newly independent nation of South Sudan](#), which split off from Sudan last year, is suspected of funneling weapons to the Nuban rebels, who operate just north of the border and fought alongside the southern Sudanese for years. Sudan and South

Sudan have nearly gone to war in recent months, after hitting an impasse over how to share oil profits and demarcate the border.

The economies of both countries are reeling, with riots breaking out across Sudan this past week, testing Mr. Bashir's grip on power and encouraging the Nuban rebels to fight on. No one sees this war letting up anytime soon.

In Yida, about 20 miles south of the border with Sudan, daybreak is heralded by the crack of axes splitting wood. Trees are being chopped down. Roads are being cleared. The camp is becoming permanent.

United Nations officials are desperate to stop this, saying the camp is too close to a military zone, the disputed border. Yida itself has been bombed. Camp officials are refusing to build schools or hand out seeds, telling the approximately 60,000 refugees to move south. But the refugees are not budging, saying the soil is bad farther south.

"Our position is not ambiguous," said Teresa Ongaro of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "We have serious safety concerns about the refugees staying in Yida."

The camp seems to be doubling as a rebel base. Recently, not far from where Haidar and the other boys live, Nuban rebels carrying machine guns loaded up a truck with barrels of fuel and then covered their cargo with a white United Nations tarp.

The Nubans are a paradox. They are celebrated for their old-school ways, like scarification and heroic wrestling, yet at the same time yearn for a modern education. Many children said their parents sent them away because most schools had closed in the Nuba Mountains when the bombing started. The hope was that they could learn in Yida.

Other children said they were separated from their families during the innumerable ground attacks and shelling sprees of the past year.

Often the packs of children, some as young as 7, were led by a teacher or rebel fighter through the stony Nuba hills to Yida, a hellish journey that usually takes about 10 days on foot.

Haidar's hut, number 60 in the children's camp, is shared with three other boys. None have a mosquito net, though malaria is rampant and often deadly.

One of his hutmates, Jazooli, has no idea where his parents are.

Another, Mohamed, said his mother and father abandoned him.

Haidar was a slave, having been kidnapped by Arab horsemen when he was 6, along with his brother, and pressed into bondage herding goats. Slavery was an acute problem during the north-south civil war and seems to be on the rise again. The kidnapers recently shot Haidar's brother, he said. Haidar fled, finding other boys along the way and essentially giving up on his parents.

"I don't remember what my parents look like," he whispered.

The volunteer camp leaders are exasperated. They are trying to keep the camp clean, ordering the kids to sweep the ground with twigs and scour the pots with sand.

"But unless the war ends, it's going to be very hard," said Ahmed Mamoun, a caretaker. "I don't see how these children will find their parents."

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/01/world/africa/from-sudan-a-new-wave-of-lost-boys.html?pagewanted=all>