

June 12, 2017



**S. SUDAN** - When violence erupted in Juba in December 2013, it spread quickly to only three of the ten states that then existed in South Sudan: Upper Nile, Unity State and Jonglei State. The fighting was intense and a town such as Malakal, in Upper Nile State, was successively under opposition and government troops at least a dozen times. It very quickly became a very 'dirty' war with frequent assaults on civilians including children, old people and even hospital patients. The number of reported cases of rape is now in the thousands. In fact, it was reported that as the civil war progressed, men and boys were recruited on the basis that 'we cannot pay you but you can loot and rape all you like'. These new recruits were not trained soldiers but were given guns and, effectively, a license to do whatever they liked against the opposition – and non-combatants. For the next couple of years, the conflict was largely limited to three states. But as money was diverted to military expenditure, the economy began to disintegrate, the South Sudanese Pound devalued dramatically against the dollar, the prices of basic commodities soared and, increasingly, hunger became a reality. At the same time, the armies of both sides had a growing number of non-professional, untrained soldiers leading to a breakdown of discipline and control. People now live in fear of their 'own' soldiers, no matter be they government or opposition. The armies have become more fragmented and often seem to act more as localized militias than centrally controlled forces. Not even the President can proclaim a ceasefire and be confident it will be observed. Peace agreements seem to have little impact. Law and order generally has declined significantly. Over the past two years, once peaceful areas such as Wau, Yei, Yambio and Riimenze have been sucked into the conflict. Like a violent cancer, the disintegration has spread. In Wau there are still many internally displaced persons, too scared to return to their own homes, clustered for safety around the Churches and near the UN base. A recent UN humanitarian bulletin described the situation in Yei: The nine Catholic Church parishes in Yei are now reduced to only one. As I heard the long-serving pastor, Bishop Erkolano, remark: 'What took 31 years to develop has been destroyed in eighteen months.' Several missionary congregations have been forced to leave Yei diocese. I know the anguish our Solidarity members felt when we were forced to leave Malakal where soldiers now occupy the teacher training college we established. It was in Malakal where I first arrived in 2009. I had accepted what I thought was a challenge - to move from Australia to South Sudan. It seemed also to be an opportunity to walk with the people of the newest nation on earth as they endeavoured to recover from many years of war. The mission was to be a new

way for religious from many different congregations and nationalities to respond collaboratively to need under the banner, 'Solidarity with South Sudan'. At that time, the difficulties we faced seemed significant, but there was a buoyant optimism in the country, a sense of stability and security and the hope of prosperity in the not too distant future. My role was to lead the educational endeavour - training primary school teachers for a country where less than half the children ever attended school. Thanks to a great team effort, our initiatives developed and progressed well and we were here to witness the enthusiasm with which independence was embraced in 2011. For the next couple of years, the people remained confident and hopeful - although some of the expected benefits of independence failed to materialise and infrastructure was obviously being neglected. Now I look back at those years as a time when we were following Christ in his public life, reaching out to the poor and needy, helping children receive better tuition, and ensuring better health and pastoral care of the people. We were missionaries of hope. In 2013, the Solidarity Board decided to move the position of Executive Director to South Sudan and I was invited to accept a wider responsibility for the whole organisation. Two weeks before I moved into this new role, the country imploded into civil war. We are still missionaries of hope but I had no idea we would soon be finding our motivation more from the suffering Christ than from Christ the teacher and healer. Initially, we felt the effect only in Malakal where our teacher training college happened to be in one of the areas of most violent conflict. For the next two years, our communities in Juba, Wau, Riimenze and Yambio, were relatively unaffected by the continuing conflict. But now, four years on, the whole country has been sucked into the widening violence, the disintegrating economy, declining law and order, a much lower standard of living and a future where hope and optimism have given way to uncertainty and insecurity. Our early Solidarity members did not expect, or choose, to come into this situation that seems so dangerous; but here we are and the question Jesus asked of Peter, now rings in our ears, 'Could you not watch one hour with me?' As Bishop Erkolano remarked at our recent Solidarity board meeting, 'If the missionaries leave, the people are more fearful.' We stay because we feel called even more strongly to be missionaries of hope. Most teacher training colleges and health training Institutes have shut down as violence once again engulfs this land. But our two Colleges, each with over 110 in residence, continue, with students from many different tribes living and training together to be teachers, nurses or midwives. Our agriculture programmes help to provide the food required. Even more importantly, our students are learning to live in peace with their neighbours from other tribes. We are preparing leaders of the next generation, promoters of peace and the promise there can be a resurrection - if only we stay with them in this critical time. Life here for us is surprisingly normal provided we accept the limited social and recreational opportunities and do not take unnecessary risks. It may not be totally safe but we are much safer than these poor people, the very poor who ask us to watch, to accompany, to seek with them a better South Sudan. The words of the proverb make resounding sense: 'A ship in the harbour is safe, but that is not what ships are for.' The seas may be a bit rough at present but our Solidarity ship is still making great headway. We expatriates could, if we wished, sail away - except that South Sudan is land-locked! We could fly, however, and we could flee but here we are with the poor, the hungry, the frightened. I have no doubt that it is better for these people that we choose to be here - and maybe even better for us. - Br Bill