

My memories of Southern Sudan – when killing becomes methodology (3- 4)

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June 13, 2012 - We were now in South Sudan in the early morning of 24 July 1997. At Juba airport big trucks were waiting for us and we boarded them and left for Juba. I think they deliberately decided to make the trucks pass through the town centre, to send a message to John Garang [the late leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM)]. Juba is a beautiful city despite its simplicity; its land is covered in green and surrounded by mango, orange and palm trees. There are only a few modern buildings, including Juba University, the old military headquarters and home of the commander-in-chief, and some government buildings. The rest of the houses are huts made of mud with straw roofs, but they are well organized and beautiful. There is also a big market in the city which I'm convinced could be the largest market in Sudan, named "Konj Konj" market, I will tell you about it later.

The airport is located in the northwest of the city in an elevated area. Our convoy passed through the heart of city towards the east. We came out of Juba, crossed a bridge and then headed south. The more we advanced, the more beautiful the scenery became; we were surrounded by all types of fruit trees, mango, guava, banana, orange, and many others, and could also see various cattle herds grazing peacefully.

We got to Rajaf, a small town inhabited by only a few hundred people. Our convoy was chased by some excited, innocent children; little did they know that we had come for death and destruction. The elderly sat along the roadside and their eyes were filled with anger mixed with bewilderment, as if they are wondering how long this war could go on. The famous Rajaf mountain is located on the east side of the town, covered in greenery from top to bottom, clouds moving across its summit. We left the town behind us, and the trucks started to climb a winding mountain road until we reached an area called the "Lahout", where we had our first shock, we could smell death.

The Smell of Death

The Lahout was originally a huge Catholic cathedral; it was built during the British colonial period and was also used as a school to teach Christian theology. There are three large wards and small barracks attached to the church which were used in the past as a residential compound. We were more than a thousand students and were placed in just two wards, the third one was without a roof and had clear signs of bombing, but they used it anyway as a kitchen.

The church is in an elevated area, an ideal location to protect the cities of Juba and Rajaf. The first thing we encountered was the stench that permeated the place and we put our hands over our noses. The ward's walls were covered in blood, with blood also spattered on the floor as if it was a slaughterhouse. We asked about the story behind the smell and the blood, and when we were told the tale of horror by some soldiers, our bodies started shaking in fear.

A few weeks earlier a small force from the SPLM approached the place in three or four small trucks, cheering and chanting "God is Great" as a trick. At the time there were more than three hundred people from the Al Dababien group and they responded naively by cheering and greeting them, in complete disregard to the army instructions. Then the SPLM opened fire on them – only fifty people survived the massacre, this was the secret of the blood and the smell.

The Lahout camp is surrounded by dense forest. There is a huge reservoir for drinking water that is brought by tankers from the Nile every two days, and each student had a small pot with a long rope, like a bucket, to draw water from it. The toilet was a hole to a depth of a meter or a meter-and-a-half covered with tree branches. You had to sit carefully or otherwise you could fall inside, and it was surrounded by a thinly thatched wall which did not provide any privacy. Sleeping was a big problem, you had to secure a place for yourself early on because the ward's capacity was not sufficient for all the conscripts.

The feeling of horror was overwhelming, no one was chatting and you could only hear whispers. Some started to hallucinate and scream as they were removed quickly by soldiers. We were now in the heart of hell, against our will and we had to face it.

My first duty in a patrol

My group was part of a regiment number one in the camp and it was our turn to guard the place, so in my first task I was joined by my friend Abu Huraira. Each group of eight people stood at a distance of twenty meters from each other and took

turns in guarding their locations through the night. On my first day of duty we were eight, including another friend from Dongola, Abdul Bagi, who we nicknamed "Buga". He was so scared that we could see the horror in his eyes and he infected us with his fear.

My turn to stand guard was for two hours from 1 a.m. to 3 a.m., through these two hours you were alone in the rain surrounded by the complete darkness of the forest. You faced a strange stillness, every sound seemed to me that an army was coming, every tree movement looked like the movement of people. Sometimes I imagined a man coming towards me, I couldn't take it anymore. So I thought of an idea, a mean and selfish idea, but at the time you become stripped of everything, even your compassionate feelings. I went after only half an hour to my friend Abu Huraira, as it was his turn to guard the place. I told him that I had fast-forwarded the clock to 3 a.m. and that he should do the same and wake the man after him. It was Buga's turn, Abu Huraira he did not even last a few minutes before he woke up Buga, the poor guy stood there for hours with the morning yet to come.

When Buga looked at the clock it said seven, but the morning had not come, as if the universe had stopped. The time of course, was only 3 a.m., and when the clock indicated eight o'clock it was still dark and no one was moving in the camp. Buga slept while he was standing. Then suddenly we heard the sound of shooting and everyone in the camp was firing in the direction of the dark forest. Some army officers came out and ordered us to enter the trenches and shoot. More than half an hour passed as we filled the place with a fiery glow. However, the military officers realized that there was no response to our firing and they ordered us to stop; and then they investigated who had fired his gun!

It turned out that our friend Buga, while he was sleeping standing up, suddenly woke up to the sound of a tree rustling and he imagined that the tree was a person heading towards him, so he fired his gun. Of course our cheating was then discovered and we were penalized by having to guard the camp for two consecutive days.

Al Dababein (those who attack tanks)

Some of you may recall the old days when expatriates would send recorded messages from themselves and their colleagues and everyone would sit around to listen to the tape. Al Dababein are just like an evil version of the expatriate's tape, with a message of delusion and death. Everything has been wiped from their brains and they are programmed to die. Now they sit with you as if they were the Prophet's companions and tell you about the filth of life, as if it is a garbage bin. And they tell you about heaven, paradise and the virgin fairies or "Hur", and speak with pride about how they will each have 72 beautiful girls.

I suspect the Al Dababein are suffering from severe sexual frustration. They tell you about death as if it is a tourist trip to Sharm el Sheik in Egypt, or to Malaysia.

When they talk about the opposition men and leaders such as Al-Sadiq al-Mahdi and Mohammed Osman al-Mirghani, you could flick your hand around to get rid of the flies on your face before you released that he was actually talking about human beings and not flies. For them, John Garang is the accursed Satan and when his name is mentioned, you must curse him three times or you are an infidel, an atheist, a Jew and nothing less than an agent or traitor. Frankly, I have sympathy for these young men as they are desperately in need of psychiatric help, because they do not make sense as normal human beings.

The problem, however, is not with these people. When the war intensified and many cities surrendered and were captured by the SPLM, the Government felt that there was some weakness in the resolve of the young people. So they came up with a very bizarre idea that was never practiced before in the wars of Sudan - the suicide mission. Although suicide is not referred to in the Quran, it is indeed forbidden in the Traditions (Hadith in Arabic) [which are the collected sayings and doings attributed to the Prophet]. But the Sudan government, in desperation, recruited some old men to preach to young people about virgins and they described the Houris as the most beautiful young women, full-breasted, with silk-like lips and their hair so long that it reaches their thighs. Hearing this, some of them went into a coma and wished they could wake up in heaven. That is how the government produced this group who are ready to carry bombs and explosives and attack tanks. The first champion of this idea was a student from the University of Khartoum, named Ali Abdel Fattah [died on 21 March 1997 in battle named "40 mile" south of Juba]. Of course, he is forgotten now, but at the time he was a symbol of heroism and his image was never out of the TV or the press; they talked about him and his tales of heroism as if he was William Wallace, the liberator of Scotland.

Of course, this idea of suicide attacks was not based on any military tactic of modern warfare. It's a random process that does not fall under the control of Sudan army military officers, to the extent that the Sudanese army expressed their frustration with these useless tactics which usually lead to the exposure of the army's position by those who sought death. This caused defeats and a considerable increase in the number of casualties in battle. And of course many bright young men lost their lives as a result of this evil.

Some say that the idea of suicide missions was advocated by Dr Al Turabi [the leader of Islamic Movement at the time]. But the truth is that a foreign terrorist figure named Belhadj who was jailed by the Americans later on, was in Sudan with Osama bin Laden in the 1990s and many sources say that he was the key person behind this kind of brainwashing. Of course Al Turabi could forge an alliance with the devil in order to achieve his goals, he is cunning and capable of smiling in your face serenely as he's stabbing you in the back, but he is not fanatical about ordering young people to die - that was not his

strategy.

But of course Belhadj, who brainwashed these young Sudanese men to die, emulating the experience of the Afghans against the Soviets, did not die for the virgins that he talks about. Instead, he enjoyed the money that Bin Laden spent on him and his many wives in Khartoum, and Bin Laden himself was in Khartoum living in a luxurious villa and enjoying among other things hunting wild animals. Al Turabi also did not send his son to catch up with the voluptuous virgins, but instead he enjoyed a lavish earthly lifestyle at his father's palace in Al Manshia in Khartoum, while trading in foreign currencies with other sons of the elites and ministers in Khartoum.

Only the poor who do not have someone to protect them were sent to die in the south, or as the Egyptian saying goes: "he without a back will be hit on the stomach," i.e. those without contacts in high places will suffer the most. The sacrifices made by these unfortunate people were designed so that the ruling elites in Khartoum could stay in power and continue enjoying what little wealth the poor nation has.

Death by Firing squad

The Lahout camp was not a front-line position in the confrontation with the SPLM, but was basically a makeshift camp where they were distributing troops to the war zones. On the other hand, it's a strategic location and is the first line of defense for the cities of Rajaf and Juba.

We stayed for two weeks in the Lahout camp and then the same trucks that brought us from the airport to the camp arrived. The students panicked as we thought it meant a journey to the war zone. In 1997 the SPLM/A captured many Sudanese army garrisons from Yei to Tonj towns and took thousands of prisoners of war. The government losses were huge and of course we were the scapegoats to stop the advance of the SPLM, the students should die for the government to stay in power. But it was not to be, at least on that day.

They asked us to board the trucks and we reluctantly got on them, but they moved towards Juba. Then we went through Juba city center and approached the northwest side of the city where the airport is located. The students started cheering, thinking that it was a trip to the delights of Khartoum. But the trucks passed the airport to the west, where there was a huge rally of people and military personnel. We thought that there must be a football or wrestling match to entertain us. When we approached, there was a huge empty piece of land which looked like a training ground and is the only flat area in the city of Juba, surrounded by hills on its west side. The arena was empty except for a crowd on the east side being controlled by some soldiers.

We got off the trucks and were ordered to join the spectators, no one told us what was happening! We did not wait long before two vehicles came. In the first one there were four people with their hands tied up and surrounded by soldiers on all sides. The second vehicle was carrying heavily armed soldiers with automatic rifles. It was clear that the four people were exhausted, none of them could walk. The soldiers dragged them along the ground and pushed them against the rocks.

Of the four wearing Sudan army uniforms, the highest ranked among them was a brigadier general in the Sudanese army, an overweight northern Sudanese man with a large sagging belly, puffy face and drooping cheeks. The other three were soldiers of various ranks, a staff sergeant from north Sudan and two lance corporals from south Sudan.

Ten soldiers lined up and faced the four. Then another vehicle arrived carrying the commander of the army in Juba, Lieutenant General Adam Hamid Musa, who later became the Governor of Kassala state [he was also the governor of South Darfur at the height of the war in Darfur from 2003 to mid-2004]. An officer, also a brigadier general, saluted the lieutenant general and ordered the ten soldiers to be ready. They aimed their machine guns - up to that moment I thought it was a military training drill or display of some sort.

But with another shout from the brigadier the thunder of gunfire could be heard. I bent down and covered my ears, then when I looked I was appalled by what I saw; the bodies lay crumpled on the ground in a pool of blood. I thought I was dreaming! I looked again and again and the scene was the same. Some people in the crowd cheered and shouted "God is great". Children, women, young men and old, some were silent, others were indifferent, as if those who had been killed were not human, or maybe they were used to this scene of public execution. When we were told to board the trucks the rumour had spread among the students, the reason for the public execution was that these soldiers were discovered to be agents of the SPLM.

The town of Torit, located some 140 kilometers east of Juba, is considered the most strategic town in the south-east area of Equatoria, and it's surrounded by a series of mountains, like an island in the middle of the ocean. The town was the last card in the hands of the government because if it was captured by the rebels, Juba would be under threat. Moreover, Torit town is difficult to penetrate from the ground or by air. The town had been captured by the SPLM/A in a few hours, but the government used Antonov aircraft and bombed indiscriminately in retaliation. They did not discriminate between the army or SPLM/A soldiers, and the general population, according to one soldier. As a result the town was soaked in a sea of blood. Those who were shot dead by the firing squad in Juba had allegedly provided some information that had helped the SPLM/A to

capture the town.

Maybe execution in cases of treachery is one of the rules of any army in the world, but the brutality of that public execution in front of children and women was incomprehensible. I am sure that these soldiers who had obviously been severely tortured, did not have a fair trial. But the army thought that this was the only way to teach a lesson to the soldiers and citizens about the price of treason.

I could not sleep that night; whenever I tried to sleep the execution scene haunted me, the scene of blood. One image I cannot forget was of the children's eyes, some were scared and others were indifferent. I think that the indifference which I saw in the eyes of some of these children was the biggest tragedy, another brutality committed by a foolish commander. You should not display such violence to children in movies, let alone in real life. But maybe the children of war see far crueller scenes than these. No, I did not sleep that night and the image haunted me for many months. Of course, Lieutenant General Adam Hamid Musa went home and had a deep sleep after he had publicly killed four people. His soul was oblivious to the fact that these children who attended his show had lost their innocence forever and the women had lost their sense of security.

The psychological scar I suffered in witnessing these things, remains with me to this day.

To be continued,

Part (1) <http://www.sudantribune.com/My-memories-of-Southern-Sudan-when,42729>

Part (2) <http://www.sudantribune.com/My-memories-of-Southern-Sudan-when,42794>