

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

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July 12, 2012 - If you have seen the great filmmaker Steven Spielberg's film "E.T." about an extraterrestrial character, the little lost alien, you can imagine what I am telling you next. After one month in Lahout camp we all started to look like the alien in "E.T.". We would look at each other and laugh, as we literally looked like malnourished children with small skeletal bodies and big heads. During that time we used to eat something called Koja which consisted of flour made from black grain sorghum durra. They would put the durra flour in a pot of water on the fire and stir it up with a stick until it became a very thick porridge, known in Sudan as Aseeda. In another pot was our stew whose main components were a bit of dried okra and water and nothing else. Then we would take our plates and be given a tiny portion of Aseeda and a very small serving of the stew. We only had two meals a day, one in the morning and the other just before sunset. With such a diet, after few days we all suffered from constipation and become severely malnourished.

In addition to all this we suffered from anachronistic diseases that the world has mostly forgotten about, such as bilharzias, dysentery and other diseases that have strange names in the local dialect. The worst was malaria, and God forbid that you caught malaria in the south where it has a different taste and color. The symptoms were at first a complete paralysis of the limbs so that your body movement would be severely limited. When our friend Yahya had malaria we did not know for over a month whether he was dead or alive. We used to examine his chest to see if he was still breathing, and open his mouth just like a little bird and pour water into it because he had not eaten anything but fluid for more than a month. Then he started to move, we did not believe it ourselves that he was still alive and we cried a lot with joy and mixed emotions. To this day, whenever I meet him I cannot believe that he is alive.

At one stage I fell seriously ill, to the point that I was not able to walk. I had two of the dirtiest diseases at the same time, malaria and dysentery. I went to the clinic where I found our colleague, the joker Al Sunni, and I asked about the doctor. He laughed and said that he was the doctor! I told him he must be joking as usual, but he swore that he was the doctor in charge of the clinic. When he saw my dismay, he explained that the camp commander had asked if anyone had knowledge of nursing. Al Sunni said he had done a first aid course with the Red Crescent, so he was immediately appointed as the doctor. He said that something is better than nothing. He wanted to inject me with an anti-malaria dose, but I refused so he gave me a tablet; the next day my condition became worse so I decided to go to Juba.

Every morning a truck came to the camp from Juba to transport patients to the army hospital in Juba, but it was reserved only for patients who had lost hope in their lives already. In the sense that if you were waiting for your last breath, then they would send you to the army medical hospital. I went to Juba with my friend Abuhurria. We arrived there after many hours in an old truck. The driver drove as if he was carrying animal stock, not human beings and sick ones at that. Every part of our bodies was in pain. When I entered the gate of the hospital, all my pain and weakness had gone as the sight of the hospital was frightening, it looked like a slaughterhouse. I told my friend that we should return to the camp, where there is more mercy than here. The trucks would only return in the evening so we went to a mosque and slept there for hours. Then we walked all the way to Juba Bridge and waited for the truck to take us back to the camp, which it did.

After one month in the camp we noticed something strange one morning. About ten trucks arrived and we were ordered to form queues. An officer then ordered two groups to fetch their belongings from the wards, they boarded the trucks and left.

After they left, as we were still standing there, the officer in charge presented to us someone with an ugly face and huge belly, wearing a safari suit, a uniform that government officials wear. He told us that this person was a living martyr named Abu Jafar! If the martyrs look like that person, even the dead would not accept martyrdom. This man's appearance and shape clearly inform you that he is fraudulent and a charlatan.

However, the living martyr started to chant and praise God, and then he danced and sang the so-called "jihad songs" of that time. And then he announced to us that our colleagues were on their way to paradise. We later realized that this fraudulent preacher, who used to preach Jihad to young people, had helped to smuggle his own son from a camp in Khartoum, just one day before our departure to south Sudan.

Simply, the government's plan was based on a historical argument that if you want to test the strength of any man, put him in a trap. The plan was to put us on the battlefield so that we could not think of anything else except that we survive. In order to survive you must kill your opponent and by killing your opponent then the government will win, and if you are dead that is

not important, they are not losing anything, they will bring others.

The world condemns up to this moment what Hitler did to the Jews during World War II, but if the world knew what has been done by the regime in Sudan, they might say Hitler was merciful and does not deserve all these attacks. The holocaust carried out by the Sudanese government officials who walk among us today and still control our destiny, is comparable to the one committed by the Nazis, if not worse.

I forgot to tell you how I escaped this massacre as my group remained in the camp. As I told you before, the camp was surrounded by dense forest. They had warned us about the forest but we still entered it in groups and through the narrow lanes to get to some sites of stagnant water found there due to the rains. We wanted to wash our clothes because they were full of clothing lice and smelled badly. Of course, our generation is familiar with head lice, but we thought of clothing lice as something of the past, but in the South it was a daily reality. But that lice sometimes became a source of fun for us and we enjoyed tracking them down inside our clothes and getting rid of them.

The day our colleagues left the camp was a very sad day for us; some cried because of their departure and others because of the fate waiting for them. One day we thought of an idea that if they called us to go to war we would hide in the forest. Some of us thought it would be better to be eaten by a lion, at least you would find a grave inside a lion's stomach.

The only one who was eager to go to war was our friend Mohamed Ahmed Hassan. I used to call Mohamed the "holy man" as he lived like a true Sufi. Life for him was not worth living and he was exploited from young age by Al Dababien who told him that paradise was full of pretty girls. As I knew Mohamed very well, I was sure that the only part that interested him in paradise was the promise of girls. I used to argue with him and tell him you are going to commit suicide and you are not going to paradise, but he was not listening. Meanwhile, we started to disappear every day into the forest as the transportation of young people was ongoing from the camps to the frontline. Our commanding officer, a lieutenant, was somehow very lenient with us and he did not report our planned disappearances to the higher authority in the camp.

One day, after the transportation of a group of students to the frontline, we returned to the camp and found that our friend Mohamed Ahmed was not there. We asked our commanding officer who told us that he had gone to an area called Mile 38. Of course, he did not think about the possibility of him returning alive. The Mile 38 area was a pit-hole of death, where the majority of the army and the Al Dababien died. It has been known as the first area where the Al Dababien threw themselves in sacrifice, with bombs, in attacks against tanks. Despite these sacrifices the SPLM did not stop and the government knew that the fall of that area meant that the South would be lost.

Discovering the Truth

There is a fact not many people know about, that the government already has set up a mass killing field for the students in the south. Some may not believe this information but the fact is that more than 600 students who were with us have lost their lives, sometimes a whole squadron in a collective death [in total according to the government official records there are 24,000 "martyrs" who have died in South Sudan]. They were thrown into the blazing furnace of war without any knowledge or proper training. The students acted as human shields for the army and they were the first to face the enemy. And some who have returned wounded have recounted to us some of these tragedies which will turn you into a gray man. This is the truth.

Of course the government hides many of the names of those who died, to the extent that some families wait at Khartoum airport for their children who were killed months ago but they still don't know about it. Meanwhile, the government celebrates what they call "the wedding of the martyr", Eris El shaheed, in Arabic [where the family receives guests who offer congratulations rather than condolences for their son's martyrdom, and the ceremony is designed to symbolize the martyr's wedding in paradise with 72 virgins. The whole idea is now known to be based on a false interpretation of Islamic teaching].

The government provides [exaggerated or fictional] accounts of his sacrifice in addition to some sacks of sugar and the promise of a kiosk in the market, this is a fact.

But with the increasing numbers of the dead there were many instances of "the wedding of the martyr". The opposition parties which were active at the time in Cairo exposed the massacre of students in the South. Of course the government did not fear us, but they did fear for their image worldwide which at the time was already bad, so they stopped sending students to the South. We were about 800 students at the time in the camp and our turn to be deployed was near, then the government suspended student deployment to the war zones. We had mixed emotions, joy but also sadness because of the loss of our colleagues.

More Tragedies

One day the commanding officer gave me permission to go to Juba. He said that my friend Mohamed Ahmed "the holy man" had been brought to Juba hospital - "So it is better for you to go and see him," he said. I couldn't wait for the camp transport, so I walked to Al Rajaf and took a vehicle from there to Juba. I arrived at the military hospital, the stench was horrible when I entered and I covered my nose with my hand. The smell was worse than that coming from a decomposed body in the open.

This smell alone was enough to kill a healthy man let alone a sick one. Piles of dirt were everywhere and patients urinated

and defecated in the hospital yard. I was confused because there was no reception desk to ask about the person I was looking for, and no one to tell you, you had to search yourself. I expected to find that my friend Mohamed had lost some body parts, so I went first to the injuries section but I failed to locate him. During my confusion I found an elderly woman wearing an army uniform and it was clear that she worked as a nurse. I asked her gently about my friend and described him for her, she told me to go the Department of Internal Medicine.

I really praised God; his sickness might be easier for me to bear seeing than if he'd lost a foot or hand. I started to look in the wards one after the other. I finished my search of one ward and while I was heading to the other I saw someone with pale skin sitting cross-legged by the window. This person looked like my friend Mohamed, but he also appeared different. He looked like a ghost of Mohamed, a person with sunken eyes, screaming and laughing hysterically and acting like a monkey. When I stood in front of him I was still in doubt and he did not recognize me, as if he was in another world. I called his name many times until he looked at me. I pulled him from the window to the bed and he followed me like a robot, not a human being.

I cried very loudly because I thought then that he would not live, and that if he lived he would not be the same. The strange confusion in his eyes told me that he saw things that do not cross normal human imagination. I tried to talk to him but he was not responding. I tried to solicit help from somebody, but I could only see patients and hear their groaning. They were being left without care to just die or be miraculously saved by God. I stayed with him for two hours and I heard him screaming, crying, laughing and saying strange things and I had nothing to support him with but tears. I left just before dark and when I got to the Lahout camp I found my friends waiting for the news. I told them that he was alive, but God knows for how long. On the second day that I went I tried to ask some medical officers at the military hospital to transfer him to Khartoum, but they did nothing.

When I came back from the hospital to the camp I found my friends crying, they told me that one of our colleagues named Abdel Gadir from West Sudan had died suddenly. Our friend was a frail-bodied young man, but he was very funny and a great joker. He was the only one who filled our lives with endless tricks and funny antics. I was very surprised because I went out in the morning and left him filling the camp with his loud laughter. Now he is dead. Was he killed? But my friends explained to me that he was suffering from a fever for a few days which he resisted until he fell unconscious that afternoon. Before they could reach the hospital he died. We felt sad and cried for his loss for days, but then we started to forget because such things had become the norm, every day we lost someone dear to us. Meanwhile, after one month at the military hospital Mohamed recovered from his illness and returned to us in the camp.

The news of students mass killing spreads and the opposition parties voiced their concern loudly. Even John Garang, in his interviews with the media around the world told how the government was taking young students and using them as human shields [and families of the students also staged many protests in 1997 against the recruitment policy]. To make matters worse for the government, a group of recruits who did not travel with us to the South were threatened with not being allowed to attend university. When they returned, they were brought together in the camp area east of Khartoum named Al Ailfoon.

One day they decided to take them to the south and apparently they knew what to expect. The students were in fear because news of what had happened to us had reached them. They decided to escape [2 April 1998], their number was close to five hundred. They rebelled but the army trapped them inside the camp so they threw themselves into the River Nile. More than a hundred were shot by bullets and a similar number were drowned - it was known as the Al Ailfoon massacre of conscripts.

This incident was the last nail in the coffin of the government. Media reports increased the pressure on the government so they decided to recall students from the combat zones, at least those who remained alive. [On 21 April 1998, the government decided to remove all student recruits from the war front. Kamal Hassan Ali, the spokesman for national service coordination said, "All students doing their national service in the southern states will be returned to the northern states."]

Several days after that they decided to relocate us from Lahout camp; we traveled by trucks to Juba and then we headed again in the direction of the south, but this time from the west. We walked until we came out of the city and went down to a huge camp belonging to the artillery division in the vicinity of Mount Sugar, a mountain range surrounding Juba on the southwest side.

In the camp in Juba the high school results were out. These results, which will take you to the university, were a great event with people usually waiting enthusiastically, and it is a wonderful moment we used to enjoy with our families. But in this year we were deprived of such joy because they linked the results to the national service. The exam itself was a sham. We took it at Juba University and we were allowed to open books and pass information to each other, so our final results were very high - most people attained over 80% and many over 90%. The Minister of Education tried to exploit that and he announced at a TV press conference that the world should learn from Sudan where students fight and still pass their exams with good results. Of course he is lying through his teeth.

Also, in 1998, a new constitution came into force following a referendum. The students were also used in a sham constitutional referendum where we were forced to vote "Yes" as many times as possible. Those who refused to vote "Yes", or who did not vote often, were punished by standing in the sun for hours.

Massacre at Christmas

As I write from memory there are so many things I have missed and the story is not in chronological order. But the memory of the Christmas tragedy in 1997 remains vivid. The celebration of Christmas had started in Juba and usually lasted for a few days. When the day was nearer we noticed that the army in Juba was on alert and was deployed heavily across the town. On 25 December 1997 the celebrations officially started early in the morning as all the people came out onto the streets of Juba wearing their best clothes, dancing and singing. In the night, fireworks and gunfire echoed heavily across the city. Some soldiers in Juba who were drunk started firing in the air, disregarding army instructions. We also participated in the fun and emptied some bullets. There were several incidents among the students but they were not lethal. That night passed without major incident.

On the next night when we heard the bullets we thought it was similar to the previous night. But the sound of bullets did not stop, gradually becoming stronger across the entire city and the cries of women were deafening, then we heard the sound of heavy artillery and we were ordered to get ready. We knew then it was not just a celebration but that an incident had occurred and we had strict instructions to shoot any person approaching the camp. We were standing ready throughout the night and out of terror we could not sleep. We escaped going to the frontline but now the frontline came to us in Juba, as if fate had strangled us. In the morning the intensity of the battle had subsided with the dawn and we could no longer hear anything. We were ordered to spread out within the city of Juba in groups, each group lead by officer. We could not imagine what awaited us.

The streets of Juba were full of dead bodies, old and young, men, women and children. Streams of blood covered the streets, as if we were in the heart of the Second World War. The scene was beyond our endurance, some of us were trembling and others vomiting from the sight of decomposed bodies.

So, What Happened?

In Juba, most women worked by collecting firewood from the forest surrounding the city. The women brought wood in to exchange for flour, bread and sometimes money, and the army barracks were especially dependent on them.

The SPLM came up with a very clever plan, they understood that there was some trust between the army and these women so they used them to smuggle some weapon into the city with their wood and no one noticed. The weapons were distributed to the sleeper cells inside the city, or to those who had entered the city during the celebration period without been detected.

The second night some of these cells violently attacked the army and caused heavy losses among them. The army's retaliation was random in nature with no mercy or distinguishing between young or old, man or woman. The killing was indiscriminate. Juba's straw huts were no protection against bullets and those who took refuge inside them were killed. It was a real massacre.

The army commander Adam Hamid was a brutal man who imposed collective punishment on everyone, even the army and the student recruits who were punished by standing in the sun for long hours.

After the Christmas massacre the situation became more complicated. Southerners blamed the death of their parents and sons on the army and the Northern Sudanese. The atmosphere became hostile, only our weapons prevented the people of the South from killing us. When our trucks passed in front of a group of southern women, young and old, they looked at us with anger and hate. Some used hand gestures to insult us, and sometimes ridiculed us with laughter while others used the middle-finger gesture.

For us it was difficult to establish a relationship with fellow Southerners as there was a lot of suspicion and caution, but we had managed to establish a friendship with a woman and her young daughter named Vivian. I will never forget her, she was tall, elegant and beautiful, with wide eyes and a small face, always smiling. She was working with her mother in a restaurant near the camp. Vivian become very friendly with our group, she told us that her dream was to visit the North and Khartoum. She asked about life in Khartoum and how Southerners are treated there. We tried to understand from her the feeling in the south and how we could remove their fears of us. I asked her once carefully, why do people in the south hate us? She told me everyone here had lost someone in the war, or had their share of the cruelty of this war; it is natural that they hate you. I told her that she was absolutely right.

In addition to Vivian we also struck up a close relationship with some southern students who came to this small market, where we shared with them some alcohol drinks, cigarettes and food. But Vivian was a special one, after my return from the south the artist Al Nour Al Jilani had a new song named "Vivian" [also written about a Southern Sudanese girl the singer fell in love with] - the song is beautiful, as if it was written about the Vivian that we know. Perhaps this was the only tape I've bought in my life. Vivian will remain forever in my memory as a symbol of the South.

Death and Lies

Mohamed Abdel Hamied was a young student from small area called Dar Awada in Northern State, and as he also spoke the Nubian language he became our friend. A short-statured young man with a chubby body and dark skin. He was very quiet

and rarely spoke. He was so kind-hearted that when one of us got sick he always looked after them and felt their pain, fed them and gave them drink. One morning he came to us shivering from fever.

Every morning his health condition deteriorated. I went to our commanding officer requesting to take him to hospital, but he refused and said it was just a fever. After three days he became worse and he started to hallucinate and lash out at anyone who came near him. Then the officer gave us permission to take him to the Army Medical hospital. A truck dropped us near the hospital, I carried him and sometimes dragged him until we reached the hospital. We went to see a doctor and my friend was sitting there laughing and hallucinating. The doctor called one soldier and gave him a piece of paper, and the soldier and me took my friend to another building. When we entered that place I realized then it was a ward for mentally ill people. Inside there I saw some soldiers who were naked, others screaming, and some acting as if they were in a war zone. It was a place of chaos and madness, this ward of those who had lost their sanity in an insane war.

I was so angry I started to swear and I told the soldier to stop, but he told me that this was an order from the medical doctor. I went to the doctor and asked why he had sent my friend to that ward, he was not mentally ill and just suffered from a fever. He responded to me with arrogance, "I am the doctor". I told him that I'd known my friend's condition from the beginning. He then said to me, "Soldier, attention!", and in the army that means you have to stand still in your place and not speak - and then he told me I was dismissed.

I went to back to the camp, told the commanding officer about the situation and I asked him to interfere; he promised to do something, but he didn't. I went the second day and requested to visit my friend but the guard told me that it was very dangerous to go inside that ward. I told him that I just wanted to know if my friend was OK, but he refused and I went back without finding out anything.

I repeated the attempt the next day. I refused to leave before I saw him so the soldier called a nurse who asked for my friend's name. When I told him he casually replied, "He died yesterday". Any description of my feelings after hearing that news would be a lie - I sat there for hours without even crying.

How had he died? Where had they buried him? Why didn't they notify the camp? Of course, such questions have no answers. I was in such a state of anger that I went to the doctor's office without even requesting permission. I spoke to him in an angry, loud voice, his reaction was somehow restrained this time and he told me that they would take the proper procedures to notify his family. After that shock I wandered through the streets of Juba without aim or direction, I don't know how I ended up in the camp. I told our colleagues and they cried and for the first time I thought seriously of committing suicide. I felt guilty for taking him to that hospital where they killed him in cold blood.

But more shocks were waiting for me when I went back to Khartoum. Our neighbour, who is a relative of Abdel Hamied, told me that the state government had arranged for a martyr's wedding for Abdel Hamied. They told his family that he had sacrificed his soul in the frontline fighting the enemy, he had died by the bullet and he was a hero and brave and had asked as his death wish that his family should not cry for him as he was in paradise. When I heard this fictional story about his death I cried once again, just look at the lies these people propagate on behalf of the dead! I told his relatives what had happened and told them to tell his family if they can; when I went to pay my condolences to the family I could not say a word. They killed you my brother and lied about you - God forgive me.

More Death and Lies

We spent now ten months in the South, then one day five or six trucks full of young people of various ages arrived at the training camp. They appeared to be forcefully recruited through army round-ups, or what was known as "kasha", that targets children working in markets and street children. They had horror and fear in their eyes, just like us on the first day when we landed in the South. When they arrived in the South they wore the same clothes they were seized in. The tragedy of these people was great and we were much better off than them. Perhaps because we were students there were people who put pressure on the government on our behalf, but this group goes to the South and never returns and no one knows anything about their fate.

One day, while we were preparing food with my friend, we were discussing something loudly in the Nubian language. A member from the kasha group stood in front of our tent and looked at us with amazement. We told him to come over and asked him why he was listening to us. He told us he was brought up in Karma [the author's home town] and his father used to work for our uncle as a brick maker. Originally from Nuba Mountain, his name was Sabah and he had a big body. He told us he worked for a while in farming, then he came to Khartoum looking for jobs but he was captured by the army. We told him that his father had worked for our uncle who died recently, he started to cry loudly. We felt pity for him and we tried to help him as much as possible. Although he was older than us by ten years he was very courteous and polite with us.

What happened to Sabah's group should be regarded as a war crime. They were supposed to receive training, but they had not been trained and were transferred directly to the South. When they arrived at our camp, we were asked to help in training them, yes us, the poorly trained students, so they could be sent to the frontline. After ten or eleven days the fighting intensified on several fronts with the government desperate to stop the advancement of the SPLA. They requested that

Sabah's group be sent the frontline. Two days passed and we received news that the group had been slaughtered by the SPLA and very few had survived. We wished that Sabah had escaped with his life but to this day we have no idea of his fate.

This group was thrown into the middle of war to die, they were sent to be executed and the government bears the full responsibility for their blood. This was the last piece of sad news we received in the South because we were preparing to return to the North.

The Return

We left for Juba on 24 July 1997 and we were ordered to go back to the North on 27 May 1998. As we boarded the trucks and headed towards Juba airport we thought it was another trick, but my God, we were at the airport in less than three hours. Juba airport was buzzing with thousands of students. I was in the group who arrived at the airport about ten in the morning with our belongings collected in a large trunk. Some of us had saved part of the fifty pounds that we received every month and bought some gifts from the markets. I was very happy, at last I would see my family again. After two hours we arrived at Khartoum airport, it was packed with thousands of families who were eager to meet their children after a long absence. Unfortunately, many families were disappointed and their joy turned to pain, they were weeping and wailing. Hundreds of families only learnt from the students that their sons had died. The government had completely ignored them.

Meanwhile, our belongings that we had shipped from Juba were stolen and hundreds of students, including me and my friend Abuhruria, lost all their savings. The only clothing left with me was the military uniform which I was wearing, and even the little money that we had saved was stolen. They took us to a huge camp called Mus'ab ibn Amir in East Kalakla. I was tired and had lost a lot of blood because of a sudden nosebleed when I arrived at Khartoum airport. We found some students in the camp who had preceded us there and we were warned not to go to see our families until they had given us certificates that confirmed the completion of our mandatory military service. Anyone who violated these instructions would not be given the certificate. In the morning our families, including mine, came to the camp and my mother did not believe that I was still alive.

We returned from the South psychologically traumatized, malnourished and impoverished. Some returned as bodies without souls, some had changed forever. After my experience in the South I had developed an all-encompassing hatred for the regime in Khartoum. My hatred for the government following my return has increased and if you add up all the hatred in the entire universe, it is not enough, it will be a tiny part of how I feel towards this criminal regime which does not observe any humanitarian, ethical or religious standards. They will do anything just to save themselves and stay in power.

Finally, this was not a memoir, as I have not achieved enough importance in life to write my own recollections. Only those who have had some impact in life could justifiably write their memoir. But this was just part of a suffering that I wanted to share with you, to reflect on what has happened in this country. Please accept my apology for the prolonged and sometimes detailed descriptions as the events were bigger than all of us.

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