



War Zone

A personal impression of a first-time visit to Sudan with a SOMA team, written by torch-light in the middle of the night in the Adjumani refugee settlement in Uganda at the end of the trip

By William Mather. May 2003

War zone. The front line is 12 miles away. On arrival in Kajo Keji the team is startled by nearby violent explosions of heavy weapons "To test they are still working". Land mines have left rusting remains of vehicles in ditches, half buried in the rainy season's new green grass.

All stone or brick-built buildings are pockmarked, roofless and most just piles of rubble with a few jagged pieces of masonry standing in the bright sunshine. Churches have been destroyed by the government soldiers "from the north". Four stone pillars are all that is visible of the church built by the missionaries at Romoggi. The rest is overgrown.

In the dry season the wild fires come, says the bishop, but so many people have fled, there is nobody to put them out, so the fires rampage on, taking with them grass-roofed Tukuls (houses) and churches.

After almost 40 years of war all the infrastructure of the country is destroyed. A few hospitals remain but even they are targets to prevent injured soldiers being cared for and healed.

There are no tarmac roads, no electricity, no running water, no new investments, no large buildings and no tractors in the fields – in fact very few visible fields. By the roads occasional Skull and Cross-Bones signs warn of land mines. There are stories of children killed and maimed. A boy in hospital had lost three fingers playing with an army bullet. He was banging it on a stone.

There are long faces as you talk about the war, about the persecution as the Arabs overran the villages and towns, about the bravery of individuals, about the families fleeing to the bush and walking miles and miles to exile in Uganda and Kenya. Figures are hazy – two million, three million in neighbouring countries, longing to return. Or the "lost boys" some of whom have somehow ended up in the USA.

In the refugee settlements schools have sprung up. There is even a theological college in a Ugandan camp training clergy for future ministry back home. Houses have been built. Basic subsistence is just possible through farming of "gardens" and creating cottage industries. But families have been split and many have grown larger as orphaned children have become dependants.

All that remains in the country they have left is the paradox of beauty and hope. The scars of war are being overgrown; the bomb craters are disappearing, the rusting useless lorries on their sides are being pillaged for housing materials and cooking pots. Corrugated iron roofs of schools stolen by the government soldiers for their bunkers are being replaced. The countryside is beautiful and apparently unspoilt.

Inside the classrooms there are piles of rubble and in places faint wall-paintings by children obsessed with war and expressing their feelings in crude graffiti of people carrying guns or kneeling in surrender.

At the orphanage in Adjumani refugee settlement a teenager had an arm severed below the elbow. He had been found like that as a baby.

In the centre of it all is the Church, unbelievably vibrant and alive, despite the trappings of Anglican worship as practised 400 years ago. Today they face different problems. One priest said when the persecutions came, his congregation scattered. Now new churches were emerging as "preaching posts" under mango trees – and how do we help them grow?

Work is also being done to ensure good relationships with other denominational groups such as Roman Catholics and Pentecostals.

The pain of the past is excruciating. So many have been killed, or maimed or driven from home. But people are coming back. They are beginning to return and they know their own plots of land and where the church sites used to be.

The Church faces the challenge of proper surveying to ensure they have title to their land. There is the challenge of encouraging new investment in building materials, of a new home for the bishop and senior clergy, and of a truck for transporting materials for homes and agriculture. There are dilemmas such as whether to invest in a tractor or teams of oxen for ploughing. It is not just the machines themselves but how to maintain and service in a land of few spare parts.

A further dilemma for the church in the war zone is what can be begun now and what must wait.

There is a weariness over war and longing for peace. And this can only be achieved by Christians and Muslims, Black Africans and Arabs talking together and reaching some kind of agreement. The Machakos Peace Process in Kenya is working hard to achieve this. And this will only work with major international pressure, perseverance and publicity. For after so many years of war the feelings go deep and now with the discovery of oil there are other and more complicated vested interests of greed at play.

The history is littered with broken peace agreements. The Christians say they want peace, forgiveness, reconciliation and finding a compromise. They complain the Arabs in the north want no such thing and that such words do not belong to their language or teachings.

They find it hard to trust the Muslims for so often they have broken their word or treaty. In the meantime the southern Christian army – the Sudan People's Liberation Army – has pushed the Islamic government forces back. At the front line the two armies face each other in an uneasy cease-fire as the politicians talk.

The debate continues over whether there can be a "united" Sudan or whether the future is for an Islamic Arab state in the North and a Christian Black South, each entering a new phase of freedom to govern, live and worship according to their own freely elected people.

Christians are praying for forgiveness to break the terrible cycle of revenge. Even secular statesmen like the Kajo-Keji District Commissioner are saying "Love is the most important thing."

After 40 years of war there must be a better way.