

Survivors tell their stories

Over the past three years the number of people in Yei town has risen from 50,000 to 150,000. The majority are families who fled at the start of the civil war and have decided to return home. These are men, women and children who have experienced years of hardship, living in the bush or in camps for displaced people in neighbouring countries like the Congo, Uganda or Egypt. They have returned with hopes of a better future. But with elections and a referendum pending, a lasting in Southern Sudan remains uncertain.

Here some of those who survived the war years tell their stories.

Catherine Aya and her children fled Yei in 1984 taking nothing but the clothes on their backs. In the cold of the open bush, she ripped her own dress to make covers for her children. Then the soldiers stole them as the children slept. Catherine and her family spent the entire civil war hiding in the bush, strengthened by her faith. “Despite all the suffering we did not lose faith in a living God. Wherever we fled, we made a church in a shed,” she said.



Nineteen-year-old Duwuki Robert (left) was born during the civil war. His family moved from village to village and against the odds he managed to get an education. In 2004 he returned to Yei and has just finished at Nile High School. Duwuki is one of the lucky ones, and is currently a youth worker and choir leader at Yei Cathedral. But his future is anything but certain. “I hope to go to college but my parents cannot afford the fees,” he says.

He said the war years were ‘terrible.’ “Sometimes the soldiers would attack people in their homes. When you cooked food you had to walk five miles to take it to the garrison. We were always beaten. The soldiers were very rude and very harsh. If they asked you to do something and you said you were just a small boy they would beat you badly. When the aeroplanes came over you had to rush into the bush and look for somewhere to hide.”

Duwuki said his worst memory of the war was the killing of friends and family. “What can happen to Sudan?” he asked. “What will it take for us to be free? If it happens again where can we go?” But he will not lose faith. “By the power of the Lord I know that even if there is corruption, something good will happen in my life and in Sudan,” he said.

Joyce Kharmisa (right) was pregnant with her sixth child when the soldiers arrived in Yei. Her husband was taken to fight, and she fled with a baby on her back, one on her neck, and some meagre belongings on her head. When the gunfire started her older children bolted. Joyce



dropped her bundle and ran to get them. When she returned her belongings had gone, leaving her with nothing but five children and one yet unborn to care for. “In the bush we survived on wild fruit. We lit fires at night for heat and to keep the mosquitoes from the children. We slept on the grass.”

Joyce spent many years in a makeshift camp in the bush. Two of her children died due to lack of medication. The women were forced to endlessly grind maize for the soldiers. Both factions raped the women and girls. When the peace agreement was signed, Joyce returned to Yei where she was reunited with her husband after 21 years.



Alex Taban (left) thinks he might be 45, although he does look much older. He was not forced to fight because the army considered him an old man, and so he and his six children lived in poverty in the rural village of Ombassi. “The most difficult thing was health. If someone got sick there was no treatment,” he said. He recalls with horror the raids by the Government’s Antelope planes.

Although he is hoping that Sudan will remain separated, he admits life is still difficult. “It is not so good. There is no work, and while there are schools there is no proper teaching. We may have health facilities, but no trained staff,” Alex said.

Mary Gboka, 45, (pictured right) learned English in Yei before the war, but like the majority of women in the area she is now jobless. When war broke out she walked for one month and three days to reach the Congo border with her family. She remained in a Congo camp for a year, before trekking for three weeks back into the Sudanese bush. A year on and she walked to Uganda. “I had to find a way to save my children. I have five girls and the eldest was 10,” she said. In Uganda the UN sent the girls to school, and two remain there finishing their education. Mary is now an active member of Yei MU.



Clement Duku, (left) is 56 and spent several of the war years working as a nurse at Yei Hospital, then run by Norwegian People’s Aid. Here he dealt with illnesses such a malaria and worms. People living in the bush never made it to the hospital for treatment. He left the hospital and went to help people in a camp in Congo. When the war ended he returned to Yei with five of his six children. One son is a soldier in the SPLA.

“Right from the time Sudan got its independence we were not considered. There is no equality,” he said. “Southern Sudan is a

rich country, it is fertile, we have oil, but all this is taken by the north.” Yet he went on: “It is better that we have suffered so we can build a better life for future generations.”