Wars which have devastated Southern Sudan

Like Northern Ireland, Southern Sudan is emerging from decades of civil war. A ceasefire came into force in January 2005, but with elections in April and a referendum on the future of Southern Sudan as a devolved state next January, the future is uncertain.

There have been peace agreements before – the Addis Ababa Agreement of March 1972 ended the first civil war in Sudan which had raged for 17 years. But the peace lasted only 11 years, when the second Sudanese Civil War broke out. Lasting more than 20 years, the fighting was focused mainly in Southern Sudan, where 1.9 million civilians lost their lives, and more than four million were forced to flee their homes. Our pictures show a Yei street today (above), and buildings, damaged during the war, still standing around the town.
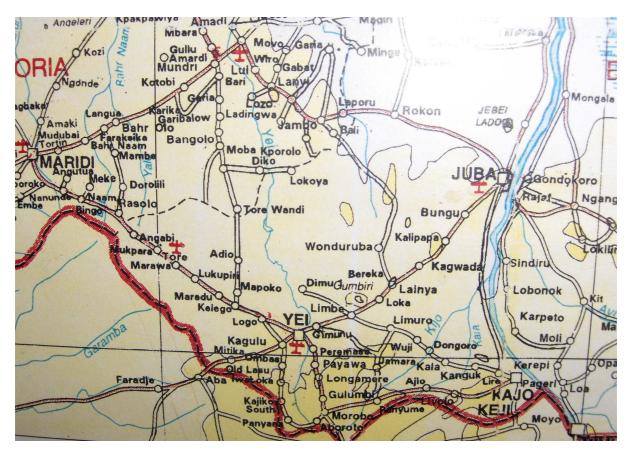

Sudan was a British Colony, and was administered as two separate regions until 1946 when, without consultation with the southerners, the two areas were merged into a single administrative region. The Southern mainly Christian population feared being subsumed by the political power of the larger north, whose people are predominantly Muslims who consider themselves culturally Arabic.

In 1953 the British granted independence to Sudan and tensions heightened. In August 1955 the first mutinies took place in southern towns, and the insurgents soon formed a guerrilla army. In 1971 former army lieutenant Joseph Lagu gathered all the guerrilla bands under his Southern Sudan Liberation Movement, which was able to negotiate on behalf of the entire south, resulting in the 1972 agreement.

In 1983 President Nimeiry declared his intention to transform Sudan into a Muslim Arab state. Shari'a was applied more broadly and criminals north and south were subjected to summary justice. These events and other longstanding grievances in part led to the resumption of the civil war. The Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) was formed by John Garang to fight central government and try to establish an independent Southern Sudan.

Map showing Yei in the south of Sudan. You can also see the capital, Juba. Below the red line lies Uganda.

There followed a brutal and bloody war. Efforts to negotiate peace at various stages failed. Thousands of Southern Sudanese women and children were taken into slavery. Livestock and wild animals were slaughtered for food. Today there is no African wildlife surviving in Southern Sudan. People fled to bordering countries including Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Egypt. Many survived in the massive Sudanese bush, and even here they were not safe, with rape by both government and SPLA soldiers commonplace, and children taken away to serve. Although they had nothing, the villagers in the bush had to find food supplies for the SPLA soldiers.

Despite the massive death toll, there were survivors and over the years many have found their way home. This is a lost generation, young people with no education, returning to a home with no economy, no investment, and little hope for the future. In three years the population of Yei town has increased threefold, from 50,000 to 150,000, shops run by locals are beginning to replace the stalls previously run by Arabs and Greeks. Left is a very well stocked shop in the town centre. Yei is determined to survive. So are its people.