

‘We’re missing our country, our place, our Ramadan in Sudan’



Sally Hayden

in Renk, South Sudan

Since war broke out in the North African country a year ago, millions of people have been internally displaced or have fled to neighbouring countries

On mats placed on sand in Renk, a White Nile town in the northeastern tip of South Sudan, dozens of men sit between shelters of sticks and billowing materials. Three buckets of juice and a few bowls of millet, or sorghum posho, are lined up in front of them. They wait for sundown, then dig in, taking it in turns to scoop out the liquid with cups, or using their hands to spoon posho into their mouths. Their fast is broken.

Soon, these men will form three lines to pray, facing Mecca. Similar lines are dotted at junctions throughout the transit centre, which offers a temporary home to 15,000 people displaced by war.

Sudan’s war began during Ramadan last year. The holy month sees observing Muslims around the world fast from sunrise until sundown, declining food and water, as they empathise with those less fortunate and grow spiritually closer to God. In 2023 Ramadan started on March 22nd and ended on April 21st. April 15th was when tensions between the Sudanese army and Rapid Support Forces paramilitary group erupted into direct conflict.

In the year since, the North African country has become the world’s largest displacement crisis. As of February, nine million people were internally displaced, UN figures show. More than 1.9 million more had fled to neighbouring countries. The true number of dead remains unknown. The UN Humanitarian Office put the death toll above 13,000 in January, though another UN report, seen by Reuters that same month, put the toll from massacres in one Darfur city as high as 15,000. Information posted by Sudanese citizens online also hints at the scale of the toll (one Facebook group, with more than 344,000 members, receives new posts about missing or dead people every few hours).

The UN Security Council called for a Ramadan ceasefire, hoping it would enable aid to reach some of the roughly 25 million people in need, but fighting has continued.

For those who try to escape, money and luck determine how far they can travel, and how much risk they continue to face.

Border crossing

At the Joda border crossing about 1,000 people cross into South Sudan every day. Many are South Sudanese citizens who initially fled that country’s civil war, which began in 2013 and is thought to have resulted in more than 400,000 deaths. While Sudanese people are mainly Muslim, South Sudan is majority Christian. Now, South Sudan is deemed the safer option, but for how long?

El Hadi Al Jeili, a 41-year-old farmer, said he fled Sudanese capital Khartoum and arrived in Renk two weeks ago, after spending six months in a refugee camp in Al Gutaina, White Nile State. His pregnant wife and three children are still in the Al Gutaina camp in Sudan, 300km away. He went ahead to earn money for their transport, and to find a safe place for them.

“When the war started in Sudan during Ramadan it was a very tough thing, very painful,” he said. “This year, in South Sudan, we’re missing home. . . . We’re missing our country, our place, our Ramadan in Sudan.” He said being with other Sudanese people at this time felt important. “This is our culture. In Canada, in Europe, in any place we reach we have to be together. Everywhere we go we are hand in hand, we have to have our traditions and our cultures.”

He reminisced about previous years, thinking about Iftar, when observers break their fast. “There is a very big difference between Iftar there and here. There, in Sudan, we have our families. The kind of food is different. The women cook and then come out, they eat, the family is the most important thing there. Here there are a lot of things missing. Most of us are alone, we’re just men, that is the difference.”

Ramadan is known as a time of charity, he said. “We still have the same spirit of that charity, we’re collaborating together and helping each other.” The men around him began to dispute this. “In Ramadan people are more charitable, but most times they are not like this,” one said.

About 1,000 new arrivals reach the transit centre each day. People stay roughly two weeks, before being moved on to a refugee camp, if they are Sudanese, or other parts of South Sudan, if they are returnees. Some sleep outside because they haven’t arranged shelters yet. Their belongings are piled up in the open air.

Mohammed Yusuf (37) was fasting with his wife Mai (also 37). Their two children moved around them: a boy, aged six, who wore a blue UN-issued wristband and was playing with a circuit board, and a three-year-old girl, her hair in three plaits tied with glittery hair bobbins.

“Before the war, life was good,” said Yusuf. The day fighting started, his wife was at the hospital where she worked as a clinical nurse. Yusuf was home with the children.

“Everyone in the community started running away. We were in the centre of the war surrounded by fighters,” he said.

“We could hear shotguns, bombs, jet fighters shooting. I had fear for my family because the bombs were constant. The



whole area was empty.”

Mai’s hospital was on the front lines “so there was an exchange of fire”. She hid in the basement and they spoke by phone. After three days, she managed to get back to them.

Yusuf hoped the war would end quickly, but soon there were only two families left in their community. The other one included a heavily pregnant woman, which made leaving impossible, he said.

“When the area is deserted, you could spend an hour looking for food. You couldn’t carry your phone when you moved as it would have been stolen.”

After two weeks, their daughter became ill and needed oxygen. They went to five hospitals searching for it – some were destroyed, others lacked supplies. Eventually, a friend – “my best friend” – helped them find treatment. That friend was later killed.

“When my friend died I became so stressed and traumatised. I felt it could be me next. I was seeing children brought in with their hands chopped off and thought what if it was my son, what if it was my daughter? So I decided I could no longer live there, we have to get away. That’s why we started coming to South Sudan,” said Yusuf.

As they waited in the hospital, Mai helped patients. “The market nearby had fighting there, so doctors could not reach the hospital, they were cut off and the hospital was lacking. I’m a nurse who specialised in kidneys. There were people whose hands were chopped off, people whose legs were cut off, people so injured,” she said.

“My wife said I cannot sit here, I have to go and help people,” said Yusuf. He introduced Mai proudly as a PhD candidate. She was in semester two of her PhD in nursing when their lives were disrupted.

Checkpoints

Once they decided to leave Khartoum, Mai’s cousins sent her 50,000 Sudanese pounds through a banking app. But the phone networks were down. After waiting three days, the family begged for transport, saying they’d send the money once they had a phone connection. It cost them 15,000 Sudanese pounds each to travel 300km from Khartoum south to the city of Rabak, a journey that took almost 24 hours due to the number of checkpoints. At one, Yusuf recalled, a “rebel” cocked a gun and pointed it at them. Yusuf covered his son’s eyes, but “the boy still has that memory”.

In Rabak they begged the driver for money to continue the journey. They stayed with an uncle in a small village 15km away, but there was no work to sustain them-

selves. In the city of Kosti, close to Rabak, they found an old man who said the family could stay with him. “You see how God works, someone just gives you an opportunity,” said Yusuf. They remained there for months. Yusuf sold vegetables and earned some money putting passengers on buses. Things were getting better, he said, “but there was only one thing bringing stress for me: my son wanted to go to school. . . . That area was full of returnees and refugees. . . . Every school was occupied.”

By that stage, Yusuf felt that “the war in Sudan will go on for more than four years. I don’t want my child then to start from zero. I thought maybe the South Sudanese will accept me and I will work here,” he said. “I started doing my own investigations, I heard about organisations like Save the Children, UNHCR, WFP and others that were helping children. I heard about child-friendly spaces giving learning to the children, so I felt like if I brought the child here he would get an education.”

The family travelled two more days to reach Renk, in South Sudan, where the

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transit centre is located. As refugees, they will only be supported to go from there to a remote refugee camp, which Yusuf and Mai said they believe is dangerous.

It “is not safe for children. It’s at the border and we heard the rebels are coming there sometimes”, said Mai.

“I received information that the life there is terrible when it comes to the hopes I have for my children: education and a good lifestyle,” said Yusuf. “If it’s not safe for me as an elder, how is it safe for a child? The only work there is getting an axe and going to the bush to get charcoal.”

Yusuf worked as an engineer in a stone quarry before the war, mixing cement and doing quality control. Now he tries to find work in the nearby market. The family got a one-off payment of 65,000 South Sudanese pounds on arrival, but that money is running out.

“I have skills and my wife has skills,” he said. “Me and my wife, we are people who work. I’m looking for any opportunity to go south to [South Sudanese capital] Juba. If I go there I know I will find something to do.

■ Clockwise from main: clinical nurse Mai Mohammed travelled with her husband and two children to South Sudan, after fleeing war in Khartoum; a woman loads a suitcase on to a truck taking people fleeing Sudan’s war from the Sudanese border to a transit camp; El Hadi Al Jeili, a 41-year-old farmer, with two friends in a transit camp in Renk; people who have fled Sudan line up close to the South Sudan border.

PHOTOGRAPHS: SALLY HAYDEN

I’m ready to go but it’s all about money. If I had the money for a boat or for road transport I would go.”

“My wife is a nurse,” he said. “Should such knowledge be wasted in the camp or is it better for a nurse to go and save lives somewhere? It is bad for people of her educational background to die in the camp. Most people have the ideology that women should stay home but I’m not that kind of man, I want to find an environment where my wife works and can take care of the family. I want my wife to have opportunities.”

In Khartoum, he said, fasting days during Ramadan passed quickly because he was so busy at his job. “By the time you lift your head it is already 5pm. You go home, you end your fast, you bathe, everything is okay. But here, the sun’s heat is on you, even you can sleep for two hours and by the time you check your clock you have only slept for 15 minutes.”

Extreme heat

South Sudan has been facing a period of extreme heat, with temperatures rising above 40 degrees, and schools shut as a result. “The sun here is extremely hard,” said Yusuf. “Having no work, it becomes harder, time does not pass. So if you’re not a strong person you can easily break your fast.”

When they break their fast, they eat dates with juice and water. Late at night they have posho and dried okra, soya beans or fish “if lucky”, which they buy with their diminishing cash. But the food is not enough.

While their children are not fasting, they do not have enough to eat either. “My children are people who go for what they want, they always make demands. They are very critical,” said Yusuf. His son – who developed a urinary tract infection due to the poor hygiene in the transit centre – was asking for hot dogs. Their daughter had a chest infection and tonsillitis. “Taking care of the children is a challenge.”

“Here, it’s all about survival,” said Mai.