

ABOVE & BEYOND

STORIES OF HOPE FROM SOUTH SUDAN





HOPE STILL REIGNS

Jubilation and hope filled the hearts of many on 9 July 2011. South Sudan, the world’s youngest nation was born after decades of fighting, despair and loss. It was the birth of a nation and the promise of a fresh start as the nation took its first steps.

There was high expectation for growth and many believed they would not see another conflict in the country they fought so hard and so long for. Unfortunately, they were wrong. The road to the prosperity took a sharp detour on 15 December when fighting broke out in Juba and quickly spread to many parts of the world’s newest nation. More than 10,000 people lost their lives and almost 900,000 people fled their homes to different UN Bases in the country and to neighbouring countries such as Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia and Kenya.

As a result, a lot of attention has been paid to the negative side of South Sudan’s ethnic groups and diverse cultures. While we need to investigate and make public all violations of human rights that are happening, we also need to shed light on the many people who went above and beyond to help those from ethnic groups different from their own. These are the voices of those who went the extra mile. Their bravery and strength in light of the situation they faced is a testament to the extraordinary power of compassion, hope and the will to survive.

Caption:

Photos: Mackenzie Knowles Coursin/Oxfam

Name: Makuay Chol Bol | **Age:** 31 | **Location:** UNMISS camp, Nimule | **Origin:** Twic East – Jonglei State

‘I was surprised that fighting broke out but I didn’t give much thought to it because I was all the way in Urur and assumed it would end in a few days.’

‘I then heard about the killings in Okobo and realised that this was worse than we thought. I am a business man in Urur county, Jonglei state. It is a Nuer area and I felt that I might be in danger. I was the only Dinka doing business and living there, and people knew me.’

‘I talked to my friend Malakan and decided it would be best if I got out of sight in case anything happened. He was not in that much danger because he is a Nuer. We have known each other for two years after we did business together.’

‘Malakan told me that I should hide in his house for the time being. I didn’t go back to my house or worry about the profit I was going to make. I listened to him and went straight to his house.’

‘While I was there people came knocking on the door asking Malakan where I was. He told them that I had left and was no longer near the area. Clearly they did not believe him because they kept coming back and asking the same questions. Luck for me they did not storm into the house looking for me out of respect for Malakan. He even told his wife and children not to tell anyone that I was in his house and told them to lie in case anyone asked where I was.’

‘I was very grateful for what Malakan was doing to keep me alive but one thing worried me. What would happen if the men looking for me got tired of listening to and believing Malakan? They would storm in to the house. This was the worst scenario because Malakan and his family would be hurt or worse, killed, because of me.

I know my friend very well and although he is strong, they were more and they would overpower and kill him. I was afraid that he was risking too much and did not want him to dies because of me. I voiced my concern to him and he said, ‘I would rather fight and die for you than stand by and watch them take and kill you.’

‘On the sixth day, Malakan came and told me that they had looted my house and property and I had lost all the sorghum I was going to sell. He also said that he was getting worried because the men intensified their searches and were lurking around the windows, listening to his conversations and also surveilling his house at night. We discussed it and came to the conclusion that it was only a matter of time before they spotted me and then everything would end. Not only my life, but Malakan and his family would be in danger too. I could not risk his life and his family anymore. I had to leave. Malakan insisted on coming with me to ensure my safety.’

‘That night, I said goodbye and thank you to his family and Malakan and I snuck out of his house at 9 pm. We walked for 13 hours straight from Urur to Duk. Malakan did not leave my side until we were close to Duk, an area populated with Dinka. We stopped and I thanked him for saving my life. I could not thank him enough. He began his journey back home.’

‘I have not spoken to him yet, but I know that he is alright.’

‘I am alive only because of him.’

‘I would rather fight and die for you than stand by and watch them take and kill you.’



Name: Kang John Bol | **Age:** 28 | **Location:** Rumbek | **Origin:** Mayom County - Unity State

I have a young child in Yei. It was a difficult to leave her but I had the opportunity to further my studies and I took it. After I enrolled to Rumbek University, my friends and I rented a house in town and were very excited to start our classes.

‘I knew that there was a big SPLM meeting taking place in Juba on 15 December. We were all following the news and reading reports in the newspapers. I thought this was just a politics as usual but we all started receiving calls from Juba the next day saying that fighting had started. I still thought that it was political and would stop after a short while. On the same day, after more calls and reports from the media, I realised that the situation had changed from political to tribal, as people were being killed based on their ethnic group. I was very surprised.’

‘We started to feel the effects when we went to class on Monday. There was a lot of tension and people were having discussions in tribal groups. Majority of students in Rumbek are from the Dinka community, so a lot of animosity was directed towards the Nuer students. I am a Nuer. It was not a comfortable environment to learn.’

‘When we returned home, we were confronted by a group of women who blamed us for the current situation. Thankfully, another Dinka woman who worked nearby defended us and told the women to leave us alone. She said that it doesn’t matter where we’re from, that we’re ‘just students.’

‘Later in the day our landlord returned home and found out about the incident. He is also a Dinka. He was very upset and went looking for the group of women and warned them never to come back or speak to us in that manner again.’

‘My friends and I were very grateful. However, we did not want to keep causing trouble for our neighbours and our landlord. If there was a risk, then we decided to take it with us. We decided to move to the UNMISS compound on 18 December 2013 and are still here.’

‘Many of our Dinka friends from the university have come to visit and they always have words of encouragement. When we decided to start attending classes again, the same friends came and escorted us to the university in case anything happened. The University Dean and Student Union have also visited us and encouraged us to keep hope and faith.’

‘I was very surprised at what happened. South Sudan has been at war for a while and I really thought that we had found peace. Civilians need to be left out of fighting. Now people have lost trust in the system. I just hope for peace and a return to normalcy so that I finish school and continue with my life. I hope that one day we refer to ourselves as nationals, not tribes because South Sudan is more than just tribes.’



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Name: Nyabil Riel | **Age:** 23 | **Location:** Mingkaman, Awerial – Lakes State | **Origin:** Pathiau, Jonglei state
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On 16 December, 2013 my neighbour, Mabior Anyieth, a Dinka, came to my house and yelled at me saying ‘please, get up let’s run’. He did not have to ask where I was from, he knew I was a Nuer. I lived in Acdier, in Bor, and most of my neighbours and friends were Dinka. There were not many people from my Nuer tribe in my neighborhood.

My neighbours and I all ran together for our lives. We didn’t know what was happening but knew that we had to run, hide and stay safe. When we got to Payueng, everybody hid in their own bush. We were there for eight days. Mabior and I helped each other while there – there was no food or water so we had to find ways to survive. By the eighth day, most of the people we were hiding with had left for Mingkaman. Mabior too left when he found the means. I could not yet leave because it cost 100 South Sudan Pounds to cross, which I could not afford. I was suddenly alone in the bush with my two children.

I was walking along the river trying to get some help. I knew I had to cross to the other side to keep my family safe. I then came across a man called Garang Riak. I don’t know why I approached him but I did – what could I lose from asking for some help?

‘I have no money and need to get to the other side. I have been left here alone with my children. Please help me with some money to cross and I will give it back to you when all of this is over’ I said.

To my surprise, Garang reached into his pocket and gave me enough money to cross to Mingkaman.

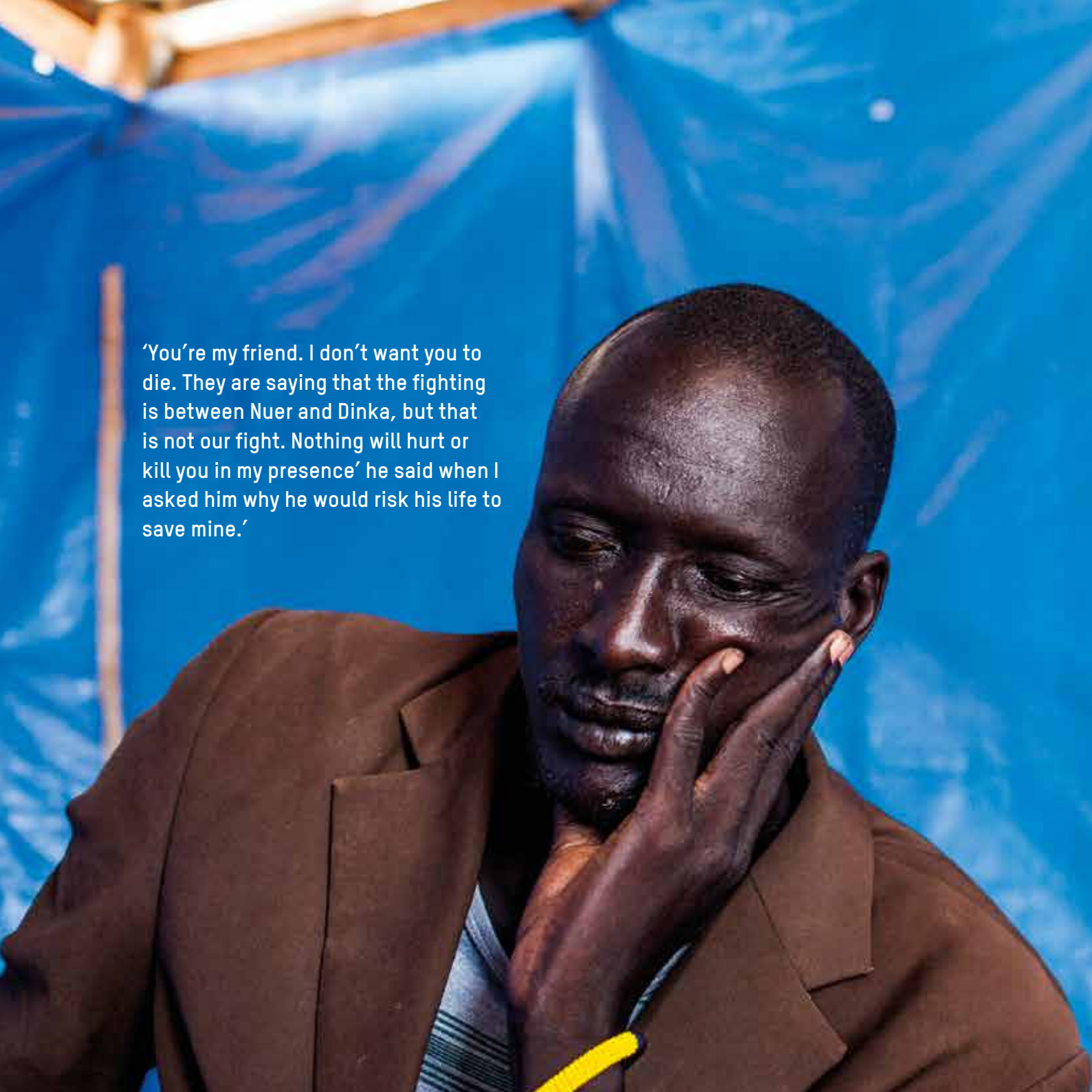
‘You don’t have to return the money I’m giving you now, he said. Gunshots don’t know the difference between a Dinka and Nuer person. They kill whatever is in their path. You’re alive and so is your family. Cross to the other side and settle this debt when all this is over and you are able to.’

All I said was thank you because I was overwhelmed and tired.

We got on the boat and crossed to safety at Mingkaman. I found the nearest available tree and settled there with my family. Everyone here knows that I am a Nuer woman. We all fled the same violence, even though they are Dinka. No one has said anything bad to me or looked at me the wrong way. I make tea, sell it and people drink it regardless of where I’m from. We’re all here in the same circumstance and have to stick together to survive.

‘To those people fighting, there is a difference between the Dinka and the Nuer. To normal people like me, there is no difference. I hope one day everyone feels the same.’





‘You’re my friend. I don’t want you to die. They are saying that the fighting is between Nuer and Dinka, but that is not our fight. Nothing will hurt or kill you in my presence’ he said when I asked him why he would risk his life to save mine.’

Name: Mabor Apiu | **Age:** 38 | **Location:** Jebel, Juba | **Origin:** Buanguoi, Nyang

‘I was in Kadak in Renk trading in cattle with my friends Deng Rou and Chol Dau. We had conducted business with our friend Khan, a Nuer man, numerous times before and were relaxing in his compound discussing issues and completing the transaction. We usually keep the cows we buy in his compound before travelling the next day. I had travelled with 62 bulls and was looking forward to a productive journey.’

‘While we were there, we heard gunshots. I turned around and saw that Deng and Chol were dead. I immediately got up and ran to the bush.’

‘I did not know what was happening. I had not been following the events in Juba or the violence spreading across the country. I was very scared and confused. I ran deeper into the forest, trying to stay alive. I assumed that they were just cattle raiders.’

‘I spent one day and night in the forest. When I could no longer hear gunshots, I decided to go back to the compound to find out what had happened. It was a very risky choice but at that time I thought it was my only option. I assumed Khan would be there and if not, I would speak to his neighbour, Nhial, whom I had known for a long time.’

‘I walked out into the open towards Khans compound but Nhial saw me, shouted my name and asked me to go quickly into his house. He explained to me what happened and I was shocked. I Nhial assured me that he did not wish me harm. I remembered then that Nhial had been a good friend and confidant, advising me in life and in business decisions. If he meant to harm me, he would have done so already.’

‘Nhial decided to help find my way to safety. He said ‘You’re my friend. I don’t want you to die. They are saying that the fighting is between Nuer and Dinka, but that is not our fight. Nothing will hurt or kill you in my presence’ he said when I asked him why he would risk his life to save mine.’

‘We left on the same day. It was a three day journey to Canal and Nhial was with me every step of the way. He could not go any further because he did not know how to swim. We parted ways in Canal and I had five more days to complete my journey to Malakal. I swam across four rivers and walked tirelessly without food and drinking dirty water.’

‘I arrived in Wuwach seven days after leaving Kadak. My uncle got word that I was alive. He came for me and I spent one night in his house before leaving for Malakal the next day. I asked him about my family and he said they were safe in Juba. He then booked a flight for me to Juba, where I reunited with them.’

‘When my family did not hear from me after the fighting broke out, they assumed that I had died. They even performed the traditional ritual of killing a bull and six goats in honour of my life. When they saw me alive and well, they were surprised and but very happy. They kept asking who the Nuer was that helped me and why I did not bring him along with me. I told them that he could not swim, that’s why he wasn’t here with me.’

‘I am very sad about what has happened. I have been trading for almost 17 years, moving between different lands occupied by different people. Now I have to start life again, it will not be the same. What happened to me and many others, regardless of their tribe, is like hitting a spoon full of food from someone’s hand just as it is about to enter their mouth. This has changed the way we live, places we go and how we make money. I hope that things will settle down one day and I can restart trading in cattle again. For now, I will go back home to Nyang with my family and cultivate our land.’

‘I hope to see Nhial again. I am here only because of what he did for me. My family also wants to meet him and thank him for saving my life. I would do anything for him. Even if he calls me after a year and asks for my help, I will drop everything and go back to Kadak to help him. He saved my life.’

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Name: David De Dau | **Age:** 38 | **Location:** Gudele, juba | **Origin:** Jonglei
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On Sunday 15 December 2013, I arrived in Juba after a long drive from Gulu in Uganda. At around 8:30 pm, I heard gunshots from the Giada where the Presidential Tiger Guards were based. I got a call immediately after from a friend who worked with the national security, telling me to stay put. I was shocked because I didn’t know that South Sudanese people could still take arms against each other.

Two days after the fighting started, I had to collect my mother in law at Miahusaba area. As I drove there, I was stopped by some policemen on the road. I reduced my speed to a snail’s pace and rolled down the glass window.

Police officer dressed in Uniform: ‘Maale?’ They asked, meaning peace be with you in Nuer.

‘Maale mugwa’ I responded. Peace is good.

This was obviously the wrong response as they cocked their guns at me and ordered me to get out and fall to my knees.

‘Get him, he’s Nuer’.

My mother in law wanted to scream saying he is not Nuer, I ask her to keep quiet. I got out of the car slowly and stood on the front right-side of my car. As they were about to shoot, I opened my mouth to speak. What were a few minutes to run my mouth going to cost me if I was going to die? I had a few chosen words for them. This time I chose to speak in Dinka, my native language. The surprise on their face was priceless.

‘I am not going on my knees. Feel free to shoot but I will never die on my knees.’ Bold, I know, but they did not shoot. I proceeded.

‘If you had asked me in Arabic ‘Salaam Aleikum’, I would have responded in Arabic saying ‘Aleikum Salaam’. Would that mean that I am an Arab? If you can answer that convincingly, then I am now ready to die.’

They dropped their guns and looked at me intently, then at each other.

‘Where are you from?’ they asked.

Bold with the presence of life in my body, I decided to provoke them further.

‘Why do you want to know? Why is it so useful for you to know where I hail from?’ I asked.

‘Just tell us where you’re from?’ he asked, now visibly irritated.

‘I roughly speak five languages, so I am from five different places’ I said.

‘You, give us your ID!’

‘I left it at home. And even if I had it, what reason do you have for asking for it. Am I not a free citizen of South Sudan?’ I said, now also visibly irritated. I did leave my house for a reason and this was not it.

‘Give us your Driving Licence!!!’

I did. They could not read.

They handed it back to me and told me that if I was moving around and wanted to stay alive, I should reveal where I am from and speak my language. Not everyone would be as patient as they were to me.

My cousin had lost his life the same way a few days before. Only he responded in Arabic and before he could finish a sentence, he was on his way out.

‘My people have shot me’ were his last words in Dinka.

The man who had pulled the trigger then dropped his gun and started crying. He had killed one of his own. The irony is not lost on me.

My mother and I drove to my house in silence. Sometimes there is so much to say but no will to say it. No one stopped the car this time. We reached home safe. My compound had never been that full of people but I understood the need for people to find a safe space. My home is considered safe because I am a Dinka.

I reflect on this as I say hello to my Nuer neighbours and their children who I have hidden in my house. How safe it is, I don’t know. I am considered safe but I was almost killed today based on flawed logic. I am considered safe, yet people constantly stalk my compound asking for ‘the Nuer’s’ that live in the compound next to mine. I remember one visit clearly.

‘We know there are Nuer people who live in the houses next door. Do you know where they are?’ they asked.

‘I don’t know where they are, they probably ran to the camp.’

‘Ok, then we will do something else to send a message’ they said, walking to their houses with every intention to loot and destroy.

‘Those houses belong to me. I am renting them to the Nuer neighbors you are looking for. If you destroy them, you are destroying my property. What message are you trying to send to me because you can just tell me now?

They left.

I wonder if I’ll still be considered safe if they know that the people they were looking for were in my house.

Three months have passed now and my visitors are still at the UN House compound in Juba. They are well. Their houses are intact and their belongings safe. They will come back to find everything just as it was.



Name: Monica Samuel | **Age:** 32 | **Residence:** Gudele road, Juba | **Occupation:** NGO worker

I remember Jekudu running frantically into the house. My sister stopped abruptly and attempted to talk but her words were interrupted by her need for oxygen. Each sentence was punctuated with pauses. Someone was in trouble in the neighbourhood.

‘I was just at Cousin Peter’s house. There is a man there in trouble. They want to arrest him because he is Nuer’ she said. ‘He was trying to leave with his family when a group of soldiers went to the house and are now trying to arrest him for no reason.’

The man was called Abraham. He was a young Nuer man with a wife and two children. They had sought refuge in a neighbour’s house after leaving their own in search of safety. While hiding there, four local policemen knocked on the door and demanded that Abraham leave with them.

‘But how did they know he was there?’ I asked

‘The neighbour that offered her house got scared. She is a Dinka lady and was convinced that if anyone found out that she was protecting a Nuer family, she would be in danger and her children would get hurt. She called the police to come and get him’ Jekudu said.

‘But why didn’t she just ask them to leave?’ I asked, perplexed.

‘That’s what we’re all wondering’ she said, visibly annoyed.

‘Peter and I heard the commotion in the compound of the house next door and went out to find out what was going on. We found four policemen trying to arrest a man. We knew he was Nuer from the marks on his face’ she continued. ‘His wife and two children were there with him as well. He was refusing to leave with the soldiers.’

My cousin Peter is a senior official in the military and commands a lot of respect wherever he goes. He is a tall well built man and when he speaks, people listen.

‘What is going on here’ Peter said. ‘Leave this man alone, he does not want to go with you.’

They argued for a few minutes and the men finally decided to leave. I am sure it’s because they realised he was in the military and that came with firepower when necessary. Not more than twenty minutes later, the four policemen came back but with an additional eight men as back – up. Peter heard the commotion and came out again to find out what was going on. Tension was rising around Abraham and use of force had been offered as an option.

‘Please, there are many families here, including my wife and children. Look at all the children around, listening to this conversation. No. I will not allow myself to be the reason they are hurt or killed’ he shouted.

Abraham then turned to Peter and said ‘Thank you but I would rather go. It will cause more problems if I stay here. People will get hurt. Let them take me.’

For the first time, everyone was quiet. It was like no one knew what to do. I am not sure if it was his resignation or his willingness to sacrifice himself that changed the course of events. Whatever it was, it was enough to make the 12 men lower their weapons and leave.

When things had settled down, we all sat down in Peter’s house to discuss options for Abrahams family. They wanted to go straight to the UN House but we all agreed that it was not safe enough to go yet. Peter offered his house for Abraham to stay, but it did not have enough room for his wife and children.

‘They can stay with us’ I said. And they did, for about three weeks before travelling to Torit where Constance, Abraham’s wife, now works.

Abraham stayed with Peter for about a week but with the help of his friend, Madam Angeth, who is a Dinka, he was able to get secure passage to the airport and then to Nairobi.

‘We are not Dinka or Nuer. We are Mundare from Central Equatorial but the wars and conflicts affect us as well. We could not stand aside and let anything happen to Abraham and his family. It might have been risky but we had no second thoughts about it. We just knew that we were saving innocent lives.’



Name: Gatkuoth Kolang Nyok | **Age:** 32 | **Location:** Jebel, Juba | **Origin:** Yei

‘I was in Juba on 15 December when the fighting broke out. I am married with three children but my family resides in Yei while I work in Juba.’

‘Our house is in Jebel, near the military barracks. The gunshots started in the evening and went on throughout the night. We could not leave because it was dark and too dangerous to go outside. Staying in the house seemed like a better idea. We were all on the floor, anxious and scared. Bullets shots were ringing in different areas, at different times, and at different speeds. It almost sounded like a song. Sometimes the sounds would be closer, as strays would ricochet on our house. Thankfully no one was injured and we had drinking water.’

‘After hours of lying low, the fighting seemed to subside. We left for the UN compound at 4 pm on 16 December. All this time I was thinking about my wife and children in Yei. If this was happening in Juba, then it must be happening there as well. I had no way of getting information from them and hoped that they were ok.’

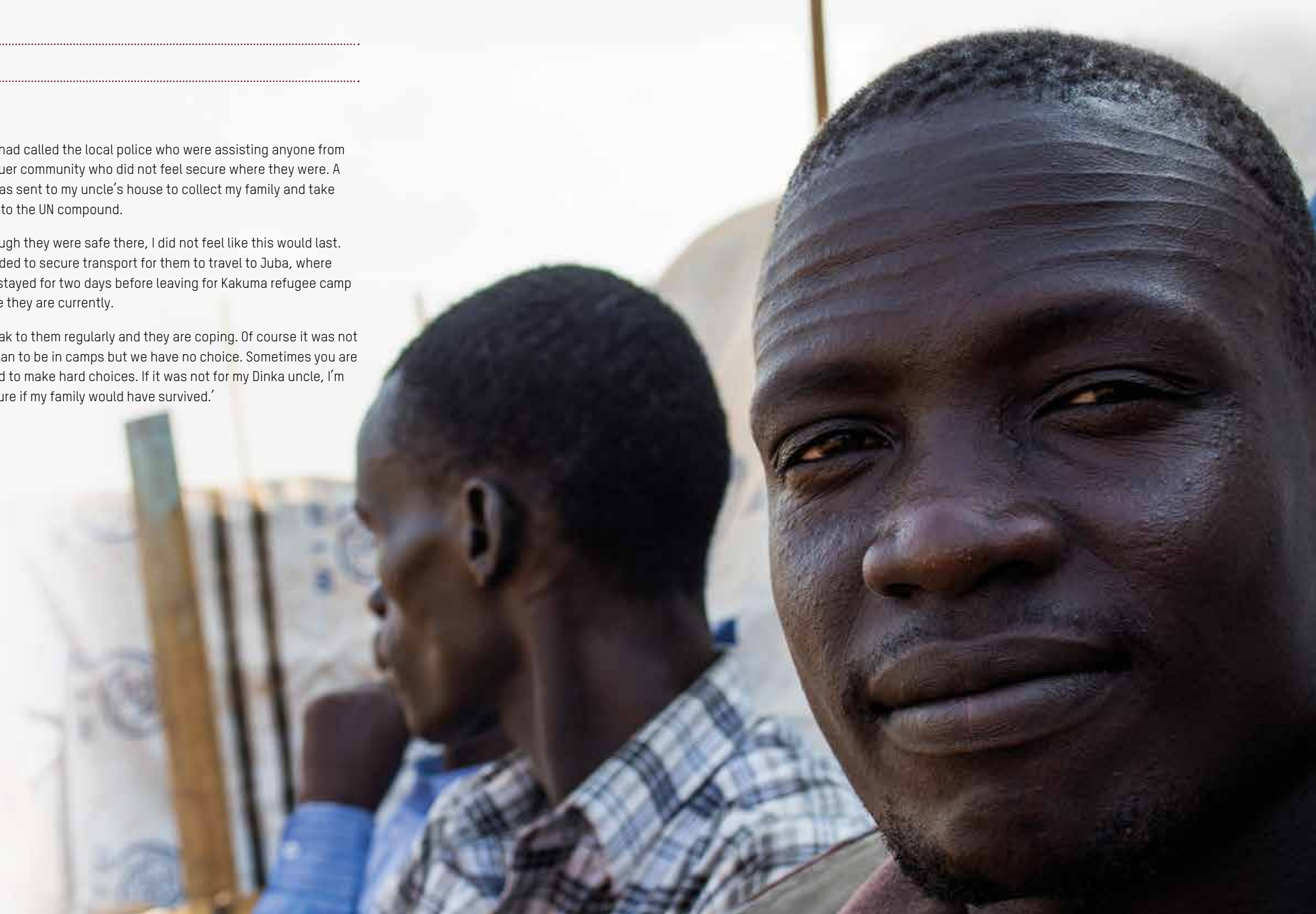
‘In the morning, I called my family to find out how they were doing. My wife told me that they hid under their beds whenever there was shooting during the day, and stayed hidden at night. I then received information that there were house to house searches and any Nuer was at risk. I had to get my family out of there so I called my uncle, a Dinka, for help. I asked him to go and collect my family and shelter them in his house. He left immediately, picked them up and to them to the relative safety of his home.

My uncle had to travel to Juba, leaving my wife and two children with his family. While in Juba, he received reports from Yei that there were more house to house searches in his neighborhood, targeting Nuer that had not gone into the camps. He called me at night with the news. I could not sleep. In the morning, my worries were abated when my uncle informed me that everyone was alright.

They had called the local police who were assisting anyone from the Nuer community who did not feel secure where they were. A car was sent to my uncle’s house to collect my family and take them to the UN compound.

Although they were safe there, I did not feel like this would last. I decided to secure transport for them to travel to Juba, where they stayed for two days before leaving for Kakuma refugee camp where they are currently.

‘I speak to them regularly and they are coping. Of course it was not our plan to be in camps but we have no choice. Sometimes you are forced to make hard choices. If it was not for my Dinka uncle, I’m not sure if my family would have survived.’



Name: Rebecca Nyakuo | **Age:** 35 | **Location:** Rumbek, UNMISS | **Origin:** Mayendit – Unity State

My husband is a police officer and has been one all his life. He was stationed at Roofchuol-Akol, not far from Rumbek, where I lived. I was visiting him when the fighting broke out on 16th December.

We have two children and needed to keep them safe. The only option was to the UNMISS compound. I had been working at the tea kiosk at the airport and had missed a couple of days of work. My phone was not working and no one at work could contact me. My colleagues at work did not know that I was at the UN compound.

They asked around for me, questioned people in the town to find out where I had gone. They said they had been worried about me, given what was happening in different parts of the country, and given the fact that my family is Nuer. They finally got word that I was at the UNMISS compound and came to visit me frequently. When my phone started working, they called me on a regular basis to find out how I was coping and how the family was. When we were really struggling, they offered some money to me, without expectation of getting it back.

Even though they were Dinka, they went out their way to make sure we were alright.

As we speak now, today is my first day back at work. When I was in the camp, my employer said that I should take as much time as I need, do what I have to do to keep my family safe, and then I can come back to work.

I am evidently a Nuer but no one has said or done anything to make me feel like I am under threat. This is in part due to the extra mile my colleagues went to comfort me and make sure I was alive and well.



Name: Zacharia Abuoi Arok | **Age:** 78 | **Location:** Nimule | **Origin:** Panyagor, Twic East County–Jonglei

I have lived many years and know how we lived before all the wars. We were cattle keepers and could move freely grazing our bulls. Yes, there were clashes and fights like in every society, but they were small and could be resolved with time and reason. There were traditional systems that worked. We were free to travel and see different lands, meet new people and share our experiences, all the while trading in cattle and making money that kept families happy. This is has not been the reality for a long time.

I was in Bor with my family when the fighting broke out. I told them to run because I am old and disabled. I lost my leg during the first war. I was left alone and on the first day, men walked into my house. They were Nuer. One of them saw me and wanted to kill me but his friend stopped him in his tracks.

He looked at the young man and asked ‘Look at this man. If you kill him, what will you accomplish? This man has done nothing wrong to you and yet you want to kill him. What will you gain from doing that?’

The young man lowered his gun and left the house. I don’t know the name of the man who saved my life but I am very grateful for what he did. Before he left he looked at me and said ‘Stay here and don’t make any noise. I will lock the door behind me. Do not open it for anyone else.

That man saved my life. I wish I knew his name and where to find so that I can thank him again.

‘He gives me hope that there is still room for healing despite all wounds we have endured. There is still hope if our systems transform towards reconciliation and healing.’



Name: Raphael Nhial | **Origin:** Awerial County – Lakes State | **Location:** Gudele road, Juba

Raphael is from the Dinka ethnic group, Peter a member of the Nuer community. They have known each other for eight months although their houses have been standing next to each other for more than three years. Peter is a retired lieutenant in the army and Raphael a seasoned diplomat.

Raphael finished building the tall concrete fence that now surrounds his house in January 2010. Although this brought much needed security, it left no space for his large pick-up truck to fit. Peter noticed that Raphael would park the car outside his compound everyday and extended him an invitation to do so in his compound. This is how their friendship was formed, a bond that would later save Peter’s life.

Raphael

‘There is a certain difference between people in South Sudan – those who fought and lived through the civil war and those who didn’t. Of course there would be a difference in opinion. In every country, there are differences in opinions but there are ways to resolve them without an escalation to violence.’

‘When the fighting broke out, we were very surprised, but also very scared. Mobile phone networks stopped working but resumed on Monday. I started calling people I knew to make sure everyone was alright.’

‘Before holding my current post, I was a deputy Ambassador of Sudan to Vietnam. When we were returning to Juba, my daughter asked me why we had to come back and I said it was because it was our home. She responded, saying ‘Juba is good, but not a good place to stay.’ As we lay on the floor in my bedroom trying to keep safe, she looked up at me and said ‘Told you dad.’

A human life is a human life. I was not worried that Peter being here would increase the risk to my family. Life is precious. If anything was to happen, it had better happen to me before it happens to anyone else. We are all the same people.’



Name: Peter | **Origin:** Nasir - Upper Nile State | **Location:** Gudele road, Juba

Peter

‘Everything seemed normal until around 9 pm. I was home with my family and shooting started around the military barracks and then it spread to various parts of Juba. We could hear it from our house.’

‘After two days of continuous fighting, I decided to take my family to the UNMISS (UN Mission In South Sudan) compound. The mobile networks had started working and we were receiving disturbing news of people we know dying. I left them there, safe, and came back to Juba.’

‘Although the situation was still very dire, I was adamant about going back to Juba. Having fought in the civil war that won South Sudan its independence, I did not see anything that I had not seen before. It was too risky however, for me to go back home, so I reached out to my friend and neighbour Raphael, a Dinka.

‘I am a Nuer and Raphael’s actions are still keeping mer safe. It’s hard to predict what will happen in the coming weeks but I am still hopeful for South Sudan to reconcile and rebuild itself.’

‘Whatever is happening is due to ignorance. The biggest challenge is that people see the differences between them as a negative thing. Diversity is a positive thing. Instead of these differences bringing us together, they are tearing us apart. It has now become very difficult for us to agree but we’re very hopeful for peace. There is no other option but that.’

‘Whatever is happening is due to ignorance. The biggest challenge is that people see the differences between them as a negative thing. Diversity is a positive thing.’





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Name: Joseph (name changed to protect identity)
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On 22 December, I received a call from my cousin. She was in Mingkaman, in Awerial County, with other family members and friends. She was desperate to come to Juba and leave the insecurity behind. They had travelled from Bor by boat and were now settled at the IDP camp.

I rented a truck and drove for four hours to Mingkaman to find them and bring them back to Juba. Amongst the people I drove back with me were two young ladies, Nyaua and Nyol. I brought them to my house in Lologo and they stayed with me for two weeks. I had asked them whether they want to stay with me or with their Nuer relatives. They chose to stay with me.

Their father is a Nuer and is involved in the fighting. When his phone was finally back, I dialled his number so his daughters could speak to him. They had been very worried about him.

‘Where are you dad?’ Nyaua asked

‘I am in Bor, looking for you. I had looked everywhere and failed to find you. Where are you?’

‘We’re in Juba staying with Uncle Joseph. Are you coming or will you remain in Bor?’

‘I wish I could but I cannot come at this point. I am staying in Bor.’

The conversation is difficult to hear. This is not something children should ever have to listen to. This is not a conversation a daughter should be having with her father at any point in her life. After he confirmed that he was not coming to be with them in Juba - that he was staying in Bor - they started crying. They didn’t understand.

‘Why are you fighting in this war? Don’t you know that our uncle, the man taking care of us, is a Dinka? Don’t you know you are fighting his people?’

‘I know that. I understand, but this is not my war. I do not want to fight in this war but I have no choice because I am Nuer. If I do not fight, the rest will not accept me.’

‘Aren’t you afraid that what you’re doing will put us in danger? Don’t you think that if you’re killing his people, maybe uncles people will come and kill us too?’

‘No. You’ll are safe with Uncle Joseph. You will be alright.’

He was right. Nyua and Nyol are safe. They are like my daughters and I would never let anything bad happen to them.

I do not feel right about what is happening. Some of my family members and close friends have been killed. They had nothing to do with the conflict but lost their lives either way. Many of my Nuer friends keep calling me, in remorse, apologising for events that are not in their hands, but of which they feel responsible for. This is not a tribal conflict but a political one, and innocent people should be left out of it.

I feel angry, but I would save those girls again. Even if my people are killed, I would rather safe a life, any life, rather than take one.

‘This is not a tribal conflict but a political one, and innocent people should be left out of it.’

Name: Nyakul Gatkuoth | **Location:** UNMISS Rumbek | **Origin:** Mayom – Unity State

Nyakul and Ajak are forever bound by the fighting that broke out on 15 December.

‘We were in Aloualuak in Eastern Lakes State when things started to unravel. Our husbands are Nuer and are soldiers in the army. Everything seemed fine on 15 December but that all changed the following day. Everyone knew we were Nuer so a few of them started attacking us. We could not stay there any longer so we ran, as fast as we could; carrying nothing with us’ says Nyakul.

‘We ran into the bush to escape and save our lives. In this commotion our family scattered and for a time we could not find each other. I had just given birth. I was very scared and did not know what to do. I was alone, clutching my new born baby and lost in the bushes.’

‘I was calling out for my husband and Nyakul’ says Ayak. ‘I was nine months pregnant with my third child and holding onto two very scared children who did not know what was going on. I was very scared. I was not sure what was going to happen. I thought I would have to give birth there in the bush. What would this mean for my new born child?’

After a few hours hiding in the bush, looking for each other, Nyakul and Ayak found each other. Not knowing where to go or what to do, they decided to stay in the bush, hiding, until they felt that it was safe enough to venture out.

‘I had my child with me and had to find water and food to sustain us. I did not know where my husband was or Ayak and her family’ says Nyakul. ‘One day I had to leave my child in the bush to go and search for water as it was faster and less risky to do so. I found Ayak and her two children. She was very heavy with child and looked even more scared than me.’



Name: Ajak Chol Riot | **Location:** UNMISS Rumbek | **Origin:** Mayom – Unity State

One day after finding each other, a group of young Dinka men came across them in the bush. This was the worst possible scenario as they were hiding to avoid the reality was facing them at that very moment.

‘They asked us why we were there and immediately knew that we were Nuer. They were very angry and meant to hurt us. We were very close to death at that moment’ says Nyakul.

‘A few moments after the Dinka men threatened us, another group of Dinka men crossed our path. They ran quickly and stepped between us and the other men and asked them what they were doing. I remember exactly what he said.’

‘What are you doing? Do you mean to hurt these innocent people? They are not part of the war. Women and children are not part of the war.’

He then turned to us and said, ‘You don’t need to be afraid. You’re safe now. We will take you somewhere you will not be hurt.’

After a short argument, the men decided to leave Nyakul and Ayak unharmed with the new group of Dinka men that saved them. The unknown men then helped Ayak and Nyakul walk to Rumbek town, where they were accommodated by the Minister of Housing, another Dinka, for a few days, before finding a place to settle at the UNMISS compound.

‘I gave birth to my child at the UNMISS compound in Rumbek. The baby is healthy and has brought a lot of joy in my life. We’re still at the camp but very grateful to be alive and safe. Were it not for the Dinka men, we would not be here. They are the reason we are alive’ says Ayak.

‘What are you doing? Do you mean to hurt these innocent people? They are not part of the war. Women and children are not part of the war.’



Name: Alier Jacob | **Age:** 42 | **Location:** Lologo | **Origin:** Bor

In June 2013, I was selected to be part of a programme that trained primary school teachers for seven months in remote parts of South Sudan to build their capacity. I was deployed to Pangak in Northern Jonglei and although it's part of my home state, I had never been there. It is very remote and deep in the village. In addition, I am a Dinka and that is an area populated by Nuer people. I was worried about the language barrier and how I would be able to effectively communicate with the teachers I was charged with for seven months.

Despite my reservations, I decided to go and find out for myself instead of making my own conclusions. Furthermore, it was what I had agreed to do as part of my job. If I did not like it, I always had the option to return to Juba. Three of us had been assigned to Pangak, two Dinka and one Nuer, to train 75 teachers.

When they were not teaching their regular classes, or training, they were sharing meals with us and introducing us to their wives and children. We were invited to their homes to break bread and discuss current affairs and also history. We became like family.

The programme successfully came to an end in December 2013. The teachers surprised us by organising a thanksgiving event on 14 December. They gathered the community together and we celebrated our accomplishment and shared our hopes for the future.

Our plan was to leave the next day and did not think it would be risky to do so even with the events taking place in Juba. Although the teachers and community members knew what was happening in the country, they did not change their attitude towards us. We boarded a boat on 16 December. The teachers came with us to say goodbye. Before leaving us, they talked to the boat captain and the other passengers on the boat.

'These are our teachers and most importantly our friends. Watch over them and make sure they arrive in Malakal safely. If they don't, you will have to answer to us' said one of the teachers. Eight hours later, we arrived in Malakal safe and sound. The teachers had been calling us in those eight hours to find out if we were alright.

The fighting had started in Bor and I found out that I lost a lot of family members. I had a lot of anger in me when news of these senseless deaths came to me. Deep in anger and grief I asked myself, 'are there any good Nuer left? This led me to ponder two very dominant and conflicting events.

On one hand, the rest of my family was being killed for being Dinka, a tribe that they did not choose to be. They were killed for no other reason that they were the wrong tribe, in the wrong place and at the wrong time.

On the other hand, I am in Juba, safe with my wife and children only because Nuer people decided to help me, even though I was from a tribe that was in some parts killing their own, even though it was a risk to their lives.

'I mourn for everyone who has suffered in this conflict. I feel for them because I have family and friend on all sides, Dinka and Nuer. When I think about what was done for me and my colleagues, and the countless lives no doubt saved in a similar fashion, I already know my answer. Yes, there are many good Nuer left.'





Name: Akol Kuol | **Age:** 34 | **Location:** UNMISS, Nimule | **Origin:** Malakal

‘We expected people to die in the previous war. Why not, we were at war and people die during wars. We are prepared for that. This time we were caught by surprise and were not even a little prepared.’

‘We had time to experience peace. We had grown to know each other and were bonding on many different levels. We had accepted each other, embraced our differences and made friends with people from different corners of South Sudan. It was very good for the people of South Sudan and also very good for business. We were just getting used to living in peace.’

‘I am in the business of rearing and trading cattle. I am based in Malakal but was in Uror conducting some business when the fighting broke out in December. It is a Nuer area and many people knew that I was a Dinka as I travel there for trade before. My tribe had never been an issue. It never even crossed my mind.’

‘I was not following the events in Juba and did not expect anything but normal business to be conducted on that day. This time, I had travelled with 25 cows and as is the practice, I paid some young Nuer men to take them out for grazing while I rested and talked to some of my old friends. I was relaxed and having a good time. Little did I know what was happening in the fields to my cattle!’

‘The first person to hear about the raids was my friend Ruei Chol. He told us that while the young men were in the field with my 25 cows, they were confronted by a group of Nuer men asking where I was. They already knew that the cattle belonged to me. The young men said they did not know. The group then forcibly rounded up all the cows and left.’

‘We talked about the events in Juba and wondered if they could have escalated to the point where people and their property were not safe. I had come to Uror with two of my Dinka friends and asked about their whereabouts. I was told that they had died.’

‘Ruei then said that if they raided my cattle and asked about me, they would soon return. He ran with me to the edge of the forest and told me to wait there for me while he went and collected my bags. I waited, not sure if he would come back, but he did. He gave me my bags and wished me well and I begun what I assumed would be a very long journey.’

‘I have Dinka traditional marks on my face. I was afraid that someone would spot them and see me as a target and so I wore a hat to cover them. My main aim was to get to Malakal and see if my wife and child were safe, as the fighting was going to reach them eventually. They were the main things giving me motivation as I walked in Nuer lands, hiding my identity as a Dinka. I can speak the language and kept a low profile so no one suspected that I was a Dinka.’

‘This journey normally takes seven days with cattle. This time, it took me three days and two nights. I was walking as fast as I could and did not sleep. I only rested when I felt that my body could go on no longer. I had some biscuits in my bag and that kept me going. It had been raining so there was water to drink from streams and rivers. It was not an easy journey but one I had no choice but to make.’

‘I reached Malakal and found my family. After knowing they were safe, I finally allowed myself to rest.’

‘I have lost all my investments and almost lost my life.’

‘I am very bitter about what has happened in South Sudan but I am grateful to be alive and that my family is safe. I would not be speaking to you now if it was not for Ruei.’

Name: Ayak Chuol | **Age:** 55 | **Location:** Nimule | **Origin:** Bor, Jonglei

Majak: ‘When the first attack happened, I was in Bor with my son Ajang, his children and my sister Ayak. When we heard the first gunshots, I told my son to leave with his family. I am old. I have lived my life, and would only serve to slow them down. I begged them to leave and with relief I saw them walk away. My sister was not with them at the time but I gave instruction that she should join them.’

Ayak: ‘I joined my nephew and his children as they were walking away from Bor. I walked for one hundred meters before realising that my brother was not going to join us. He had sent us away to safety but refused to come. I love my elder brother very much and could not imagine him dying there alone. I knew that my nephew could take care of the children and so I left them to continue with their journey and went back to be with my brother.’

Mayak: I was surprised when she came back, but also very touched that she did. On the 18 December, there was a lot of fighting in Lake Yang estate in Bor. We could hear gunshots all around us but thankfully it did not come to our doorstep.

The following day, there was even more fighting. This time it sounded like it was moving closer so we went to the bedroom and hid under the beds. We stayed there for some time. After a while, there was a loud knock on the door. The door was forced open and we heard footsteps heading towards the door. I don’t know what time it was, but it was getting dark. They found us hiding in the bedroom. I could not count how many they were, but they were many.

Mayak: The visit was quick. They asked each of us a question in Nuer and if you go the answer wrong you were tortured and killed. My sister and I speak Nuer so we answered correctly and were left alone.

Ayak: We decided to leave for the UNMISS camp after that incident. While we were walking, we spoke to each other in Nuer as we were in a Nuer area surrounded by Nuer men with guns. We did not want to be anyone’s target if they found out that we were Dinka. We stopped on the way to rest and I asked Mayak in Nuer weather he was thirsty.



Name: Majak Chuol | **Age:** 76 | **Location:** Nimule | **Origin:** Bor, Jonglei

In that unfortunate moment, he had forgotten where we were and what we were trying to do and responded to me in Dinka. Immediately, a man who was close to us grabbed him, shoved him onto a tree, cocked his gun and prepared to shoot him.

Mayak: I forgot and spoke in Dinka. The man grabbed me and shouted ‘This man deceived us. He is not a Nuer. He is a Dinka.’

At that moment, when I thought I was surely going to die, a young man, about 19 years old, saved my life. I heard a scream and saw him come out of nowhere. He stood in front of me, facing the man and his gun. His name is Deng Makwach and he is Nuer.

‘How can you even raise your gun to kill this man? Look at him’ he said. ‘If you do it you will be cursed, even as a Nuer man. If you shoot him, then you will have to kill me.’

The man was visibly very angry but did not pull the trigger. He lowered his gun and walked away from us. Deng walked with us the rest of the journey to the UNMISS camp in Bor. He brought us to the space where his family was staying and gave us a space to settle until we found our next destination. We were with him for seventeen days and became good friends.

Ayak: I was very shocked that a young man would risk their life like that to save our but was very grateful for it. Without his interference, we surely would have died. After he walked with us and welcomed us to his home, I spoke to him, wondering what was going through his head when he did it.

‘Why would you risk you life to save us. We’re old and have lived well. You’re very young and have your whole life head of you. Why sacrifice all that for a couple of old strangers?’ I asked.

‘When I looked at Mayak, I was reminded of my father. When I saw your face, I was reminded of my mother. I knew that if I let anything happen to you then I might as well have killed them and myself. There is no difference. It did not make any sense for me to watch you die and do nothing about it. I made no sense for anyone to die.’





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