

THE GATHERING STORM

The strife in Sudan is far from over. Under the oppressive hands of its Arab militia, African tribes like the Nuba—the mountain people of oil-rich South Kordofan—are being slaughtered “like animals” for their land. Daily air bombings have forced them to seek refuge in caves to avoid the carnage—a terrifying Darfur-like crisis, but with muted international response. **Carsten Stormer** breaks the conspiracy of silence

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
CARSTEN STORMER

MOUNTAIN PATROL
A soldier of the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army (SPLA) points to the sky where a Sudanese war plane is closing in.



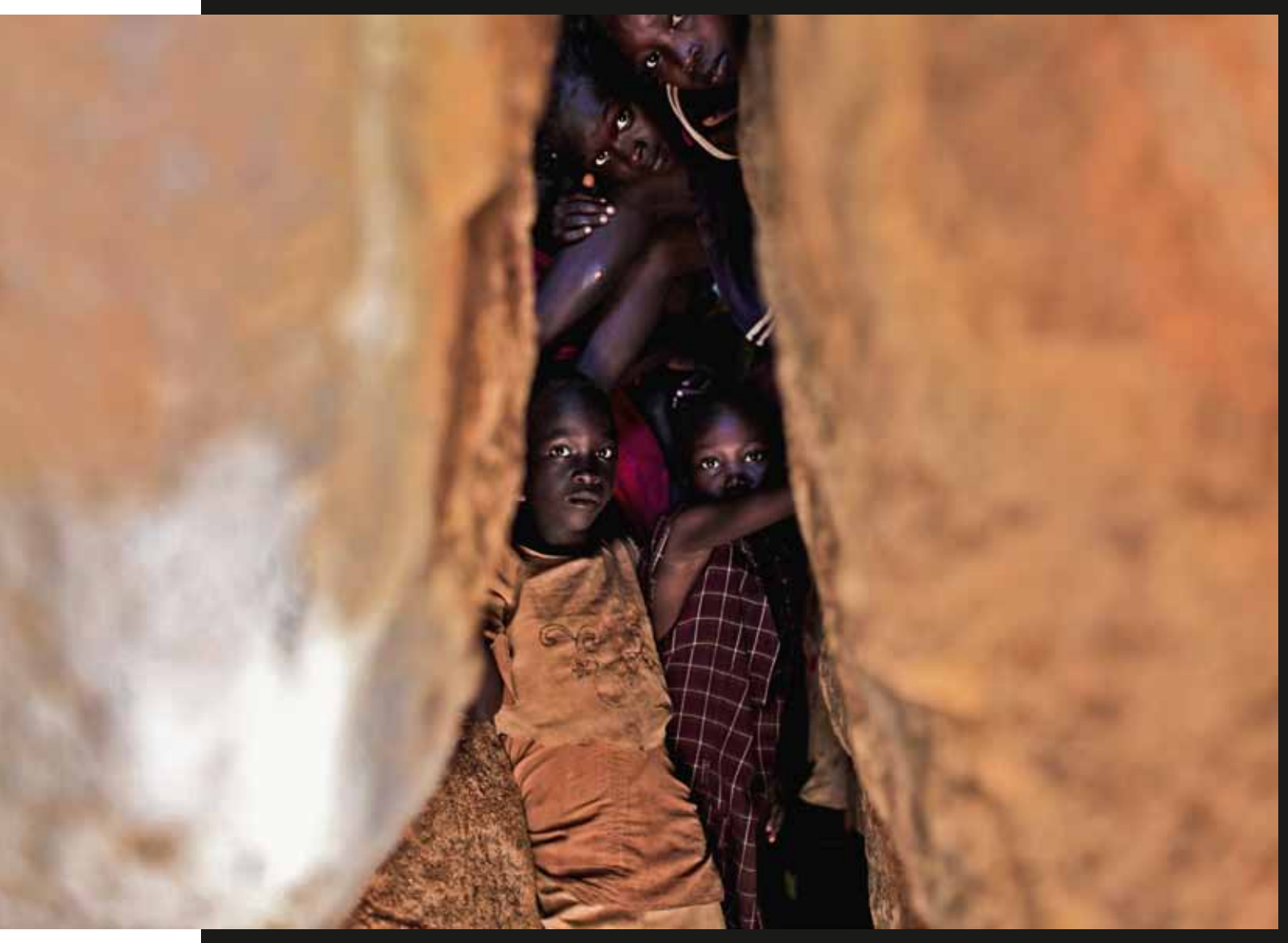
His day begins with a vain attempt not to think about death. Musa al-Abir, still as a pillar of salt, stands on the summit of a huge granite rock, looking up. His gaze lurches from place to place across the sky. His ears are playing tricks on him. He thought he heard an airplane. Overhead, nothing but clouds casting dark silhouettes on Sudan's Nuba mountain range. He knows the airplanes must come soon, since they come every day. The question is where they will drop their payload.

Tall and gaunt, Al-Abir, 45, has eyes as black as onyx. His calloused handshake is limp, as if he has no strength left. Everyday he stands here on the hilltop, surveying the sky and listening to the silence. “Just yesterday a bomb landed on a house,” he says. Ponderously, as if carrying an invisible burden, he climbs down the slope. He works his way through a thicket to the cave that has been his home for two months. Extending his arm to full length, he points to an array of tiny, wind-struck buildings a thousand feet below us. Two parallel rows of market stalls line the dirt track that links Kurchi to the rest of the world. “Down there,” he says. “That’s where two of my daughters died.”

In addition to its outrageous tactics in Darfur, the Sudanese government has been waging a quieter war against the civilian population of the province of South Kordofan since early June. Seemingly at random, the Sudanese Air Force alternates bombarding markets, residences, village wells, and outposts of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). Refugees speak of ethnic cleansing. Hundreds have already died in the attacks. The United Nations estimates that more than 200,000 people have already fled their villages and settlements to seek shelter in caves and crevices in the rock.

In the caves, the talk is of Arab militias that follow the air support on camels and motorcycles. They slaughter innocent people, steal food and cattle, abduct children, set homes on fire. Reports originating in the government-controlled provincial capital Kaduqli speak of summary executions of civilians. Satellite photos confirm reports of mass graves. Human rights organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch warn that the conflict could become a second Darfur. The United Nations wants to investigate whether the Sudanese army is committing war crimes in South Kordofan.

Al-Abir belongs to the Nuba people. The Nuba—both farmers and herdsman, Christians and Muslims—are known for their religious and cultural tolerance. But



Mohammed Ali sits under an acacia tree, in the shadow of a tank. His comrades avoid him, the black African—"the traitor," he heard them whisper behind his back.

an invisible boundary divides the province of South Kordofan, where the people of northern Sudan with their Arab ancestry come into contact with the black African south. Contrasting cultures, rituals, and traditions clash. The Arabs have regarded the Nuba as primitive third-class citizens for centuries. South Kordofan is a region that limps along behind modernity, with progress making a wide detour. There are few macadam roads or hospitals. The teachers in the region's few schools are unpaid. Water comes from muddy pits; electricity, when it is available at all, from generators.

The rebellious Nuba have been a thorn in the side of the powerful in Khartoum for a long time. First they took the side of the SPLA, the southern Sudanese rebel group, in the Sudanese civil war. Then they demanded independence and self-determination, refusing to submit to Islamic law. A peace agreement reached in 2005 culminated this

year in the independence of South Sudan. South Kordofan remains in Sudan.

In May of this year, the Nuba saw one final opportunity to demand their political rights. South Kordofan was supposed to elect a new governor. There were virtually no international election observers, and after the vote was tallied, both sides declared victory. The government in Khartoum backed Ahmed Haroun—a man under indictment by the International Court of Justice in the Hague for war crimes in Darfur. A new war began.

Al-Abir suspected nothing. His life went on in the rhythm of work in the fields until the afternoon of June 26, a Sunday. As usual, the people of the village of Kurchi gathered at the market after church. Kurchi is a sleepy scattering of round huts roofed with thatch, surrounded by mountains and fields of millet. The provincial capital Kaduqli is two hours away over rutted dirt roads. Old men played dominos under the acacias and drank tea.

Young men sucked on hookahs. The village's women and girls stood in line at the water hole to fill their canisters. Al-Abir was out working his fields—he wanted to harvest soon, millet and maize, so that his wife and four daughters need not hunger during the difficult months between harvest and sowing.

Al-Abir sits in his cave as he tells the story. He wrings his hands and his voice breaks. He has to pause to get his breath. His eyes turn glassy as if he were looking into two different worlds at once.

In the early evening, he heard a soft droning from the sky, and saw the plane—a Russian Antonov shimmering silver in the light. A few seconds later, the first bomb hit. Very close, near the market. So close that rocks and dirt rained on his head. Al-Abir threw himself to the ground. He saw black smoke rising and heard people screaming as they ran away to hide in the underbrush.

He found his daughters in the thorn



CAVED IN

Soldiers of the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army (SPLA) take a break from fighting to enjoy a hookah and sweet tea. *Opposite page:* Nuba children take shelter in a cave as the Sudanese Air Force bombs the surrounding hills.

bushes where they had sought protection from the bombs. Maryam, 15, died instantly when shrapnel tore away part of her head. Iqbaal, 13, bled to death on the way to the clinic, where two nurses were struggling to patch together the mangled bodies of the wounded. Kurchi has no doctor. Al-Abir buried what was left of his daughters next to his hut.

Seven bombs fell on the market that day, killing 16 people and gravely injuring 53. After the funerals, he packed his possessions together and moved with his surviving family into a cave, where they remain like hundreds of other families. He points at a pot with a little millet. "That's all we have to eat," he says, burying his face in his hands. "We also eat leaves. From the trees."

A few caves down, the 30-year-old teacher Suwar Daldchum, a delicately built woman wrapped in a luminous red shawl, perches on a simple bed frame, the gift of a villager in Kurchi. She fled Kaduqli, her hometown, shortly after the election in May when Sudanese soldiers and militiamen began going from house to house to kill any Nuba rumored to have an SPLA connection. "They burned our millet and our houses," she says. "They led people away and killed our cattle. They killed my brother." She was on the road for four days with her five children. At night they walked. During the day they hid from the army and militias in bushes and dry riverbeds.

Next to her on the cot sits Khamisa Idris Tia, 20, who is trying to nurse an infant. But she has no milk. She fled, still pregnant, from the village of Heban. A brother-in-law

pushed her on the back of his bicycle for hours, snaking through the parched savanna to reach the shelter of the mountains, then returned to his village to organize food, money, and cooking utensils. Militiamen got to him first. They slit his throat.

The air raids drain the villages of their people like water draining from a bathtub. The refugees suffer from hunger, diarrhea, malaria. The state of emergency has become the new normal. Schools are closed, and fields can neither be weeded nor harvested. Now life revolves around news-gathering and rumor-mongering. Have the soldiers withdrawn? Where is the SPLA? Have there been battles, executions, looting? Life in the caves is a vacuum where time does not exist. The few aid organizations have pulled out their international employees. South Kordofan is losing its lifeblood.

One of those who remain is the American doctor Tom Catena. In Konjo—three bumpy hours on rain-soaked roads away from Kurchi—the 48-year-old tries to save whatever flotsam the war sweeps into his operating room: children with their feet blown off, women with severe burns, soldiers who stepped on antipersonnel mines in the jungle. Catena is the last remaining doctor in the only hospital in South Kordofan. Every day he fights the urge to leave the crisis zone, as did his assistants and anesthetist before him. "Common sense tells me I'd rather stay alive—my conscience tells me to stay," he says. At some point, to keep himself from going crazy, he decided to stop listening to common sense. Only two nurses—from Uganda and Mexico—stayed on. The room smells of

The Clooney Connection

Celebrity humanitarian installs "spy satellites" over southern Sudan



"We are the anti-genocide paparazzi," says actor/humanitarian George Clooney, who launched the Satellite Sentinel Project (satsentinel.org), private spy satellites that have been monitoring troop movements in southern Sudan since December—thus casting a spotlight on the atrocities being committed against civilians in real-time (images are made public within 24 hours of an event, to remind Sudanese leaders that they are being watched). "I want war criminals to enjoy the same celebrity status as me . . . if you know your actions are going to be covered, you tend to behave much differently."



MARCH 6

Sightings of two destroyed villages in the town of Tajalei



MARCH 21 & 28

Encampment of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) at Goli



MAY 24

Movements of SAF troops, tanks, and artillery at El Obeid



AUGUST 6

Mass graves at Khalil Yagoup Garden in Kadugli



SHELTERING SKY

A young Nuba family finds a new home in the caves of the mountains surrounding their village of Kurchi: the remains of a civilian home, after being bombed by the Sudanese air force. *Opposite page:* Rebels of the Sudanese Peoples' Liberation Army (SPLA) monitor the frontlines near the village of Alhamra.

perform several operations at the same time: "I stop operating on one patient, run over to the other to put him under, and hope that the first one doesn't choose that moment to die."

He is grieved at the loss of his anesthetist. "Someone like that is irreplaceable," Catena says, once again adjusting his glasses. "You can't get trained medical personnel here." He is slowly running out of medicine. Since the landing strip in nearby Kauda was bombed, no more aid shipments have been arriving from Kenya or South Sudan. South Kordofan is cut off from the outside world. Hardly anyone comes out, and almost nothing goes in. The future here is seldom farther away than the next morning.

On clean sheets in the hospital ward, traumatized, speechless people stare mutely into space. Catena hurries through the halls, checking the bandages on a young boy whose face is half missing after being hit by shrapnel, patting the head of 11-year-old Marcela who lost a foot when a bomb exploded while she was standing at a watering hole holding a plastic canister. Now she totters through the hospital on crutches and hides her stump with pink shower shoes. Zainab Daud, 61,

lies in a room with burns on her face. A bomb that exploded next to her hut in the village of Dilami knocked her out and set the roof on fire. Only at the last second did one of her sons manage to drag her out, unconscious and half burnt.

"Antonovs!" Catena says, moving to the window. "The goddamned Antonovs!" They fly over the hospital every day, like the rising and falling of the tides, and every day he fights the desire to leave the Nuba Mountains. "But I can't leave these people in the lurch," he says. "They need me." Of course he is terrified. But he is less afraid of dying than of being seriously injured. "I've seen what those bombs can do," he explains. These are thoughts he does his best to repress, because he works with his hands and it doesn't help if they're trembling. He says he does what he can. An almost defiant platitude. He stares at his shoes as if ashamed. The rest, he says, is trust in God.

Since the rainy season began a few weeks ago, the war has been moved to a back burner. The rain turns the roads—loose sand and clay—into one long morass where even four-wheel-drive vehicles bog down.

disinfectant and sweat.

The hospital is a transit camp for ruined bodies and souls. Already in the dawn light, new arrivals are collecting in the hospital courtyard. Catena is a tall, gangly New Yorker with dark circles under his eyes, a receding hairline, and glasses that constantly slide down his nose. When he talks about his work, his voice gets deeper and deeper until finally it is little more than a rumbling. Always the same suffering, the same stories. Only the faces change. He says that seriously injured people are brought in every few minutes, and sometimes he has to decide who will live and who must die. Once they brought in, on a flatbed truck, a young man whose legs had been ripped off by a mine. When he touched him, he died of shock. Sometimes he has to



He heard a soft droning from the sky, and saw the plane—a Russian Antonov, shimmering silver in the sunlight. Seconds later, the first bomb hit.

It is a long, hard road to the front. We pass abandoned villages, huts devoid of life, and SPLA checkpoints.

In a rebel camp on the Alhamra front, a slight young man named Mohammed Ali sits under an acacia tree, looking fearfully at a world he no longer understands. He sits in the shadow of a tank captured by SPLA fighters a few weeks ago. Next to him, a boy leans on the tank, leafing through the user's manual for a grenade launcher and scratching his head.

Ali is 24 years old and narrow as a birch sapling. His weary eyes blink at the evening light. He looks over at a group of rebels who are laughingly playing dominos and smirking as they punch each other in the ribs, their AK-47s and bazookas never out of reach. They pay him no attention. For them, he is a nobody. They want nothing to do with him. He is tolerated as a guest, but no one trusts him, even though he is a Nuba, one of them. For three years, Ali was a private in the Sudanese army. Then the war began. His eyelids tremble, and he closes his eyes as if he wanted to see neither the present nor the past.

Suddenly there is an uproar in the camp. Rebels who a moment ago seemingly regarded themselves as invulnerable stare at the sky with round, stricken eyes like frightened children. A white helicopter flies over the camp, very close and low. Men and boys look for cover under trees, jump into bushes, aiming their rifles and bazookas at

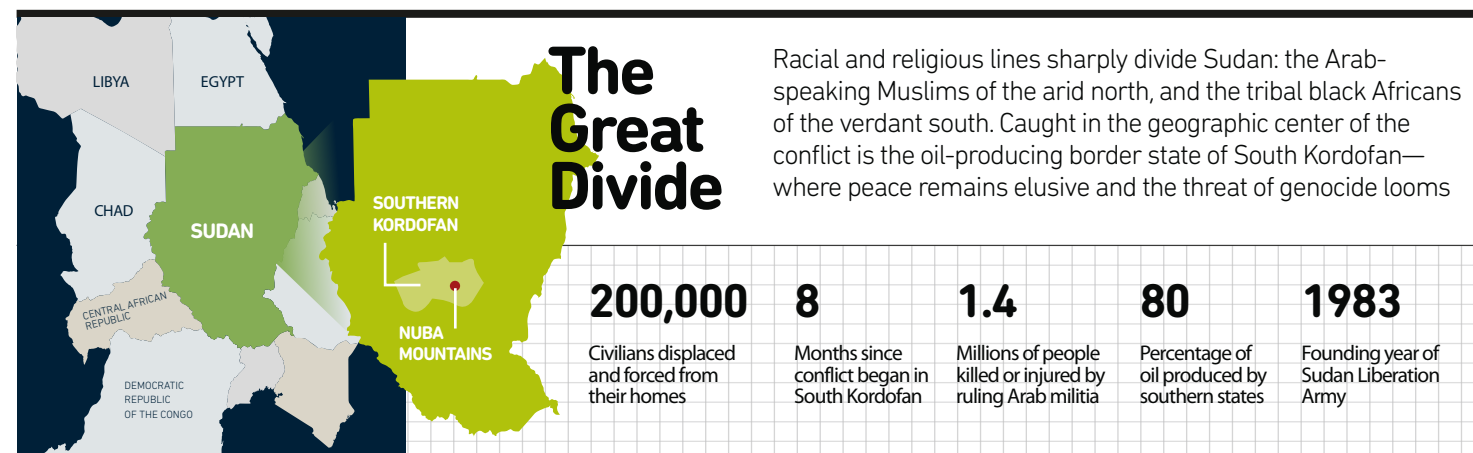
the sky. "The enemy!" they yell, their faces masks of terror and hate. Ali's hands start to tremble. His body tenses. He seems to shrink physically. He hyperventilates. From somewhere, there is the dull thud of an anti-aircraft gun. The helicopter circles a few more times and then turns away. Tension gives way to relaxation. The soldiers return to playing dominos. They ridicule the helicopter pilot as a cowardly dog, praise their own courage, pat each other's backs, laugh. Their eyes are still cold.

"I never want to fight again," Ali says. "Never again!" And then he tells of those days in July in Kaduqli, the provincial capital of South Kordofan, where his unit was stationed. As soon as the fighting began, his comrades started avoiding him, the black African—"the traitor," he heard them whisper behind his back. They believed he must be passing information to the rebels.

On a Thursday in July, his unit was given orders to visit the United Nations peacekeeping mission (UNMIS) in Kaduqli with a list of the Nuba who worked there. We need workers, the soldiers said, and the Egyptian UN soldiers believed them. Ali drove the truck in which eight men were driven out of town. In the no man's land of the savanna, near the village of Alshire, they were made to get out of the truck and dig a hole. Then they were bound, blindfolded, and shot. When his Arab comrades began disarming the Nuba in

their ranks a few days later, Ali took the hint. He deserted and joined the rebels. Now he is stuck here on the threshold between life and death. He says he has no idea whether his family is still alive. The last he heard, they were trying to survive, somewhere in the mountains. Like so many these days.

In Kurchi, the father of two dead girls, Musa al-Abir, hikes through the mountains looking for something edible—a patch of millet, a tree with fruit. His eight-year-old daughter, Heba, clings to his hand. Since the air raid at the market, she has refused to leave his side. The shrapnel in her knee and eye are painful. Heba cries a lot, and at night it takes her a long time to fall asleep. Rain clouds darken the sky. Then al-Abir hears the droning of engines. It slowly comes nearer, louder and louder. "Antonov!" the refugees cry. Their shouts echo from the rock walls of the canyon. Children run in panic, shoehorning themselves into narrow cracks in the rock. Women huddle into shallow caves. A wild chaos. Al-Abir grabs his daughter by the arm and runs with her up the hill until he reaches the mouth of the cave. They slip inside. Heba cries. Her little body trembles as she nestles against her father. His eyes closed, he runs his hand through her hair. Shortly thereafter, they hear the impact of the bombs—a dull rumbling somewhere farther south. And again a veil is laid over his eyes. Then it begins to rain. □



Racial and religious lines sharply divide Sudan: the Arab-speaking Muslims of the arid north, and the tribal black Africans of the verdant south. Caught in the geographic center of the conflict is the oil-producing border state of South Kordofan—where peace remains elusive and the threat of genocide looms

200,000	8	1.4	80	1983
Civilians displaced and forced from their homes	Months since conflict began in South Kordofan	Millions of people killed or injured by ruling Arab militia	Percentage of oil produced by southern states	Founding year of Sudan Liberation Army