News
Ministry



A Sudanese refugee camp in Chad. (Courtesy of Wikipedia Commons)

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The dramatic rescue of a group of nuns and Catholic officials from war-torn Sudan last year highlights the shifting dynamics in a largely overlooked conflict, which may be the world's worst in terms of human suffering.

Through last August, a handful of Salesian nuns worked to keep a small school and religious center in Khartoum open. As siege-like conditions worsened, they coordinated with Sudanese officials for an escape. An investigation by Religion Unplugged has revealed new details about the operation that were previously undisclosed.

This evacuation was coordinated with Sudanese intelligence officials (GIS), with the counter-terrorism unit playing a critical role, according to multiple sources who spoke to Religion Unplugged.

Muzamil, who declined to give his first name due to the sensitivity of the operation, said the Catholic evacuees had been living in a Khartoum compound that was part of the Dar Mariam Primary School. Before the war, most of the school's pupils were refugees from South Sudan.

Despite the Rapid Support Forces surrounding the area since April 2023, the Armed Forces never lost control of the compound. The RSF and SAF have been locked in a brutal civil war that has displaced millions across Sudan. This conflict, marked by extreme violence and human rights abuses, has forced families to flee their homes, creating a massive humanitarian crisis.

Initially, the nuns at the school attempted to organize their own evacuation, but they were unable to pass through RSF lines.

"An earlier attempt by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to evacuate the group was thwarted due to the Janjaweed's [RSF's] targeting of the convoy. Following this, the church formally requested the Sudanese authorities to evacuate their nationals from the besieged area. The SAF successfully carried out the evacuation to Omdurman and then to Port Sudan," said the SAF in announcing the evacuation's success in August.

The use of the term "Janjaweed" is a pejorative reference to the RSF's origins in the notorious "Janjaweed" militias, which were responsible for massacres in Darfur in the early 2000s. Those war crimes drew global condemnation. The campaign led to as

many as 200,000 deaths and sparked international outrage.

Former President George W. Bush labeled the actions of the group as genocide, a move the Sudanese government saw as an attempt to appease the Christian right. Efforts to contact RSF representatives to provide their account of the events surrounding the nuns' evacuation were unsuccessful.

Despite the international outcry over Darfur in the early 2000s, the war in Sudan has largely gone unnoticed in a world distracted by the crises in Ukraine and Gaza. Estimates from last month suggest that as many as 130,000 people may have died in the current Sudan Civil War.

A new start

When Sr. Teresa Lushuka came to Sudan in 1989, she hoped for stability. That year, Col. Omar al-Bashir seized power in a bloodless coup and would rule the country for the next 30 years. Although a civil war raged in the South, Lushuka found Khartoum to be relatively peaceful.

At the start of the current civil war, Lushuka, along with other nuns — all in their 60s — worked at a school in the tranquil Lamab neighborhood of Khartoum. She was passionate about her work and especially proud of a class designed for uneducated youths who were too old to catch up with regular grades and too young for adult school. The school welcomed both Muslim and Christian students, although it was primarily focused on South Sudanese refugees. Fr. Jacob Thelekkadan, an Indian national, had relocated to the school after it began operating the St. Joseph Vocational Center in Khartoum.

Lushuka recalled that, on the first day of the war on April 15, parents rushed to collect their children. However, fleeing the conflict proved impossible for many families, leaving them shattered. By the end of May, those with few options were returning, including homeless children and mothers with young babies. The conflict had turned children into soldiers, and many parents hoped the school would offer safety.

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With the onset of the war, Sudan's education system collapsed. According to the United Nations, more than 90% of Sudan's school-age children are not receiving an education. However, education, though limited, continued at the Christian school. Food was scarce and rationed within the compound. Lushuka recalls a small Muslim girl who would pass through an RSF checkpoint to bring a few packets of lentils or sugar to the school.

This situation persisted until November 2023, when the school was bombed twice — once on the 3rd and again on the 5th. The bombings destroyed parts of the upper floor of the building.

"Thanks be to God, no one died. Only a few of us were injured, but not seriously. God protected us," Lushuka said.

It was a near miss. At the time, 45 children, one priest, one teacher and a group of men were staying at the school. The six nuns were joined by 14 other women who were also at the school, according to the Vatican. A little over a month later, the school was strafed with automatic weapons fire as fighting raged nearby, and occasional gunfire became a frequent occurrence.

The SAF visited the school regularly, bringing food and medical aid. The nuns and their staff were among the last foreigners remaining in Khartoum. Maj. General Nasr Al-Din Abdul Fattah, commander of the Sudanese Armored Corps, struck up a friendship with the group. The general even brought them an unexpected gift: A satellite Wi-Fi device so those in the compound could reach their loved ones and the outside world. For those trapped inside, it was a special moment.

Christians targeted

Before the war, over 5% of Sudan's population was Christian. However, since the start of the conflict, the Christian community has been disproportionately targeted. Just two days after the war began, the RSF attacked the Anglican Cathedral in central Khartoum on April 17, 2023.

Both sides have targeted places of worship when it suited their military needs. A report from May 2024 found that only two of the thirteen Catholic parishes in Khartoum were able to hold services due to the war.

As the months passed, food became even scarcer, and those at the school survived on Madida porridge, a basic mix of corn and flour. The RSF, realizing that the continued presence of the nuns and their staff was draining SAF resources, refused to let them leave.

Nasr Al-Din Abdul Fattah's visits became more frequent. On one of these trips, he gave the nuns urgent news.

"He told us to be ready in just two hours for our evacuation," Lushuka recalled.

Much of the Lamab area lies along the White Nile, and intelligence services arranged boats for the clandestine midnight evacuation. However, the nuns refused to leave behind those they had cared for during the preceding months. Nearly two dozen South Sudanese nationals were also evacuated from Dar Mariam in the same operation. All evacuees underwent a full medical examination by the SAF before being released.

The nuns were shocked to see that life in some areas of Khartoum controlled by the SAF was almost normal. Yet, everyone had a story of loss during the civil war. Not long after their departure, the nuns left the country, albeit reluctantly.

The war in Sudan is increasingly recognized as one of the worst conflicts in the world. Disease and starvation are stalking victims far from the battlefield, and sexual violence is systematically being used as a weapon of war.

"You can find videos online of RSF crimes — they're proud of their bad deeds," said Mekki Elmograbi, the former Sudanese spokesperson in the United States. "They did the same in the early 2000s. Back then, the world was very concerned about the suffering in one region of Sudan. Now the entire country is in flames, and suffering, but the world is silent — or worse, trying to impose a weak and false peace deal with the RSF."