

# The Displaced: Chuol

At 9, without his parents, he was forced to flee to the swamps.

Photographs by LYNSEY ADDARIO; Text by MARC SANTORA NOV. 5, 2015

Chuol was only 5 in 2011, the year South Sudan, after decades of war, became the world's newest nation. He was living with his parents, grandparents and other relatives in a village near the city of Leer, not yet old enough to understand the hope and joy sweeping through the small East African country.

But that optimism turned to despair two years later, when a power struggle between President Salva Kiir and the former vice president Riek Machar triggered a civil war. The battle for control of the country — and its oil fields — pitted the nation's two largest ethnic groups against each other: The Dinka aligned with the president, and the Nuer aligned with the vice president.

As the fighting raged, the tactics used by combatants on both sides turned ever more cruel. Human rights groups and other independent observers have documented the atrocities: Rape, the kidnapping and recruitment of children to serve as soldiers, whole villages pillaged and razed to the ground. The war has left 4.6 million people — more than a third of the country's population — without sufficient food. About 2.2 million have been displaced from their homes. Many of them are children.

One night in May, the fighting came to Chuol's village. He remembers every terrifying detail. Women were raped and men murdered. His father and grandfather were herded into a small hut and burned alive. Chuol's grandmother later described to me how a group of fighters argued over who would rape a 12-year-old girl. When they could not agree, they shot her dead.

With his mother and grandmother, Chuol fled into the swamp. In the chaos, his mother ran in another direction, and they lost her. For months they did not know if she was dead or alive.

For weeks, he and his grandmother swam and waded through snake-infested waters, dodging crocodiles, eating little more than grass. Chuol was constantly afraid that he might die. If a soldier did not kill him, he thought, an animal surely would.

“We would swim for so long until we could swim no more,” he recalled. “But we could sometimes still hear the gunfire and needed to keep moving. So we pulled ourselves along by the reeds.”

In July, they arrived on one of the small islands that dot the vast swamp, joining some 80,000 other displaced people. (The New York Times agreed not to name the exact location out of concern for the family’s safety.) For months, the conflict prevented widespread humanitarian aid from reaching the increasingly desperate masses hiding on this muddy sliver of land. But by late summer, a lull in fighting and a tentative peace agreement allowed food and other supplies from groups like Unicef to be airlifted again to the region.

This fall, Chuol and his grandmother were able to get to a camp in Juba, South Sudan’s capital, before traveling to another camp in Kenya to join other relatives. Chuol’s grandmother told him she is planning to go back to South Sudan to look for his mother. Unicef has received reports that she has been seen alive in the country.

When I spoke to Chuol this past summer, he was still on the island in the swamp. He recalled how his mother worked for humanitarian organizations before they were forced to flee — clearing an airstrip and doing other odd jobs to help them get by.

“Sometimes, before we were displaced, I would dream about being able to learn more and then going to work for a humanitarian organization,” he said. “Or maybe even becoming a doctor and working in a hospital where I can help people.” He looked down at his hands, pausing for a moment, lost in his thoughts. “If I grow up and leave this place,” he said, “maybe I can still become a doctor.”

Marc Santora is a reporter covering breaking news in New York City for The Times. He has reported from Iraq, Africa and across the United States.

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