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Sudanese voters in Nashville may give their war-torn homeland its freedom

The Absentee Vote

by BRANTLEY HARGROVE

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December 16, 2010

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ERIC ENGLAND

Nyang Maiwen showing his voter registration card

Atak Tong's eyes were bloodshot and road-wired, but his grin was broad as he shook hands with 15 or 20 Sudanese immigrants from all over the Southeast. Mostly men, they stood needling, joking, embracing and catching up outside a small storefront on Fourth Avenue. Here, the diaspora of their beleaguered homeland is less a constellation than a web.

The men crowded beneath the awning of The Lost Boys Foundation at Fourth and Lea, ducking the drizzle staining the asphalt. The building forms a modest gallery in a drive-through part of downtown where few stop on their way to the interstate. From the small brick building's plate-glass windows, traditional carved masks peer with empty eyes onto the street.

For the estimated 8,000 Sudanese immigrants living in and around Nashville, however, this is a cultural center. And at the moment, it is helping to decide the future of a people, and a country, on the other side of the world.

The men standing outside are the children of a broken country, riven by a civil war that's raged on and off since the 1950s. They're here because Nashville is one of eight cities in the United States that serves as a registration and voting center for a referendum on the destiny of Sudan.

The vote will determine whether South Sudan, their former home, will

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ERIC ENGLAND
Makhat Makuaach in front of The Lost Boys Foundation



declare its independence from the political and commercial power centers of the north. If so, it will create two sovereign nations that never should have been one in the first place.

Outside on the street, near Scott Bolt & Screw, a teal Nissan Pathfinder bears a large orange poster across its windows with masking tape. "Referendum Centre," the sign read in English, and also in Arabic with broad calligraphic strokes. Registration began last week and ends Dec. 22. So far, for the Jan. 9–15 vote, some 3.2 million people have registered in South Sudan.

The men hope their vote, in its small but decisive way, will end the subjugation of the mostly animist and Christian people of South Sudan by the largely Arab and Muslim North. That responsibility made Atak Tong leave his home in Jacksonville, Fla., at 2 a.m. with 17 other Sudanese men and women. What's more, they made the nearly nine-hour haul to Nashville just to register. They'll do it all over again Jan. 9 to vote.

Tong has been in the United States for eight years. It's been much longer than that since he was able to return to his boyhood home. Dressed in dandy finery — a buff embroidered suit with sharp-cut lapels and knife-point alligator loafers — he says when he finally can go home, it will be to an independent South, as one of thousands of prodigal sons.

"It will be much, more different," Tong says. "We'll have freedom. We'll have a country. We will be separated. We've been fighting for 21 years." Makhat Makuaach, another man huddled underneath the awning, echoes his enthusiasm.

"This is an investment," Makuaach says. "This thing came about as a price for the blood that's been spilled."

Makuaach fled his home when he was just a boy as the Sudanese government's army cut a bloody swath through the South, in an attempt to quash a rebellion sparked by its long history of malign neglect and political repression of non-Muslims. Like so many, he grew up in refugee camps in Kenya and Ethiopia before a resettlement program placed him in the United States in 2001. He harbors no illusions about the challenges a fledgling South Sudan will face.

"We only have 40 miles of paved roads," Makuaach says.

That isn't the half of it. To understand why, it's necessary to revisit Sudan's bloody recent history and the roots — and the bitter fruit — of its torment.

Sudan has been at war for most of its existence, since it was occupied by the British. Under the Crown's rule, it was administered as two separate countries because they were so utterly different in nearly every way. The North was Arab, and it more closely resembles the people and deserts of Egypt. The South was more like Kenya and Uganda, with vast tracts of arable land, swamps and forests.

But when Sudan finally won independence in 1956, the two disparate regions were united, setting the stage for more than half a century of bloodshed. When the newly established government in the northern city of Khartoum reneged on its promise to establish a federal state — which would allow the South a modicum of representation in the newly minted and unified Sudan — conflict broke out. For nearly two decades, civil strife prevailed.

A series of Arab regimes concentrated power in the North. Meanwhile, the South withered, undeveloped and voiceless in its own country. That changed in 1969, when Gen. Gaafar Nimieri led a military coup. He proclaimed Sudan a socialist, not Islamist, state — which had the effect of alienating both Muslims and communists. Faced with few options, he sought support from the South, offering inclusion to the disenfranchised. In 1972, civil war ended with the signing of the Addis Ababa Treaty, which granted the South more autonomy than it had ever known.

It didn't last. The treaty received no support from Muslims and secularists in the North. So Nimieri hedged his bets. Figuring a disgruntled North posed a greater threat to his regime than the weakened South, he attempted to annex parts of South Sudan into his newly federated country. The treaty was no longer worth the paper it was printed on. And there was a new reason to hijack a portion of the South he'd already ceded: In 1979, Chevron struck oil there — the currency of conflict. And so, in 1983, civil war ignited once again.

Soon after, Nimieri's regime was overthrown by Sudan's current president, Omar al-Bashir. He abolished political parties and newspapers, and Islamic law was declared countrywide — including over many Christian and animist residents of the South. That turned a smoldering insurrection into a conflagration. The Sudanese army pushed south, pursuing Southern rebels led by the Sudan People's Liberation Army.

The results were horrific. Two million were killed in the conflict, with another four million displaced. The Sudanese now bore the terrible distinction of having the largest displaced population in the world.

International efforts to broker a treaty between Khartoum and the South were unsuccessful for years. U.S.-led talks stalled because of Khartoum's support for al-Qaeda and international terrorist activity. But President George W. Bush managed to open a dialogue. In 2005, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed — granting autonomy to the South for six years, to be followed by a referendum on independence.

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As the gaze of the United States shifted to ongoing atrocities in the western Sudanese region of Darfur, however — not to mention two ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan — much of the treaty remained unimplemented. But the referendum is taking place — and a world away, on a downtown Nashville street that resembles nothing in their former lives, men and women whose homeland is a bittersweet distant memory now hope to chart its future.

More than a few wrinkles complicate the referendum and its expected passage. Not the least of these is the indictment and arrest warrant recently issued for President Omar al-Bashir by the International Criminal Court, for war crimes perpetrated in Darfur.

Then there's the central region of Abyei, which sits on a quarter of the nation's oil deposits. It's likely that neither side will cede it without a fight, and both sides appear to be preparing for war. Among the diplomatic cables recently released by WikiLeaks was a notice that a shipment of T-72 tanks captured by Somali pirates in 2008 — which Kenya claimed was bound for its port — was actually headed to South Sudan.

As recently as last week, the North was accused of bombing the South. It's in this hair-trigger climate that Khartoum and Juba, the South's new capital, are expected to divvy up oil revenues and demarcate national boundary lines.

But apart from Northern aggression and the potential outbreak of civil war, questions remain about the impoverished South's ability to govern itself — to provide the essential services and infrastructure the country needs to grow.

Above all, will it have the sort of expertise and human capital that fledgling countries require in order to thrive? There are generations missing from the South, driven to sprawling refugee camps in neighboring countries. The region has lost so many of the boys who would be men now, prey to the gun, privation and wild animals along the way. There are irretrievable generations of Sudanese resettled all over the world, who may never again call Sudan home. And there are still others who will watch and wait, wondering if peace can last.

"A lot of those kids, myself included, had never seen the good of Sudan," says Gatluak Thach, director of the Nashville International Center for Empowerment. "Many of them left when they were 5 years old, 6 years old. You don't have any exposure to the country, and you move from country to country, camp to camp, and you don't really know what your identity is."

Atem Kuot is an 18-year-old high school student in Mobile, Ala. He plays for the school soccer and football teams. Unlike those of the thousands who walked and starved for so long on their way to Kenya or Ethiopia or Uganda, his chest and shoulders are broad. His English is flawless, uninflected.

Kuot knows nothing of Sudan aside from the stories his mother tells him. They fled the country when he was very young, and he hasn't been back since. He grew up in a sprawling refugee camp in Kenya called Kakuma. Four years ago, his family was given the opportunity to move here and pursue a better life and an education for their son. Kuot is now flourishing. But will he ever return to the country he scarcely knows?

"If we get the referendum, I'll go to visit," Kuot says. "But I love it here. You couldn't ask for a better life than this." He may always be an absentee voter, he says, but his cast vote isn't about his future in Sudan.

"I'm voting for my people," Kuot says.

Clarification, 2:33 p.m., Dec. 17: Initial references to the Dinka people of South Sudan have been changed to reflect the tribal diversity of the region.

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