

United States Institute of Peace
Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Sudan Experience Project

Interview # 46 – Executive Summary

Interviewed by: W. Haven North
Initial interview date: November 27, 2006
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The interviewee is a documentary filmmaker, who is interested in what life is like in southern Sudan after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), i.e., the effects of its implementation. According to his interview with one Southern Sudan county commissioner, there is not much difference now than before the CPA; the one exception is that the North is no longer bombing the South. There are continuing problems with food security and inter-tribal violence. There has been some building going on and some improvements.

But there has been a proliferation of small arms. Inter-tribal violence is resulting from disputes over grazing rights and cattle thefts, but there are many different groups with many different issues. Each county has an area set aside for the displaced people. The local governments are training police officers; they are reducing the violence in the cities but the violence continues outside the cities.

There are problems with disarming the local population. When one group has given up its guns, it is taken advantage of by another group with guns. All groups have to be disarmed, if the tribal rivalries are not exacerbated; this is a process that has not happened yet; there is confusion about how to proceed.

The interviewee visited the districts: Yirol East, Yirol West and Awayrial. In Yirol West, where Yirol town is located, conditions seemed ok and people are rebuilding. In the Yirol East, the town of Shambe has the “biggest humanitarian disaster” in the area; Southerners are returning by boat from Khartoum in large numbers—1200 in first six months of 2006; ten percent died along the way. There are widespread outbreaks of cholera. There are no NGO services in the area; nearest clinic nine-hour walk from Shambe.

The people are definitely aware of the CPA (but without details) from local officials and NGOs—no more bombing. There are no radios outside of towns.

Lesson: A greater sensitivity towards tribal differences, cultural differences when dealing with disarmament; a stronger health care program, particularly where refugees are returning, e.g. Shambe, and Yirol East.

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Q: To provide a context for this interview, what has been your association with Sudan and with the CPA?

A: I am a documentary filmmaker, so my relationship is purely from a journalistic perspective. I have been interested in southern Sudan for a while now, since probably 2002 or 2003, and I followed some of the proceedings, as the CPA was coming into effect. And I finally was able to put together a small project on what life is like in southern Sudan post-CPA. So my relationship to Sudan and the CPA is really seeing what life is like in southern Sudan.

Q: Are you familiar with the CPA process or just about southern Sudan?

A: Just about southern Sudan. I am not familiar with the process of the CPA, beyond a cursory history; I am not familiar with the details of how it came into effect.

Q: So your knowledge is in relation to the implementation of the CPA in the South, is that right?

A: Yes, but even more specifically, how that is affecting individuals, what individuals' lives are like post-CPA, as the CPA is being implemented, how it is affecting people, regular people on the ground.

Q: Then, how would you describe the condition of the people in the South prior to the CPA going into effect?

A: I did not go before the CPA, so I could not say with accuracy. The best impression I have was from one of the commissioners, one of the county commissioners whom I spoke to and he said there is not much difference now, before the CPA and after the CPA, except that they are no longer being bombed. But other than that, they are having difficulties with food security, and there is actually an increase in inter-tribal violence. The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) until recently was still causing a problem in a good section of southern Sudan. So my sense is that he probably is exaggerating, as I have seen the building that is been going on; probably there have been improvements, but people are still definitely struggling in terms of food security, in terms of security generally. The proliferation of arms is still happening.

Q: There was some comment that with the CPA agreement there was less bombing or there was less warfare. Was that your sense, too?

A: Yes, with the CPA, the North is no longer bombing the South; that was the big relief. When I talked to the commissioners, they did not have to worry about that anymore.

Q: So what were your findings; what were you documenting?

A: My interest was in the proliferation of small arms and how that affects inter-tribal violence and internally displaced people and returnees. Internally, people are actually continuing to be displaced, because of this tribal violence. The availability of AK-47's, essentially (I think they say it costs four cows) is enabling long standing tribal rivalries to escalate the violence between these different tribal groups. I was in an exclusively Dinka area where I was working over the summer, but there were at least three different sub-tribes of the Dinka in that area that were constantly fighting.

Q: Do you understand the issues that they were fighting over?

A: Grazing rights, essentially possession of cattle. It was not exactly clear to me that it was clear to them. I was able to talk to both groups involved in this conflict and everyone blamed the other tribe, that "They stole one of our cows and then we had to retaliate." It is just a circle of violence that seems to go back a millennium.

Q: But then you said this was displacing people?

A: This is displacing people. I saw a good number of people who had been forced to leave their land.

Q: Where did they go?

A: Each place had an area where they could take displaced people; and there was a process to help them a little bit. Often these are people on the borderlands between the tribal groups, so if there were raids from one tribal group, people on the borderlands would have to flee. They would move deeper into that tribal area and it was not really their land. Their cattle would all be taken; their possessions would all be taken.

Q: Was this general, throughout the South?

A: I cannot speak to the entire situation. I read about this happening outside of the counties that I was visiting, so it seems like it definitely is happening. There are so many different groups that have different issues. The violence I was seeing was specific to eastern groups, but I was reading about violence happening 100 kilometers away with a different group of people, across on the other side of the Nile, similar sorts of things. So I think this is a general phenomenon.

Q: Was there any evidence of the Government of Southern Sudan was trying to moderate any of this?

A: Yes. I was in three counties and I spoke with two of the three commissioners; they were in the midst of training police and building a prison. They said that that has actually reduced the amount of violence that people are seeing. Really what it has done is it is pushing [the violence] out of the cities because the cities are seeing the police first and so the efficacy of their work sort of trails off the farther away you get from the city. But at least it is not in the city. There had been some tribal violence in the city.

Q: What were the three counties or areas that you visited?

A: Yirol West, Yirol East and Awayrial.

Q: How do you describe the situation in those particular areas, the condition of the people?

A: In Yirol town, the conditions seem okay. People are rebuilding. There are still buildings that are falling apart, but those are being rebuilt. The local clinic is being turned into a hospital. They are expanding it. It actually was a hospital at one point and then they lost their doctors and it just became a clinic. Now they are refurbishing it. And there is de-mining work that is going on and a bridge has been built that connects the road from Yirol town to Rumbek that has enabled more supplies to come in; before there was a ferry that had to take you across the river. So Yirol West, where Yirol town is located, seems more developed. Visiting both Awayrial and Yirol East I saw many more problems with access to clean water; there is more violence happening in those two areas, because they are further away from towns. Awayrial is pretty desperate in terms of its access to water, in terms of its food security and there is a good amount of violence happening.

Yirol East probably has the single largest humanitarian crisis in this area, because people are returning from Khartoum, southerners are returning from Khartoum, southerners who had fled to Khartoum during the war are returning to a town called Shambe. Shambe is on the Nile, the problem is that the road is terrible and during the rainy season simply inaccessible for vehicles; it is a nine hour walk to the nearest other town. So in Shambe, I actually was able to get a vehicle and see the town, which was in the midst of a small cholera outbreak. There had been a larger cholera outbreak earlier in the year, but when I was there in July it had not been confirmed as cholera. They had several deaths, but it had not been tested to be cholera.

But returnees are still coming into Shambe, and because there are no vehicles there, it has become a bit of a refugee camp of sorts. And there is a large area where a number people are buried; it was a hundred and something people are buried from the cholera outbreak earlier in the year, I think that was April. When I was there, I was the first person (I was not a representative of an NGO) who came from outside Shambe in over a month. So no NGOs, no medical clinics, had been there in over a month. They were receiving reports that there were people with cholera but the Red Cross is not allowed to go there because

the main road is still mined. There is an alternate road that takes a couple hours longer but because of the mines the Red Cross is not allowed to go there. Because it was during the rainy season, an Italian NGO Was not able to go. And it was just sheer luck that when I was there; we had three days without any rain and so we risked taking a vehicle to the town. But that area is suffering a lot.

Q: When was this?

A: This was July of this year, 2006.

Q: We were talking about some NGO activity. Were there any NGOs or any government aid coming to these areas?

A: In Shambe, no. Shambe was not receiving any NGO assistance. Everyone knew it was the biggest crisis in the area, but it was a combination of it being so inaccessible and being a return point for anyone coming from Khartoum or from farther south, who taking a boat on the Nile, it has this influx of people. Every two weeks or so a boat shows up with a hundred and something people, but nobody can get there to help them, during the rainy season.

Q: And the southern government was not active there?

A: The southern government was not active there. There was a town council but that was it.

Q: And in the other two areas, what was happening?

A: Shambe is in Yirol East. Some of the things that I saw, a village had been entirely abandoned because of inter-tribal fighting. There were houses but no one living in them. I saw a number of graves from the tribal fighting. One of the most poignant cases was a man who had returned from Kakuma who had been told that there would be a UNHCR representative who would be able to help him and he got there and there was no one. And he had been shot during the war and was injured and could not really rebuild. There was some assistance from the government, the Government of Southern Sudan, in the town, but the additional houses that they had were all full; they did not have enough supplies. They did not have a large enough supply of houses to put returnees in who were trying to put back their lives.

There is some NGO work and there is a local NGO that was doing a good amount but still was understaffed. Actually I saw that in the other districts, such as Awaysrial, even more difficulties dealing with returnees and Indigenous Displaced People (IDPs), because they are very inaccessible as well by road. So there were NGOs that were implementing small-scale plans and helping people out with a certain amount of food and a bucket to wash their clothes in and a small number of items.

Q: Were these international NGOs or local ones?

A: This was a local NGO that was being supported by international groups. The NGOs I did see working in this area was the Irish NGO Concern; the Red Cross was in the greater Yirol area.

Q: Which Red Cross?

A: It was not American. I believe it was Swedish. There was an Italian medical NGO and then there was the de-mining group. That was about it, I believe.

Q: Is there any other aspect of what you observed in these situations that we have not touched on?

A: What seemed promising was that these local governments did seem to be building. They were putting together a police force. They were training police.

Actually, there is a topic that I did not touch on, which is disarmament. They have been having significant problems with disarming the population, because a lot of the people in the cattle camps were given guns during the war in order to function as a militia. There were several battles in this area, trying to take back the town. So they were given guns and they do not want to give up their guns. There are instances where people who, one tribal group has given up their guns and the other tribal group has taken advantage of an unarmed group, by going in having guns. So it is a difficult problem, because in order to make sure that these tribal rivalries are not exacerbated all of them have to be disarmed all at once and that is a process that just has not happened yet.

Q: Is somebody working on it?

A: I was told that at one point there was someone working on it but not at the time I was there. It seemed like people were confused about how to proceed. It seems people in power really did not know what to do, because they had seen the fallout of taking guns from one group of people at a time. I do not think people really had a sense of how they could do it *en masse*.

Q: You get any sense that people were aware of the CPA agreement?

A: Yes, people are definitely aware of the CPA. Everyone definitely had a sense that they are no longer fighting with the North; the North is no longer bombing them, that they are trying something new. People were still very skeptical of the North. People were blaming the North for the attacks by the LRA. People were still wary, but there was this definite sense that we are in a different time, now.

Q: Do you have any understanding of what they understood about the details or aspects of the CPA agreement?

A: That I do not really have a sense of that.

Q: Where were they getting their information about the CPA?

A: They were getting it from the local commissioners and the local NGO that was working in collaboration with the local government and the international NGOs.

Q: There was some talk about providing radios to people. Did you see any evidence of that?

A: No, I did not see evidence of any of the citizens having much in the way of radios. In the towns there were some radios, but once you got out of town, there was little to none.

Q: But there was some hope that the CPA was going to make the situation better, is that the impression you had?

A: Yes, that is my impression; at least they are no longer at war with North. They may be at war with their neighbors, but that has been going on for years.

Q: You were doing a documentary. What was its focus?

A: The focus will be essentially what I just told you, focusing on life in this area. The end goal is to make a series of short films about life in southern Sudan in the interim period before the referendum.

Q: You are doing a series, you said?

A: Yes. I hope to go back to different parts of southern Sudan and to explore different issues that are seen in different areas. So in this area I am focusing on returnees, IDPs, on health. I would like to be able to go and see churches, see something about oil and the way that that is being dealt with, the formation of the government. These are future plans. The first short film will be about all the things I just mentioned.

Q: Are there some other aspects that we have not touched on that you want to comment about? Did you start seeing hope for this area?

A: I do have hope, because there is a lot of international concern, because people seemed ready to rebuild. People seemed ready to be at peace, to form governments and to really have strength so that, if in 2011 they decide to secede, then, they will be able to govern themselves. I met some very good leaders. I had a lot of faith in two of the commissioners who I spoke with and a number of the people who were running the local NGOs. They inspired a lot of confidence.

Q: Did you have any dealing with the Government of Southern Sudan in Rumbek?

A: No, I did not. I did not make it to Rumbek.

Q: Did you have any problem with access? People complain about being restricted and not being allowed to go to the area.

A: Absolutely not. The first thing I did was introduce myself to the commissioners.

Q: Which commissioners?

A: The commissioners of Yirol West and Yirol East; they were welcoming. I had access to pretty much anything I wanted to see.

Q: You came in from Nairobi, I guess?

A: Yes, I went from Nairobi to Loki and then from Loki to Yirol.

Q: And these commissioners were very cooperative in terms of allowing you to document the situation?

A: Yes, very cooperative.

Q: Explain to me who they are. They are the ones in charge of a particular district, is that it?

A: Yes, in charge of these particular districts.

Q: And did you get any sense that they have any staff or any capacity to govern?

A: They have some staff. They have buildings and they have soldiers at their disposal and they have people working for them. And they work very closely in tandem with the NGO, the local NGO. They seem to be doing the best they can with what they have. They could use some more resources but the whole area could use more resources.

Q: Do you know where they get their resources?

A: I believe they receive support through the Government of Southern Sudan and through the international NGOs that support the work of the local NGO.

Q: Were there any technical assistance people working in the commissioners' office?

A: No.

Q: I was thinking maybe there was some work on capacity building within the commissioners' office.

A: There was capacity building with the NGO but not in the commissioners' offices, as best I saw.

Q: Is there something else we have not touched on? This has been very interesting and it certainly gives an impression of the area.

A: I think I have told you everything I know.

Q: One of the purposes of these interviews is assess lessons learned; what should not have been done or should have been done. What do you think might have been done differently or what is working, even within the focus of what you were working on?

A: A greater sensitivity towards tribal differences, cultural differences, when dealing with disarmament; generally a stronger health care program; more attention needs to be paid to health. The cholera outbreak that happened in the spring involved a hundred people in Yirol, but this was part of a cholera outbreak that occurred across southern Sudan and cholera is really easy to prevent and it could have been dealt with better. That is, unfortunately, what happens in these situations; it always can be dealt with better. But more emphasis is needed on health at places where the returnees are coming in.

The worker from the Red Cross said something that I found very telling, which was, I asked her why the returnees are continuing to come in to Shambe, that port town, even though it is the rainy season and they essentially get stuck there. And she said she has no idea, they should know better, they should know because they just cannot come. I asked the same question to the people in Shambe: Why did you come? You know it is the rainy season. And they said, "We have been waiting for a boat for six months. There is not enough space. So when the time came, we just had to leave."

That level of misunderstanding, where the NGOs say, "Why are these people coming here?" and the people say, "We have to come here." I think that could have been dealt with much better. If the Red Cross had known that the people were going to come no matter what because they had been waiting six months, they could have, perhaps, saved a few lives by dealing with it better.

Q: You get any sense these people were being pushed out of Khartoum?

A: That was not exactly the sense that I had. They never wanted to be in Khartoum, because it was tough for them there. They were eager to get home. They were eager to leave Khartoum. Was life worse in Khartoum after the CPA or before the CPA, that I could not tell you.

Q: But did these people come from Shambe?

A: They all originally came from this area, the Yirol area, fled during the fighting. They either had relatives in Khartoum or some just sort of accidentally came there because they figured there would not be fighting in the capital.

Q: Do you have any numbers?

A: In terms of people coming back? The people coming back through Shambe was, in the first six months of the year, something like 1200. I believe it was ten per cent died along the way, coming from Khartoum to Shambe.

Q: They came by boat?

A: They came by boat. It was between five and ten per cent that died, either when they came to Shambe, got cholera or a group of people who came who actually died on the boat.

Q: And then nobody was really taking care of them in Shambe?

A: No, nobody was really taking care of them in Shambe. The nearest clinic, as I said, was a nine-hour walk from Shambe.

Q: Anything that you think should be done, more effort by the international community that we should be concentrating on?

A: I have said the things that I have spent the most time thinking about. Perhaps if I get back there I will have some more thoughts.

Q: Is this documentary going to be available some time?

A: I sure hope so. Right now I have not had a chance to edit it. So I hope to get to edit it this winter.

Q: And when are you going back next?

A: It's up in the air right now. I will either try to go back in January or again in July. I have to be in Kenya in January so it makes sense for me to try to go then. It depends on the funding sources.

Q: This has been very interesting; it is a perspective we have not had from most of the interviews, so it is important to have.

A: Glad to have been helpful.