

## Crossing the River Kiir

*Sophia Dawkins*

**P**erched on a plastic chair, a little girl sports a blue traditional fabric — a perfect replica of her mother’s — and a pair of sequined cowboy boots. She is patient and impervious to the flies that buzz around her eyes. This is Juba airport at 8am. Dirt, dust, and pandemonium.

Check-in consists of unmarked trestle tables. People shove and trample to get to the front. Everybody pushes — but with alert eyes. Stationed throughout the crowd, tall Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) soldiers in blue battle fatigues and berets survey the scene. A misdirected shove would not make for a smooth transfer through check-in.

The security check at Juba airport is equally chaotic. Swathes of people queue before a rag behind which one has the joys of a full body search. Women wrapped in Barack Obama-patterned cloths wear shower caps. Smart-suited men flash gold watches. A man in a white tunic dons leopard-skin slippers. Military and more military.

At first, it was difficult to decipher the protocol for shoving — and even more perplexing to understand the flow from check-in, to security, to the gate. Miraculously — and perhaps because I looked hopeless — I was summoned along and pushed forward at every juncture.

The waiting hall was bursting to capacity, pungent from the adjoining pit latrine and gallons of sweat. Clad in black Stetson, South Sudan’s leader watched heroically from the walls. The posters bore the words: “Salva Kiir — congratulations to our president elect!”

In the departure lounge I fervently hoped that I would shed my lost expression before I reached Abyei. Mercy Corps was sending me to this oil-rich pocket of land, nestled at a confluence of the Bahr el-Arab on the edge of South Darfur, to help integrate a civic engagement initiative with a local government capacity building program. It suddenly dawned on me that my boss had made a terrible mistake.

As the thirty-person plane hovered over Juba, I had a dizzying moment. A mosaic of shipping container structures and mud Tukuls adorn a sweeping bend of the Nile in

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a landscape of arid hills. Juba is the great metropolis of southern Sudan — metropolis enough to have a five-arched bridge across the Nile. For a split second (and with some squinting), I thought I saw Florence.

The terrain became flatter and more parched, with tributaries of the Nile snaking into the landscape. As the plane descended, I caught sight of ancient looking red brick edifices with high walls and flat roofs, like pyramids that had lost their tips. A dirt strip came into sight. On landing, we just missed a herd of cattle. As we taxied, the dust cleared to reveal ranks of burnt-out aircraft. “Welcome to Wau,” the air hostess said earnestly. My fellow passenger reassured me: “Either crashed or shot-down.”

A former slave-trading post, Wau is the home town of two NBA basketball players and the British model Alek Wek. It has been the scene of some horrific battles during the civil war. The terminal building bares the war’s marks. Airline personnel check tickets in a half-ruined out-house missing most of its roof. In the dust, a bevy of aid workers awaited their bags. I hadn’t a clue how to find my field plane for the Abyei Area.

Suddenly, somebody flung something into the dust. I crouched down to find a fistful of discarded packing tape. I heard an Australian voice: “Don’t worry. No garbage cans here.” I had run into one of the six people going to Abyei that day. Thankfully, the Pact Sudan NGO representative and his Sudanese colleagues knew exactly where to go. They clasped my bags and we ran back to the airstrip.

Our aircraft looked like a Land Rover with wings. The cockpit opened like a car door and we flung our luggage into an undercarriage as if we were loading up a bus.

You can see so much from a miniscule plane. The journey was truly spectacular. As the airfield approached, I could not discern any structures that resembled an urban or Western building. The view was partial desert, partial Tukul. As we were landing, it felt like we fell from the sky too fast, and we only just made the air strip.

Our clothes stained with red dust, I shook the Pact team’s hands. “We’re flying back in nine days. Join us.” Every night since January I had rehearsed this arrival in my mind. I told my friends that it would take miraculous persuasion for me to leave before summer was out.

### **Neckties and Guns**

An elegant guard with arrow-shaped markings on his forehead beamed through the window and asked me to sign. Packed to bursting-point, our Land Rover rocketed out of the compound and hit the road to Abyei Town.

First stop: Agok. As we turned up the main street, my colleague — who happened to have studied at Brandeis and knew Boston’s main thoroughfares — shrieked and said “Welcome to downtown Agok. This is Mass Ave.” Women balanced calabashes on their heads. Little boys pushed each other in wheel barrows. Young men rode oil drums with wheels, pulled along by donkeys. We also passed the local police post where a

dozen officers in tattered uniforms were performing their morning drill.

In the distance, through all the dirt, I caught sight of two tall, perfectly groomed men in dinner jackets and neckties. My colleague shrieked again and laughed nervously: “These. We don’t want these. No, no, no. Not these.”

“What are they?” I asked.

“Don’t you see? Those men in neckties, they are carrying guns. Special Forces.”

And sure enough, when I peered closer, these tall Dinka men who appeared dressed for a May Ball carried automatic weapons.

The Land Rover bumped past and we ground to a halt in the cloud of livestock that constitutes Agok’s market. A tall, elegant man with feather-like scars on his cheeks wearing a giant crucifix appeared. As one of Agok’s village elders, it was custom for him to ride in the front seat, so I started to descend. Before I could fully dismount, he smiled with kind eyes and gave me a hand back into the passenger seat. Folding his long legs into an impossibly small space, the village elder joined the project team among our notebooks and workshop posters in the back.

Now for Abyei Town proper. The Land Rover trembled and shook across the flat, scrubby landscape, which had just sprouted hints of green from the rains. The sky grew grey and the warm charm of Agok melted away.

After an hour of nauseating driving, we reached a dribble of brown Nilotic water, an SPLA flag, and a checkpoint. This was the River Kiir, the border of the “contentious land,” as my colleague put it. Across the water, we entered a wretched place. Abyei is featureless, dusty, and arid. Its lands bear few fruits, yet beneath its surface, it harbors all the wrong fruits. Save for the oil, people’s will to battle the elements here seems almost beyond comprehension.

As the vehicle entered Abyei Town, we confronted two billowing World Food Program tents, stained with the omnipresent red dust. I recalled these same tents and location from a Human Rights Watch report. The report reviews the conditions that surrounded the May 2008 battles and forced displacements. In the image, several women peer, terrified, out of the grainless tents.

The Land Rover ground to a halt ahead of an enormous herd of cows. Fitting of their status in this region, they condescendingly ignored our vehicle. “Is this enough to buy a wife?” one colleague asked. “You would need at least twice this, especially if she is tall and well-educated,” another retorted.

Once we had inched through the cows, my colleague snapped, “Sophia. Alight!” He and I dropped out of the vehicle — into a river of mud. In an attempt at “cultural appropriateness” that morning, I was wearing a flowing white skirt. My colleague chuckled at the impracticality as he led me deeper into the dirt, across a stream via a narrow plank, and through a field of muddy Tukuls. In the distance, a giggling UNDP representative took pictures of our ordeal with his phone, and motioned to a small gap in a barbed wire fence through which we were to make our grand entrance.

### **Lunch with the Blue Berets**

The UNDP Inter-Faith Council workshop was in full swing. My colleague, as former UNMIS Civil Affairs Officer conducting the good governance component, motioned us to the front. A row of church and mosque leaders, clad in thick gumboots, sat in seats of honor along the wall.

Through a Dinka translator, the facilitator asked some loaded questions to the participants.

“Is good governance good or bad?”

Then, my colleague took the floor. After fifteen years of conducting such workshops from Ghana to Sudan, he jumped into the subject like a concert pianist. Many participants were captivated. Yet, others had clearly never heard a piano before and struggled to follow.

Sensing this, my colleague started to recount fables. He told a curious one — given the setting — on the subject of equitable participation.

“Do you know, in England they had a man who could not walk. He was in a wheel chair — and he could not see either.” My colleague clicked his tongue to emphasise the gravity.

“And yet, this man — this man who could not walk and who could not see — he held such a high political position. Higher than the Payam Administrator, higher than the Chief Administrator of Abyei. This man, he could do everything that another man could do in government.”

I was tempted to interject that David Blunkett’s condition had also not barred him from “consorting with many women” out of wedlock, but I kept my lips sealed.

My colleague then moved to the subject of the factional conflict at hand. “If you are not an Arab, what are you?” “An African!” a participant cried. The ladies giggled.

One man, who kept cutting-in with perfect English, launched into a tirade about Christians burning a mosque during Ramadan. I saw the color seep from the UNDP representative’s face. He rose to his feet and declared that it was time for tea.

When the room was empty, my colleagues shook their heads. “I know exactly where he was going, and I couldn’t let it happen.”

I sauntered over to the window to view the grey landscape. My colleague explained that I was observing the most treacherous of the 2008 battlefields. Hundreds had passed away before this window. There was a concrete compound with blue paint. That was the new office, my colleague explained. Our organization had bought it from UNDP, who decided not to return after government forces stormed it during the battles.

Suddenly, we had company. The man who had precipitated the tea break was back. He sported a corpulent girth and glared at us with blood-shot eyes. “Why does UNDP do this Inter-Faith Council? For what?”

The UNDP representative spun beautiful words about the value of tolerance, good

governance and unity. “But you don’t like Muslims,” the man replied. He enunciated every syllable with precision. My colleague attempted to defuse the situation, and then declared that it was time for us to depart for the workshop in Noong. Our UNDP friend accompanied us outside. “Community work. It is sacrifice, pure sacrifice,” he shrugged. I got the sense that he had had enough.

At the roadside, we found that we had missed our ride, so our friend loaded us into a fake fur-lined UN Land Rover to have lunch at UNMIS.

Again, my colleague commanded me to “Alight, Sophia!” at the gates of the UN compound. We sauntered past trucks of Zambian and Scandinavian Blue Berets, who projected the odd wink.

The UNMIS compound constitutes a collection of white containers with black “UN” letters. A large specimen among these containers was identified as the cafeteria. It appeared like obscene luxury given the experience of the preceding days. There was a plumbed-in water tap for hand-washing and — most miraculously — in-container air conditioning.

I was still not in the fashion of eating following the tribulations of the last few days, but I relished the cold air and wholesome scene of Blue Berets digging into boiled goat with access to both knives and forks.

Smug as I felt to have entered the UN compound, I had my sights set on Noong for that afternoon. So we sauntered along the marshy UNMIS rugby field and slipped past the comfort of the UN guards to find ourselves ambushed by the unpredictable.

### **Cassava Chalk**

We would not reach Noong that day.

From the UNMIS gate, we called the first driver. Land Rover No 1 had experienced a mechanical failure outside Abyei, stranding the Project Team. We called the second driver. Land Rover No 2 had got stuck in the mud near the River Kiir, stranding the workshop participants.

This was serious enough to summon the Operations Manager. We called the Operations Manager, a former U.S. marine who was sure to mount a slick rescue operation. However, the Operations Manager was also sitting on a road-side tree stump — having experienced mechanical failure.

The entire compound population was scattered across the Abyei countryside, none of us with immediate hope of rescue. My colleague and I set off for the new office, the eerie ex-UNDP base, to guarantee a roof for the night.

A UN driver let us hitch a ride to the market. We hid from the vicious sun in the shade of a teetering truck, giving us time to consider our next move. Through the stream of donkey carts and suspicious stares from turbaned nomadic Misseriya traders, two men in green army fatigues approached. I froze.

To my surprise, they shook hands with us and moved on.

“They are fine, Sophia. JIU.”

The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement engineered the Joint Integrated Units (JIUs) as a security compromise so that government forces and SPLA troops could both be barred from the Three Areas. Though no deterrent in 2008, the JIUs are less liable to drunkenness and intimidation, so my colleague claimed.

Eventually, we hitched a ride with another UN vehicle, which dropped us in a mud-bath of a field. We picked our way through the dirt around the edges of a dejected concrete ruin. This was the SPLA’s most recent headquarters in Abyei — bombed to the ground.

As the new office came into sight, we entered clusters of Tukuls adorned with UNHCR plastic sheeting. I asked my colleague about the rate at which people had returned to Abyei after it became a ghost town in 2008. “At first, returns were slow. Now, we’re expecting another 20,000 over the next three months.”

I also wanted to know how my colleague would describe the root causes of the slaughter that occurred in this field two years ago.

“It’s ongoing. Even a fight between two children can lead to a battle. Everybody wants to occupy this patch of ground.”

We pounded on a blue gate and a thin boy welcomed us in. This boy must have been about 13. He looked like a blade of grass in a World Cup t-shirt.

The compound was still but not without vestiges of struggle. Newly-finished concrete outhouses surrounded by over-grown weeds and the remnants of two cabins scorched to the ground. The largest outhouse contained a pile of mattresses and a single bed frame. We sat on opposite sides of the bed frame, spoke for some time and then fell silent. The boy stood at the entrance, motionless.

I recalled that I had a packet of biscuits from UNMIS. I rolled back the wrapper half way and extended them to the boy. His eyes lit up, and neatly — one by one — he picked out every biscuit in sight. He must have been starving.

My colleague asked him whether he went to school. He nodded. So my colleague asked him why he was not in school. He claimed he had no uniform. My colleague held up a pass, his short name in large capitals. The boy squinted, trying hard, but eventually shrugged and sauntered off.

We sat silently for an indeterminable length of time. It was one of those moments of mid-afternoon heat when one strives to minimise movement so as not to provoke further waterfalls of perspiration.

Suddenly, whoops of laughter peeled across the compound. The project team had made it. For the next several hours, the compound came alive. My colleagues shifted around mattresses, reclined, dozed, and shared jokes.

I sat under a tree with a fellow Monitoring & Evaluation enthusiast. He is a young

colleague from Upper Nile State, half the size of the two project officers to which he often plays side-kick. The Operations Manager cruelly greets them as “the two bulls and the calf.” But this colleague is no calf. He is sharply articulate with penetrating intelligence. My colleague told me how he was born in the late eighties and attended one of the first primary schools in his village. In his first years of learning, he recalled, resources were so rare that they used cassava to write on the chalkboards.

As he neared the end of primary school, life took a worrying turn. Local rebels were forcing boys to “join the movement.” Many school friends became so-called “Lost Boys” — the poster children for Sudan’s civil war in the nineties. Yet, my colleague was lucky. A group of missionaries accepted him for a boarding school in Nairobi. He left Sudan, finishing secondary school in 2008. My colleague was saving for a higher education, and started working for Mercy Corps so that he could look after his mother.

He was happy to return to southern Sudan, he said. Since the CPA, he claimed that people had felt hope. Strangely enough, many southerners venerate George W. Bush whom they view as the broker of the agreement. I wonder whether it would comfort the ex-President to know that he maintained popularity at least here.

The sun was starting to drop when we received good news. We left the boy with some money for food, and departed in a delegation for the vehicle that hearsay suggested we would find at the market. Beside a cigarette vendor, we re-connected with one of our staff from Abyei.

Events suddenly descended into confusion. Two of my colleagues left the group, saying that they would remain in town for the night. Another pair of colleagues struck off in search of phone credit. The only remaining colleague led me into a rented car, claiming that this would drive us to the official NGO vehicle at the local mechanic’s. We arrived at a bustling end of the market. My colleague exited the vehicle, yelled “come!” — and vanished into the crowd. Then three men climbed into the rental van with me.

For a split second, the first time during this trip, I felt a surge of fear. We were approaching the UN curfew. I could not find my colleagues. I was in an unofficial vehicle. I was the only woman. I was in Abyei.

Thankfully, the cloud of vendors parted and I caught sight of a Land Rover bearing the NGO logo and “no weapons” decal. I was flushed with relief.

I encountered, once again, the friendly eyes of Agok’s village elder. Since we had met that morning, he had waited with the broken vehicle all day and never reached the training.

As the Land Rover spun out of Abyei, there was an atmosphere of celebration. Homeward bound at last.

But not so soon. Just past the checkpoint over the River Kiir, the clouds burst with rain. The landscape turned to brown glue, laced with veins of lightening. Up ahead, we saw flashing lights. We faced a stationary parade of bogged-down trucks. We slid and ground to a halt, the wheels descending deeper into the mud.

I was wondering what the night would bring. I was the only female in a vehicle of six men. If we were to sleep that night, we were going to have to sleep on each other. I had not “done my ablutions” for a good twelve hours. I did not want to leave the vehicle and wander into the bush alone. I wondered how this was going to work.

But — miraculously — a courageous driver and muscular colleagues navigated the glue. Once again, we were sliding across the open road. After three and a half hours on the move, I rejoiced at the crunch of compound gravel. A bowl of lukewarm boiled goat had never tasted so delicious.