News



Preacher Daniel Rasash falls to his knees and weeps in prayer at the Yoyo Pentecostal Church in the Bidi Bidi refugee camp in northern Uganda, on June 4, 2017. South Sudanese refugees meet in open-air churches rigged from timber with seats made only from planks of wood or logs drilled into the ground, yet these churches offer support among the daily humiliations that come with rebuilding their lives. (AP/Ben Curtis)

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Bidi Bidi Refugee Camp, Uganda — August 11, 2018
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Every morning when Achol Kuol wakes up, she borrows a Bible from her neighbor and reads a verse to comfort herself before she meets others in an open-air church rigged from timber. They sing, dance and speak in tongues during the service. Some who feel filled with the Holy Spirit scream and jump — not with joy, but remorse.

Confessions flow as they recall the ones they killed in the civil war back home in South Sudan. They cry out, lamenting ordeals they endure at night. Others weep in prayer as they ask God for forgiveness.

"I can't sleep unless I keep on praying," said Kuol, 38, a mother of five. "I always have nightmares. In my dreams I go back to my old village and I see how my friends were shot dead. They keep on calling me, 'Achol! Achol! Achol!' And I would wake up screaming."

For thousands of South Sudanese here in the world's largest refugee camp, the search for healing from recent horrors involves a quest for God. Saddled with post-traumatic stress disorder in many cases, refugees are often encouraged by camp counselors to attend church as a pathway to healing.

"Many refugees usually go to church because it's the only likely place in the camp where they can get help to recover from the trauma," said Gabriel Mayen, a trauma counselor at Bidi Bidi. "The church gives them new hope, which is important to refugees and any person who has experienced trauma."

South Sudan, the world's youngest nation, broke into civil war in late 2013 when troops loyal to then-Vice President Riek Machar clashed with forces loyal to President Salva Kiir. The conflict spread quickly into an ethnic clash as the two leaders were representing two major tribes. Christianity is the majority religion in South Sudan.

As a result, thousands have been killed, 2 million have been displaced in South Sudan, and another 2 million have sought refuge in neighboring countries. More than 1 million have fled to Uganda.

This camp, known as Bidi Bidi, is home to more than 250,000 people. Here, dozens of churches have cropped up and are becoming increasingly popular as the traumatized seek a foundation to put their lives back together.

Kuol's husband was murdered in June last year when government soldiers attacked her town of Yei in southwest South Sudan. She fled with her children, arriving at Bidi Bidi three days later. One child died from hunger during the journey.

"I passed through a difficult time," she said. "God saved me from death, and I had to accept him. In God I find peace, and I don't have nightmares … though the memories of the killings still haunt me."

More than 30 churches spread across the camp are headed by South Sudanese pastors, according to Ugandan officials. Many church leaders, including pastors, bishops, priests, evangelists and others, moved with their South Sudanese congregations into exile when civil war erupted.

"When these church leaders arrived at the camp, they began their own churches," said Deng Bol, a refugee teacher and representative. "We have different denominations. Refugees have options here. If they want to go to Catholic or Protestant churches, they can go."

Pastor John Deng of Christ Ministry Church fled South Sudan in 2016. He said his church is bringing together members of warring tribes, the Nuer and Dinka, and fostering cooperation across tribal lines. The church also provides emotional healing if one loses a family member at the camp or back home in South Sudan, he said.

"The church has played a vital role in unifying the people of South Sudan who had hated each other," he said. "We are happy that people are living peaceful in the camp away from home."

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Peace can be elusive at Bidi Bidi. Those traumatized by torture, rape and other violence often bring vengeful habits with them, Mayen said. Many drink alcohol in excess and become violent, he said.

"Some even take machetes and attack other refugees," he said.

Spiritual warfare is a theme heard often around the camp. During a recent worship service, Deng warned the people of South Sudan that civil war in their country will not end until they turn to God and ask for forgiveness. Quoting from Proverbs 6:16-19, Deng said his home country was already under curse.

"Our country is cursed," he said. "The only hope we have is heaven. It's written that shedding someone's blood is the work of the devil and anybody who is killing people is doing the work of the devil. We need to kneel down and ask God for forgiveness if we want him to bring peace in our country."

The new churches make a point to offer hope. When rebel soldiers attacked Yei town last year in the middle of the night, Akur Piok and her husband escaped in different directions. Since then they have not once seen each other. Piok escaped with three of her children, leaving behind two.

"I'm traumatized," she said as she walked toward the church. "I don't know if my children and husband are still alive or dead. I have many problems. It's only God who can solve them. I want to go and sing, worship and pray so that God can be the answer to my problems."

Deng agreed. In his view, only God can solve the daunting challenges these refugees face.

"If you see them praying and crying, they have a reason: These refugees have problems," he said. "They have no food to eat. No hospitals to take their families when they are sick, and their children are not going to school. The only hope they have is God."

Kuol, a Dinka tribeswoman, credits God with sustaining her desire to live, despite her overwhelming troubles. Her church has helped her focus on the future rather than the past, she said. Her plans include a church wedding to her Nuer prayer partner.

"I don't know where I would have been without God," Kuol said. "I would have died a long time ago. I have so many problems that I sometimes think of committing

suicide. But God always comes to my rescue."