

UPDATE FROM LEISA WAGSTAFF ON MALAKAL, SOUTH SUDAN

Dear Friends,

It has been a long time since I last communicated. Hopefully, you received my October 2013 newsletter. If not, I am attaching it without photos. (Photos take forever to download from both Addis Ababa and Malakal.)

So much has happened since that time but I just could not write about it. The happenings were so confusing, so painful and so difficult to express in words. Even now, after being in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia since 21 December 2013, I cry easily whenever I think of or hear news from South Sudan.

As I am sure all of you are aware, war broke out in South Sudan in mid-December, first in Juba, the capitol city. Upon hearing about it from afar (in Malakal, the place where I serve), it seemed impossible that the fight for rule among the political powers that be could ever reach our quiet town. I thought that those who were fighting would come to their senses and some compromise would be reached. My colleagues, friends and neighbors, on the other hand, were holding their breath, remembering what had happened in the past and the decades of ethnic conflict and the fight for independence from the powerful northern country of Sudan. We were in prayer constantly that the nonsense would stop. I think that it really dawned on me that things may get worse before better when the moderator of the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan (PCOSS), our partner church, informed a sister-friend and me with tears in his eyes and a voice that would break at any minute that one of our pastors and evangelists had been killed in a church compound in Juba. They were killed because they belonged to the wrong ethnic group and they had ventured out to protect their church community.

As the violence spread to other areas of the country and the Nuer ethnic soldiers began to take up arms to defend themselves and their ethnic group against the president's army (made up mostly of his Dinka tribe) who had been commanded to stamp out the culprits/threat/opposition, I still hoped and prayed that it would not reach Malakal. The PC(USA) began to work frantically to get all of its mission personnel out. They were not only concerned for our safety but did not want the church partners to have to worry about us and have that added responsibility of taking care of us in a time of war. I and my two PC(USA) colleagues, on the other hand, wanted to stay; we wanted to remain with the people we had been called to serve alongside.

Every avenue that the PC(USA) took to evacuate us did not work out. All flights were cancelled to/from Malakal and even if we had reached Juba there were only a few emergency flights arranged by the embassies and United Nations. The PCOSS leaders then began to inform us that it may reach Malakal and that, if possible, we should leave for safer countries. It was so hard to hear them say this because it was a confirmation that the conflict would reach our beloved town, even though many people had already left. Through PCOSS contact the three of us finally arranged seats on a scheduled humanitarian flight to Ethiopia for the 23 of December. All other aid/mission personnel had long since evacuated and many people were still surprised to see us there. While they were all concerned about our safety, many hoped we would stay. They felt that if there were still foreigners, especially church workers, there would be some protection from the international community. Just two days before the fighting reached Malakal, I received a call via satellite phone that the Office of World Mission of the PC(USA) had brokered a company out of South Africa that specializes in flying into dangerous areas to take us out. The company had already been booked by an Asian diplomatic group to fly into Malakal for their five stranded personnel. There just happened to be three available seats on that nine passenger plane and there were three of us! Seeing how this transpired was confirmation that maybe we were not to remain. With just a small tote bag and many tears streaming down my cheeks, I said good-bye to our friends there and shared many prayers. On the 23rd, the day that we were scheduled to hop a possible UN flight, the prolonged conflict in Malakal began.

Since this mid-December, however, hundreds of thousands of innocent people have been killed, traumatized as well as displaced throughout the country. To this date, hundreds of thousands of people are still encamped in UNMISS compounds, hiding in the bush, or trekking weeks and weeks to neighboring countries. The Presbyterian Church of South Sudan, however, has stood firm in its stance against the war and its leaders have stood by people who could not flee the madness or chose to shelter in place, regardless of ethnic origin, location or faith persuasion.

At one point, there were more than 6000 South Sudanese crammed onto two PCOSS compounds in Malakal – Protestants, Catholics and African religionists, Dinkas, Nuers, Meurles, Shullucs, and Anywaks, old and young, male and female, strong and weak. One former moderator of PCOSS ventured out to secure food and water for his gathered people after days of having run out of both and was killed by those engaged in warfare. The current moderator stood at the gate of one of the church's compounds in his clerical attire and pleaded again and again with the soldiers who wanted to enter to slaughter particular ethnic groups to spare God's people, as those within prayed. No one within the compound was killed despite the prolonged and intense fighting in the area. This is a strong testimony to the rest of the country that God cares about God's people, we are indeed our brothers' and sisters' keepers, all are welcome into the fellowship of Christ, and there is hope for the future.

South Sudan may seem to you as just a place on the other side of the world where only bad things happen, but as one of my colleagues has shared, "this place on the map has become home and the bad things are happening to people we know and care about-- our neighbors, friends, and church family. So, these days of waiting, yearning for the next bit of information, hoping for good news, desiring peace, wondering when it will be possible to return home to South Sudan, and what is it that we will find when we do return, make for long difficult days."

Just over a week ago, a peace agreement was finally reached but it is not being adhered to by the warring groups. The government soldiers continue to drag people out of their homes and kill them simply because they think that they are supporting the rebels. It is and will continue to be a slow process with more suffering every day and stories of unbelievable atrocities against the innocent.

I have been called by God to serve in South Sudan and I know that when I return, things will be different. Many of the familiar landscape and infrastructure will be changed or nonexistent. Many of the people that I have come to love, appreciate and depend upon will not be there, either because they were killed or cannot return to the place of bad memories. Nonetheless, I must go but I must have your prayers and support. We, together, must continue to be with these people as they pick up and start again, for I truly believe that like the birth story in Matthew and the Moses exodus story, a great leader and savior will rise from the ashes of the massacres of the innocents. Just as God raised up Moses and Jesus to be the saviors of his people, "God is now preparing someone to come forward with peace on his/her heart to raise up the people of South Sudan so they may also lead abundant lives."

In Ministry Together,

Leisa Wagstaff

PC(USA) Mission Co-Worker (South Sudan)