

## SET ADRIFT IN SOUTH SUDAN'S WAR, A FAMILY IS REUNITED

**ABUROC, South Sudan:** Their hug is long and moving but awkward as Jorgina, sobbing, strains to embrace her teenage son Emmanuel who has grown taller since South Sudan's war tore them apart. It has been three and a half years since they last saw each other. They've both been shunted to and fro by the relentless fighting. Emmanuel is now a gangly two metre (6.5 ft) tall 17-year-old. He and Jorgina are among thousands of family members who lost sight of each other in the chaos of the civil war in the new African nation that just gained independence from Sudan in 2011.

More than 3.7 million people have been forced to flee their homes since the war started in Dec 2013. That year Emmanuel was attending school in the northern city of Malakal near the Sudanese border, not far from his family home in the town of Kodok. On Dec 24, just days after the fighting began between troops loyal to President Salva Kiir and those backing his former deputy Riek Machar, a rebel offensive on Malakal forced Emmanuel to take flight. "I walked to Kodok. It took me two days. When I arrived... I went to my family," he said. A few days after his return he was sent to buy some food at the market. "When I came back, my parents and relatives were not home."

### 'Nobody showed up'

The small town had been buzzing with rumors of an imminent offensive and while Emmanuel was gone his family, along with many other inhabitants, had dropped everything and fled. "I stayed at home three days. Nobody showed up," he recalled. So he returned to Malakal, where he got wind that his parents may have reached the capital Juba. Using some money given to him by a distant relative, he managed to bargain his way aboard a government

plane which was heading to Juba empty after bringing food to Malakal.

Once in Juba an acquaintance from Kodok put him in touch with a woman named Lena Ngor, who like him was from the Shilluk ethnic group. "I called him to say I would look for his relatives. When I failed to find them, I called him to tell him to stay

with us," the 34-year-old former journalist said. So Emmanuel moved into a large tent in the garden next to her house, but he never returned to school as Ngor, who has four children of her own, could not afford his fees. Nevertheless it is thanks to Lena, via one of her work colleagues, that Emmanuel managed to find out in March that his family had

returned to Kodok. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which is working to reunite families, then got involved. In early June the organization had registered 1,800 cases of missing family members - double last year's number - as fighting spread into the southern Equatoria region.

"If we take all the cases of people who approach us, approximately, we manage to restore the contact for half of them. And we organize family reunification only for a small number of them, for the most vulnerable," said ICRC's Celine Croon. Separated families, once identified, mostly communicate by phone, with the ICRC logging 33,000 calls already this year.

### 'The bad things have gone'

Emmanuel was meant to reunite with his family earlier this year but a new government offensive once again forced the residents of Kodok, including his mother, to flee. But the time eventually came for Emmanuel to go home. On the eve of his departure Lena was ambivalent about seeing her "little brother" leave. "I'm going to miss him. He was helping me. I would like to meet his mother and his father one day," she said. Emmanuel made it to Aburoc, a village hosting 10,000 displaced people in early June, and it was at the edge of a small landing strip that he was reunited with his mother and uncle. "I thought I might not see him again, because of this conflict," said his mother, Jorgina Pagam Obur. "I have only two children. And now my child has arrived, all the bad things have gone. I feel very happy and very light," she said. Now she intends to seek refuge in neighboring Sudan, and try to get Emmanuel back into school. But while he may have found his family, the future remains uncertain for the young man who has gone from isolated minor, to displaced teenager and perhaps soon, to refugee. — AFP



**ABUROC, South Sudan:** Emmanuel Samuel, 17, comforts his mother Jorgina Pagam as he reunites with her after landing on June 5, 2017. — AFP

## ISRAEL REDUCES POWER TO GAZA AS ABBAS PRESSURES HAMAS

### HOSPITALS STRUGGLING WITH POWER SHORTAGES

**GAZA/JERUSALEM:** Israel will reduce electricity supplies to the Gaza Strip after the Palestinian Authority limited how much it pays for power to the enclave run by Hamas, Israeli officials said yesterday. The decision by Israel's security cabinet is expected to shorten by 45 minutes the daily average of four hours of power that Gaza's 2 million residents receive from an electricity grid dependent on Israeli supplies, the officials said.

The West Bank-based Palestinian Authority (PA) blamed Hamas's failure to reimburse it for electricity for the reduction in power supplies. But PA spokesman Tareq Rashmawi couched that explanation with a demand that Hamas agree to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' unity initiatives, which include holding the first parliamentary and presidential elections in more than a decade. "We renew the call to the Hamas movement and the de facto government there

to hand over to us all responsibilities of government institutions in Gaza so that the government can provide its best services to our people in Gaza," he said.

Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum said Israel and the Palestinian Authority "will bear responsibility for the grave deterioration" in Gaza's health and environmental situation. Any worsening to Gaza's power crisis - its main electrical plant is offline in a Hamas-PA dispute over taxation - could cause the collapse of health services already reliant on stand-alone generators, many of them in a poor state of repair, Ashraf Al-Qidra, spokesman for the Health Ministry in Gaza, said.

Israel charges the PA 40 million shekels (\$11 million) a month for electricity, deducting that from the transfers of Palestinian tax revenues it collects on behalf of the Authority. Israel does not engage with Hamas, which it considers a terrorist group. Last month, the Palestinian Authority informed Israel that it would cover only 70 percent of the monthly cost of electricity that the Israel Electric Corporation supplies to the Gaza Strip.

At the security cabinet session late on Sunday, ministers decided that Israel would not make up the shortfall, the officials said. "This is a decision by (Abbas) ... Israelis paying Gaza's electricity bill is an impossible situation," Israeli Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan said on Army Radio. Israeli military and security chiefs backed the move, despite concern Hamas could respond by increasing hostilities with Israel. Hamas seized control of the Gaza Strip from Abbas's Fatah movement in 2007, and several attempts at reconciliation, most recently in 2014, have failed. Hamas has accused Abbas of trying to turn the screw on them to make political concessions. —Reuters



**GAZA:** A Palestinian family eats dinner by candlelight at their makeshift home in the Rafah refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip during a power outage on Sunday. — AFP

## SYRIAN ARMY, ALLIES STEP UP BOMBING OF REBELS IN DARAA

**AMMAN:** The Syrian army and Iran-backed militia forces have escalated attacks against a rebel-held part of the southern city of Daraa, a possible prelude to a large-scale campaign to wrest full control of the city, rebels and residents said yesterday. The intensive raids and bombing strikes mainly pounded the southern part of Daraa, strategically located on the border with Jordan and where the uprising against Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad erupted six years ago.

The Syrian army has recently intensified dropping barrel bombs, drums or cylinders packed with shrapnel, and has fired hundreds of so-called elephant rockets on Daraa's old quarter and a former refugee camp nearby, rebels and residents said. The army has not commented on its troop build-up in Daraa or the escalating aerial bombing. State media has long branded the rebels as foreign-backed "terrorists".

More reinforcements from the army and its allies, the Iranian-backed Lebanese group Hezbollah and Shiite Iraqi militias, are also being rushed to the city from several locations near the capital, Damascus.

Troops were using the Damascus-Deraa highway, a major supply route where well-fortified trenches on both sides of the road have made it more difficult for rebels to mount attacks. "The regime has brought large columns of troops from the elite 4th Armoured Division, and also Hezbollah forces," said Major Issam Al-Rayes, spokesman of the so-called Southern Front grouping of

the Free Syrian Army (FSA) rebels, who are supported by an Arab-Western coalition.

The troops being sent as reinforcements are considered to be the Syrian army's elite division, which has the best training and equipment. Rebels say the troop build-up and relentless aerial bombing in recent weeks pointed to a major campaign for what the FSA rebels see as a decisive battle. "Everything indicates the regime is preparing for a large-scale military campaign in Daraa in which they plan to encircle the city and reach the Jordanian border," Rayes said.

Adham Al-Karad, the commander of the missile brigade in the FSA's Southern Front, said: "Our surveillance shows troop carriers and heavy armor ... if it continues at this same level of reinforcements, this will be very large." The army had stepped up its campaign to regain the Manshiya neighborhood, a strategic district that almost completely fell into rebel hands after four months of street battles.

Rebels stormed Manshiya, the last army foothold in Daraa's rebel-held old quarter, in February to ward off any army attempt to capture a strategic crossing with Jordan. The army's control of the crossing, a once-thriving passenger and commercial gateway with Jordan, would sever the rebel link between the eastern and western parts of the province they control, dealing a major blow to their cause in the south. The Syrian government's strategic goal is to open a direct route from Damascus to the Jordanian border. —Reuters



**DARAA, Syria:** This frame grab from video provided yesterday shows smoke rising over buildings that were hit by Syrian government forces bombardment. — AP

## EGYPT BANS SCORES OF NEWS WEBSITES

**CAIRO:** An often fiery government critic, Egyptian journalist Khaled Al-Balshi has been arrested, had his operations monitored, and staff harassed by police for years. Yet his website Al-Bedaiah, a rare dissident voice in Egypt, had never been touched. On Sunday that changed when it suddenly went blank with no warning after being blocked, part of what Balshi called an unprecedented and far-reaching state crackdown on scores of news websites in recent weeks.

"Let's be clear, the Egyptian websites going through this are dealing with a long-term shutdown - this is not short term," said Balshi from his downtown Cairo office, where four work stations sat idle, because staff feared coming to work in case of arrest. Balshi's website was the 57th blocked since May 24, according to the

Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, a non-government organization tracking the affected sites through software that monitors outages.

Journalists see the campaign against them as a step toward banning all but the most state-aligned media, effectively reversing the private media boom that flourished in the final decade of former president Hosni Mubarak's rule and which they say helped push him from power in 2011. Though no precise figures on readership are available, Egypt enjoys an active private media that includes widely read print and Web format publications as well as popular late-night talk shows. State newspapers still maintain wide circulation. The spike in censorship has come as a surprise, even to journalists long-accustomed to

reporting within strict red lines in Egypt where direct criticism of the military, the president, and judiciary are considered taboo and punishable by jail time. The government has offered no comment on the reason behind the blockages and the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology had no immediate comment.

Makram Mohamed Ahmed, head of the newly formed Supreme Media Council, a state media regulator, told Reuters he believes "the main reason is how much [these websites] deal with the Muslim Brotherhood or express support for terrorism," referring to the Islamist group whose president Mohamed Morsi held office for a year before being ousted in 2013 by the military after mass protests. — Reuters



**DIBSI FARAJ, Syria:** Syrian pro-government forces pray in this village at the entrance of Raqqa province after they entered the area on the western outskirts of the Islamic State (IS) group's Syrian bastion on Sunday. — AFP

## US-BACKED SYRIA FIGHTERS NEAR OLD CITY OF RAQQA

**BEIRUT:** US-backed Syrian fighters battling the Islamic State group pushed closer to the Old City in the jihadist stronghold of Raqqa yesterday, a monitor said. The Kurdish and Arab fighters of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) entered Raqqa for the first time almost a week ago, after months of battle to encircle the northern city. In the east of the city, they hold the Al-Meshleb neighborhood, captured days after the operation inside the city began, and on Sunday they seized their first district in the west, Al-Rumaniya.

Yesterday, fighting was continuing on both fronts, with the SDF advancing quickly in the eastern neighborhood of Al-Senaa, which leads to the Old City of Raqqa, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor said. "The SDF forces now control 70 percent of Al-Senaa," next to Al-Meshleb, Observatory director Rami Abdel Rahman told AFP. "If they take Al-Senaa it will be the most important advance in the battle for Raqqa because it brings them to the center of the city where the most important IS positions are," said Abdel Rahman. "When they have captured Al-Senaa, the real battle will begin." The fighting is expected to become more difficult as the SDF approaches the more densely populated center of the city. "This fight will be tough," SDF fighter Berkhdan Qamishi told AFP on Sunday. "As we get close to the city center, we'll be fighting inside multi-storey buildings. Urban battles are tougher than fighting in villages, but we will fight until we control the whole city."

### 'Huge number of mines'

In the west of the city, meanwhile, SDF forces were battling to enter Hatim, the neighborhood next to Al-Rumaniya, captured on Sunday. The SDF reported "fierce clashes between fighters and the terrorists" on the two fronts and said 23 IS members had been killed, without specifying in which neighborhood or when. An SDF source told AFP that fighters had uncovered a series of tunnels dug by IS jihadists in Al-Meshleb. "We are moving carefully and cautiously to avoid the huge number of mines that IS has planted in the city," the source added. An AFP correspondent inside the west of the city on Sunday said

the approach was littered with mangled motorcycles and unexploded mortar rounds fired by IS. The bodies of several alleged IS fighters could be seen on the empty streets, and SDF fighters appeared on edge over the possibility of IS-planted mines and weaponized drones. The SDF was also advancing outside the city's northern outskirts, where progress has been slower.

After repeated assaults, the SDF seized parts of the heavily fortified Division 17 military base as well as all of an adjacent sugar factory, the Observatory said. IS had been using the base and the factory to defend the northern approach into Raqqa, and the US-led coalition has carried out heavy strikes in the area, destroying most of the factory, the monitor said.

### Civilians trapped

Originally a Syrian army base, Division 17 was seized by IS in 2014 when it took control of swathes of the wider Raqqa province. IS seized Raqqa in 2014, transforming it into the de facto Syrian capital of its self-declared "caliphate". It became infamous as the scene of some of the group's worst atrocities including public beheadings, and it is also thought to have been a hub for the planning of attacks overseas. An estimated 300,000 civilians were believed to have been living under IS rule in Raqqa, including 80,000 displaced from other parts of Syria.

Tens of thousands have fled from the city and its surroundings since the SDF announced their operation to capture Raqqa in November. The United Nations estimates around 160,000 people remain in the city, where conditions have deteriorated, according to activists. "Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently," an anti-IS group, has reported closed bakeries for lack of flour, as well as electricity and water outages. Civilians trapped in Raqqa also face the threat of being caught in the crossfire, with more than 60 killed in the city since the June 6 launch of the SDF operation, according to the Observatory. The monitor said five civilians had been killed between Sunday night and yesterday morning in air strikes and rocket fire on several parts of Raqqa city. — AFP