

## International

# Driven to 'help my women,' a midwife in limbo in S Sudan

South Sudan has one of the world's worst rates of maternal mortality

**JUBA:** In a small classroom in Juba, male and female students listen attentively as Grace Losio launches into a lesson on what it takes to be a midwife. Like Losio, many of the students have come here with a passion. They are driven by memories of women in their villages bleeding helplessly to death, or babies dying from avoidable complications, with no healthcare workers for miles around.

But despite her enthusiasm, Losio, 50, knows that with its three classrooms and crammed makeshift dormitories, the Kajo-Keji Health Science Institute where she is principal is a shadow of its former self. For one, it is now several hours away from where it is meant to be, in the southern town of Kajo-Keji near the Ugandan border. When fighting erupted in Kajo-Keji in 2017, and tens of thousands of people poured over the border into Uganda, Losio and her students tried to wait it out. But the constant gunfire and their increased isolation became too much to bear.

So with about 20 teaching staff and 100 students they fled to Moyo in northern Uganda where they stayed for a month. They then relocated to South Sudan, in Juba—more than 300 kilometers (about 190 miles) by road from Kajo-Keji, with the support of the International Medical Corps (IMC). “We were in a very hard situation. When we arrived in Moyo they (the students) slept without food... moving with a number of people is not easy,” Losio told AFP.

In 2018, 36 of those students graduated as

midwives, and new ones have since joined from across the country. But Losio prays for the day she can return home and serve the women of her community. South Sudan has one of the world's worst rates of maternal mortality, with 780 deaths per 100,000 live births, according to UN figures. Even so, this grim figure is under a third of what it was a decade ago, thanks to a drive to train more midwives. Around 900 have now registered, according to health ministry statistics.

South Sudan's population was last officially estimated at about 12 million, and UN figures show war has scattered millions of them. More than five years of conflict has left many women on their own in childbirth. “In my village, most of the ladies you find they deliver at home because we don't have trained health personnel like midwives. You find most of them losing their kids and even they lose their lives,” said Augustino John Kuluel, 28, one of Losio's male students from a village in central Gok State.

South Sudan is famously nicknamed the world's youngest nation, although it is also one of the most tragic, for it plunged into civil war just two years after gaining independence from Sudan in 2011. The country is the size of France but has only an estimated 200 kilometres (120 miles) of paved roads, with the majority of the population living in traditional villages or as nomadic cattle herders. Losio, like much of the population, has known a life mainly marked by



**JUBA:** Grace Losio, 50, who teaches a midwifery class at the Kajo Keji Health Sciences Institute, speaks during an interview in Juba. — AFP

war. She was carried as a baby into a Ugandan refugee camp by her mother after her father was killed and their house burned down as war raged between Khartoum and southern rebels agitating for greater autonomy. “When I was a child I admired the nurse's uniform. Nurses used

to come and take care of patients within the refugee camp,” she recalled. Losio said she decided to follow in their footsteps because “I needed to help my women.” After independence, an NGO-backed initiative to train midwives took off across the country.—AFP

## After IS, Mosul tackles another attack: Bacteria

**MOSUL:** Explosives left behind by the Islamic State group in Iraq's Mosul took 12-year-old Abdallah's left leg, but another kind of terror may cost him his arm: antibiotic-resistant bacteria. Doctors around the globe are sounding the alarm over bacterial infections immune to modern medicine, but their prevalence in Mosul—where thousands of patients are struggling to recover from severe war wounds—can be even more dangerous.

“I have a bacteria-bacteria are bad,” said Abdallah Ali Ibrahim matter-of-factly, leaning against the crutches that support his right and only leg. “Whenever I go outside, I have to put on a gown and gloves, and sterilise my hands,” he adds from his isolation room at a Doctors Without Borders (MSF) hospital in Iraq's Mosul. The city was controlled by jihadists for three years until Iraqi forces backed by an international coalition ousted IS in 2017. It emerged ravaged, its streets littered with unexploded mines, one of which detonated in August 2018 as Abdallah and his older brother walked to the market.

The explosion killed Abdallah's brother and

sheared off the younger Iraqi boy's left leg and most of his left arm. But after five surgeries and endless consultations in three of Mosul's hospitals, Abdallah's health kept deteriorating. “My son wasn't responding to medication. Whatever they would give him, his body wouldn't react,” his father recalled. “The kid was collapsing,” the 49-year-old told AFP. It wasn't until January that Abdallah was referred to MSF's special facility in eastern Mosul, where doctors diagnosed him with a bacterial infection resistant to antibiotics.

### A deadly cocktail

The World Health Organization says antibiotic resistance constitutes one of the biggest threats to global health, with illnesses like pneumonia and tuberculosis evolving into forms harder to treat with normal medication. In the Middle East, antibiotics are easily available over-the-counter and therefore over-used, allowing bacteria to develop a tolerance.

Zoom in on Mosul and the problem is even more acute. “Conflicts play a huge role in this: we saw antibiotic resistance evolve and spread here,” said doctor Zakaria al-Bakri, the medical supervisor at MSF's facility. He described a deadly cocktail: decades of unregulated antibiotics use among Iraqis, poor health generally across Mosul's population during IS rule, war wounds from months of fighting, polluted water sources, and a healthcare system in ruins. The number of hospital beds in Mosul province dropped from 6,000 before the jihadist takeover to 1,000 by the time IS had been driven from the city.—AFP

## Fleeing regime fire, Syrians desert the northwestern town

**KHAN SHEIKHUN:** During a lull in regime bombardment, Abu Abdu al-Sarmani drove a pick-up hurtling into his wrecked hometown in Syria's Idlib province to grab his family's belongings a day after they fled. The northwestern town of Khan Sheikhun is supposed to be protected by an internationally brokered ceasefire deal, but increased shelling and air strikes by regime forces last month have left its streets near empty. “There was a truce and everything quietened down, and then suddenly the bombardment picked up again and we could no longer stay,” Sarmani said, wearing a maroon bomber jacket.

“The bombardment was so close... I spent two hours hiding in the bathroom,” the 36-year-old said, describing the events that pushed his family to flee last week. Khan Sheikhun lies in the Idlib region, the last major bastion of opposition President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. In September, rebel backer Turkey and regime ally Russia inked a deal to set up a buffer zone around the region, part of which runs just south of Khan Sheikhun.

Russia halted an imminent regime

offensive many feared could lead to the Syrian conflict's worst bloodbath yet, in exchange for which Turkey was to remove jihadists from the edges of the region. The agreement, which Moscow stressed at the time was temporary, prevented the offensive but jihadists have increased their footprint inside Idlib and Russia is losing patience. Clashes and violations of the demilitarized zone have spiked in recent weeks and regime fire on Khan Sheikhun has led thousands to escape.

### 'No work, no hospitals'

Since the start of February, more than 7,000 women, children and men have fled the town, mostly to other parts of Idlib, the United Nations says. Sarmani said he, his wife and three daughters escaped Khan Sheikhun last week because of the bombardment, but also because the town has become unlivable. “There's no work, no more people about, no hospitals, no doctors, no pharmacies, no basic infrastructure for living,” said the accountant, whose family has relocated to Sarmada, 100 kilometres (62 miles) north.—AFP