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In Sudan's forgotten counties

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A herdsman outside the Thar Jath oil facility.

REUTERS/Frank Nyakairu

It always feels the same when flying away from the southern Sudanese provincial city of Juba. The further you go away from it, the scarcer human settlement becomes. I had been to the east and west of Juba but this time I headed further north. And when the pilot struggled to control the caravan plane against the destabilising wind, I knew we were at the heart of Africa's aviation problems. But thankfully he slammed on the brakes and landed on the dusty, potholed runway of Leer in Sudan's Unity State.

This is the only state in south central Sudan that has oil wells south of what is supposed to be border between the Islamic north and the Christian south.

I am here accompanying the German organisation Sign of Hope, which is investigating possible contaminations of wells by the numerous oil wells.

But after a few hours in Leer I soon discovered that contaminated water with high salinity is only one of Leer's numerous problems. The people here are not only seemingly forgotten or have loose connection with the countries north and south, they are also effectively cut off and isolated.

The suffering from hunger and disease is almost tangible. There is a pond from recent flooding, children are swimming in water, others are fetching the clearly muddy water for home use. No food, running, water or electricity.

FLOODS AND HEAT

Extreme weather conditions push people to the edge here. When it rains, all plains get flooded, roads get washed away and crops die. And when the sun is out, the heat is blistering and all crops dry up. Year in, year out, people don't have food and depend on the rare food handouts, which local resident James Aswol is very sure do not reach their intended beneficiaries.

James is a 29-year-old catechist but he looks 40. He is tall, dark and skinny, with traditional scars running across his forehead, like most Nuer man. He offered me his insights into south central Sudan's problems.

We visited the booming Leer village market together. "You see, this is where all relief food ends," he said, pointing at a container labelled "WFP cooking oil".

"There are many traders here from Darfur who buy and take it away," he said. "The food situation is very serious. Most people cannot afford two meals a day. They have to eat once and that is it."

LOCAL HERO

South Sudan's president, Gen. Salva Kiir has never been to this county, at least according to John Malwal, another Leer resident. But people here have their own hero: southern Sudan's vice-president, Riek Machar, whose home is within sight.

"Have you been to Emma's grave?" Malwal asked, implying that if I did not I would be missing out. He was talking about Emma McCune, a young British woman who was married to Machar during the war and died in an accident in Kenya's capital Nairobi. Her story has been published in the book: "Emma's War: Love, Betrayal and Death in the Sudan".

She remains Leer's fallen hero. Her grave, tightly guarded and fenced off, is the only concrete structure in Leer.

STARK CONTRAST

Leer and Reir counties represent a real contrast of abject poverty and oil wealth. Leer is located less than 20km away from the Mala and Thar Jath oil fields. The only signs of modernity across Unity State's counties are road signs to oil installations.

But a litre of petrol here costs 2 Sudanese pounds or \$1, just as much it would cost me in Nairobi. Oil is extracted and pumped northwards through a pipeline to Port Sudan and exported.

In his makeshift office, the executive director of Reir county, where the Thar Jath oil well is located, speaks of his ignorance of what takes place at the multi-million dollar oil installation.

During my five-day visit I also hoped to travel to Malakal and Abyei, two major hotspots in Sudan's north-south political divide. Calculating distance using a map can be a fatal mistake here. "Oh, you can't go by road but by ship; it will only take you two to three days to reach Malakal," said James.

Major roads to the north and south have been destroyed by flooding, and people here have to use transport on the River Nile or spend hundreds of dollars to go by plane. A local priest told me how he had to wait for over a week for the roads to dry after spending the Easter weekend in another town.

My arrival in the county of Bwual was greeted with a shocking incident where a woman was dying from a venomous snake bite. There is no nearby hospital or dispensary she could go to. But thanks to treatment with the traditional black stone the next morning, she was up and running.

James and John are convinced that life here is as hard as it was during the war days, only that the daily bombardments from Russian-made Antonov planes are no more. Or is it?