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Rebels, Many in Teens, Disarm in Sudan's South

By MARC LACEY

TAM, Sudan, Jan. 22 — Hope is gaining ground on the front lines of Africa's most expansive — and exhaustive — battlefield, where Sudanese have killed and maimed other Sudanese in an area the size of Europe for 20 long years.

The new reality could be seen in this village west of the Nile the other day when a brigade of rebel soldiers arrived in formation, singing songs of liberation and clutching aging AK-47's.

At their commander's order, about 100 of the youngest fighters dropped their rifles in the dirt, stripped off their camouflage uniforms and ran around in the hot sun like children. Actually, they were children, the youngest no more than 10.

The Sudan People's Liberation Army, which enlisted the children when Tam was a flash point several years ago, is forcing them out of the army and back to their homes now that major fighting has subsided in the area.

Southeast of here, in Leer, where government troops and rebels have dug in for battle not far from each other, there are similarly optimistic signs. Between them a small team of international monitors have carved out a neutral zone. The monitors watched with amazement recently as a government commander entered the area, strode past rebels he has long been trying to kill and sat down to get his hair cut.

Peace is still not a word that captures present-day Sudan, despite a string of accords signed in recent months between the government and the main rebel movement, known as the S.P.L.A. There are too many guns, too much ill will and too many people still dying.

Fighting rages most explosively in Sudan's east, where the government is laying waste to communities controlled by a rival group of rebels not part of the peace talks. Tens of thousands of refugees have poured across the Sudanese border in recent weeks into the harsh deserts of Chad.

The main war, though, has been the one between the north, controlled by the Islamic government in Khartoum, and the south, a patchwork variously claimed by S.P.L.A. rebels, various militia forces and the government.

Southerners have long resisted attempts by the government to impose Shariah, the Islamic legal code, on them. Oil has exacerbated the north-south conflict as the government has piped the south's rich underground deposits to the north without sharing the wealth.

Recently, though, the north-south war has entered a new, low-intensity phase, as the warring parties await developments from Naivasha, the lakeside resort in Kenya where peace negotiations are unfolding.

Led by Vice President Osman Ali Taha and the rebel leader John Garang, the parties have made significant strides in setting up a new Sudan with a semiautonomous south.

The negotiators have agreed to let southerners decide in a referendum in six years whether they want to separate altogether from the north. They have agreed to form a joint military force in the south, and pull back forces from the web of front lines that crisscross the country. They have also decided to divide the nation's oil wealth evenly.

But reaching a final deal has proved difficult, with various deadlines — first the end of 2003, then the end of January — slipping. Pushing hard from the sidelines has been the Bush administration, which has made resolving Sudan's war a top priority.

Should a deal be reached, there will remain deep skepticism in the south that Khartoum will honor its commitments, especially if southerners vote to separate from the north.

John Gang Guom, a teenage soldier demobilized in Tam in an exercise organized by Unicef, said he believed he would be picking up his gun again soon. "I can't believe there will be no more war," he said. "The enemy is still out there."

Such gloom, however, has not stopped many southerners from taking advantage of the lull in the fighting. Displaced people — and Sudan's war has displaced more than any other current conflict — have begun returning to their homes from other parts of Sudan and from neighboring Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia.

Some trek for days in flipflops. Others climb aboard vehicles, like the rickety pickup truck that made its way across the south the other day loaded with 29 civilians, one goat, numerous sacks of dried fish and a rebel soldier.

When the returnees reach their villages, they are sometimes disappointed to find that family members have run away, too. But there are poignant reunions, like the one the other night at the Majoko residence in Rumbek.

One of Moses Majoko's 14 wives managed to make it back home after 20 years of being blocked from her family by war. She was thin and weak when she arrived, shocking every last family member.

As she lay in a hut, her family slaughtered a bull to celebrate her return. "Our mother has come!" one of her sons cried.

Sudan, and particularly the south of the country, has suffered immensely from the long war. Public buildings are in ruins. Paved roads are nonexistent, isolating the south from the region.

Only a quarter of the south's children are enrolled in schools. Peace is expected to clog the relatively few schoolhouses still standing and force many pupils to learn outside under trees, as some do now.

Experts estimate that as many as two million land mines remain hidden. Just as dangerous, AIDS, which has affected the population at relatively low levels, is expected to skyrocket when soldiers and refugees flock back home.

Armed conflict is also likely to continue, peace deal or no peace deal. Ethnic skirmishes have become commonplace in the south, stoked by government-backed militias. Petty crime is also expected to soar.

In Rumbek, one of the main southern towns, the tiny police department is training new recruits, hoping to get out front of any lawbreakers. There are plenty of guns available, but the police have no vehicle. "We foot it," the chief said.

Despite the many challenges, southerners hope the war is finally petering out.

It is that optimism that gives strength to the young men hacking through the bush outside Yarol with homemade axes and machetes. Using a narrow dirt path as their guide, the villagers have cleared miles and miles of trees and brush from Yarol to a place called Ramciel.

In the Dinka language, Ramciel means "Where the Rhinos Meet." Southerners envision it as the place they will meet, too, in their future capital.

Today it is nothing more than a collection of shrubs and trees around a towering rock. In the dirt, there are snake tracks and paw prints left by very large cats. But southerners have high hopes. They see fountains atop the dry earth, broad boulevards and maybe even skyscrapers.

Pipe dreams, probably. But international donors preparing to flood southern Sudan with assistance should peace eventually break out are not thrilled with the idea of building a shiny new capital while people are suffering so.

The work crew is not worried about that. With the sun beating down and at least six more miles of brush to clear before they reach Ramciel, they are happy to be planning for something other than the next battle.

"The road is the first step," said Jok Ayom, a local administrator who imagines the future city rivaling even Rome. "Ramciel can function as soon as people can get there."