

Field Report from Bor

Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.

Bor is the capital of South Sudan's largest state, Jonglei. The town is largely made up of bars, cheap hotels and corrugated steel huts that sell clothes, food and cell phone airtime. Because there is no electricity, the constant hum of generators serves as the soundtrack to Bor.

Kuol Manyang Juuk, Governor of Jonglei State in South Sudan, says almost any problem facing his state like education, healthcare and security can be solved with new roads.

"Where there are no roads, they don't go to school. When we build the roads everybody will get the social services they need. The police is unable to move because there are no roads."

Like so many in South Sudan, governor Juuk has an overwhelming and unrealistic belief that independence will quickly usher in all of these changes. The South Sudanese imagine an unparalleled peace dividend that among other things will free South Sudan from its reliance on hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign aid.

"Once we become independent then our economy will pick up. Investment will be there for building roads. Private sector will develop. Everybody will find employment, will have water for their cattle, and they can be able to sell their milk. Everybody will have money and they will not need any services from the NGOs. I think in five years it will be able to resolve it. I'm very optimistic."

Despite this pervasive optimism, South Sudan remains among the least developed places in the world. In fact Jonglei, which is the size of Pennsylvania, lacks a single paved road.

The Nile River spreads out through South Sudan. The country transforms into a massive swamp during the rainy season and it becomes difficult to move. Judy McCallum, Country Representative for the NGO Pact Sudan, says the quality of the roads has a direct effect on her work.

"When we had a vehicle get stuck in the mud in July, we could not get it out until January of the next year. It's very hard to do any development. All of our development [plans] are based on the rainy season and when you can access the communities."

Along the road that connects Bor to the capital of South Sudan, a fleet of dump trucks, rollers and other earth movers attempt to smooth out the dirt roadway that was wrecked during the rainy season. The rains turn dirt roads into mud rivers with pot holes that can swallow cars. Some roads are impassable for up to three-quarters of the year. They are trafficked only by heavy trucks or people on foot.

Yot Kot Yot is a smartly dressed cattle dealer who uses the road to move livestock. In a place where half the county lives on a dollar a day, cattle holds great wealth. For Yot, no road means no business. Like many in South Sudan, Yot believes independence will quickly usher in prosperity and peace.

"I feel if the south is separated, I can go away to search for things for our own benefit. My wife can continue to stay without any fear of insecurity."

Security is also a big concern.

The lack of development, the shortage of roads, and the general of reach of the government of South Sudan makes for a very short arm of the law. Although there is no longer a war with the north, the government has been unable to secure peace among South Sudanese. In 2009, there was a spike in intertribal violence that left thousands dead.

Often this south-on-south violence involves cows. Mabior Sodit lives with his family in an improvised lean tube. He stands among his 300 white cows that have long curving horns. He says he used to have many more but some were killed by disease and 400 were stolen.

In Mabior's case, the thieves took the cows and left but many of the raids turn violent. Intertribal violence has pushed cattle herders and farmers off their land forcing them to seek relative security closer to the roads that do exist in places like Pariak. This roadside town has seen its population grow significantly in recent years due to refugees from violence.

One recent arrival is a woman who moved here after an armed raid on her village. She remembers one rainy morning when eight members of her extended family led their animals to pasture. Their attackers didn't shoot.

"They just hacked people to death. They killed five people instantly, then three children were abducted in the process."

She says there was nothing she could do but cry and bury the dead. Despite the fact that the government of South Sudan has been unable to deliver security, many like this woman continue to pin their hopes for peace on separation from the north. There is a common belief that the north is deliberately sowing unrest between South Sudanese tribes.

"I am hoping that things will change because most of these people are being sent by the Arabs. If we are to be an independent nation and they are prevented from coming to the south to influence anyone to instigate enemies for us, then all things are possible and we shall at one time be united."

Outside the governor's office in Bor, an elderly man in a khaki suit waits to speak with Governor Juuk. He is a chief from a part of Jonglei so remote and inaccessible that he had to board a UN flight to meet with the governor.

Chief Sofriano carries a carved wooden cane and wears a brand new Jonglei state baseball cap. He has come to deliver an important message. Even though he supports separation, he says he wants the governor to know that there are no services in his village.

"My place is just a desert – no water, no schools, no hospital, food isn't there, and no roads."

Governor Juuk says these provincial chiefs have unrealistic expectations. When services are scarce, the sense of inequality is yet another flash point for intertribal tension.

McCallum of Pact Sudan says there is a pervasive belief amongst South Sudanese that independence from the north will solve all of the country's ills but there is no way that liberty alone can ensure southern unity.

"I think the biggest perception is after January 10, South Sudan will be independent and it will become the land of milk and honey. I think there are a lot of challenges facing Southern Sudan. It's always easy to unify when you have a common enemy to fight against. When that common enemy goes away, then you see the fractures within your own society."

– Reported by Matt Ozug for America Abroad