SHARING IN THE GRIEFS, ANXIETIES AND HOPES OF THE PEOPLE
AN ACCOUNT OF WAR CONFLICTS IN LEER MISSION

By Fr. Raimundo Rocha, mccj

“Local Christians were collecting food to feed us. We got four goats and a bull which we shared among all. The same we did with dry fish. Hunt was also part of the menu (buffalo, hippo and crocodile). We drank from the same swampy water we bathed with, we just boiled it.”

“’If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me.’” Mark 8:34

Initial Remarks

– The narrative that follows is not meant to be any kind of official report of the members of the Comboni Family who work in Leer mission on what happened to them over the past three weeks. It is, however, intended to be a personal sharing of what happened in Leer mission following the outbreak of violence that started in Juba 15 December 2013 with particular emphasis on the experience the missionaries in Leer went through and the outcome of it. It mostly reflects the personal experience and views of the author without neglecting the role of the two groups of missionaries involved. For security reasons, the name of some places and of some people will be omitted.

Leer Mission and the Missionaries

– Leer mission (Saint Joseph the Worker Parish) is comprised of Leer, Mayendit, Koch and Panyijiar counties, in the southern of Unity State. It is under the Diocese of Malakal and has been entrusted to the pastoral care of the Comboni Missionaries. The whole area is inhabited by the Nuer people and is a land rich in oil and other natural resources. We are currently five Comboni Missionaries working in Leer: Fr. Francesco Chemello (Italy), Fr.
Raimundo Rocha (Brazil), Fr. Yacob Solomon (Ethiopia), Br. Nicola Bortoli (Italy) and Br. Peter Fafa (Togo). In January joined the mission in Leer the scholastic (seminarian) Ketema Dagne (Ethiopia) and Fr. Michael Barton (USA). They went there to learn the Nuer language. The Comboni Missionaries Sisters working in Leer are Sr. Agata Catone (Italy), Sr. Carmirta Júlia (Ecuador), Sr. Laura Perina (Italy) and Sr. Lorena Morales (Costa Rica).

Our Guests

- On Friday 10 January we welcomed Fr. Stephen and Fr. Ernest Adwok who fled Mayon and Bentiu. We accommodated them together with a married couple. Fr. Joseph Makuey, also a diocesan priest working in Rubknona, went to stay in Koch. A lady from Juba, with her 17 months old daughter, who had been trading in Bentiu, asked for help and was also accommodated in our mission house in Leer on 24 January. She walked all the way from Bentiu and spent two weeks in the bush before reaching Leer. She is a widow and belongs to another tribe and knew no one in Leer.

The Conflicts

- When violence broke out in Juba on 15 December no one could expect it would spread so rapidly across the country. While getting to know what was going on in Juba, we in Leer went on with our daily routine, but with concerns. Soon violence broke out also in Bentiu, Unity State. That raised even more concerns because Bentiu is located 130 km away from Leer. At this point the army had split and the opposition was in control of Bentiu. Fighting was occurring and people started fleeing Bentiu towards Leer. An estimated 30 thousand people had fled to Leer. Concerns were even higher, and yet, we hoped violence could not reach Leer.

The Conflicts and Change of Environment in Leer

- Since conflicts began in Bentiu the atmosphere in Leer changed. There were days of high tensions alternated with days of relative calm, but there has never been a real fighting till the day we left. Leer market was the only one supplying food for the rest of the region. The movement of soldiers in Leer increased when government troops advanced and took control of Bentiu. Leer MSF hospital was operating normally. We, instead, cancelled most of our pastoral programmes and remained in Leer monitoring the situation and updating both the Comboni Province and UNMISS on security matters. Information came that the government troops were advancing towards Leer.

On Monday 13 January gunshots were heard all through the night. At 4.00 am some catechists came to inform that they were fleeing Leer to the villages for they heard troops
would have reached Koch (Tharjath, 55 km from Leer). We held a community meeting at 5.00 am and decided to remain in Leer and to run to the bush only if we would be under big danger. The gunshots were a kind of warning for the population to leave the town. We learned later that it was also to scare people and loot the market and residences as civilians were moving out. In fact, the market was looted. MSF team of expats evacuated.

Tensions and fears increased. The possibility for the war to come to Leer now was real. Leer had been very crowded the days before. Now became almost a deserted town. Up to this point the army in opposition (rebels) was in control of Leer. There was no fight, but people would not return to their houses and there was no harassment towards the missionaries. On Sunday 19 January we prayed in four different locations within and around Leer. Fr. Francis Chemello had gone to Mayiendit and then to Panyijiar in pastoral safari since early January.

Again on Sunday 26 January we prayed in six different locations. This time we saw that the situation was getting worse. Food was getting finished. There was lack of clean water, sanitation and medicine. Later on that week two Comboni Sisters, Laura and Lorena, decided to move out to stay where people were. They went to a community 6 km away from Leer. At this point the government troops had reached Mirmir area (21 km from Leer). Fighting in Mirmir went on for some days. We could hear the sound of heavy artillery from far.

Tensions were mounting, fears were increasing. The remaining civilians fled Leer. The possibility to evacuate the mission at this point was pretty difficult, but still possible, if any of us wished to. However, we decided to remain. On Wednesday 29 January five different groups of policemen/soldiers attempted to take our cars. Some were drunk. Leer MSF hospital and other compounds belonging to NGOs had already been looted. The mission compound could be the next.

I reported the provincial that the situation became a lot more tense and worsened and confessed that I was afraid. Both phone networks were down. Our internet was the only means of communication. That night we received information that in the front line of the troops there were the Darfurians rebels who would have allied to the government troops. They would not respect church personnel as the army soldiers would. Meanwhile, I received a lot of appeals from family members, friends and other missionaries to consider leaving the mission, but that was too late and we had made up our minds as to stay.

**The Fleeing of the Missionaries to the Bush**

– On 30 January, after the Morning Prayer, we met and decided to leave the church and seek refuge in the bush where people had gone. Fr. Stephen had already left with the married couple we hosted. We decided to go to a location called Gandor hoping to find Fr. Stephen there for he was holding a Thuraya (satellite phone). We packed what we could take, loaded the cars with food and other items and left at 9.45 am with three vehicles. In my bag I made sure I put the Holy Eucharist and what was necessary for prayers, a statue of Our Lady Aparecida of Brazil, my old computer, documents and a few clothes.

Before leaving, we informed the Comboni Missionaries and Sisters about our decision and where we were going to. We did not...
have many options. Leer is isolated. We would be cornered anywhere we went. So we went off. Now we had become also displaced persons, just like our people. Fr. Michael Barton decided to remain in the mission house. As soon as we left, people, both civilians and military, started looting our mission houses and the mission schools (Vocational Training Centre).

As we moved out, we came across Sr. Lorena and a lady who were heading for Leer to see how we were. We took them back to the place where they were before and there decided to move further up to a safer place together with some catechists. Gandhor would be still close to Leer. We went instead to Beer (28 km from Leer). One of our cars got stuck in the sand. That delayed the journey. Our group increased because some catechists and a couple from Yambio joined us. Excluding the Nuer people among us, we were ten missionaries, one diocesan priest, a lady with her child and the married couple from Yambio. On the way to Beer we met Fr. Stephen. We informed him about our destination and he was planning to join us later on. We finally arrived in Beer chapel at 1.45 pm, had a tea with some biscuits and decided to rest.

**The Most Dramatic Moment**

- We were welcomed in Beer chapel by local Christians and settled there thinking that we were safe. We assumed the government troops would reach Leer soon, but through the main road. Now we were 28 km away from Leer, and so, safe. What happened was that Darfurian rebels attacked us just one hour after our arrival in Beer. They came from Mirmir through the bush and were divided into three groups. Those people do not knock on your door, they arrived shooting at us.

When we heard the gunshots and the sound of bullets flying over our heads, we took what we could and ran into the bush. I ran with three bags. Fr. Ernest ran with me and also the lady with her child. People ran in different directions. The gunfire was intense. I fell down three times. At some point I had given up, I could run no more and was ready if they came to shoot me. Fr. Ernest was encouraging me. An old man, whose marriage I had assisted at, appeared from nowhere. He put a bed sheet on the ground for me to rest and took my heaviest bag. Another bag was given to one of the sisters. We had more gunfire and more running. The lady with the baby was left behind. When I and Fr. Ernest got completely exhausted, we threw ourselves on the ground in the middle of the dry grass under some palm trees and remained there unmoved for more than one hour.

We were not able to figure out what had happened to the rest of the group. We thought some could be dead. The gunfire went on from 3.00 to 6.00 pm. Suddenly, two cattle keepers walked by and saw us lying on the ground. We indentified ourselves. They moved on and came back later with Rebeka, a lady of the church, who took us to where the rest of the groups was. We were glad to see they were alive too. We miraculously escaped death. No doubt God protected us all along. The lady with the baby and a few others were still missing. We had information they had run very far and would be alive. We spent the night in a house nearby in terrible fear.
Reaching Another Location and Reality

– Early in the morning we moved to a far off location in the swamps. There we would be safer. We were welcomed by the owner of the house. There we set home and would sleep on the ground for the next twenty days. Little by little the group was getting together once again. We felt so relieved and grateful to God. Now we learned that one Nuer person was shot dead, two of our cars were taken and another car was set on fire by the Darfurians and government soldiers while civilians and military rebels were looting the mission.

We had lost almost everything. Most of us remained with the clothes we were wearing. We shared our clothes and other items with those who had little. I was able to save my documents, old computer, Holy Communion and a few clothes. And so was Fr. Jacob. Some money was also saved with which we would by our food. The new location was a real swampy area and very far. There are hippos and crocodiles. It was cold at night and very wind during the day. It soon became crowded. Many other displaced families joined us. One day I counted over 140 mosquito nets tents each sheltering tree or more people. We were nearly 500 people. Food was getting scarce.

Christians were collecting food to feed us. We got four goats and a bull which we shared among all. The same we did with dry fish. Hunt was also part of the menu (buffalo, hippo and crocodile). We drank from the same swamppy water we bathed with, we just boiled it. I had some medicine which I was sharing with the sick. Most children were affected with cough and malnutrition. Some sick with malaria. It is the burning season and to make things worse, fire was put in the dry grass. On 10 February a big fire came towards our camp. We run for a short distance till the fire was extinguished. Now most firewood was burnt. That bush was also our ‘toilet’.

Solidarity in Difficult Times

– We were in the same situation as all the people. We had very little to rely on, but we all had God. In fact, every evening at 5.00 pm we celebrated mass having an improvised small altar and people seating on the ground. We were sure that many would be praying for us around the world. We never lost hope that we would come out. The biggest challenge was communication. The catechists plus two of us walked three hours till they found a satellite phone with which they were able to communicate with Juba. We felt much relaxed because people in Juba and our families and friends would know that we were alive and well. We also came to know that Fr. Francis Chemello was still in Panyinjjar and Fr. Michael Barton had been rescued from looters in our house, taken to Adok by car and put in a boat to reach Old Fangak mission. Fr. Stephen was taken by the attackers to Mirmir and then to Bentiu. Nothing bad happened to him.

We hoped they could rescue us, but UNMISS does not do rescue operations since a helicopter was shot down last year. We intensified our prayers. We got all possible support from some
local Christians. If, on the one hand, the very people we have been trying to help and serve, including some Christians, looted our properties and made us feel sad, on the other hand, the solidarity of some Christians made us proud of them. We ate little, but never lacked food. They shared the little they had with us. The regional catechist of Leer walked two days looking for us. When he found us he shared with us the money of a goat he had sold out to help his handicapped son. And there were many signs like that. We were worried and anxious also because the longer we would remain there the more we would be a burden on people. However, the only way to evacuate us was to go to Leer airstrip. So, I wrote a letter to the Commissioner to enquire if it was safe to move to Leer town and if we could stay in our houses. At the same time the Commissioner was searching for us unsuccessfully. When we got a reply that we could walk to the main road so that he could pick us up by car, we decided to move back to Leer next morning at dawn. We left the place at 6.00 am. It was very cool and we were helped by the moon light. We walked for four hours. Sr. Agata, a 67 years old nun, was really brave. Some Christians walked us up to Mirmir and Leer.

We walked in fear since some armed youth were threatening us because they thought our presence there would attract the soldiers. When we reached Mirmir we learned that the cars went to another location to collect us. We spent two days in Mirmir. The soldiers were friendly and supportive. No harassment or animosity. They gave us food and mosquito nets and mattresses to spend the night. Transport was delayed. Later we learned that the reason was an ambush on them. So, they had to chase away those ambushing them and clear the way between Leer and Mirmir.

Finally, transport arrived and we were taken to Leer in great fear of a possible ambush. We reached Leer on Sunday evening 16 February and went to stay in our houses. It was heartbreaking to see our mission houses all looted. Only the buildings were standing with doors, gates and bathrooms all damaged. Everything else had been taken by both civilians and soldiers. The church was not touched, but all the buildings in local material were burnt down. It is very sad indeed to see huge investments and years of hard work all destroyed. However, our lives and our faith were not taken. The possibility to go out to Juba was more real and that night we celebrated a thanksgiving mass for having reached this far.

– On 16 February we were informed that there would be a flight for next day, but there would be only for seats available. We met and discerned who could be the first four passengers to leave. We let those who were sick to travel first. These were Sr. Agata, the lady with her sick daughter, an old lady and Sr. Carmita. They flew out on a Caravan Cesna by UNMISS/WFP. Nine of us remained behind for another flight which would come two days later. This allowed us time to clean the mess in both houses and to recover some books. We were given some more food,
which was added to some food sent from Juba by plane.

Finally, we left Leer on 20 February at 2.30 pm on a Mi-8 UNMISS/WFP helicopter. After a lading in Rumbek for refuelling, we reached Juba at 5.45 pm all exhausted but happy. We were warmly welcomed by both MCCJ and CMS communities of Juba. We met again Fr. Francis Chemello, who had been flown from Panyijiar two days earlier. I was able to talk to my mother, a sister of mine and a nephew by phone. While in exultation we were also mindful of our people who remained behind in the bush in fear and lacking food, clean water, shelter and medicine.

**Decision to stay in Leer**

In Leer itself, up to the day we left it, there was no fighting. When Darfurian rebels and government troops arrived there the town was desert and the rebels had gone into the bush. Yet, they burnt all the grass houses. There are reports that some people were killed and women raped. A woman would have been raped by seven men. Only brick and zinc buildings remain standing. The entire Leer population and some thousands from Bentiu are still in the bush right now. Only some women go to Leer looking for food. Men fear to go.

Also, some Bentiu residents go to Leer to be taken back to Bentiu. Government forces are in control. While all this took place, many people wondered why we stayed in Leer when we knew it was extremely dangerous to do so. On this I share my opinion, which may coincide with that of my colleague missionaries. Actually, I was afraid to stay, honestly, and was the only one who expressly told the provincial by email that I would leave Leer, should I see my life at risk and if that was safe enough for a plane to land. Some family members, other missionaries and friends were encouraging me to leave and come back later with my colleagues. The question I kept asking myself was when my life would be at risk and when would it be the right time to leave and how. It was not an easy discernment.

What weighted more in my decision to stay was the fact that, if I left to Juba, leaving all my colleagues behind to suffer alone and even being killed, I would never forgive myself for such an attitude. My religious community is my family. I would not abandon my family. I would rather face all hardships, even death, than to remain alive and safe in pain and suffering. This was one of my feelings. As for the two religious communities, what made us to stay basically was the hope that government troops would not reach Leer and there would be no fighting in town. And if they came at all, we hoped that they would respect us as church and would not loot the mission properties.

We also hoped that the cease-fire agreement would be implemented and conflicts would end soon, instead it was violated and violence was escalating. Besides, we thought that our presence around Leer would somehow inhibited atrocities and harms towards innocent civilians. We want also to give hope to our people and stand by their side at this war. We had been there for them, we would stay with them. However, we were very aware of the risks.
We were not naïve, did not underestimate the situation and did not want to put any one in trouble either. It was our missionary option. We only considered running into the bush, if that was necessary, but to remain. In fact, that is what happened. All along we tried to make decisions together. Both the Provincial Superior of the Comboni Missionaries and the Provincial Superior of the Comboni Sisters respected our decisions and supported us all through. No decision was imposed on us. It was our free and conscious choice and we have never been neglected.

– We are now in Juba and for the time being we will remain around recovering from stress and tiredness. Juba is safe. We shall monitor the situation in Leer and in the rest of the country. We pray and hope that this war may come to an end soon and peace may be re-established. I am very grateful to the God of life and love for all God has done for me, for the sisters, for my colleagues and the people who helped us. I want to thank each and every one of you who has been praying hard for our safety, life and rescue. God listened to yours and our prayers. I believe in miracles. They happened.

Many thanks to Br. Peppo and to Sr. Anna in Juba who mobilized ‘half of the world’ to evacuate us to Juba. Thanks a lot also to the provincials Sr. Giovanna and Fr. Daniele Moschetti for the trust and all support. Thanks to Fr. Moschetti and to the Comboni Missionaries in Brazil who showed their solidarity and kept my family informed. Many thanks to UNMISS/WFP for coordinating the flights.

Also, my immense gratitude to all Christians and other people who helped us in Leer in many different ways. I am still recomposing myself and trying to make sense of a lot of things, but I am happy and proud of being a missionary member of the Comboni Family. May St. Daniel Comboni and St. Josephine Bakhita intercede for us and for the peoples of South Sudan. Remain blessed and in peace.

In Christ,

Fr. Raimundo Rocha, mccj