

South Sudan's armies gear up as fighting season approaches

With peace talks continuing, **James Copnall** visits rebel and government strongholds to find preparations for war



- - - [James Copnall](#) in Leer and Malakal
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Martha

Nyarueni and her family fled Leer in January to escape the violence. On their return they found that their home burned and food stores looted. Photograph: Nichole Sobecki/AFP/Getty Images

Leer is a town in waiting. Like battle-scarred rebel outposts and war weary villages throughout South Sudan's conflict zone, residents and militia alike are gearing themselves up for a new round of fighting when the dry season begins in November – even as their leaders gather for peace talks in Tanzania.

[In the early days of this 10-month war](#), Leer – the hometown of rebel leader Riek Machar – was sacked by government troops loyal to the president Salva Kiir. Hospitals, mud-and-thatch huts and corrugated iron market stalls were set on fire. Thousands of civilians were forced to flee into the nearby swamps, eating wild animals and water lilies to survive. Some did not make it back.

Rebel forces have since regained control of the town, but the government's aggression has not been forgotten. Civilian support for Machar, Kiir's former deputy president, is extremely strong. In the past few months, rebels have bolstered their ranks by conscripting large numbers of young men from Leer and the surrounding area.

“There is a lot of recruitment,” says Joinet, a Leer resident. Some have volunteered to fight, especially the Ngueni, as cattle guards are called in the local Nuer language. Others, however, have been taken by force.

“They capture young men and take them for training,” Joinet says. “Even me, I am worried. You are only protected if you work for a NGO.”

But local staff from the international aid agencies say they are not immune. Aleem Shah, the head of Médecins Sans Frontières in Leer, is often called upon to rescue staff who have been captured. “Time and again, I myself go to the commissioner or the area commander to release my six to 10 staff every week, because they are also taken,” he said.

Brother Nicola Bortoli of the Comboni Catholic missionaries says there are hardly any young men in church on Sunday any more. “The sad part is that they recruit every day. They don't care if they are under 18, they just take all who can work. Going house by house in the night.”



South Sudan president Salva Kiir, left, Tanzanian president Jakaya Kikwete and South Sudan rebel leader Riek Machar, right, at peace talks in Arusha on 20 October. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

Senior rebel official George Gatloy Koang denies that his movement is conscripting young men, before adding that defending the community is “a must”. Both the rebels and the government frequently claim they are acting in self defence, and accuse each other of breaking the [cessation of hostilities agreement both signed in January](#).

Despite some progress in [negotiations between the government and rebels in Arusha](#), when all parties agreed to take collective responsibility for the conflict, there is little prospect of an effective peace deal being signed any time soon. The recent lull in violence has nothing to do with an easing of hostilities. Rather the calm can be attributed to the rainy season, which transforms dirt roads into impassible sludge, restricting the movement of tanks and other vehicles.

With the dry season approaching in November, both rebel and government fighters are preparing to resume the contest.

Malakal, one of South Sudan’s biggest towns, changed hands six times between December and March, ending up with

forces loyal to Kiir. In the process much of the town was destroyed. Creepers decked with vivid yellow flowers have grown over the thatch-less frames of burnt huts. Nearly every home and shop has been looted.

The petrol station in the main market no longer operates; an enterprising man with an antique Singer sewing machine has set up shop on the forecourt. Not far away, two boys, seeming only just into their teenage years, stand guard outside a building now occupied by the army, wearing military fatigues and carrying guns. Both sides in this conflict have been accused of using child soldiers.

The government is determined not to cede control of Malakal again. The town is important symbolically as the capital of Upper Nile state, occupies a strategic position on the White Nile river, and is the gateway to South Sudan's only remaining operating oilfields.

Local chiefs from the Shilluk ethnic group say Johnson Olony, the leader of a Shilluk militia loyal to the government, has been recruiting heavily on the west bank of the Nile. The government has also sent in more troops and tanks to Makalal and the rest of the state, in preparation for the battles to come.

"We have more soldiers now," says Awer Dau, the deputy governor of Upper Nile. "We are preparing to defend our town." At the end of September, the rebels and the government exchanged shellfire a few miles to the south of Malakal, an incident which followed clashes near the town of Renk, on the border with Sudan.



Displaced

South Sudanese women walk towards the UN base in Malakal in January. Photograph: Simon Maina/AFP/Getty Images

South Sudanese activists and religious groups are demanding an end to the fighting. Catholic bishops call the war “evil and immoral”. Bishop emeritus Paride Taban, South Sudan’s most respected peace campaigner, says he has been shocked by the levels of violence.

The civil war which led to [South Sudan’s independence in 2011](#) “was not for power”, he says. “It was for the dignity of the people of South Sudan. And this was something accepted. But this one has no meaning. It is a senseless war which is taking a lot of innocent lives.”

Back in Leer, as residents brace themselves for renewed conflict, it is easy to see how the war has affected every part of society. On one of the main roads in town, a wide dirt strip pockmarked with puddles, young children gather every evening to play a new game. Armed with shields made of cardboard, and lumps of mud to hurl, they divide themselves into two groups. One side pretends to be the government, and the other the rebels.