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Sr. Molly Lim, a member of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, visits South Sudanese families living in Kakuma Refugee Camp Feb. 17. She and other sisters preach peace and counsel refugees suffering from trauma from experiencing civil war in South Sudan. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)



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Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya — May 15, 2023

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Editor's note: *Global Sisters Report's series Hope Amid Turmoil: Sisters in Conflict Areas offers a look at the lives and ministries of women religious serving in dangerous places worldwide. The news stories, columns and Q&As in this series will include sisters in Ukraine, Nigeria, Kenya, Sri Lanka, Nicaragua and more throughout 2023.*



On a hot and dusty afternoon in this sprawling United Nations camp, Sr. Molly Lim gathered a group of South Sudan's two predominant tribes, the Dinka and Nuer, for a dialogue on reconciliation and healing.

"Dear God in heaven … may you give us the peace and understanding we need," she prayed as the members of the two tribes suffering from ethnic conflict bowed their heads and folded their hands. "Heal the wounds of our brothers and sisters who have gathered here. May God help us bear with each other and forgive one another."

Lim, a member of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, and other religious sisters lead such meetings twice a week to find ways the two rival tribes living in the camp can reconcile and regard one another as brothers and sisters.



A sign stands near Kakuma Refugee Camp in northern Kenya. The camp is home to more than 200,000 refugees, mainly from South Sudan. Others are from Sudan, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Ethiopia and Uganda. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

The Dinka and Nuer ethnic tribes have been violent toward one another long before they moved to Kakuma Refugee Camp, where the hostility continues. Here, they fight each other to death at the slightest provocation, always armed with machetes, knives, and jerry cans of kerosene and petrol to attack each other in case of an argument. The fights and attacks sometimes lead to the deaths of members of either tribe, camp officials told Global Sisters Report.

In December 2013, violence broke out in South Sudan after President Salva Kiir, a Dinka, accused his then-vice president Riek Machar, a Nuer, and 10 others of attempting a coup d'état. Kiir fired Machar, a move that developed into a conflict between the two major ethnic groups in the country. (There are 64 ethnic groups in the East African country of nearly 11 million people.)

The African Union investigators, led by former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, detailed in their 2015 findings that after the violence broke out in 2013, government forces and the Presidential Guard — an elite military unit of Dinka soldiers that protects Kiir — targeted members of the Nuer ethnic group. The report

further revealed that victims of South Sudan's civil war were raped, burned, and made to drink blood and eat flesh, with both sides committing gross human rights violations.



A youth from the Dinka tribe cries at the Kakuma Refugee Camp Feb. 17 as he recounts the horrors he experienced at the hands of Nuer rebels in South Sudan before seeking refuge at the camp. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Thousands of refugees fleeing South Sudan's civil war every day have extended their ethnic hatred to one of the world's largest refugee camps, established in 1992. Religious sisters have observed that the hatred can be a fertile ground for genocide in the camp that hosts more than 200,000 refugees, mainly from South Sudan. Others are from Sudan, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Ethiopia, and Uganda. Meanwhile, the Kalobeyei settlement, just outside Kakuma Refugee Camp, is home to more than 53,000 refugees.

Sr. Elizabetta Grobberio of the Missionary Sisters of De Foucauld said there had been violent revenge attacks between the Dinka and Nuer, blaming each other for killing their relatives in their country's civil war. Sometimes the slightest provocation between the two tribes in the camp can provoke deadly violence that's impossible to contain, sometimes resulting in deaths and injuries, she said, including unrelated bystanders who try to intervene.

As attacks escalated, officials from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees deployed security in the camp and segregated the two tribes to avoid regular confrontations. However, the refugees told GSR that, though they share a market with each other, they still sometimes fight when they meet.

"The violence these people have experienced has made some of them lose their sense of judgment, and they still fight each other and point fingers at each other away from their home country," said Grobberio, a nun from Italy who has worked in the camp since 2013. "Whenever they see each other, they only think of fighting and killing each other."



Fr. Jose Padinjareparampil, director of Don Bosco Kakuma, preaches peace and harmony among the refugees during his sermon at Guadalupe Parish in Kalobeyei

settlement in Kakuma, Feb. 26. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Fr. Jose Padinjareparampil, director of Don Bosco Kakuma, said refugees from South Sudan are very tribalistic, blaming each other for their country's problems and civil war. For example, Dinkas always accuse the Nuers of starting the war by wanting to overthrow the government of their leader, he said. In contrast, the Nuers blame the Dinkas for using state machinery to target and kill them.

"They don't want to hear each other's names," said Padinjareparampil, a parish priest of Holy Cross parish in Kakuma Refugee Camp, who has worked there for nine years. "There was a time I was visiting one of the houses in the camp, and I found a particular group of youth fighting each other. They had broken bottles and were aiming at each other. I tried calming the situation, but it was very bad. One of the youths was seriously injured."



Srs. Elizabetta Grobberio (front row) and Sabina Mueni (second from left) pose with refugees in Kakuma Refugee Camp. Religious sisters hold weekly meetings to teach the refugees about forgiveness and reconciliation. (Courtesy of Missionary Sisters of Charles De Foucauld)

The Dinka (representing 36% of the population) and the Nuer (16%) have been embroiled in the protracted conflict for decades. The two rival groups are semi-nomadic cattle keepers; in the past, they competed for pasture and water for their cattle, resulting in a conflict that has not yielded massive fatalities. However, analysts said that the firing of Machar by Kiir acted as a catalyst for mass violence.

Nyuop Muker Monytung, the former chief of Pibor village in eastern South Sudan who fled the country in 2013 after the civil war escalated, said the conflict between the two tribes worsened after Kiir incited the Dinkas.

"Kiir accused Machar of wanting his tribe to overthrow the government and kick out Dinkas," said Monytung, a 54-year-old member of the Dinka tribe living in Kakuma. "The message by Kiir poisoned Dinkas, who wanted to kill and finish all the Nuers. However, the Nuers also retaliated, resulting in massive deaths and displacement."

South Sudan's civil war has left nearly 400,000 people dead. The violence has also displaced over 4 million people from their homes, including almost 2.2 million who have fled to neighboring countries, including Kenya's Kakuma camp.



Sr. Molly Lim, a member of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, prays with a south Sudanese refugee during her tour in the camp to preach peace and reconcile communities, Feb. 17, 2023. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

A thirst for revenge

At the camp, tribe members tend to walk in groups wherever they go for their safety in case the rival group attacks them.

Gai Tong, a Nuer refugee living in the camp, said his heart is full of revenge against people from the Dinka tribe for killing his entire family.

"Whenever I see a Dinka, my blood boils. I feel very angry," said the 24-year-old, sobbing and wailing. "I was told to watch as my mother and two uncles were burnt alive. One of my uncles was told to eat human flesh from his brother. After that, the rebels from the Dinka group tied us to a tree and left us for the dead. We were told that what we saw should be a lesson to all the Nuers."

Tong, who arrived at the camp in 2016, was rescued by other Nuers on their way to Kakuma to seek refuge. His maternal uncle, who was forced to eat human flesh, became depressed and later died, he said.

"Since that time, I have had anger issues," he said, noting that his tribe is always armed with machetes, clubs and spears in case Dinkas attack them. "When I see a Dinka, I want to attack him and get revenge for the things they did to our tribe. They hate us, and we hate them, too. They are the root cause of the problems we are going through in our country."

One Dinka woman who arrived at the camp in 2017 from Jonglei state told GSR that rebel soldiers from the Nuer ethnic community raped her and her three daughters before murdering her husband and five of her seven children.

"You can’t forget such a thing; revenge is the only solution because it can console you," said the 48-year-old mother, who requested anonymity. "I always have nightmares of Nuers attacking me and wanting to rape me again, and suddenly I wake up and start screaming for help. The incident affects me, and when I see a man from the Nuer community, I usually start running away while screaming."



Dinka and Nuer refugees attend a gathering organized by religious sisters to discuss the importance of maintaining peace, reconciling and forgiving each other as they live together in Kakuma Refugee Camp. (Courtesy of Missionary Sisters of Charles De Foucauld)

Religious sisters intervene

The hostility in the camp has prompted religious sisters to find ways of reconciling these communities and empowering them.

Lim, who hails from Singapore and has worked in the camp for more than seven years, said they introduced weekly counseling and prayer sessions to help thousands of refugees recover from the wounds and scars caused during the civil war.

During the counseling sessions in groups of 20 to 40 people, mainly from the Dinka and Nuer, refugees traumatized by injuries or memories of how their loved ones were brutally killed can freely share their experiences.

"Some of the refugees cry uncontrollably when they narrate their horrific experiences, but that's the way of healing and accepting themselves," said Lim, adding that some are taken to hospitals for professional assistance. "We encourage refugees to forgive each other, show love to each other and live in peace as brothers and sisters."

Grobberio said they frequently bring together the Nuer and Dinka communities in meetings intended to reduce tensions in the camp, with the hopes that the two communities can eventually work together. During the meetings, the sisters allow them to talk and share their ideas on how peace can be achieved among themselves.

"The Dinka and Nuer communities end up talking to each other after the meeting, which is a great achievement," she said. "We also involve the two communities in activities that unite them, like soccer, netball and athletics. They participate, cheer and finally greet each other after the match. Such activities have slowly brought peace between the communities."

Grobberio noted that prayers and sharing the Gospel with refugees have also brought peace among the warring communities in the camp. The nun has formed small groups of Christian refugees in every corner of the camp, with the groups visiting other refugees' homes with sisters to encourage them to accept Christ, join the church and be part of their group.

"The prayers and Gospel are working because more people, regardless of the tribe, are coming to church and joining Christian groups in their areas of residence," she said. "The refugees forgive each other after they understand the love of Christ and how God loves them despite the situation they are going through."

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The sisters have also empowered refugees by providing practical job training in tailoring and dressmaking, masonry, catering and accommodation, hairdressing, welding, plumbing and baking.

Padinjareparampil said that priests and sisters together have held meetings for both tribes to share activities — such as sports and music festivals — to remind them of their culture and encourage them to trade together. These activities have been a way of bringing peace, healing and acceptance, he said, as has the formation of different groups of men, women and youth who meet every Sunday after Mass.

Meanwhile, Tong said that he had started attending the counseling and prayer sessions carried out by the sisters to deal with his anger issues.

"In every session, I'm taught about forgiveness and acceptance," he said. "The sisters are holding meetings for both communities to discuss our issues, and I am learning how to peacefully coexist with my fellow refugees and view the Dinkas as brothers rather than enemies."

This story appears in the **Hope Amid Turmoil: Sisters in Conflict Areas** feature series. View the full series.