



‘Where will we run this time?’

South Sudanese civilians living in a displacement camp fear U.N. peacekeepers can't protect them from a massacre

MALAKAL, South Sudan — She was living in the safest place she could find, a white plastic tent on a muddy field where 32,791 people crammed together under a blue United Nations flag.

For more than two years, Rachael Mayik had found refuge in this camp from one of the world's most brutal wars. But now the fighting seemed to be speeding toward her.

Radios blared reports from the capital, 300 miles away, about the breakdown of a cease-fire between the opposing forces of the president and the vice president. She saw the planes evacuating aid workers from the nearby dirt

airstrip. At the field hospital, doctors were making space for an influx of victims.

The camp, Mayik knew, could be overrun.

“We need a way out,” said Mayik, a tall, weary-eyed 56-year-old, squinting into the sun as she walked toward the perimeter fence of the U.N. Protection of Civilians site.

In front of her was a guard tower manned by Indian peacekeepers. Beyond it, in a more fortified part of the camp, were 3,000 U.N. employees, two helicopters and an arsenal of weapons. That had once been enough to make her feel safe. Now she wasn't sure.

The United Nations operates 16 peacekeeping missions around the world, many of which exist primarily to protect vulnerable civilians. That mandate was reinforced after the genocides in **Rwanda** (<http://www.histori.ca/peace/page.do?pageID=339>) and **Bosnia** (<http://www.nytimes.com/1999/11/16/world/un-details-its-failure-to-stop-95-bosnia-massacre.html>) in the mid-1990s occurred as outmanned U.N. peacekeeping forces stood by.

But 20 years later, the United Nations is once again facing sharp criticism for failing to protect civilians, this time in South Sudan, where **160,000** (<http://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/unicef-south-sudan-humanitarian-situation-report-88-3-16-june-2016>) people are living in its camps, often surrounded by armed men from rival tribes.

In February, fighters carrying AK-47s and grenade launchers broke into the Malakal camp. As many as 50 people were fatally shot, burned alive in their tents or crushed by panicking crowds while U.N. peacekeepers fled their posts. Even the United Nations acknowledged its troops' failure.

For civilians in the camp, it was like trying to escape from a prison set aflame, the barbed-wire fences penning in wailing mothers and children with swarms

of gunmen.

Mayik eventually managed to flee through a large metal barrier, known as Charlie Gate, into the U.N. staff compound next door, which was protected by additional layers of razor wire.

Now, as the July sun burned overhead, she was trudging again toward the far edge of the camp.

“The rumor is they will attack within the next day or two,” said a man walking past her.

“The camp isn’t safe,” said an older woman.

Finally, she approached Charlie Gate. And then she saw it: a backhoe piling green sand-filled blast barriers, one on top of another, in front of the gate. The United Nations was sealing off the entrance.

“Where will we run this time?” Mayik asked, her voice cracking as the machine rumbled on.

‘Nowhere else to go’

For years, Mayik doubted that southern Sudan would ever become its own nation. It was too fragmented, too poor and battered after decades of war with the north. But by 2007, independence looked like a real possibility, as a peace process championed by then-President George W. Bush took hold

(<http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/25/unmade-in-the-usa-south-sudan-bush-obama/>) .

So Mayik packed everything from her house in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum, where she had been working as an English teacher, and traveled 400 miles to Malakal, her birthplace.

She started building a home less than a mile from the White Nile river. Malakal

was southern Sudan's second-largest city, a former British colonial trading post with an international airport, foreign banks and a bustling market. When South Sudan gained its independence in 2011, she danced in the streets.

But before Mayik could finish painting the master bathroom, in late 2013, the city collapsed into war. A feud had erupted between President Salva Kiir and First Vice President Riek Machar, and it quickly pitted the longtime rivals' respective ethnic groups — the Dinka and the Nuer — against each other. Tens of thousands of South Sudanese would die over the next two years.

In Malakal, gunmen went door to door in search of people from opposing tribes. Mayik's brother was killed in her home. Her husband, Mugo, was fatally shot at a hospital where he lay recuperating from a hip injury. When Mayik found out, she ran, weeping, to the open field next to the U.N. peacekeepers' base.

"There was nowhere else to go," she recalled. "People said, 'The U.N. is that way,' so we ran that way."

The U.N. mission, known as UNMISS, said it would shelter anyone fleeing from that violence, and it created six makeshift tent cities in late 2013 and early 2014. It was the right thing to do, the U.N. peacekeeping chief, Hervé Ladsous, would later tell reporters. "Many of them would be dead now if we had not done that," he said (<http://www.un.org/africarenewal/news/south-sudan-un-peacekeeping-chief-says-action-will-be-taken-probe-malakal-violence>) . Still, no one expected the crisis to last so long.

Not Mayik, whose flimsy tent gradually took on an air of permanence, with a framed portrait of her favorite cousin, rusty iron chairs, and curtains fashioned out of excess white plastic from the tent.

Not the United Nations. Over time, the camp became so neglected — its latrines overflowing, its food in near-perpetual shortage — that it failed to meet

the minimum humanitarian standards governing the world's refugee and displacement camps.

And not the U.N. peacekeepers in Malakal, who found themselves guarding a volatile camp divided between ethnic groups, in which a few young men began to smuggle in guns through gaping holes in the poorly guarded perimeter fence.

Now, the recently appointed senior U.N. official here, a short, hard-charging Namibian named Hazel De Wet, was standing in her office in a metal prefab container less than a mile from Mayik's tent, taking a phone call from a U.N. colleague.

"Lots of rumors of mobilization," De Wet said.

She was certain that Malakal would soon erupt.

"It could just take one person to shoot, and all hell will break loose," she said.

Close, tense proximity

As morning gave way to a brutally hot afternoon, Mayik stepped into a large white tent near the perimeter fence where some camp leaders were meeting.

"Things are getting bad in Juba," Mayik told the women as she sat in a plastic chair. But they had already heard the news. One woman, wrapped in a black shawl, was quietly crying.

"Will it come to us or not?" asked Viola Daniel, one of the women.

"Always, if there is fighting in Juba, it comes to Malakal," Mayik said, and the women nodded. In 2013, it had taken exactly nine days for the war to spread from the capital to this city, where the country's three largest ethnic groups lived in close, tense proximity.

Like Mayik, most of the women in the tent were ethnic Shilluks, allies of the Nuers and adversaries of the ethnic Dinkas who controlled the area outside the camp as well as the national military.

The women all knew people who had been killed in mid-February, when South Sudanese troops invaded the camp after a few young Dinka and Shilluk camp residents began shooting wildly at each other with smuggled weapons. Bullets tore through tents as thin as plastic bags. Dozens died, but the camp burned with such intensity that no one would ever know exactly how many victims had been incinerated.

The women saw how peacekeepers ran from the fighting or refused to use their weapons.

“What will the internationals do to protect us this time?” asked one woman, Veronica Nyijak.

Everyone always looked to Mayik to answer. She was the one who spoke English and who had a job with an international relief group, the Danish Refugee Council. In a country where 85 percent of women are illiterate, she had translated the Old Testament from English to Shilluk.

“It’s the U.N. now who can protect us,” she said firmly. “Last time they said they weren’t ready. This time, they have to be.”

The truth was that she wasn’t sure the United Nations could protect them.

After the February attack, Ladsous, the U.N. peacekeeping chief, pledged to send the negligent troops home. The United Nations, in an internal investigation, would eventually conclude that peacekeepers failed in Malakal through a “combination of inaction, abandonment of post and refusal to engage.”

But only two commanders who performed poorly were repatriated, officials said.

When the meeting ended, Mayik got up from her plastic chair and walked back into the scorching afternoon. She'd almost forgotten that it was South Sudan's independence day, **July 9** (<http://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/09/africa/south-sudan-violence/>) : the fifth birthday of the world's youngest country.

“What a mistake this whole independence has been,” she said.

Fighting rages in the capital

The next day, Mayik settled into the front row at Dolieb Hill Presbyterian Church, a wide, open-air hall in the camp with a tin roof and a dirt floor.

“Please turn off your cellphones,” one of the pastors pleaded.

But no one did. Instead, their phones rang one by one, and the congregants rushed outside to hear updates from their families in the capital. Was the fighting still going on? they asked. How far had it spread?

The answers came in terrifying fragments.

The U.N. displacement camp in Juba had been caught in the crossfire. A rocket struck a tank, killing two Chinese peacekeepers. Civilians at the U.N. compound were ripped by machine-gun fire.

Eyewitnesses in Juba would later describe how most of the peacekeepers did almost nothing to defend the camp. Instead, they fired tear gas at civilians to keep them from running into the U.N. staff compound for safety. At least 11 civilians were killed and 139 wounded in and around the U.N. base. Dozens of women were raped by combatants.

In the church, Mayik looked down at her Bible. A pickup truck full of Rwandan peacekeepers in riot gear rolled by the church. Another pastor, Obaj Laa, recited the same prayer he said every Sunday:

“Let God protect the U.N., give them peace and love so they can support our people.”

‘No one wants to die for the U.N.’

That night, as the death toll in Juba rose and rumors swirled that Malakal could be next, two platoons of peacekeepers, one Rwandan and one Indian, piled into their vehicles for a joint patrol of the camp’s perimeter. Since the February clash, peacekeepers had been instructed to be more vigilant.

Less than a minute after the troops left their bases, a Rwandan truck carrying six peacekeepers got stuck in the mud on the narrow perimeter road. The soldiers dismounted and tried to push it forward, grunting.

“Seems impossible?” a Rwandan commander asked his men.

They nodded.

As his colleagues tried to dislodge their truck, one Rwandan soldier stared at the ground on the side of the road.

“This happens every day,” he said.

They were the men who were supposed to safeguard Mayik and the rest of the camp’s residents. But the trucks were just one of many problems facing the blue-helmeted “world police,” who have assumed an ever-growing mission even as their abilities are questioned.

For years, aid groups and U.N. officials themselves have raised concerns about

the lack of training and professionalism of peacekeepers who frequently come from the world's least-developed countries. Complicating matters, many are bound by commands from their own militaries — what the United Nations calls “hidden caveats” — that trump U.N. orders. And those militaries often don't want their soldiers risking their lives to fulfill an international mandate.

“What it boils down to,” said a senior U.N. official in Malakal, “is that no one wants to die for the U.N.”

Yet the United Nations is reluctant to dismiss poorly performing troops, in part because they would be difficult to replace. Few advanced militaries are willing to dispatch entire battalions to U.N. missions like Malakal. The United States, for example, contributes a total of 35 troops and 33 police to peacekeeping missions around the world.

Eventually, on this night, the Indian peacekeepers left the Rwandan platoon and continued patrolling.

They stopped periodically to visit the sentry posts on the perimeter of the site, overlooking a vast darkness. Their flashlights illuminated stray dogs and silhouetted the few camp residents who had ventured from their tents. Mayik's block was barely visible, a patchwork of plastic and corrugated tin.

“We don't see anything, so we assume everything is fine,” said Lt. Col. R.M. Purohit, the commander of the Indian platoon.

But the peacekeepers knew how quickly things could change.

“We've seen the lack of respect for the U.N. flag — there's just nothing off-limits,” as De Wet put it.

‘So what do we do?’

It was raining when Mayik and about a dozen other camp leaders arrived at the U.N. staff compound the next afternoon for a meeting with top officials.

Malakal was transformed in the rain — the cracked earth turning a soupy gray. It meant mosquitoes, which meant malaria, which meant death. It meant flooded latrines, which meant people had no choice but to defecate on open ground, which meant the entire site smelled like an open sewer.

Mayik and the others dashed through the downpour to a metal storage container that served as a conference room. De Wet sat at the head of the table, flanked by three U.N. military officers. The air conditioning blasted.

“You are all wondering: What is UNMISS going to do this time around?” De Wet asked.

“Your protection has and will be sacrosanct,” she said.

Then Col. Deo Rusanganwa, the Rwandan chief of peacekeeping operations, began speaking.

“I’m not saying the crisis is going to come tomorrow, but when the threat comes, don’t be worried,” he said. “We are ready to do whatever.”

A young man in a red soccer jersey, David Dak, raised his hand.

“We are wondering what the U.N. will do if something happens. Charlie Gate is now closed,” he said, referring to the main entry to the fortified U.N. staff compound. “If there’s an attack, how can we cross to the other side?”

It was the same question Mayik had been asking herself. She picked up her pen to write down the answer in her notebook.

“This time around there will be no problem inside,” Rusanganwa said. “We’re not ready to fail. Be comfortable with where you are until we give you another

information.”

Mayik looked up. If she had stayed in her tent in February, she would have been killed.

What she didn't know was that blocking the gate had been De Wet's decision, an attempt to keep out camp residents who might steal or damage expensive U.N. equipment or drag the fighting closer to the staff quarters. U.N. officials had decided that another gate, farther from Mayik's tent, could be opened in case of an emergency. But they hadn't told the camp's residents.

Mayik raised her hand. She was nervous and upset and still wet from the rain.

“We can try to be calm, but still we are affected,” she began.

The rain pelted on the tin roof. Mayik was exhausted and nearly out of words.

“We hope that this time it will not come to us.”

The meeting ended. Mayik stepped outside into the mud.

“They still can't give us a guarantee,” Dak said. “So what do we do?”

There would be a lull in the fighting over the next few weeks. But no one believed that the crisis was over. As July ended, U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon would warn: “South Sudan remains precariously poised on the brink of an abyss.”

Returning to her tent, Mayik thought about the U.N. attempts to reassure her.

“They're still not sure they can protect us,” she said.