

# Protection in Sudan's Nuba Mountains: Local achievements, international failures

By Justin Corbett\*

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**SUMMARY:** In June 2011, the internationally brokered and monitored peace agreement in South Kordofan broke down and a civil war erupted that left over a millions civilians cut off from all markets, services and contact with the outside world.

Despite explicit targeting of civilians and a rapidly worsening humanitarian crisis, the UN and the international NGOs have been unable to provide any protection or assistance. In contrast, the efforts of a small group of local volunteers are showing how vulnerable communities can help each other to strengthen their own capacities for self- protection.

These initiatives alone may not meet all local survival needs, but they do highlight the primary importance of local agency as well the inadequacy of international protection mechanisms.

Local to Global Protection (L2GP) is an initiative intended to document and promote local perspectives on protection in major humanitarian crises. So far, community oriented studies have been carried out in Burma/Myanmar, Sudan, South Sudan and Zimbabwe.



## How it started

In June 2011, armed conflict broke out in the Nuba Mountains region of South Kordofan (Sudan) between the armed forces of the northern opposition party SPLM-N (Sudan People's Liberation Movement - North) and the GoS (Government of Sudan). Fighting rapidly escalated, despite the presence of a well resourced United Nation Peace Keeping Mission (UNMIS) mandated to monitor and uphold the protocols of the internationally brokered Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

Over one million civilians, mostly ethnic Nuba, were living in what rapidly became a highly aggressive war zone cut off from public services, trade or international assistance. Six months on, they remain extremely vulnerable to attack from GoS land forces and almost daily aerial bombardment. Over 250,000 have been displaced and, in an attempt to escape starvation and fighting, some 25,000 have made the perilous journey to become refugees in the Republic of South Sudan. Since the start of this civil war, the GoS has denied any humanitarian access, whether "cross-line" from the north, or "cross-border" from the south.

By chance, L2GP researchers were in the Nuba Mountains in June when the war erupted and rapidly spread across South Kordofan. They were collecting the experiences of those that had lived through the previous war which ended with the CPA in 2005. Witnessing the level of immediate risk faced by civilians, the inability of UNMIS to offer any protection at all and the eagerness of local civil society to be active, the idea of forming a group of civilian protection volunteers was borne.

Working with a local Nuba NGO, some 30 youth who had already been involved with a (peace-time) child-right's project were brought together. They enthusiastically embraced the idea of forming a team that could move between villages to encourage, support and strengthen community-based self-protection. A coordinator was selected from the local NGO and the minimal funds to cover the core costs of a 6 months pilot were mobilized.

The objective of the pilot was to **strengthen the capacity of communities to protect themselves** - their safety, their livelihood needs, their rights, their psychological wellbeing (dignity, unity, sense of community, happiness). The basic approach and core tasks were identified as disseminating key protection advice and ideas, facilitating cross-learning between villages, raising basic human rights awareness and documenting accounts of human rights abuses. If possible, they would also distribute some selected materials (e.g. empty sacks, water purifiers, sports and music items). An initial training was rapidly designed and delivered. The civilian protection volunteers (working in teams of two: one

woman, one man) were allocated districts and villages which they were to cover on foot (already vehicles and fuel were unavailable) and basic workplans were developed. Once a month they planned to congregate at a central location for a two-day meeting in which they would share their experiences and reports and developed ideas for improving their service.

### **Experiences to date**

With minimal management or guidance, intermittent payment (they were to receive an allowance of about \$100 per month) and no supply of materials except for some empty sacks, water tablets and basic medicines, the protection volunteers have now been operational for 6 months. Moving between villages on foot, each team of two volunteers covered from 3 to 8 villages (settled and displaced), thereby reaching between 200 to 800 families (approximately 1,000 to 4,000 people). After three months, the volunteer coordinator took the initiative to make the difficult journey (6 days on foot through zones of intense fighting) to another area of the mountains and trained a further 24 volunteers. In all, we estimate that in half a year, about 75,000 people have been reached by the volunteers. The total cost has been less than \$30,000.

In practice, their activities have focused around 4 key tasks:

#### 1) Disseminating practical advice

Some of the protection measures disseminated were identified by L2GP research based on local experiences from the last war, but volunteers are also spreading new ideas being generated by effected communities now:

- Protection measures during bombardment
- Setting-up community run early warning systems (using observers with whistles or traditional horns or bells) to warn of approaching Antonov bombers or ground attacks
- Mine and UXO awareness education and basic first aid skills
- Hiding multiple stashes of food in safe places (and the natural measures that can be used to reduce insect damage)
- Simple primary health messages (e.g. mosquito control, water treatment, risks of non-prescribed antibiotics)
- Types of herbal treatment for skin diseases, fevers, infected wounds and snake bite
- When supplies allowed, the volunteers were also able to boost self-help by distributing empty sacks (for moving grain and other food stocks, storing

grain in caves), mosquito nets and/or malaria medicines, water treatment tablets.

## 2) Promoting and encouraging self-help

The volunteers found that the level and quality of self-protection varied considerably between different communities. People were more directionless and uncertain in villages that were predominantly populated by recent returnees than in those whose members had direct experience of the last war. In such villages, volunteers spent more time on encouraging, mobilizing and animating communities to become more proactive and organized in their self-protection efforts, including:

- working with local leaders to organise host-communities to provide assistance to incoming IDPs
- mobilising communities and households to dig bomb shelters (or identify natural ones) and clear dry grasses near to houses.
- sitting with people who are in shock and trauma and encouraging them not to give up
- mobilizing communities to provide food for those in the hospital and prisons who had lost their families
- encouraging cooperation between church pastors and mosque Imams
- identifying interest among local leaders requesting leadership training to strengthen self-protection capacity of their communities

An important part of this mobilizing and animating was to encourage leaders and communities to prioritise social events that could rise spirits and morale (e.g. wedding parties, traditional celebrations, singing, dancing, wrestling and sports activities). The volunteers found that the considerable stress and psychological problems caused by constant aerial bombardment in many communities was weakening self-help and local action. Unfortunately, due to access problems, the planned supplies of footballs, musical instruments, wind-up radios (which volunteers were to distribute) has still to take place.

## 3) Channelling messages from the people

The volunteers found that all communities they visited demonstrated a strong interest in communicating with the outside world. Many villages saw the volunteers as a channel through which they might make their voices heard outside of their blockaded and war-torn homeland (whether to the

northern Sudanese public, the GoS leadership, the African Union or the wider international community). Often it seemed they considered it worthwhile just having someone to listen and record their opinions. Some of these quotes have already been used in advocacy pieces, articles, reports and presentations (they tend to be equally critical of the actions of the Government of Sudan and the inactions of the international community!).

#### 4) Monitoring and reporting

Although not initially intended as one of their roles, all of the protection volunteers continued to record the basic condition of the villages that they covered each month. Their nature and depth of their reports varied considerable, and included:

- Monitoring the fluctuating numbers of IDPs and their movements.
- Identifying most vulnerable groups – who and where they are (e.g. numbers of widowed families, number of orphans)
- Assessing condition of the people (host and displaced): nutritional, health, morale
- Monitoring changing water supplies
- Monitoring fighting, bombing, shelling (and resulting casualties) and changing risks of land attack in the future; for example: " 07/10/2011 Antonov bombed Mothan with 4 bombs at 11:59 am, injuring 4 person and then with 6 bombs at 12:25noon with no casualties. On same day, they bombed Abeyat at 1:35p.m with 3 bombs killing a donkey, and then Urrma at 2:00p.m with 6 bombs injuring two persons and destroying Abel Hamid's house and garden and leaving unexploded bombs in the village"
- Identifying the priority needs for different villages, differentiating between villages which suffered most from lack of shelter materials (for IDPs), shortage of water, vulnerability to malaria, incidences of skin disease and food, lack of veterinary drugs
- Assessing likely or actual harvests, condition of livestock and prevalence of different diseases
- Recording incidences of human rights abuses (including systematic rape of young girls by GoS forces in particular villages)

#### **Impacts and lessons learnt**

Because of the lack of access, it has not yet been possible to carry out an independent impact assessment of this work; for now we are reliant on observations from the volunteers themselves and from local informants on the

ground. But to date, the feedback seems very positive. The volunteers are reporting that their monthly visits to their different target communities are welcomed and productive. Even without payment many of them have continued their work which indicates that both they and the local communities consider it worthwhile. Several different sources confirm that despite increased and sustained aerial bombardment, casualties have dropped significantly because of the advice and ideas disseminated.

At the same time, it is clear that much depends on the particular communication skills and level of motivation and initiative of the volunteers themselves. With very little leadership and guidance, inadequate training and mentoring, and virtually no supplies, not all volunteers have been able to maintain the motivation needed to make a difference. Several do not have the confidence or interest to animate and mobilise, preferring instead to monitor and record and wait (albeit with decreasing faith) for international assistance. And however effective even the strongest might be, there is little they can do to counter the worsening food availability without a significant inject of resources.

### **Conclusions and next steps**

Much could be done to strengthen the potential efficacy of the protection teams. Greater investment and support for management and coordination would make an enormous difference. As would improved communication and basic equipment for the volunteers (cameras, flashlights, footwear, in some areas mountain bicycles). Training could usefully include more practical first aid and primary health care, as well as more on basic mobilization and communication skills. But at the same time, improvements in access to food for hundreds of thousands of war affected civilians in the Nuba Mountains must also be realised if famine is to be averted and the efforts to strengthen self-protection are to remain relevant.

The L2G Project is now attempting to carry out a more systematic review of lessons and impacts generated by this pilot. Assuming that this confirms the value of continuing the initiative, measures will be rapidly undertaken to strengthen the leadership and capacity of the volunteers and the materials and skills at their disposal.

Meanwhile, the potential and comparative cost effectiveness of the approach is further highlighted by the fact that for the first four months of this initiative, a fully funded UN peace-keeping mission was present in the area, with large numbers of well-paid peace-keeping and protection staff, logistics (cars, personnel carriers and helicopters) and communications. Not only did they never visit any of the villages, they hardly ever ventured out of their camps. They certainly were unable to do anything to either keep the peace or protect civilians and they only became active when at last they were able to withdraw (taking their logistics and communications with them).

However imperfect the protection volunteer pilot might be, it certainly did more to protect civilians and at a fraction of the cost. As the recent ODI Humanitarian Practise Network Paper 72 concludes: the role and value of international peacekeepers in the protection of civilian populations needs to be re-assessed and thoroughly revised, informed and directed by local realities and local priorities. L2GP aims to increase pressure for such reform, drawing on lessons from Nuba and elsewhere to promote a radical rethink on how international peace-keeping missions are designed and implemented. And at the same time it will continue to explore how better to support the efforts of those who are still the primary providers of protection, namely the families and communities under threat themselves.

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L2GP studies from Burma/Myanmar, Sudan, South Sudan and Zimbabwe are available at [www.local2global.info](http://www.local2global.info)

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