

# Neglect and Abuse

by Nhial Bol

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Until recently, Aroghu Radolfa was a lieutenant in Sudan’s main rebel group, the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), but she was unable to move further.

The reason given was that she was a woman.

Aroghu was one of five female ex-rebels who recounted their experiences to the press here last week after defecting from the rebel movement. They are among a group of 27 women who decided to leave the main faction of the SPLA and one of its splinter groups, the Southern Sudan Independence Movement (SSIM).

Their life in the bush was characterized by discrimination and abuse, the five women said.

“We fight side by side, on equal footing with the men, but when it comes to promotions, women are less equal. It’s really difficult for us to get promotions,” Aroghu said. “Some of my (male) colleagues have had little education, but still they become commanders.”

The SPLA main faction is estimated to number 800,000, and according to Aroghu there are some 354 women officers below the rank of commander.

But lack of promotion was not the only problem faced by women rebels, said Aroghu. They were also forced to put up with human rights abuses.

“I remember during our training in 1986 in the bushes of the Equatorial region (in the south), some of us were sexually abused not only by the Sudanese trainers, but also by Ugandan soldiers who were training us,” recalled Aroghu who joined the SPLA in 1986. She has come home to help her family, find work and go back to school.

Some women were married to male rebels without their consent, she charged, adding that compulsory marriages were common in rebel territory. “You were told to

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sleep with a man you had never talked to and if you disobeyed, you violated the orders of the movement and you were punished for it,” she added.

“(SPLA leader John) Garang himself told us during (one of) his lectures near Chukudum in Equatoria State that he favored marriages among fighters, because the movement needs children for this war,” Aroghu said. “Garang wants us to produce more children in order to support his forces in the future.”

According to Aroghu, the international community has made no effort to investigate the serious human rights violations perpetrated against women behind rebel lines.

Women and young boys were also given the most distasteful tasks, such as burying battlefield casualties, the former rebel complained.

On one occasion, she said, “I was given some women and young boys to bury people killed on both sides. The dead bodies were allowed to remain in the open air for some days so the birds had been consuming them and later we were told to bury them. That particular job was very unsanitary and made us sick.”

Another former fighter, who gave only her first name as Aliza, said she too had been a lieutenant, but her rank meant little to her male fighters.

Aliza, who has lost her hair and carried the scars of war on her legs and in the face, said she had been detained and tortured in the town of Wau (Southern Sudan) for refusing to go to bed with her local commander. “I tell you, women were nothing in the eyes of the rebels...,” she said.

Because women fighters were poorly trained, Aliza said, they often constituted a high number of the fatalities on the battlefield. More than 200 women and girls died last year in factional fighting between the SPLA and the SSIM’s army in the Southern Sudanese towns of Watt, Aiod and Bor, and some 25 women died during the siege of Jekau in the Upper Nile region this year, she added.

Aliza said that women must begin to fight their oppressors on all fronts. “Women should prepare the ground for demanding equality and justice even through the use of armed struggle,” she said. “For how long are we going to face this oppression?”

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