

# Encounter with a fighter

by Ellen Lammers

*Amidst the routine of life back in Amsterdam, I remember Jacob and our last meeting as he wheeled himself through the jam-packed ward of a Kampala hospital. It had been four years since we last saw each other.*

We talk about Sudan and the peace deal signed two weeks ago. Jacob is excited, yet – like most Sudanese I talk to – sceptical. “Those big people brokering the peace received six hundred US dollars per day in attendance fees but our people continue to suffer.” He shares the fear of many that the Equatorians and Dinkas will soon start fighting each other: “We may have peace with our enemies but do we have peace among ourselves?” And he doubts whether John Garang will manage to satisfy his hundreds of commanders. They will all want to get something out of this deal: money, land, and positions of authority in the interim government. They need to feed their wives, educate their children. What will the movement do for them? It has no reputation for taking care of its fighters. Jacob is left dying in hospital – no-one has come to inquire after him. Yet before his imprisonment (following a fall-out with a senior commander) and his eventual flight to Kampala, Jacob had served long years in Garang’s headquarters. He remains indignant about the SPLA’s human rights abuses but will not extricate himself from the movement’s cause. He spent half his life engaged with Africa’s longest-running war.

Jacob used to be twice my size, his upper arms muscular and massive. Now his fingers are lean, his legs the

size of my wrists, and a fuzzy down covers his head. But he has the same captivating smile and his voice is unaltered. In his reduced face I see the traces of a young boy. I suddenly recall what he spoke of years ago: the things he did as a youthful recruit, emboldened by his newly acquired power – the AK47 he was instructed was “his father, his mother, his food, his everything”. At the time he had only vaguely understood what he was fighting for and why. They were things he later regretted.

Statistics of HIV/AIDS in Africa are shocking but do not have the same impact as seeing a person one knows affected by the disease. Jacob’s wife Rose visits every day. If she has something to eat she brings it. If not, she takes part of his daily ration of *posho* and beans provided by the hospital back home to the children. She cleans Jacob’s cubicle, empties the plastic container under his bed. On days that I’m there before her, I sit on the bed so as not to have to look under it. I feel silly and pathetic but cannot bear to see that reddish, turbid liquid. Rose appears strong but looks down when I tell her so and says, “I just worry about the children.” Jacob tells me he prays God will give him a few more years: “Just so that the boys are a bit bigger, and able to distinguish between what is right and wrong.” He says Rose had a tough time in Sudan. The village women at the public water tap would move away when she approached, saying, “That one, let her go first, or her husband will come and disturb us!” Both fear their children will be ostracised or become the objects of revenge once they are not longer alive to protect them.

I look at Jacob and Rose and wonder: how many people in their home country are affected by this disease? HIV/AIDS has rarely been talked about in the Sudanese context; the focus has always been on the war. With no health facilities in southern Sudan to speak of, the likely answer is that nobody knows.

UNHCR pays Jacob’s hospital bills but has stopped providing for his family. His wife and the children live in one room, without electricity or windows and with only one mattress. When Rose complains, the social worker suggests the family move to one of Uganda’s rural refugee settlements. A nonsensical idea because, even if his TB and anaemia improve, both Jacob and she need monthly check-ups to determine when they should start taking antiretrovirals, if they are lucky enough to have access to them.

“I’m no longer with the military, no longer with politics, but I will stand for my people. You know, Ellen, I haven’t given up hope. If I’m still here in, say, October, I will go back to Sudan and help my community. We are only four from our community who are educated. But you know what the problem is? There are so many guns in southern Sudan.” Jacob smiles and jokes, “There, you don’t need to go looking for guns. They come and look for you.”

I gave Jacob a dictaphone into which he recorded his thoughts in a quiet corner he discovered in the overcrowded hospital. On my last visit he handed me two tapes and made me promise to keep them well. “So many children in Sudan don’t know anything about their parents. Sometimes I wish I could send my sons back into the womb of their mother but I can’t. I want them to at least remember my voice.”

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