

MINISTRY UNDER FIRE

The Sudan: A War of Bullets and the Word

*Story and photos by
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Far Reaching Ministries Pastor Wes Bentley addresses the chaplain trainees of the SPLA 54th Chaplains Brigade in their training facility in Nimule, Sudan.



A local family came out of their home to cheer the chaplain

trainees of the SPLA 4th Chaplains Brigade as they sing out praises to God to keep cadence during an early morning run.

“Many of the chaplains you train today will sleep with the Lord by this time next year.” --Wes Bentley

With the predawn sun streaking the clouds, the African bush is formless and black. The sounds of men waking up, stretching, and greeting each other in a blend of Arabic and English, are the only noises heard in the darkness. Moments later, as the first rays of light scrape the top of the tallest acacia tree, a single voice yells, “I’m in the Army,” and 72 chaplain trainees from the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) answer with the refrain, “If I die, then let me die, let me die in the army of the Lord.”

Continuing to sing, the chaplains break into two columns and head out of the reinforced SPLA 54th Chaplains Brigade training compound operated by Far Reaching Ministries in Nimule, New Sudan, to begin their morning run and calisthenics. The daily 90-minute physical training is filled with worship songs to keep cadence and is interspersed with singing prayers asking for guidance as the chaplains prepare to minister to fellow soldiers, civilians, and prisoners of

war at the front lines. The fighting is currently about 12-miles away. One song simply rings out, “Try to be humble, try to be humble, try to be humble in the eyes of the Lord.”

Often the prayers sung ask for divine protection from the Antanov, the Russian manufactured airplane piloted by the Islamic Government of Sudan (GOS). They drop bombs on Nimule and the compound. The attacks are part of the 17-year war in which the Islamic government in Khartoum is trying to drive out the Christians and Animist of the South. Since 1984, Muslim Sharia law has outlawed the practice of any religion besides Islam and caused the persecution of millions of Christians, including enslavement and crucifixion for those who do not deny their faith. Humanitarian groups report two million people have been killed and 4.2 million people have been displaced as refugees to neighboring countries.

Like the other chaplains in the SPLA, First Lieutenant Chaplain

Peter Akech, age 34, believes the war in Sudan is a spiritual battle that is manifested in bombs, AK-47’s, and rocket propelled grenades. Peter, a veteran of more than 100 battles since 1985, claims to be fighting with the power of God. “I am now a chaplain, but it is still a fight because God wants to use me like Gideon, Joshua or David; to fight with the power of the Lord. I used to fight with my gun,” said Peter, who bears the scars from a grenade on his cheek and added, “But now I lead the men with my cross, I do not want to kill the Arabs, but save them.”

On March 14, 2000, GOS bombs killed one chaplain, injured others, and heavily damaged the training facility. On October 22, bombs that narrowly missed the facility, struck a nursery school, destroying a building and ripping shrapnel holes in others. A bomb also landed in the Catholic Church compound during worship services. The Nimule hospital, clearly marked with a large cross on the

roof, is often a target. In the town of Lui, north of Nimule, GOS forces have repeatedly bombed a hospital operated by Samaritan’s Purse, a Franklin Graham ministry. Two civilians were injured and a church was destroyed in recent attacks.

“We never know when the Antanov is coming,” said Far Reaching Ministries’ missionary Rick Deam. “We always live with one ear to the sky and one eye to the nearest foxhole.” Under the compound’s main classroom is a large bunker that can fit the whole class, compound staff, and any visiting pastors. The locations of all the bomb shelters are the first instructions given to visiting Bible teachers. To help disguise the compound from the air, buildings are covered with camouflage netting. Sandbags surround all the sleeping quarters.



SPLA 1st Lt. and Senior Chaplain James Olal, above, prays for the Far Reaching Ministries Chaplain Training Program. Chaplain trainees study their Bibles between classes at the Nimule, Sudan Training Facility, left.

“Soldiers sometimes feel they no longer belong to God... As soldiers they are used to the conditions, but as humans they are lacking both physically and spiritually.” --James Olal SPLA Chaplain

The Mission

“Many of the chaplains you train today will sleep with the Lord by this time next year,” said Wes Bentley. He was coaching American Calvary Chapel pastors preparing to teach the chaplain trainees. He informed them that a chaplain from a previous class had been martyred.

Wes is the director and founder of Far Reaching Ministries, the Calvary Chapel based ministry used by the New Sudan Council of Churches and the SPLA to train soldiers to be chaplains. At war’s end they will be pastors in the Calvary Chapel style of ministry. Classes last six months. Graduates are immediately commissioned as first lieutenants in the SPLA and sent to minister at the front. Most of the trainees are experienced soldiers. They now prepare to lead men into battle carrying a cross or Christian flag instead of the

AK-47 or rocket launcher they once used.

Calvary Chapel pastors and others come to the compound for approximately three-week rotations to train the soldier-chaplains. During the six-month period the trainees go through most of the Bible and are prepared to go out in twos and threes to the battle-front.

Addressing the Trainees

A former U.S. Marine himself, Wes addressed the 72 assembled trainees to encourage them in their studies and walk with the Lord. Dressed in fatigues, he shared his admiration for their devotion to the cross of Christ.

“God wants to use you. Do you realize that your life can change this

Far left: An SPLA patrol makes their way through Nimule, Sudan, towards the front. While the GOS gets arms from China and France, the SPLA must capture most of its arms. Islamic GOS is the recognized government and receives aid, but the SPLA is considered the rebel insurgency by much of the world community and is not recognized.



Bottom: An SPLA soldier lays in a hospital in Nimule, Sudan. He was brought back from the front with injuries resulting in having his legs amputated.



Left: Bryan Bartels, pictured left a minister with Sowing Circle and Pastor Jack Stevens of CC Cypress, are helped into body armor by Senior Chaplain and SPLA 1st Lt. James Olal outside of Gulu, Uganda, as they prepare to pass through dangerous area enroute to Nimule, Sudan.

country?” Wes continued, “Following Jesus may cost you your life and I hope that every chaplain here will be willing to sit at the table with Jesus and drink from His cup,” alluding to the persecution they will endure if captured.

“It is not only by the gun that we will succeed, but by the power of God,” said James Olal, SPLA Captain of the Chaplain’s Corps. James speaks with experience since he spent months at the front line ministering to SPLA soldiers and has returned to the training facility as an instructor.

In their ministry to the soldiers of the SPLA, chaplains must deal with the guilt of being associated with the atrocities of war and men fighting alongside their children in hut to hut combat for the right to freely practice their faith. “Soldiers sometimes feel that they no longer belong to God after some of their actions,” said James.

Though many of the soldiers have been fighting the Government of Sudan since they were children and have never known a time of peace, the conditions are harsh, even to them. “As soldiers they are used to the conditions, but as humans they are lacking both physically and spiritually.” said James.

The Fellowship

Bryan Bartels, a minister with Sowing Circle, a helps ministry and maker of Blue Letter Bible.org, came to Sudan with three Calvary Chapel pastors last fall. Bryan’s assignment was to teach through Ephesians, but he slowed down greatly when he got to Ephesians 1:15-16 on his first day. “Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers.” After a long silence and overcome with emotion, he continued, “I love you guys and look forward to being in heaven with you, worshipping God.” Standing still and holding his Bible, he explained, “I am seeing this in action today. In America when we hear of your faith, we will always be moved to pray for you.”

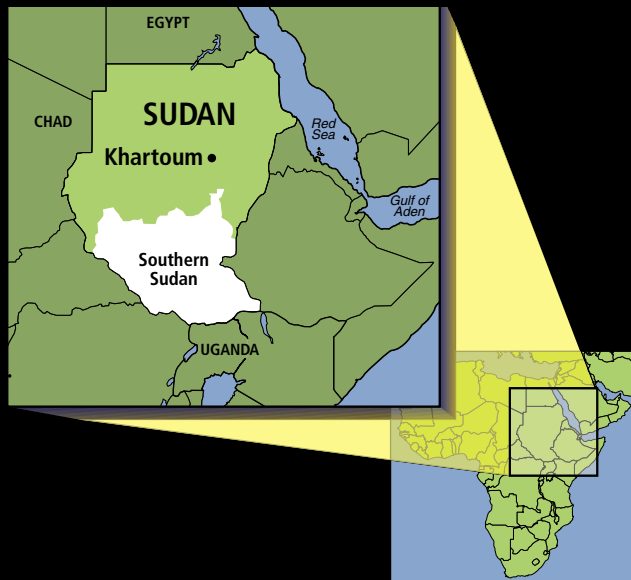
Along with Bartels, Calvary Chapel Cypress’s Pastor Jack Stevens, CC Saving Grace’s Pastor Donny Gunter; and Sowing Circle’s Pastor Steve Greenberg taught the chaplain trainees in their third and fourth weeks of class. Besides the training through the books of Daniel, Acts, Galatians, Ephesians and Revelation, the Bible teachers spent

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Top: This shrapnel hole is an ominous reminder that war is never far away from the training compound in Nimule Sudan. The compound, and civilian area around it, are often bombed by the GOS.

Above: Bryan Bartels, a minister with Sowing Circle, and a local, check out an unexploded bomb from a recent GOS bombing run outside of Nimule, Sudan. The crater is just outside a school yard and between three huts. The bomb was later detonated.



Peter Akech, 34, is a Dinka warrior. He is also a SPLA 1st Lt training program he leads the SPLA soldiers into battle carrying a

in the 54th Chaplains Brigade. Akech has been fighting the Islamic regime to the North since he was 12. Formerly he used an AK-47 or RPG. Since going through the chaplains

“Let me die in the army of the Lord.”

72 SPLA Chaplain Trainees

SPLA First Lt. Chaplain Peter Akech (left) and Far Reaching Ministry's overseeing pastor, Wes Bentley, take cover in a bomb shelter at the chaplain training center in Nimule, while an unexploded bomb is detonated. The GOS sends bombers to shell the compound and churches in the community.





Pastor Donny Gunter from Calvary Chapel Saving Grace in Belgrade, Montana, prepares his teaching for the chaplain trainees while sitting outside his tent. All the tents are surrounded with sandbags and covered with thatch to camouflage the facility from bombers.



American Bryan Bartels, and Pastor Steve Greenberg pray with some of the chaplain trainees before class. Both are associated with Sowing Circle, a helps ministry.



Chaplain trainees start each class with worship.



Bryan Bartels, a minister with Sowing Circle, right, is escorted by an SPLA soldier as he goes out to preach outside Nimule, Sudan. Though Nimule was held by the SPLA, there is always a chance that GOS soldiers could break through or the front lines could fall. The front is about 12 miles from Nimule. The Islamic regime has kicked all Americans out of the country including embassy personnel in Khartoum. The SPLA welcomes Americans into southern Sudan, sometimes called New Sudan, and offers them protection as they come to preach or help in other ways.

time teaching basic theology using the “Calvary Chapel Distinctives” and going through a New Believer’s course.

American pastors and Bible teachers start at 8 a.m., with the chaplains providing a rousing African style of worship, and continue until 6 p.m. The Americans were often late to bed, helping chaplain trainees with homework or answering questions by kerosene lantern.

“I love spending time with these chaplains, helping them, and praying with them. It is one of the most enjoyable parts,” said Gunter.

The Americans accompanied the chaplain trainees to the Nimule hospital where they ministered to the injured SPLA soldiers and later presented the Jesus Movie in outlying villages. One thousand people gathered around a portable screen and generator-powered projector. The movie was shown and then Gunter’s message was translated into Arabic.

“My church back in America is praying for you,” said Gunter, who explained that he lived in a place that has eight months of snow to people living in the African savanna who have never seen snow.

Even as the Gospel goes out, the fact that Sudan is a war torn country is never far off. Bentley explained that when traveling

outside the Far Reaching Ministries training compound, Americans must be with an armed SPLA escort. The chaplains, though many are former soldiers, do not carry rifles. Leaving the compound, Bentley reminded the Americans to listen to the SPLA soldiers and senior chaplains. “In danger, they will protect you, their blood is their covenant.”

Mighty Men of Valor

SPLA First Lieutenant Chaplain Frances Shombe, age 33, sees Far Reaching Ministries work as essential to the SPLA’s cause. Shombe will be leaving for the front, but said he did not worry because Far Reaching Ministries had trained him well. Having been a preacher before entering the chaplains’ brigade, Shombe was particularly impressed with learning how to teach the Bible verse by verse. “I do not fear, how can I fear? I am teaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” the soldier of the Lord said.

“Besides, now I am fighting a spiritual war to bring people to Jesus Christ, and that war will not end until He returns,” said Frances. ↗

For more details or information on other ministry opportunities contact us at:
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