

# DAILY NATION

THURSDAY  
October 9, 2008

## War is over but South Sudan town must first deal with mines



Sudanese President Omar al Bashir in this file picture. Bashir has condemned rich countries of arm-twisting tactics in relations with poor countries.

By BADRU MULUMBA Nation Correspondent  
Posted Wednesday, October 8 2008 at 19:49

**KAPOETA, Wednesday** - Life is slowly returning to this shanty town of dilapidated buildings and muddy roads.

The soggy road winds past a buzzing makeshift market that still reeks of fresh construction wooden bars and iron to a gusty Sorghum plantation roiling down the hills.

Three years ago, much of Kapoeta was deserted: Landmines littered the bushes, the effect of Sudan's north-south war that wrecked much of Southern Sudan.

"That was the border between the Sudan Armed Forces and the Sudan People's Liberation Army," Mr Abraham Ajac, 30, says, referring to the warring parties during the north-south Sudan war.

Mr Ajac saw the war unfold. He was a refugee in Kenya, he was a de-miner and later, a finance officer with Mines Action Group. Mr Ajac was also among the young boys and girls who took up arms to fight Khartoum.

That war did not just claim more than 2.5 million lives and displace more than 4.5 million. It left mines in its wake.

“Of course, we did it,” Mr Ajac says of planting mines during his days as a rebel soldier. “We didn’t think much about it at the time.”

South Sudan’s 21-year-civil war ended with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed in January 2005. But, landmines have continued to hold back the region’s potential.

Perhaps, no other area has been held back by landmines the way Kapoeta was. Kapoeta can help unlock the full potential of Southern Sudan.

While the northern edge of southern Sudan overflows with oil, Kapoeta is home to gold diggers, timber prospectors and cement surveyors.

But landmines have always stood in the way: in the way of gold diggers and in the paths of cattle herders, in the way of schools and hospitals and obstructed the region’s emergence as a major trans-Africa transit route. “This road is international in that it doesn’t only connect to Kenya and Ethiopia, but to [northern Sudan],” the Commissioner of Kapoeta, Mr Peter Lokuju says, pointing to the soggy road cutting through the town.

“Kapoeta has gold and diamonds, we also have cement,” Mr Lokuju says. “One day we would emerge as also donors.”

Upper Nile Borders northern Sudan.

“Without extraction of land mines in Kapoeta there would be little the government would do to benefit from the resources here,” says Mr Lokuju.

And people would have little to celebrate over.

On a rainy day, mid September, Toposa dancers and officials gathered around a cleared mine field to celebrate the completion of the mine clearance around the town.

De-mining work started in June 2005, and involved some 283,000 square kilometers. “It (minefield) has been in existence for many years and also a huge area,” Mr Stephen Naude, Technical Field Manager, Mines Action Group, the organisation that did the work, says. “It prevented the expansion of Kapoeta area.”

“What we see here today would not have been possible without clearance of the mines,” says Mr Naude.

Kapoeta is the first minefield around a town in southern Sudan to be cleared and handed over back to the community. Most towns have had mines cleared off one side only.

Mr Ajac has been involved in de-minning since 2004.

“It was tough removing mines from here,” Ajac says. “They had to plant and replant.”

## Changed hands

Kapoeta changed hands between the Northern and Southern forces several times. Each time each group took over, new mines were planted.

“The work of clearing the land was very hard and very slow,” Ms Hannah Bryce, Programme Manager, Mines Action Group says. “It’s good to see the cleared land being used for schools, markets and telephone masts.”

The impact of the mines is still visible.

The bushy, deserted Mogos Farmers Cooperative Society – fenced-off farm, with cement brick apartments and rusty motorbikes under trees signals decay and a move back to history. Land O’Lakes then came here to help people farm cattle for milk.

“They have closed,” Mr Ajac says. “All the cars have been packed at national security because their license ended.”

On this once well-tended land now stands temporary shanty structures – wooden poles with black polythene roiled over them.

But it’s development all the same, because with out the mine clearance, even the shanty structures would not be there.

What passes for decay is the beginning of a life beyond a non governmental organization.

“This was minefield back then – the whole of this area was mines,” Mr Ajac says. “This is finished by now; that’s why people are building here.”

Marinyo Lopotia Lomoya, 63, is one such person. Mr Lomoya revels in what the future without landmines promises. He’s a member of the Mogos Cooperative Farmers Society. Farmers pool money and cattle together on a farm that is a former minefield.

“I was just a farmer, a local farmer and it was difficult for us to walk,” Mr Lomoya says. “If you went to tend the cattle, you would only walk along the stream.”

Mr Lomoya is not alone.

“People are herding goats, because they have finished de-mining,” says Mr Ajac.

Just as he says so, a family emerges from the bushes around the Kapoeta airfield.

A man pulls a bull by the rope, slipping often on the soggy ground.

Behind him a woman carries firewood, children drag goats, and another man follows with a dog.

But it's not just the herders celebrating a life without mines.

The Association for Aid and Relief of Japan digs boreholes for clean drinking water.

"Without de-mining, we don't work. First we ensure that de-mining is complete," Mr Shuichi Ishibashi, the association's Programme Coordinator says.

"We work with government and local people to clear bushes," Mr Ishibashi says. "And they tell us that this area is safe before we start."

The World Food Programme works here to supply food to people at risk of starvation. "At the same time they are providing water," Mr Rajendra Gupta, WFP Programme Officer in Kapoeta says, referring to Association for Aid and Relief, "we are providing food."

WFP provides food to help people to, for instance, cultivate, encourage girl-child education, and returnees.

"For us, with or without de-mining we provide food," Mr Gupta says. "But we ensure that where the food is supplied is de-mined."

And elsewhere new structures and services have long been turning up here, long before the area was fully cleared.

"Now we are looking forward to sending our children to school," Mr Lomoya says. "Now women can go to school, fetch firewood, to continue to contribute to the development of this place."

Just outside about five hundred metres away, at a brick school with 780 pupils, mines are a distant memory for some, and news to some.

"By the time I came here I didn't know that any mines existed on this land," says Mr Diureno Peeto, Kenyan teacher, who, in mid 2007, came here from Turkana South, Kainur Division.

The school has attracted more life to Kapoeta, as home to Internally Displaced Persons from the countryside. In 2007 Commissioner Lokuju brought 60 Toposa to the school from Nogalaate, Kolkalang.

About a kilometre away from the school is the market and taxi park, a bustling hive of activity for a former sleepy town.

That is where women, men and children converged to stomp their feet and swirl their hands.

"Even as we speak, we are speaking on a former minefield," says Alex Schmidt, Field Coordinator, Mines Action Group.

Behind him Toposa dancers, ankles belled, stomp their feet as they praise a god of security for securing their land from mines. For Kapoeta, a new life has begun.