

UNHCR South Sudan diaries

Humanitarian workers share stories about their experiences and the people they meet

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Strength of a woman: the story of Chirke

By Pumla Rulashe in Doro refugee settlement, Upper Nile state



I met Chirke Kwodja in Doro refugee settlement, in the tent (*see photo*) that she shares with her mother and eight young children. By modern standards her slender frame would make her the envy of many women.

But there is little in Chirke's circumstances to envy, apart perhaps from the sheer resilience with which she and her mother deal with the challenges life throws at them.

Ruefully Chirke recalled the incident in November last year that changed her life forever.

Then pregnant with her youngest child, Chirke was at the market in her home village of Bilatuma in Blue Nile state contemplating the meal she would prepare for her family. Early that morning, an airplane had circled over the village. People hardly paid attention. Bilatuma was removed from the fighting that was raging in other parts of Blue Nile state.

Suddenly, bombs rained on the market. Nine people were killed instantly. The force of the explosion shattered Chirke's left leg below the knee. Broken bone and tattered flesh was all she could see. The scene degenerated into a frenzied panic. Chirke lost consciousness.

Later she learned that her aging mother had hurried through the confusion at the souk to search for her, fearing the worst. Chirke was rescued. In due course she was brought to Bunj Hospital in Upper Nile state. She has no recollection of the journey that took her across the border into South Sudan. Later she was referred to Malakal Hospital in the capital of Upper Nile state. Her badly damaged limb had to be amputated below the knee. Miraculously, her unborn baby remained unharmed.

Chirke recovered slowly and painfully. In Doro refugee settlement her elderly mother assumed guardianship of the children. The grandmother became the family's principal care giver and surrogate mother as Chirke struggled to deal with her new disability.

One night Chirke went into labour, in the tent they now call home. Her mother aided her as women in the community do, while the children slept. Chirke had a difficult labour, compounded by the effects of the amputation from which she has still not recovered. She must have passed out. She remembers nothing of the delivery. She believes she survived her baby's birth by God's grace and by her mother's determination that both daughter and granddaughter must survive.

And survive they did. Three month old Sunday, is a healthy bouncy baby.

Chirke struggles to cope with her disability. Getting up to do the smallest task requires the assistance of another person. Her aging mother is devoted to helping, but she tires easily. Meanwhile, the energetic brood of seven is pretty much left to parent one another, with the older children assuming responsibility for the younger ones.

As fate would have it Chirke's husband had fled Blue Nile state a few months before the Bilatuma incident. Although he now knows, he was mercifully unaware of his wife's ordeal and his family's upheaval when it happened. A spate of aerial bombings in Kurmuk, where he worked, had forced him to escape eastwards into Ethiopia. He is registered by UNHCR in Tongo refugee camp in Benishangul Gumuz province.

This story is about Chirke's experience. Yet, every line conveys the impressive determination of the woman who is her mother -- a paragon of strength. One imagines the frantic search for her daughter in Bilatuma market. Where were her grandchildren were at that moment? How did she gather them together? And the journey across the border into South Sudan? What did they eat? How fast could they have moved with such young children? I imagine the anxiety over her pregnant daughter, and the very real prospect that her grandchildren could be orphaned.

I have nothing but admiration for the unshakable resilience that is the story of these two women. Thrust by destiny into the unfamiliar world of refugees they continue take each challenge in their stride.

http://hcrstaffdiaries.blogspot.co.uk/2012_05_01_archive.html