

An oil slick on the road to Sudan



Travelling across north-eastern Africa in a Land Rover, Zoë Bake-Paterson finds much more than she expects

VICTORIA (CUP) — On the way back to my room, walking through ankle-high grass, I see it: a scaly beige scorpion in the dry grass, its thumb-sized body marching past my feet through the dust. I back up as it stops near my boot, pinchers forward and snapping. The tail uncurls and the venomous tip twitches. I freeze. It waits for a few minutes, ready for attack, before marching off through the grass. I walk away cautiously, tip-toeing along the path, aware of the many holes in my tattered hiking boots.

The air stirs as a battered pick-up truck rolls into the compound. Brown dust funnels upward in a small sandstorm, coating every surface. Our escorts have arrived—five men in heavy camouflage uniforms creased with dust, automatic rifles slung over their shoulders. They pile down from the truck. There are no apologies for their two-hour delay; nothing said at all, simply a nod and smile as we are introduced one by one, 10 anxious and eager Canadians, now a shade darker as the dust mixes with sweat. The large man with the lopsided smile is Kennedy, the leader. The man we obey at all costs.

They inspect our gear: 10 bags each weighing less than 70 kilograms, two boxes of filtered water and enough food for a couple of days. Sitting on a wooden picnic table, I am impatient to leave, having already gone through this inspection as we waited for the delayed escorts. I see another scorpion in the grass.

Even here in the Norwegian Peoples Aid compound in Lokichoggio, the town in northwestern Kenya where we have slept for the last two nights, the environment is harsh and

unforgiving. It was easy to forget about the scorching heat and choking dust when I looked at the soft, green mountains at dawn. Now, everything looks stark. Red-brown dirt and powder-dry green bushes cover the landscape.

When the guards finally arrive I find new entertainment by watching a two-inch long yellow and brown gecko. It runs up my arm, clinging to the edge of my shirt. In the bustle of the truck arriving and my fellow travellers moving, the gecko leapt into the folds of my long skirt, a vanishing flash of yellow on blue. I hope it is gone.

It is late morning and the Kenyan sun is relentless. Already hot enough to fry an egg on the hood of the Land Rover—which is apparently how some of the military in this area cook. The Rover windows barely crack open and dust adds to the thickness of the warm air. Slowly, we follow the armed escorts from the Kenyan military through the dirt roads of Lokichoggio.

Behind us, barely visible through the window painting of a donkey, is another Land Rover with the other half of our group. We are quite a spectacle, driving through this extremely rural community of Kenya—such a large convoy of obvious foreigners. Being white adds to the show. The people of Lokichoggio are used to solitary foreigners, for this tiny village has become the International Aid headquarters for non-governmental organizations assisting the war-torn, drought-stricken, impoverished areas of North Eastern Africa. Even the local international NGO workers stop and stare.

In Kenya, I am used to stares. By my own standards we are an unlikely clump of people, in theory one from each province. But following suit with Canadian Federal politics, the prairies are represented as one area, the territories are under-represented and Ontario is over-represented. So we are 10.

We are strangers as much to each other as to this place. Other than one weekend in Toronto, we have had no contact with each other, although here we travel in community. Our common bond is that we are Canadian. A delegation called to witness and learn about international refugee situations, specifically the civil war in Sudan. The title glosses over the individual people in the group: seven students, an actor, a youth minister and a refugee worker. Broken into security groups of three, I am paired with two other women—Julie, a student at UBC who is a few years older than me, and Heather, who works in Toronto in Immigration and Refugee Advocacy for the United Church of Canada and has been to Kenya five years earlier. At 20, I am the youngest of the 10. It is my first time off the continent. And I am the only one who has been held at gunpoint before this trip. (An incident in Guatemala in 1997).

The vehicles slow, approaching a military checkpoint, the last line of defense before the Sudanese border. We leave the relatively smooth dirt roads—flattened by NGO supply lorries and four-wheel-drive jeeps. The familiar sound of a cargo plane buzzes loudly overhead, returning from a drop in Sudan. It's a reminder that we are headed into an area where even UN aid convoys are illegal, banned by the fundamentalist Islamic regime that controls Northern Sudan. From my window, I see a sign, warning in Kiswahili, Arabic and English that taking photos within sight of the checkpoint is a criminal offence.

A dozen men in camouflage mill around the wooden supports and rubber tires lining the road that make up the checkpoint. A group of Sudanese men, I can tell by their height and face structure now, stand under a precariously set-up shelter. Their faces streaked with sweat in the weak shade, the only shadow for miles in this semi-desert land. The guards by the road wave us forward with their guns; our escorts pause to chatter with them. I know very little Kiswahili but catch a surprised "Why?" and "Where?" from the guards, along with some excited gesturing towards us.

There is been constant surprise from the people we meet in Kenya when we mention that we plan to travel to Sudan, the New Sudan. This independent territory, the southern third of Sudan, claimed by the Sudanese People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/SPLM), has been an area of war for decades. Islamic North against Christian and animist South. Sudan hosts the longest civil war in history.

Only days ago, I walked through Kakuma Refugee Camp and watched

the distress on the faces of Sudanese refugees, who make up 80 per cent of the refugee population in Kakuma, as they heard our group's plans to travel to the war zone. Two young men who tell us stories of living in Sudan make it clear that if something bad happens, you're walking out. They can both recall men, members of the SPLA, walking hundreds of kilometres with bullet wounds to find medical aid at the refugee camp in Kenya.

I talk myself out of imagining World War styled-bombing blitzes or trench warfare, and replaced them with images of land mines and machine guns. I hope my imagination is exaggerating until one of our military escorts reminds us to walk within tire treads to avoid the possibility of mines. Seeing young men, boys really, lined up with AK47's and camouflage pants reminds me again how volatile this area is. But less than 45 minutes from the border of Sudan, there is little to see except an expanse of dusty terrain marked by distant shadowy mountains and an occasional brown termite tower—a hollow column of packed mud, cemented by the hot sun. Other than our escorts, there is no evidence of military activity.

Narus, Sudan's most southern town, is the last stop for refugees fleeing across the border to find safety in other countries. It blossoms with patched-together housing and colourful NGO tarp as people migrate towards the Kenyan border, but hesitate in making the final move out of their country. Our driver tells us that the place used to be tiny—not even a village—until oil became an issue in the war in the 1980s. Then the military began clearing the people of the South off the land, destroying food crops and killing villages, ending a lifestyle of nomadic herding to make space for a railway and oil testing.

Companies from China, Malaysia and Canada began to build and operate oil wells, paying the Northern official government of Sudan for protection from the paramilitary in the south.

I remember hearing in Nairobi from a group involved with Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS), a UN aid project, that more than a million Sudanese have become refugees. Narus is now flooded with internally displaced people, thousands waiting for the war to end so they can return home.

I stare out the window at the endless desert as the Rover bumps determinedly over this road, trying to forget the possibilities of bombs, mines, bandits and paramilitary. I have been told repeatedly, it will come soon enough. We are entering desperate times with desperate people, comforted only by the reassurances that we are guests, peace-keepers, called to "witness" their stories. How else to justify the money its taken to come here and the food tied to the roof of the Land Rover when people in this area pick individual grains of rice out of the dirt?

Caught in my imagining, I miss the u-turn of the escort truck and am jolted by the roaring four-by-four off-roading as it swerves around our vehicle. Jackson our driver says they have gone back for the other Land Rover, which is nowhere in sight. Fifteen minutes later, Kennedy walks back to us. There has been a breakdown. He climbs on to the back bumper and we turn back, wobbling over the rutted dirt. The other Land Rover appears around a curve, hood raised and engine smoking. I clamber out into the sun, quick to stretch my cramped legs though we have only been on the road for half an hour.

The guards quickly warn us: never step outside of car tread marks because of land mines; under no circumstances photograph the guards; if the truck isn't fixed soon, the guards will leave because they have a pick-up at the border.

While a string of guards and our two drivers attempt to fix the vehicle, we mill about finally deciding to re-pack all our gear onto the roof of the working Land Rover in case we decide to squish in. I clamber to the roof, helping to strap bags down with small

bits of rope and bandanas. Kennedy stands at the bumper passing bags up in his woolly green sweater while I sweat through my white cotton shirt. He points left to face the closest mountain range, says that those mountains are in Ethiopia. Straight ahead is Kenya, Lokichoggio and further to the right is the northern part of the Great Rift Valley. He points to the vast red desert plains marked with dry prickly green shrubs; the distant mountains are in Uganda. Behind me is Sudan. I take a sequence of photos that scan the scene, a panoramic of "the four corners of North-Eastern Africa," as he describes in broken English. Picturesque from a distance, I find it easy to forget that the refugees I met at the camp refer to the unbearably hot and remote land as Hell. An abandoned land where they have been left to wait until one day, they can return home. Many have been waiting for at least 10 years.

Impatient and hot, the guards decide to abandon our broken vehicle. Equally impatient and anxious from watching where we step for fear of mines, 10 of us squish into the six-seat Land Rover along with Jackson our driver. He tells us that the border is really 45 miles away not 45 minutes, and the trip will take a while. I perch in the middle of the bench seat in the back, knees knocking into everyone as the road turns from deep ruts to ravaged riverbed. Red earth rises on all sides as we lurch down embankments. There are no handholds so I bang repeatedly against the roof. Jackson tells us from the roomy driver's seat that this is the road hundreds of thousands of Sudanese have walked in their journey to safety.

In Kakuma refugee camp we walked past a wide empty riverbed with a metre-wide trickle. A dozen women from the camp had walked down to the water. They were filling their jugs while children splashed nearby. A local at the camp said that it had rained in Uganda the day before, that's why there was water. Jolting along the river-bed-turned-road, I hoped desperately for no rain, realizing that even a shower in Uganda could bury us in mud.

An hour later, the Land Rover has threatened to roll so many times that we are experts in quick weight distribution, sprawling over laps to maintain balance. My body is bent over, huddled between others, coated with grime and nervous sweat. And just as I decide that the cramping is permanent our escorts honk loudly and pull to the side. The border.

It is quiet here. There are fewer uniformed guards than our military escort group, but the presence of a smiling teenage boy in his Nike "Just Do It" t-shirt swinging an automatic rifle from one shoulder to the other is unnerving. Our Land Rover pulls into the border crossing and we unload our bodies to stretch. One of the uniformed men escorts us to a small hut with a straw roof, its doorway only reaching to my shoulder, which we learn is the customs office. A small man in a blue uniform sits behind a desk, writing into a pale blue notebook and ignoring us as we file in. A stack of rifles is heaped in the corner. I count more than 11 before he begins talking. We produce the temporary visas we picked up in Kenya allowing us to enter into the New Sudan as guests of the SPLA. Each carefully marked to say we are Kenyans.

It is a relief to stand in the shade, muggy though it is, smelling the musty straw roof steam in the afternoon sun. The man at the desk tells us he is a General with the SPLA, while slowly matching our photos on the visas to our faces. The documentation is not quite accurate: my height is said to be a foot shorter than I am, and one of the men in our group is marked as female. The General doesn't seem to care. He asks us about the weather in Nairobi and what we think of Kenya, so we talk about the trip and Heather talks about our plan to go to Narus. Despite the weapons stacked in the corner, I relax.

I turn towards the door of the hut,

holding my visa in hand, as he warns us not to be caught with them by the North Sudan military. Casually, as an afterthought, he asks where we are from. We assuredly answer that we are Canadian.

"Halt!"

His barked command jars me. We all turn back to face him and he stands. There is a gun in his hand. He paces the narrow room in front of us.

"You are from Canada? We are at war with Canada! You are our enemy."

He begins an interrogation. Do we know that Canada is at war with the New Sudan? Do we know that a Canadian oil company—Talisman Oil from Calgary—is responsible for killing thousands of Sudanese nomadic farmers? Do we know that hundreds of thousands of refugees are fleeing because of Canada buying weapons for Sudan?

No, we didn't know.

From talking with Lloyd Axworthy, former Minister of Foreign Affairs before this trip, I heard Talisman Oil is under pressure to leave the oil industry in Sudan. The foreign oil companies are accused of turning a blind eye to the violence of the Northern military. Talisman Oil argues that if they pull out, another country with a worse human rights record would buy in. But Canada at war with Sudan?

It was a shock, one company representing all of Canada. The General made a good argument though, comparing the millions of dollars paid to Sudan by Talisman and the millions of dollars spent funding the military attacks on the New Sudan.

After a pleasant welcome to Sudan, guests of the local paramilitary, we became potential prisoners of war, guilty by association. Polite peacekeeping Canadians we were not. We are in solidarity with the New Sudan, we explained, there to see their side of this war. To spy, he said.

That he considered us to be enemies was disturbing. Hated for our nationality, we get a taste of what so many people experience all over the world.

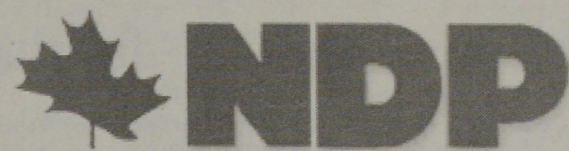
The General re-questioned our itinerary while in Narus. Only after 30 minutes of questioning was he satisfied. We told him none of us came from Alberta, and that we had no contact with Talisman Oil—conveniently forgetting that our friends, family and co-workers owned shares through many pension programs like the BC Teachers Federation. Not innocent, but far from guilty enough to be imprisoned. Or shot. We slunk silently from the hut while he propped himself against the desk, his gun raised, glaring at us.

We arrive in Narus five hours after we left Lokichoggio for a "45-minute drive." The town is cramped with huts and temporary tarp tents, dark brown earth packed down to make a smoother road. Some villagers swim in a small pond; others sit in small groups under the few leafy trees.

As I watch a bumblebee the size of my big toe fly along beside the car it is hard to picture this village as a war zone. Then around the corner come the remains of a bombed out hospital, which I later learn was bombed on the day of my birthday earlier this year.

Some men by the road asked us where we are from when we slow to let some goats pass the road. There is a long pause before I say we are from North America. The fear and embarrassment of being from a country they see as the enemy is so strong that I choose to deny it. For when they ask if I mean American, we are all quick to say yes. We are American. And the people smile and welcome us into their village.

This article was written about a trip in August-September 2001, when Talisman Oil was still operating in Sudan. As of October 30, 2002, Talisman Oil has begun to withdraw from Sudan due to international pressure and much criticism. They eventually sold their 25 per cent of shares in Sudan's Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company to India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation.



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