

## TURNING TO STONES FOR SURVIVAL

By Yuggu Charles

The hammers and chisels rise and fall on the huge stones, crushing them into pieces as the villagers race against time before night comes. They work at the site from dawn to dusk. To a visitor, it is a site to behold. But to villagers living in Rock City on the slopes of Jebel Kujur Mountain near Juba in Southern Sudan, crushing stones is a major economic activity that has attracted the interest of not less than 200 families. While temperatures in most parts of Southern Sudan traditionally soar up to 37 degrees, residents of Rock City in Central Equatoria state have to contend with slightly higher temperatures which sometimes hit a staggering 40 plus degrees due to the rocky hills. Despite the temperatures and the back-breaking work, the residents of Rock City see stone crushing as the only way they can get by from day to day. They are able to put food on the table, buy clothes for their children and pay their school fees from the proceeds they get from selling the ballast they produce from the crushed stones. One of the residents – 25 year old Agustin Karanja Obola – who hails from Eastern Equatorial state is married to two wives and has four children, and he has been in the business for two years now. "I sell a heap of these stones at 250 Sudanese Pounds but, sometimes loaders charge 50 Sudanese Pounds which reduces my profit. Obola is however worried because sometimes it takes up to three weeks before he gets another buyer for the stones which are used in the construction industry. "I am crushing these stones because there are no other jobs. It is hard but I have no alternative," he said sadly. "After I sat for the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education, in Kenya, I tried to look for any job but in vain. So I have to do this work to sustain my family," he said. He said the work was hard and needs determination. "The stones are hard to crush; I have to buy fire wood and burn them for two to three days until they develop cracks, before crushing them," he said, pointing at a huge rock. I have decided to do this work, because it does not require any capital to start unlike other businesses that require investment," said Obola. Obola said he was trying to save some money from his earnings to enable him to start a restaurant. "I will build a small restaurant so that I can cater for my family. I know it is difficult because it requires a lot of capital but I hope I will succeed," he added. In the meantime, Obola is asking the government to open up more



40 years old Unice Domon crashing stones at Jebel Kujur hills in the outskirts of Juba city.

vocational schools for youth like him so that they can study basic entrepreneurial skills. Another villager, Fatina Loing, 40, a mother of seven, has been involved in the stone crushing business for six years. She told 'The People's Voice' that she buys the stones from some middlemen in big quantities and crushes them for sale. "I buy these stones at 100 Sudanese Pounds. I then crush them and sell them at 250 Sudanese Pounds a heap," she narrated. Loing, however, expressed a worry that there is a decreasing market for her stones. "Construction companies used to buy the stones but, they no longer come because they now prefer stones crushed by machines." She noted that at one stage the government taxed their businesses at 75 Sudanese Pounds for three years but, later stopped when they complained. "We complained that we are very poor people who can barely survive, so they stopped levying taxes on our businesses," she said. Loing added that there used to be 30 women in the business but, this has since reduced to 12 because of the hard labour involved. "I am among the few women remaining on site. I can't leave it because I have to pay school fees for my children and feed the family, as my husband is jobless." She appealed to the government and Non-Governmental Organizations to create more women friendly jobs. Like many other Southern Sudanese women, Liong did not get the chance to attend school because of the civil war between the North and South. Now, with Southern Sudan as an independent country, she hopes her children will get a good education and find good jobs. "I have been living here in Juba since 1990 so I was caught up by the war and I did not go to school", she recalled. Another labourer is Hanisa Juan, a 60 year old widow who lost her husband during the 1992 Juba massacre. She now lives with one of her grandsons and insists that it is only through this job that she can secure some little money to earn a living.■

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## DEFYING THE SCOURGE TO SOLDIER ON

By Yobu Annet

HIV/AIDS remains a major threat in a post conflict society such as Southern Sudan despite the extensive civic education programme mounted by several civil society organizations. That the scourge has continued to quietly conspire with increased poverty levels in the war torn region is not only evidenced by the high bed number occupancy in most health facilities but, also by the number of orphans left behind after their parents succumb to HIV/AIDS. The reality is that many more people continue getting infected besides the already overwhelming number of patients who cannot easily access the anti-retroviral (ARV) drugs available in the few surviving health facilities across Southern Sudan. On a Sunday evening, 'The People's Voice' caught up with Agnes Mering; she is in her early fifties and a widow following the demise of her husband, a former soldier. As the sole bread winner for her six children, Mering braves Southern Sudan's baking sun to till her small piece of land. "My children and I have to survive. I am struggling to raise money to feed them. As for school, I cannot afford school fees for my six children", she said as her hoe cracks the ground. Mering recalls the sad death of her husband whom she says succumbed to HIV/AIDS way back in 2007. According to Agnes her late husband contracted the disease many years back during the bush war. "Just before he became weakened, he advised me and my co-wife to go for blood

tests and we were both found to be HIV positive", she revealed with some distress. Despite all the challenges standing before her, Agnes maintains that she is not about to give up as her children have no one else they can depend on now apart from her. Agnes is actually luckier than most; her brother-in-law has done much to help her. She said, "my brother-in-law advised me to join him in Juba, where I can easily get access to free counseling and even ARV drugs". She praised her brother-in-law who has looked after her through many hardships and says she does not know what she would have done without him. Agnes recounts how she got involved in stone quarrying in order to try and support her family. "I tried stone quarrying but gave up because it was affecting my health, because of the heavy dust from the mines", she says. Agnes has also been relying on food rations offered by the World Food Program through the Sudan Council of Churches. "It is not enough and I have to supplement it with manual labour," she states. She advises her fellow Southern Sudanese against leading promiscuous lifestyles, which might put them at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. "I can confidently tell anyone that condoms should be used as a protective measure instead of risking their lives. HIV/AIDS is a real killer. I know some people still do not believe that the disease kills but, I can tell them that this is a real threat to all of us", she advises.■

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## WOMEN SUFFER DUE TO THE KUKU'S OUTDATED CUSTOMARY LAWS

By Yuggu Charles

To outsiders, it is a cruel and outdated custom, but to the people of Kuku in Central Equatoria State, the customary law is good and must be followed to the letter. Some of the community's customary laws are particularly cruel to women, a situation that has provoked the anger of human rights activists, who are now campaigning to have them changed. According to the Kuku community's customary law, women are regarded as children and are treated as the property of men. They belong to men and are therefore treated by men like personal property and have no rights, according to a local resident, Franco Jale David, 27. "According to the custom, if a woman is married and she divorces, she will return to her home empty handed, even without her children, as she has no right to property," says David. He adds: "A man marrying a Kuku woman must pay a full dowry – comprising twelve head of cattle and twenty four goats – and this makes many men say the women are being bought and have to remain obedient and subordinate all the time." The Kuku is an indigenous community living in Kajo-Keji County, some 75 miles south west of the South Sudanese capital, Juba. Custom also bars women from attending village meetings or traditional courts in the village and

states they must be confined to the kitchen all the time. David is among the locals who are campaigning for the rights of women and girls in Kuku and many men do not like him because of this. "The government should educate the community on the rights of the girl child. They should rescue women from this repugnant custom that depicts women as lesser human beings," said David. He added: "The custom has given men the lee way to



35 years old Owe Jane from Kuku community.

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## FRESH EFFORTS TO SAVE SOUTH SUDAN'S STREET CHILDREN

By Paul Jimbo

June 16th marks the 'Day of the African Child', which has been celebrated every year since 1991. It was first initiated by the Organization of African Unity to commemorate the 1976 march in Soweto, South Africa, when thousands of African school children took to the streets to protest about the inferior quality of their education and to demand their right to be taught in their own language. In South Sudan, coordinated by the United Nation's Children's Fund (UNICEF) in collaboration with the Ministry of Gender, Social Welfare and Religious Affairs, alongside several other stakeholders in the child protection sector, including the United Nation's Mission in Sudan (UNMIS), the theme of this year's 'Day of the African Child' is 'All Together for Urgent Action in Favour of Street Children', in order to spotlight

the need to understand and address the issue. The problem of street children in Southern Sudan can easily be attributed to the typical challenges that most post conflict countries have to contend with as they dream of embracing peace and normalcy. In Southern Sudan, the issue of street children is real and devastating, with possible indicators that it could be heading for uncontrollable levels. "The situation is very bad as we witness new arrivals on streets on a daily basis; they

arrive in their droves and the challenge is where do we take them and what do we do with them?", asks Ms Regina Osa Lulo, the Director General of Gender and Child Welfare at the Government of South Sudan's Ministry of Gender, Social Welfare and Religious Affairs. According to Regina, a number of factors contribute to the increasing number of street children in Southern Sudan. "Some were left as orphans after their parents were killed during the war, some are victims of domestic violence, probably constant mistreatment at home, and some have run away from their families to look for food because of poverty. I mean, the economy is not balanced and so we have so many parents who are old, poor and have to use their children to feed them", Regina stated. She said that child labour in Southern Sudan was rife in urban centres and took many different forms including shoe polishing, collection and resale of empty plastic water bottles, washing cars, hawking, and touting on public service vehicles.



Ms Regina Ossa Lulo, Director General incharge of Gender and Child Welfare at GoSS Ministry of Gender, Social Welfare and Religion

She said that some of the children were on the streets because of lack of care

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# EDITORIAL

## Hope of a new dawn amid serious challenges

It is only two weeks to the birth of a new nation. As the world waits anxiously to usher Southern Sudan into the club of independent countries, ecstasy is sweeping through the capital Juba where preparations are underway for a big party. But as independence day approaches, the people of Southern Sudan are grappling with a myriad of problems that may undermine the future of the new nation, if not addressed urgently. It is for this reason that 'The People's Voice' went behind the scenes to reveal the challenges facing the new country. Once again, our reporters traversed South Sudan, interviewing ordinary people about their predicament and seeking answers from the government officials. We started the journey in the Capital Juba where high food prices are threatening to spoil the big independence party. Residents are going hungry and children are dropping out of school because the price of food has shot up beyond the reach of the common man. But why can't Juba feed its people? We have answers for you in this edition, complete with accounts from the victims.

Also featured in this edition is the issue of street children. In a sizzling story, our senior writer – Paul Jimbo – talks to the Ministry of Gender, Social Welfare and Religious Affairs about their response to the plight of street children raised in previous issues of the 'The People's Voice' and hears about their the efforts to halt the crisis in Juba and other towns in Southern Sudan.

We also have a detailed analysis of the fight against HIV and AIDS, via one person's story, in Southern Sudan, where culture, stigma and poverty is impacting negatively on the gains made in taming the disease. Our reporter Yobu Annet spoke to someone living with the disease. In our efforts to bring to you a holistic approach to socio-cultural issues in Southern Sudan, we have a sad story of how outdated culture is undermining the rights of women in Central Equatoria State. Why should women be treated like children or objects just because they are women? Our reporter Yuggu Charles was in Central Equatoria and brings you the story of a people whose lives are still dictated by repugnant traditions. From Rumbek, we hear the distressing story about the poor health services in the vast region. And from the Rock City area on the slopes of the Jebel Kujur Mountains, we bring you a story of determination in the face of grinding poverty. Haunted by deprivation and the high cost of living, villagers here, including elderly women, are forced to resort to breaking stones into ballast in the scorching heat. It is a tough, energy-sapping job, but the locals have no alternative but to survive the hard way.

There is no doubt you will find this issue most interesting. Read on. ■

## EDITORIAL TEAM

**Santino Okanyi**  
*Project Supervisor*

**Oliver Modi**  
*UJOSS Chairperson*

**Paul Jimbo**  
*Project Coordinator/  
Chief Editor*

**Lily Michael**  
*Finance Secretary*

**Andy Abong'o**  
*Designing and Arts*

**Contact: Tel: +249 (0)924875595**

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## WOMEN SUFFER DUE TO THE KUKU'S OUTDATED CUSTOMARY LAWS

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find woman looking after cattle as young men go to school because of the skewed gender roles," he explained.

At Logu village, 30 year old Jane Pujo says she is optimistic that the current campaign on the rights of women by Non-Governmental Organizations and some locals would bear fruits. "I am married with three children. I have not gone to school, but at least now, I know some of my rights," she said after attending a meeting on human rights.

Another Kuku woman, 45 year old Emmelida Kojo comes from Logili village and recounts how some of the customary laws contribute to increased domestic violence in the community. She said that though the Kuku customary laws did not necessarily encourage beating of women; gaps and lack of clearly laid out procedures in implementing the customary laws

contributed heavily towards the increasing domestic violence cases. Emmelida lost her two teeth after she was attacked by her husband for demanding her rights. "I have five children and I was recently beaten by my husband resulting in the loss of my two teeth. I fled to my parents and filed a case in a local court for compensation," she said.

Meanwhile, Kiden Victoria, a 25 year old medical student at the Juba Teaching Hospital says little has been done to overcome the outdated traditional cultural practices amongst the Kuku people. Victoria who is from Longira village said: "I do not agree with these customary laws and traditional beliefs because they are inconsistent with the dictates of modernity. Women must be given equal opportunities in education so that they can pursue education like me who is now studying medicine." ■

## FRESH EFFORTS TO SAVE SOUTH SUDAN'S STREET CHILDREN

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and love from their parents. "It is not that all the children you see on the streets are orphans, no, some of them are there because of neglect and lack of parental care. At some point even some parents deliberately send their children to beg and get something for their survival and this is all because of poverty", Regina intimated. The Director General, who spoke to 'The People's Voice' in her office in Kololo-Juba, made the remarks while responding to a raft of issues on street children featured in previous editions of 'The People's Voice.' She said that some people were still stuck with the old mentality of giving birth to many children yet they had little capacity to sustain them. "When someone gives birth to a child, they should understand that this comes with responsibility which includes upbringing, education, feeding and even mentoring. There are some cattle traders who engage children in the trade only to leave them behind in towns. This is so common amongst cattle traders from Eastern and Central Equatoria and Jonglei states", she revealed. The government, she stated, had come up with the Child Act which was already in circulation and would soon embark on the next phase of a children's rights protection campaign. This would involve sensitization of

villagers and members of the society at large on child rights. "We will also be training trainers and child welfare officers who will be posted across the states, counties and even payams, where they will be able to gather information on child survival, and they will also be able to prosecute all those bent on violating children's rights. The law is very clear on this, we will not relent in our resolve to protect these children from further abuses", Regina vowed. The sensitization process, she clarified, would further involve explanation of the role of parents in society and what constitutes violation of children's rights. Her ministry, she added, had also embarked on a master plan aimed at ridding the streets of children very soon. "Once we carry out the survey which will include mapping and understanding each child's family background, we will come up with a transit centre where they will be temporarily held as we track down their guardians and relatives, as we embark on a reintegration, reconciliation and reunification mission which must be out of goodwill from both the child and would be foster parents or hosts", she stated. This exercise, Ms Regina explained, would be done in collaboration with the Ministry of Health to further secure relevant child growth and development data ■

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## High food prices dampen spirits ahead of independence celebrations

By Yuggu Charles & Paulina Poni

The continued rise in food prices in Juba has dampened the spirits of many residents, even as they prepare to celebrate the birth of their new nation in July. In most parts of Juba, sorrow and helplessness are quickly replacing the excitement that hung in the air soon after the Southern Sudanese people voted, to the last man and women, to separate from the North. A survey in most parts of the capital showed that the prices of basic foods and essential commodities had risen to an all time high, severely affecting the living standards of middle and lower level income groups. Retail prices of cabbage, eggs, tomatoes, kale and other food stuffs have more than doubled since January this year, due to what observers attribute to an erratic supply from Uganda, the main source of food consumed in Juba. At Jebel market, 32 year old Jesika Kuyng, a mother of four, walked from one stall to another pleading for a discount from the traders. She was shocked to learn that prices of food stuffs had doubled within just one week. "They are selling five pieces of tomatoe at 5 Sudanese Pounds. I can't afford this," protested Jesika as she moved to another stall where a tall elderly trader from Uganda was selling cabbages. She added: "I have to look for alternatives. Maybe I should look for where I can buy ready made tomato paste that costs only one Sudanese pound." Jesika said the price of meat has also increased from 12 Sudanese pounds to 16 Sudanese pounds in most butchers in Juba. "One litre of cooking oil has climbed to 6 Sudanese pounds, while 20 litres of vegetable cooking oil has risen to 125 Sudanese pounds, up from 75 pounds." She explained: "I spent 15 pounds a day for my family. We can only afford one meal per day and things are getting worse." Her salary of 500 Sudanese Pounds, she lamented, was too little. Like most of the residents and traders, Jesika attributed the high cost of food stuffs to the fact that all the food in the market is imported from Uganda and Kenya. A trader called Paul Pitia Jacob commented, "why can't our government start planning for massive food production since we have so much arable land? The common person is suffering because somebody somewhere does not want to listen to

his concerns. It is a situation where the well fed do not understand the plight of the hungry and angry". Another resident, Nyoka Easter Noel, 29, a mother of three, said traders had hiked up the prices because of the high cost of transporting the food to Southern Sudan. "Traders incur a lot of expenses while transporting food from Uganda and Kenya. They are passing these losses on to poor consumers," she said. The story is the same at Gudele on the outskirts of Juba. Twenty year old Susan Keji Ezibon is a mother of five and can hardly make ends meet. "The situation is worse here because of its remote location. Traders here have to travel to Juba to get the food," she said. But why can't the traders reduce the prices? A member of the Association of Traders of Juba Payam, Lily Jigi Mark, said that the biggest cause of the rise in prices was the high transportation costs and the strong US dollar. The US dollar is a widely used currency besides the Sudanese Pound. She said trucks transporting food to South Sudan spend many days on the road due to being stuck on poor roads, especially along the Kampala-Nimule road. There are also several road

blocks mounted by both Ugandan and South Sudanese security officials. "The high taxes we pay at the road blocks get passed on to the consumer," she said. A Ugandan trader, Fatima Ejobiru, 40, who is based at the Konyo-Konyo market said the long delays on the road were very costly, due to the fact that huge quantities of food go bad while in transit. "It takes one to two days to bring goods from Kampala to Nimule then you have to stay there waiting for clearance by the customs authorities. By the time you get to Juba, the vegetables, bananas and even other fruits have started rotting. Imagine you start counting your losses on the way. This is why we have to double the prices of the little that we manage to bring to the market", added Sophia Abdi, a trader who sells dry fish and vegetables. The traders are appealing to the Southern Sudanese government to improve roads and reduce police check points on the main highways, as well make efforts to increase domestic food production in order to alleviate the problems ■

## Rumbek residents decry poor health services

By Abraham Machuor Lum

Poor health services in Southern Sudan's Rumbek region have sparked uproar among residents, many of whom are now turning to traditional healers. Locals claim the state hospitals in the region lack drugs and vital facilities that could save lives. This has impacted badly on the lives of many poor residents who cannot afford the cost of private clinics. A local resident, Achul Mawel Kuach has a sad testimony about the sorry state of affairs. "My auntie was admitted to hospital on Saturday of last week and three days later, she had not been attended to. She has not even been given a single tablet and I am worried she can even die," said Kuach. "I could have taken her to a private clinic in Rumbek town but I don't have enough money. I have to wait," he added. At the same Rumbek State hospital, another patient, Makoi Majak Mathei, lay on his bed

wondering when the doctors will bring drugs. "I was admitted here on Saturday morning and I was diagnosed but, told to buy the medicines from a private clinic because the hospital does not have any. My brother used 30 Sudanese Pounds to buy the drugs at a private pharmacy. I would have died if it were not for my brother," he said. "I really think that the government should do something to help improve the condition of the state hospital because Southern Sudan will soon become an independent country," he added. The director of Rumbek State hospital, Chan Deng Mulual, admitted the hospital has been facing challenges but, said the staff were doing their best to offer medical services and to save the lives of patients. "Some of the allegations are not true. We have been treating patients here very well despite some

shortcomings. In fact, we even work over the holidays and at night," he stated. But he admitted that the hospital does not operate on weekends, hence the outcry by some patients. Chan said: "We don't work over the weekends because as human beings we also need to rest. Furthermore, the government has done very little to motivate the workers. I hope, however, that these issues will be addressed." In an interesting twist and admission that the health care at the hospital has deteriorated, Chan accused some of the County's health workers of stealing drugs from the facility. "There are a few workers who steal drugs and sell it to private pharmacies. This is very bad," he said. He also admitted that the state hospital was lacking professional midwives, forcing expectant women to seek the help of Traditional Birth Attendants (TBA) who are not qualified to attend to them, resulting in high child mortality rates in the state. The state minister of health, Dr Samuel Mayek Deng, said the Rumbek State hospital has not been meeting its obligations but, promised the government would improve the situation. He said the hospital was lacking important facilities such as beds, x-ray machines and qualified staff. The hospital has only four wards; one pediatric ward, one maternity ward, one surgical ward for men and women and one combined medical ward shared by both men and women. Mayek said most patients seeking treatment at the hospital suffered from malaria and diarrhea. He also confirmed that the government was investigating the theft of drugs at the hospital and warned that those found committing such crimes would be severely punished. He said initial investigations revealed that a private pharmacy used as a conduit for the stolen drugs was owned by a doctor working at the hospital. "We have closed down that pharmacy and the doctor is under investigation," he said. He has also asked villagers to stop sending expectant mothers to untrained Traditional Birth Attendants, adding that with 2,054 deaths out of every 100,000 live births, Southern Sudan has one of the highest child mortality rates in the world.