

Time Trip: Sudan's Civil War

The current conflict in Sudan is only the latest chapter in the country's violent history. Apart from an 11-year peace from 1972 to 1983, Sudan has been entrenched in war since it became an independent nation in 1956.

The Darfurian conflict erupted just as a long civil war between northern and southern Sudan was winding down. That war was fought between the mainly Muslim Arab north and the mostly non-Muslim, non-Arab south. It began in 1983 and was one of the longest-lasting and deadliest wars of the 20th century. About 2 million civilians were killed, and more than 4 million people were forced to flee their homes.

Some of those refugees are known as the Lost Boys of Sudan. Fleeing violence and the fear of being forced into war, thousands of boys fled by foot to Ethiopia. The 1,000-mile trek was grueling. They went days without food or water, eating leaves and berries and sucking liquid from mud to stay alive. Exhausted, some boys died of starvation or dehydration.

The boys who continued found shelter at a refugee camp in Ethiopia, but their safety was short-lived. Fighting erupted in Ethiopia in 1991, forcing them to flee again. As they ran, gunmen in tanks fired at them. To escape, the boys had to cross the crocodile-infested River Gilo. Thousands drowned, were eaten by crocodiles, or were shot.

By the time the boys arrived at a refugee camp in Kenya in 1992, only 10,000—fewer than half of the original 26,000—were still alive. After nine years at the camp, about 4,000 of the Lost Boys were brought by the U.S. government to cities in the United States to begin new lives.

Now some Lost Boys are returning home. A peace agreement signed on Jan. 9, 2005, officially ended Sudan's civil war. Though aid agencies recently reported that many communities in the south still lack food and water, some 500,000 Sudanese are expected to return home this year in what is one of the largest movements of people in recent history.