

The bitter legacy

Two new books tell the sorry tale of South Sudan and Sudan, and the oil at the heart of their dysfunctional relationship. Review by Anthea Pitt

SOUTH Sudan will mark the third anniversary of its independence on 9 July. In 2011, the sense of jubilation on the streets of Juba, the capital, was palpable. The future had arrived, it was filled with unimaginable promise. After decades of civil war and subjugation, South Sudanese were free and the future was theirs.

This year, however, there is precious little to celebrate, save perhaps the hope an increasingly fragile ceasefire will hold, halting the country's descent into all-out civil war.

Even if war is averted, South Sudan's problems are increasingly intractable. The country's treasury has been plundered, with an estimated \$4 billion thought to have been siphoned off corruptly. Dissidents have been murdered, the media muzzled. Oil revenue – about 98% of treasury receipts – has slowed to a trickle. At independence, South Sudan produced 350,000 barrels a day (b/d). When hostilities broke out in December, production totalled 245,000 b/d. Since then, output has fallen to just 165,000 b/d.

Before the present ceasefire was declared on 10 May, the civil war – sparked by a power struggle between President Salva Kiir, from the majority Dinka tribe, and his erstwhile vice president, Riek Machar, a Nuer – had taken on a chilling ethnic dimension. There have been massacres in the major towns of Bor, Bentiu and Malakal; armed men have attacked civilians seeking refuge in a UN base; villages and crops have been razed. Supply routes have been severed, threatening a famine. The rainy season has brought with it the possibility of worsening food shortages, cholera and malaria. The situation is so grave that UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon said that if full-scale civil war breaks out, half of South Sudan's 12 million citizens will be “displaced internally, refugees abroad, starving or dead” by end of this year.

The publication of James Copnall's *A Poisonous Thorn in Our Hearts: Sudan and South Sudan's Bitter and Incomplete Divorce* and *The New Kings of Crude: China, India and the Global Struggle for Oil in Sudan and South Sudan* by Luke Patey, could not have been more timely. Both add much-needed nuance and context to the terrible events unfolding in South Sudan. Copnall's book,

James Copnall, *A Poisonous Thorn in Our Hearts: Sudan and South Sudan's Bitter and Incomplete Divorce*, C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd £19.99

Luke Patey, *The New Kings of Crude: China, India and the Global Struggle for Oil in Sudan and South Sudan*, C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd £25

drawn from his experiences as the BBC's correspondent in Khartoum, provides a comprehensive overview of the relationship between the two countries, examining the impact the past has on the present. He is at his best when he traces the threads that continue to bind Sudan to South Sudan (the “poisonous thorn” of the title). His examination of the two nations' interdependence – similar to the wrenching push-and-pull of a dysfunctional relationship – is clear and concise.

He writes sensitively, moving with ease from broader political, economic and security issues to more personal stories. These stories – the creeping militarisation of life in the north extending to the school yard, where uniforms are made from camouflage fabric, for example – give the book heft. This subtlety of focus also allows Copnall deftly to expose the roots of the present conflict threatening South Sudan. He points out the fault lines were apparent at the country's birth.

Privileged elite

There is no triumph in this analysis, rather sadness that South Sudan's elite have adopted many of the cruel traits they so despised in the Khartoum regime. In almost three years, the SPLM/A government has concentrated privilege into the hands of a Juba-based elite and grown intolerant of dissent. Crucially, Salva Kiir's government has squandered the goodwill it once had and failed to use the country's wealth to the benefit of its citizens. This failure draws Copnall's sharpest rebuke. “South Sudan has to stop its march in Sudan's dirty footsteps, and Juba should spread wealth and power as it has promised to do,” he says.

Patey's focus is equally valuable. Oil, after all, lies at the heart of the relationship between Sudan and South Sudan. It was key to the Sudanese civil wars. Access to oil fuelled and prolonged the conflicts. It was crucial to the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which paved the way for South Sudan's independence. Oil continues to bind the Sudans together.

While *The New Kings of Crude* tells of Sudan's first encounter with Big Oil (Chevron entered the country in the 1970s, exiting in 1992, as the US

imposed sanctions against Khartoum and the second civil war gained murderous intensity), the central story is the expansion of China and India into the Sudanese oil play. Patey does not frame his narrative as a 20th Century revision of the scramble for Africa, a trap which could have snared a less perceptive author. Instead, he presents a solid, exhaustive account of how Sudan, while allowing China and India to expand their international footprints, proved a coming-of-age for both. The scholarship is obvious, but Patey also tells a cracking tale.

His discussion of India is especially perceptive. The western media's focus has been China's expansion into Africa, neglecting its Indian parallel, and the broader impact Sudan has had on the companies and people in its oil patch. Like Copnall, Patey uses individual stories to illustrate broader points. His discussion of the role played by Atul Chandra, who turned ONGC Videsh (OVL) into a truly international oil company, is a case in point. Atul's initiative paid off. Pre-independence Sudan at one point pumped almost 50% of OVL's production and, in the seven years to 2010, helped boost profits from about \$80 million to \$500 million.

The Sudans increased revenue and output for Chinese and Indian producers, becoming their “greatest operational achievement”. But the Sudanese oil patch also changed the way the state-run companies operate outside their home turf. *The New Kings of Crude* opens with the 2008 kidnap and murder of five China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) workers by Misseriya gunmen (combatants in the Darfur conflict). Patey argues persuasively that the murders so shocked CNPC – its peers too – that it shook itself from its isolation, actively seeking to engage with the communities in its operational areas.

South Sudan is on the brink of civil war, renewed conflict with Sudan remains a risk. Copnall concludes that peace for both countries remains some way off. Patey offers a similarly bleak assessment, citing former Chevron executive Allan Martini speaking 20 years after the company left Sudan: “We couldn't see any indication the situation would improve. As far as I'm concerned, the situation still hasn't sorted itself out.” ●