

Your support guides people out of danger

NP staff accompany people to safety and out of danger

By Nonviolent Peaceforce Philippines Communication Team

SEVERAL MONTHS AGO MARAWI CITY, the Philippines, became a picture of devastation and chaos. In May, Maute militants, who claim affiliation with ISIS, attempted to take the city. Hundreds of thousands of civilians were displaced and dozens killed. Many people fled their homes without food, provisions or medical supplies.

Suddenly, NP protection officers in Lanao were on the frontlines of a large humanitarian crisis. Members of our field staff and their families were among those displaced. Yet they immediately responded to protect other besieged and displaced civilians. Team members worked around the clock to get people to safety, rush the injured to medical

care, and assist other organizations with the distribution of relief kits.

Four-hours to save lives

NP's biggest challenge was along the Peace Corridor. The Peace Corridor is a joint effort of the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The purpose is to create safe passage for rescue and humanitarian operations. It has two parts. The first are volunteer staffed centers to help evacuate civilians trapped in the conflict zone. The second is a 45-mile stretch of

At a community-based evacuation centre in Iligan City, NP staff Xarifa Sanguila listens to the concerns and needs of people displaced by conflict in Marawi City, the Philippines.





Peace Corridor volunteers worked in dangerous conditions to get as many civilians as possible out of Marawi City during a short ceasefire.

highway heading out of Marawi for the flow of relief goods.

Two weeks into the conflict, civilians were allowed to be evacuated. But, it had to happen during a four-hour temporary ceasefire. NP chose two of its protection officers, Salic and Nohman, as volunteer rescuers. With such a small window of time and such a big job, it was important that they both speak the local language.

It takes a lot of planning to conduct an accompaniment during a temporary ceasefire. First the team analyzes the situation and does a risk assessment. Then they plan for safety and organize activities.

During the operation, Salic and Nohman scrambled to aid civilians. In spite of the ceasefire, rescue workers were hampered by heavy artillery fire. The rest of the team was on edge during the whole operation, but able to stay in contact through text messages. They knew the rescuers were at great risk of attack as they searched the zone for trapped civilians. But Salic, known to the staff as Sensei, was unstoppable. He set to work immediately after the establishment of the Peace Corridor. He headed to his native Marawi City every day to help move more civilians out of danger.

Protecting others at a time of personal crisis

Salic is the Lanao's team point person on civilian rescue and we all look to him for news and updates on a daily basis. He is dedicated to protecting civilians. He is also the head of his extended family, responsible for more than two dozen individuals, including young children and elderly. They depend

on him for strength, guidance, safety and security. In spite of this, he performs his civilian protection duties day in and day out—without a complaint. He is not alone.

Many others on the Lanao team are personally affected by the conflict. Some have relatives who were displaced. Some have relatives who are unaccounted for, presumably trapped in Marawi. One of our field staff and his family left their home with few belongings and no food provisions. Yet they carry on their work to protect civilians in Lanao del Sur and Lanao del Norte.

Peace process earns respect

NP is one of only a few international organizations in the area responding to this crisis. The number of foreign nationals allowed to work here is limited. We are restricted and subject to stringent security measures. In spite of the restrictions, NP has garnered trust and respect through our work on the peace process. We've secured passes to move vehicles freely between Iligan and Marawi to rescue trapped civilians. Along the Peace Corridor alone, there have been 1561 civilians rescued, according to government sources. The exact number of civilians still trapped in the conflict zone is unknown. It is likely around 500 or more, and many remain as hostages. Our staff, along with other rescue groups and humanitarian workers, are risking their lives to save others.

You did it

Your support made the protection of civilians caught in this crisis possible.



“It's worth it that after the operations, the retrieved civilians and their families finally felt relief. It's really touching and indescribable how happy they are knowing that they are safe.”

—Salic Mai
Peace Corridor Volunteer,
Nonviolent Peaceforce

Salic photo credit: Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, Facebook

You remind people of humanity in the middle of conflict

Because of your support, Rami Kolehmainen works in remote areas of South Sudan to protect people from war.

By Teija Laakso

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Translation by Leena-Maija Laurén, University of Turku and Rami Kolehmainen

NONVIOLENT PEACEFORCE PEACEKEEPERS work in areas where the other international actors will not enter. According to Rami Kolehmainen, who works in [South Sudan](#), NP has a key role to play through its presence.

A phone call and a flight

Kolehmainen answers the phone call in his home in Turku, Finland, but soon he will be sitting in a helicopter en-route to the Northern part of South Sudan. Helicopter transportation is the most convenient and safest way of travelling in a country where paved roads are not common and the safety situation is unpredictable.

Kolehmainen works for an international non-governmental organization called Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) headquartered in France. He started in January 2017 and is about to return to the field to complete his second six-month contract.

The philosophy for NP is peacekeeping without weapons. NP protection officers live amongst the civilian population in conflict areas without any weapons or safety gear and work at the grassroots level in locations where no other actors dare to go.

One of most important strategies is to offer presence. Protective presence is a very effective way to protect civilians.

“In South Sudan horrible things happen all the time. Without the presence of a third-party these events would never be registered and they could easily get worse. When the parties in a conflict see that they are not just living in their own bubble, but there is, for instance, a blonde Finn present, they understand that they cannot continue committing atrocities the way they used to do,” explains Kolehmainen.



Rami Kolehmainen is a Nonviolent Peaceforce International Protection Officer. Here, the South Sudan Teachers' and Parents' Association learn how to protect children. Offering training to the local people is a part of nonviolent peacekeeping.

Roots of violence

In the media, South Sudan is often described as hell on earth. Prior to gaining its independence in 2011, the country as Sudan went through years of bloody civil war and, even with its oil resources, the area was already very poor before the current conflict.

The country was brought to turmoil in December 2013, when different ethnic groups led by president Salva Kiir and his vice president Riek Machar got into open conflict. That was the beginning of a bloody civil war in which several participants and sides have committed serious human rights violations. Civilians have been killed and raped, children have been kidnapped and villages have been burnt down and plundered.

Almost two million people are internally displaced inside the country and a similar amount of people have fled outside the country as refugees.

A complicated crisis

Lately, new groups have emerged into the conflict after breaking-away from existing armed groups. The cycle of violence cannot be explained by ethnic differences alone and other reasons could include a struggle over the natural resources and power.

According to Rami Kolehmainen, the situation at the grassroots level is even more complex than the news reports, because in South Sudan conflicts and violence are at all levels: domestic, intra-community, clans and between ethnic groups. At the local level, violence can start from a situation where someone steals a cow. In addition, the global politics and neighboring countries are influencing the crisis and ultimately all levels affect each other.

Soccer as a tool to manage conflicts

The work Kolehmainen is responsible for takes place at grassroots level, amongst civilians. His placement is in the Northern Upper Nile state and his accommodation is a safari tent.

His team gives local leaders and civilians training on the human rights of children, gender-based violence prevention and how to evacuate effectively when violence breaks out. They also facilitate meetings for local stakeholders to meet in person.

“... the situation at the grassroots level is even more complex than the news reports, because in South Sudan conflicts and violence are at all levels: domestic, intra-community, clans and between ethnic groups.”

In the near future, there will be a soccer tournament and the purpose is to offer training in conflict management at the same time.

“In this area there are many young people who have weapons and too little to do. We try to give them something else to think about.”

The protection officers also inform relief

organizations about the needs of locals and give them advice and assistance.

While working, the NP teams chat with the local people and ask them how things are.

“The main aim is to emphasize humanity in the middle of a conflict. When there is violence all the time, it is reflected in the community and it will stay that way,” explains Kolehmainen.

We are not a threat

South Sudan is full of weapons, and not even humanitarian workers have been spared from the violence. Yet NP peacekeepers still work totally unarmed. They don't use helmets or bullet proof vests. NP's work is based on the good relationships with local people, not on violence.

“When we walk without the bullet proof vests, helmets or armed vehicles, we demonstrate that security is based on mutual trust and that we are not a threat to anyone,” says Kolehmainen.

You might think this sounds outrageous, but Kolehmainen states that in South Sudan no one has ever pointed a gun at him. In general, the local people treat foreigners well.



Women Peacekeeping Team—Nonviolent Peaceforce trains local women in unarmed civilian protection.

Cold-cut shelves seem strange

There is no solution to the current crisis in South Sudan for the foreseeable future. The famine in the country is getting worse and violence is increasing. United Nations indicated last year that the situation in the country is possibly a genocide. However, according to Kolehmainen people try to live their everyday lives in the middle of all this.

“Most people try to live life as normal. They fall in love, get married and have children and try to get food. Smiling, dancing and singing is everywhere, because they are survival tools for humans,” he describes.

In South Sudan, he especially appreciates the women who are supporting their families in this violent situation and even take part in the community-based unarmed civilian peacekeeping.

Kolehmainen, who has worked in many global conflict areas, returning home to Finland is always a cultural shock – but in a positive way.

“It does not trouble me but the basics in my own community seem somewhat funny. People shopping in the stores spend several minutes at the 20-meters long display counter of cold cuts while wondering what to buy. It makes me smile,” says Kolehmainen. ➡

About Rami: He has worked for three unarmed civilian protection (UCP) organizations: Christian Peacemaker Teams, the Ecumenical Accompaniment Project for Palestine and Israel and NP.

When you support NP, you put local people first Adapting our approach from Myanmar to South Sudan

by Huibert Oldenhuis, Head of Mission for NP in Myanmar

I'LL NEVER FORGET SETTING UP A FIELD TEAM

for Nonviolent Peaceforce in South Sudan in the summer of 2012. Within a few hours upon arrival in Waat, Jonglei, we had to evacuate our first team member. He had contracted malaria on the two-day drive from Juba. Within a few weeks of our team arriving, two of the town's clans began quarrelling over our recruitment process. At the same time, monsoon storms blew away our newly built fences and sunk our tents into a thick layer of mud. With half the team ill and the other half demotivated, I was tasked to lead a project to reduce the impact of a potential genocide.

It looked calm, but ...

The genocide didn't happen, at least not while I was there. In fact, hardly anything



Unusually heavy monsoon rains made transportation impossible. Our tents sank in the mud.

happened at all in Waat. The planned disarmament process was called off and fighting shifted to neighboring Pibor. While our NP colleagues in Pibor hit the ground running and protected women from sexual violence, we watched the days pass by quietly. Though we felt that violent conflict was lurking just beneath the surface, the town's people believed, or perhaps hoped, that the worst was behind them. Many of them were traumatized and reluctant to think about worst case scenarios. The village elder I spoke to in my first week gave me a cold stare and said, "You are too late. Our women and children have already died." A year later, on my way out of South Sudan, I switched on the TV at a transit hotel in Egypt. Civil war had erupted in South Sudan. Waat was in the middle of it.

Getting started

How do you move forward in a situation like that? How do you start a protection project in a place where violence is not visible? In a town where you can meet all relevant actors within a single day? In a year when heavy rains make transportation impossible for months on end?

On foot

I decided to walk. Literally. Sometimes I walked for up to 12 hours a day, through water that came up to my chest. The locals laughed at me and called me 'the white Nuer.' We visited remote villages across the area and facilitated workshops on unarmed civilian protection. Our teams did this mostly to gain trust and build relations. What kept me going was the small achievements. This included a discussion in a small village where a group of women voiced their disapproval of marital rape

and got the men to listen. As our visits became more frequent, villagers started to share protection concerns: cases about confiscated cows, abducted children and armed men moving through the area. In Waat, I learned the importance of holding my ground during the inevitable low tide of a conflict cycle and at the same time maintaining movement.

Moving to Myanmar

When I resumed my work for Nonviolent Peaceforce and moved to Myanmar in 2014, I found myself in a completely different situation. I arrived at the center of movement and in the high tide of political change. Buildings and roads were rising up on every corner of Yangon. Armed groups and government negotiators were signing a nationwide ceasefire agreement one month and Aung San Suu Kyi swept the national elections the next. Despite the excitement of being in Myanmar at such a historic time, it was frustrating to have little access to the field. I missed the freedom of Waat, the ability to move about freely and to intimately connect with the people on the ground.

A new approach

The only way to move forward was to change NP's approach in Myanmar. Instead of zooming in on a particular context, we zoomed out and started to train local actors across the country. Though the absence of field teams was challenging, I came to see the civilians we trained and coached as our field teams. Besides, adopting a bird's eye view created opportunities to share lessons and connect with people across ethnic divisions. Most



Walking from village to village helped us win the trust of the people. When they knew they could trust us, they started to share their fears.

of all it was deeply rewarding to see so many ordinary civilians overcoming their fears and responding to conflicts in their own communities. Yesterday, one of our partners sent me pictures of an unexploded ordnance villagers found. After they contacted him, he contacted the military and together they visited the area where the unexploded ordnance was found.

Three years later, Myanmar's honeymoon

period seems to have ended. The pace of the peace process is slowing down. There is a feeling that the space for civil society's participation in the peace process is shrinking. Some of our partners have decided to slow down their efforts or contemplate stopping altogether. In Rakhine, the situation suddenly explodes just when we are about to strengthen capacity on the protection of civilians. I remember the words of the village elder in Waat and wonder if we are too late, once again.

Lasting change

Yet when I am disheartened, I remember a recent message I received from a colleague in South Sudan. She told me how much my former South Sudanese team mates have grown since I recruited them in 2012. One of them has just mediated a dispute in his own community and is proud of his promotion with NP. His dream of making a difference for his people came true.

You made this possible. Change comes in waves. We need to hold our ground and keep moving! ➡



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*In the course of history,
there comes a time when humanity is called to shift
to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground.
A time when we have to shed our fear and give hope to each other.
That time is now.*

— Wangari Maathai, founder of the Green Belt Movement, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate