

In Sudan's Nuba Mountains, rebels roll up string of victories

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MAFLUL, Sudan — Flanked by machine guns and foxholes on a hillside near Sudan's southern border, rebel Gen. Nimeiri Murrat peered through a pair of binoculars one day recently onto the abandoned rooftops of the town of Talodi, two miles away, tasting what seems like almost certain victory.

The rebel forces, perhaps 8,000 strong, have flanked the town on three sides and are pushing 2,000 government troops back, forcing them into a final hillside stand that is possibly just days away.

But not quite yet. After 10 minutes in the open, enough to attract an airstrike by Sudanese government planes, Murrat has seen what he needs to. "It's time to go," he yelled and leaped into a truck, racing to a command post nearby, guarded by four tanks the rebels captured from government forces.

The war between the rebels in Sudan's Nuba Mountains — most of them African Muslims but including Christians and animists — and the Arab Muslim government of Sudanese President Omar al Bashir in Khartoum has raged for decades. Hundreds of thousands have died, and Sudan's South Kordofan state is a humanitarian wasteland, where aerial bombing by government planes has driven thousands of villagers into the countryside. When the rainy season begins next month, it will be nearly impossible for fuel and food to reach them.

Lost, however, in those humanitarian worries is a key detail: The rebels appear to be winning and may stand at the edge of a triumph that could have enormous strategic implications.

Capturing Talodi would give the rebels, for the first time, a base at one end of an all-weather road that leads to Malakal, a city in South Sudan, the newly independent nation whose rulers have long been closely allied with the rebels here. With Talodi in their hands, the rebels would be close to opening a year-round supply line from the south, where the military, the Sudan People's Liberation Army, bears almost the same name as the rebel force, the Sudan People's Liberation Army-North.

The rebels have failed before and could well again. In October, they tried three times to take the town, but each effort was repulsed. Journalists who were flown into Talodi from Khartoum on Thursday said they saw no sign of the rebels and that Sudanese officials said the closest rebel-held area was 25 miles away — a

claim that certainly was untrue six days before, according to the GPS coordinates for Murrat's command post.

In any case, a string of victories has given the rebels not only turf but thousands of tons of captured supplies, including tanks, heavy trucks, and months of food supplies.

A weeklong tour through rebel-held land by a McClatchy reporter who sneaked in from South Sudan along a road that will turn into impassable mush once rain starts to fall bears testimony to their victories. For one, the rebels are just 10 miles from the state capital, Kadugli, and one can see the town's lights twinkling in the darkness on the horizon.

The war infests everything here, blanketing the countryside in fear and revolutionary resolve. Hunger haunts the mountainsides, where women and children cower under boulders and sleep inside caves. Husbands and brothers are absent, many on the front lines.

Fields lie fallow and towns abandoned. Meanwhile, mangos litter the ground under unharvested trees near the front lines. Few dare trek far during the days' 115-degree heat, the scorching wind a blow dryer in the face. Traveling at nighttime is a dangerous affair.

That Talodi could soon fall to the rebels is a sign of the rebellion's new prowess. Previously, the rebels had no heavy weaponry and could fight only as guerrillas. Major towns like Talodi were safe from their grasp.

But the rebels feel victory near. The Sudanese government force might still have better weapons, Murrat allows, "but they run much easier than before," he says with a toothy grin.

Recent victories back his bravado.

In January, Sudanese troops attacked the towns of Tess and Buram with the elite Republican Guard and 10 tanks, but they had to flee after the rebels ambushed them in front and behind. In their flight, they left several tanks behind for the rebels.

In February, the rebels routed 6,000 Sudanese soldiers from the town of Trogi. Trenches surround the town, where empty tank artillery shells are scattered like afterthoughts. The last time rebels controlled the town: 1994.

The rebels also are pushing east into areas surrounding the towns of Rashad and Abassiya, north into the areas around Dalami and Habila, and west, where they surround the town of Laghawa.

For Bashir's government in Khartoum, the push is more than just a local threat. Already, the rebels have fought side by side with the Justice and Equality Movement group based in Sudan's Darfur region, where the long-simmering rebellion is drawing new recruits. The SPLA-North is also fighting a separate insurgency in Sudan's Blue Nile state, which borders Ethiopia to the east.

The rebel plan is to drain Sudan's resources on multiple fronts across the country, before collectively marching to the Sudanese capital.

"We can take Kadugli on our own," vowed Maj. Gen. Izzat Kuku, the rebel's third in command, huddled in a secret location to avoid detection from the air. "Then, we will go together to Khartoum."

Unless the Sudanese government crumbles from inside, that seems unlikely and would take years. Of the three fronts, only the one here is going well for the rebels. But the Nuba rebel training camp is churning out 3,000 new soldiers every four months, and it has had to turn away some volunteers because it didn't have enough room.

The Sudanese government's main response has been to flex its one clear advantage: air power. Russian-made Antonov cargo planes used as bombers and MiG and Sukhoi fighter jets descend on fields, villages and markets like predator birds. The attacks seem designed to sow terror among the civilians, disrupting farming and squeezing the land of food.

That constitutes war crimes, but the government does not seem to care. The governor of South Kordofan state, Ahmed Haroun, is already indicted for war crimes at the International Criminal Court for his role in organizing atrocities in Darfur.

In an audio recording found on a Sudanese officer's captured cellphone, Haroun is heard screaming to a crowd: "Clear them out. Take them alive. Eat them raw." In another video captured by rebels, a laughing Haroun tells troops to take no prisoners, because they don't have room for them.

In an apparent violation of a treaty it signed in 2003, the Sudanese government is planting anti-personnel mines in areas it abandons. The mines, which McClatchy filmed and photographed near the town of Trogi, are marked with Farsi, the language of Iran.

But the brutality doesn't seem to be working. In fact, it may be backfiring. The rebels say most of the opposing fighters they face in the Sudanese army are Nuba also, quick to lay down their guns in battle.

How much the rebels' success is owed to South Sudan is an open question. The rebels say they have free movement in and out of South Sudan, where they can get fuel and send wounded for medical treatment. Abdelaziz al Hilu, the rebel commander, just completed a visit to South Sudan's capital, Juba, which lasted several weeks.

They also acknowledge that many of them were members of the South Sudanese army before the current fighting started and brought their weapons with them, but they insist that since then they've captured most of their munitions from the Sudanese army.

Salaries from Juba stopped arriving in October, according to Izzat Kuku, who said South Sudan no longer has money to share since it shut down oil production in a dispute with Khartoum.

But the South Sudanese army has weighed in at critical moments, halting in February a Sudanese offensive near the border town of Jau in late February that would have blocked the road from South Sudan, had it succeeded.

Neither side is negotiating, and nobody expects the conflict to end soon.

"We need peace. But that is impossible as long as Bashir is in power," said Ibrahim Kuku, a chief near the town of Tess.

"How can responsible countries see this man bomb his own people, and yet do nothing?" he asked.

The rebels' belief that they are fighting for their very survival against a government bent on wiping them out has kept morale high. Izzat Kuku, the rebel third in command, proudly explained that his own wife and children are hiding in the mountains with their neighbors.

"It is their part of the revolution. Everyone is contributing."

That spirit is evident even among the rebel wounded. Lying in a hospital bed and wincing in pain, rebel soldier Kuri Mandela Kuku explained how he took shrapnel in the legs in the fighting for Talodi. He said he yearns to rejoin his comrades.

"When my legs recover, I'm fighting again," he said. "They have air power and big guns. But face to face, they can't defeat us."