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Over eight months pregnant, Nyibol Mayen Ayual (24) will soon deliver her sixth child on the dirt floor of her crowded hut, like she did her five children. Abysmal lack of government investment in healthcare services has led to a situation where 90 per cent of pregnant women deliver in unsafe environments without access even to a skilled birth attendant.



LIFE IN CONFLICT

PAVITHRA S RANGAN

The world's youngest country, South Sudan, has been caught in the throes of a violent civilian conflict. Now in its fourth year, the ongoing war is afflicting the lives of millions of people, especially women and children, in irredeemable ways. Here's a snapshot of how poverty, disease and famine are plaguing the nation. Its people, however, continue to hope against all odds for a better, peaceful, tomorrow.



South Sudan has among the highest maternal mortality and child mortality rates in the world. Yet, with near zero government investment, health services are inaccessible in several places, and where functional, only a narrow, ad-hoc range of services are intermittently available.

Left
Each day, these eighth graders march together to school with a heart full of hope. Passionately they discuss their dreams and say that they will grow to be teachers, pilots, doctors and scientists and help their country, their people.

LIFE IN CONFLICT

Right
Barely anyone in the remote village of Kau in Warrap has ever seen a hospital. Angar Ajanj Kong has helped deliver almost every single child alive here today. As a little girl of 15, she started helping her mother who was a traditional birth attendant. Today all families only ever approach her for a delivery. They don't pay her in cash or kind and she never asks them for anything.

Below
Children across the country have spent fearful nights listening to sounds of bombs and bullets. Some have even seen their families shot dead in front of them. Here, children are gathered at a child-friendly space, a safe haven that provides psychological and education support to help them start afresh.



Mary Paul (29) hasn't seen her husband, since she was last pregnant, three years ago. Like several in the country, he has been pulled into the armed forces to fight the ongoing war. "He hasn't sent us any money. I collect and sell firewood every morning, but that barely feedstwo of my five children for a day. I haven't eaten for three days now," she says.



Right
The famine in South Sudan last year has left at least 4.8 million people in severe food insecurity. Nearly 1.1 million children under five were estimated to be acutely malnourished by the end of the year. Here, a mother feeds her child ready-to-eat therapeutic food (also called the 'plumpy nut'), being distributed by humanitarian agencies.



The significant prevalence of HIV, coupled with a lack of awareness, has been destroying several lives in South Sudan. Women support groups for those screened and diagnosed with HIV, such as the one seen here, are providing much-needed medication, awareness and strength required to combat the spread of the disease.

Pavithra S Rangan is a former Indian journalist who worked for The Hindu and Outlook. She is currently in South Sudan working for the UNICEF.