

# South Sudan's cattle wars

Udier, Rumbek, South Sudan

Weak rays of early morning sun seep through the smoke rising from smouldering piles of dried dung, keeping flies away from the precious cattle.

Children instinctively reach down for the white ash, a natural mosquito repellent, and rub it on their skin as women set to milking and men prepare for a long day seeking pasture at the peak of the dry season.

The passing of centuries seems to have changed little in the ebb and flow of life for herders in remote South Sudan, whose cattle serve as a bank account and play a core role in every aspect of life.

There has, however, been one devastating shift.

Instead of their traditional spears, cowherds now carry automatic rifles that have transformed cattle raids, a generations-old phenomenon, into massacres that have unleashed brutal cycles of vengeance.

"It is good to have a weapon because it helps you to protect the cattle," said Puk Duoth, 25, a herder from a camp outside the north-

eastern village of Udier.

While South Sudan's elites signed a power-sharing truce in September 2018, cattle raids have worsened, highlighting the herculean task required to resolve local conflicts in a society shattered by war.

According to the UN peace-keeping mission UNMISS, 218 members of herder communities were killed in January in tit-for-tat attacks -- almost three times the toll of 73 in the four months from October 2017 to January 2018.

Observers blame a deadly cocktail of factors for the rising body count: a breakdown of law and order in the war-torn nation, an influx of guns and inflation in the bride price -- paid in cattle.

## Cash cows

In these parts, cows are everything.

In the culture of the Nuer and Dinka peoples -- South Sudan's largest herder communities -- boys are named after a favoured bull, and songs are written to glorify the long-horned beasts.

"If you

are sick, then the cow can be sold and the money used for treatment," says Beny Chuer, a Dinka chief from Amading camp outside the central city of Rumbek -- one of the areas worst affected by raids and revenge killings.

"If a mother dies leaving a small baby, that child will live because a cow will be milked to feed it."

Cattle is currency -- each head worth about \$500 (440 euros). The more a man owns, the more admiration he garners.

"If you are sitting in a community meeting and you are talking rubbish, but people know you have many cows, you will be honoured," said Peter Machar, of the NGO Saferworld working on local conflicts.

In his 1940 study of the Nuer people, British anthropologist Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard found this single-minded preoccupation frustrating in his research efforts.

"I used sometimes to despair that I never discussed anything with the young men but livestock and girls and

even the subject of girls led inevitably to that of cattle," he wrote.

## Costly brides, rampant guns

"For us, a cow is the source of money," said chief Chuer, well over two metres (6 feet, 7 inches) tall -- a genetic legacy perhaps of tall women being viewed as more valuable in herder communities.

He boasts that his tallest daughter earned him a whopping 250 cows.

This is part of the cause of conflict, said Peter Machar's colleague Majok Mon, his own first name a Dinka word for the markings on a bull.

Bride prices soared as donor money poured into the country after independence from Sudan, allowing politicians, military men and the well-connected to enrich themselves and "get a lot of money" to pay for a wife, he said.

The average price went up from about 20 head of cattle to 100, in a country where the majority of people follow the tradition.

Suddenly, many young men could not afford to get married unless they raided cattle from other

communities.

Guns flooded the country between the war for independence, achieved in 2011, and the internal conflict that erupted two years later as President Salva Kiir and rival Riek Machar fell out.

Both sides armed young herders and mobilised them to fight, said Peter Machar.

As any semblance of law and order collapsed, the warring also destroyed traditional systems, managed by tribal chiefs, for settling feuds.

"What brought the issue of cattle raids is the gun... if you don't have a gun, then you will be monitored slowly, slowly until you are shot and your cows taken, but if you have your gun, then you can shoot" in defence, said Chuer.

## Out of control

While fighting has stopped in most of the country as a result of the peace deal, this has nothing for herder groups nursing long-standing grievances unrelated to the

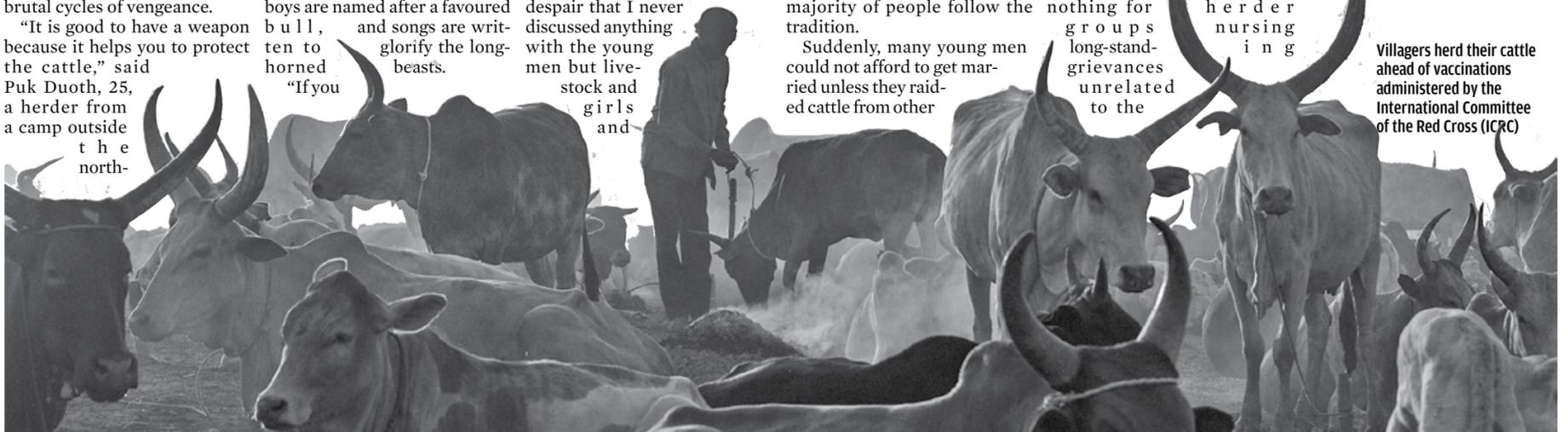
national tug of war for power.

And with the attention elsewhere, armed herders are launching increasingly deadly military-style attacks on rival camps, with women and children among the victims.

The reality in these remote communities "is very far from what is happening with the elites in Juba," United Nations special envoy David Shearer told AFP.

A report on the "militarisation" of cattle raiding in South Sudan, published last year in the Journal of International Humanitarian Action, warned that leaders like Kiir and Riek Machar, "having undermined the traditional mechanisms that once governed violence in order to further their individual political interests, no longer have control over these raiders either."

All these factors bode ill for prospects of peace in a country whose youth has known nothing but conflict.



Villagers herd their cattle ahead of vaccinations administered by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

## Secret chamber uncovered 2,000 years on at Nero palace

● The find offers a tantalising glimpse into "the atmosphere of the 60s of the first Century AD in Rome"

Rome, Italy

A team of archaeologists have discovered a secret chamber decorated with detailed frescoes during restoration work at Emperor Nero's Domus Aurea or Golden Palace constructed two millennia ago.

The team came across an opening leading to a room covered with depictions of mythical creatures including centaurs and the god Pan, officials from the Colosseum archaeological park, supervising the work, said on Friday.

The archaeologists have dubbed the chamber, which will require excavation with much of it buried and just its vault currently visible, Sala della Sfinge, or the Room of the Sphinx and say it is a significant discovery.

The find offers a tantalising glimpse into "the atmosphere of the 60s of the first Century AD in Rome," the Colosseum officials said, adding that what could be seen of the vault was "very visible and fairly well preserved."



The newly discovered room of the Nero Domus Aurea, in Rome

Set against a white background can be seen "red-edged squares finessed with yellow-ochre lines and golden bands punctuated by a dense series of floral elements," the officials said.

Each of the tiles depicts different types of animal form -- from panthers to birds, centaurs and

a sphinx, while others show musical instruments.

The archaeologists were working on a nearby area of the complex set beneath a hill next to the Colosseum in ancient Rome's historic centre when they chanced upon the chamber.

Architects and archaeologists

secured the site once home to a gigantic landscaped palace and consolidated the frescoes with a view to embarking upon a further stage of excavation to reveal the room in its full splendour.

Built between AD 64 and 68, the immense complex, which other Roman emperors later

built on, comprises buildings, gardens and an artificial lake.

After Nero, who legend has it played the fiddle during the AD 64 fire which laid waste much of the centre of the Roman Empire, died in AD 68, his successors tried to destroy traces of his rule. Emperor Trajan had the Domus



Details of a decoration in the newly discovered room

Aurea covered over with soil and built baths over it while Vespasian set in train construction of the Colosseum where the ornamental lake had been.

In the intervening centuries, much of the site was abandoned and today only few traces remain visible of what was a huge estate and of which only a fraction has been excavated with much of it lying under today's modern bustling city.

Part of the site was discovered by Renaissance artists including Raphael, some of whom managed to slide down on ropes and squeeze themselves through a hole in the ceiling to gaze upon magnificent frescoes which would inspire their own works.