

The Displaced: Oleg

At 11, he is living in the ruins of his former life.

Oleg Teryokhin was living with his mother and father in Nikishino, a rural village of fewer than 1,000 coal miners, farmers and their families in eastern Ukraine, when fighting broke out in April 2014. Hastily formed separatist militias, goaded and armed by Moscow, rose up in a rebellion against a new, pro-Western government in Kiev. In the first months of the conflict, the fighting was far from Nikishino, and Oleg, then 10, spent the early summer tearing about the village on his bicycle, zipping past its old brick cottages and apricot orchards. Then, in July, scorched scraps of clothing and bits of paper with foreign writing blew through the village — debris from the crash of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, the passenger jet that was shot down, killing hundreds of people whose bodies lay in fields just south of the village. When Oleg carried some of these items home, his mother, Galina, was horrified that the conflict had come so close.

A few weeks later, she and Oleg left their village, seeking shelter elsewhere in Ukraine. Oleg's father, Aleksandr, a coal miner, stayed to tend to their two cattle and Galina's elderly father. But by November the fighting had intensified, and a front line separated Aleksandr from the home of Galina's father. He abandoned the livestock and joined his wife and son and the more than 130,000 internally displaced people in the Kharkiv region of Ukraine. The family spent most of the winter in a small, drafty cottage that they rented, struggling with boredom and a shortage of firewood.

Battles raged in and around Nikishino in the ensuing months, and the separatists eventually took control. Oleg's family heard nothing from Galina's father. As cease-fire talks halted the worst of the fighting in February, Oleg's family, along with a few dozen others, returned to the village. They discovered her father's body in the backyard of his house. He had probably been killed by shrapnel and had lain frozen outside for months. "Before the war, I visited him every day," Oleg, now 11, said. "Now I visit his grave."

Most of the village's 360 houses were wholly or partly destroyed. Oleg's home was one of them: A shell hit his bedroom and blew a hole through the roof. His school was hit, too. Looking at the ruined building, Oleg said, "When the teachers would yell at us, we used to say: 'Wouldn't it be cool if the school blew up?' I would never say that anymore."

The war has divided Ukraine into three parts: a main territory under the central government; the Crimean Peninsula, claimed by Russia; and the separatist zone where Nikishino lies. As the conflict settles into a stalemate — with a cease-fire but no final resolution, much less any plan for reconstruction — roughly 3.2 million people, including Oleg and his family, now live amid destruction or in dire need of humanitarian aid. Oleg's father has returned to work in the coal mines, and Oleg goes to school in a neighboring village. As his parents repair their home, the family lives in the portion of the house that is still standing. Once picturesque, Nikishino is today a tableau of shattered glass, broken concrete and scorched timber. "I tell myself: No matter what happens, even if shells are falling, I will never leave my home again," Oleg said. He still speeds around the village on his bicycle with his friends, roaming this no man's land.

By Andrew E. Kramer, *New York Times*, Nov. 5, 2015



The Displaced: Chuol

At 9, without his parents, he was forced to flee to the swamps.

Chuol was only 5 in 2011, the year South Sudan, after decades of war, became the world's newest nation. He was living with his parents, grandparents and other relatives in a village near the city of Leer, not yet old enough to understand the hope and joy sweeping through the small East African country.

But that optimism turned to despair two years later, when a power struggle between President Salva Kiir and the former vice president Riek Machar triggered a civil war. The battle for control of the country — and its oil fields — pitted the nation's two largest ethnic groups against each other: The Dinka aligned with the president, and the Nuer aligned with the vice president.

As the fighting raged, the tactics used by combatants on both sides turned ever more cruel. Human rights groups and other independent observers have documented the atrocities: Rape, the kidnapping and recruitment of children to serve as soldiers, whole villages pillaged and razed to the ground. The war has left 4.6 million people — more than a third of the country's population — without sufficient food. About 2.2 million have been displaced from their homes. Many of them are children.

One night in May, the fighting came to Chuol's village. He remembers every terrifying detail. Women were raped and men murdered. His father and grandfather were herded into a small hut and burned alive. Chuol's grandmother later described to me how a group of fighters argued over who would rape a 12-year-old girl. When they could not agree, they shot her dead.

With his mother and grandmother, Chuol fled into the swamp. In the chaos, his mother ran in another direction, and they lost her. For months they did not know if she was dead or alive.

For weeks, he and his grandmother swam and waded through snake-infested waters, dodging crocodiles, eating little more than grass. Chuol was constantly afraid that he might die. If a soldier did not kill him, he thought, an animal surely would. "We would swim for so long until we could swim no more," he recalled. "But we could sometimes still hear the gunfire and needed to keep moving. So we pulled ourselves along by the reeds."

In July, they arrived on one of the small islands that dot the vast swamp, joining some 80,000 other displaced people. For months, the conflict prevented widespread humanitarian aid from reaching the increasingly desperate masses hiding on this muddy sliver of land. But by late summer, a lull in fighting and a tentative peace agreement allowed food and other supplies from groups like Unicef to be airlifted again to the region.

This fall, Chuol and his grandmother were able to get to a camp in Juba, South Sudan's capital, before traveling to another camp in Kenya to join other relatives. Chuol's grandmother told him she is planning to go back to South Sudan to look for his mother. Unicef has received reports that she has been seen alive in the country.



"Sometimes, before we were displaced, I would dream about being able to learn more and then going to work for a humanitarian organization," he said. "Or maybe even becoming a doctor and working in a hospital where I can help people." He looked down at his hands, pausing for a moment, lost in his thoughts. "If I grow up and leave this place," he said, "maybe I can still become a doctor."

By Marc Santora, *New York Times*, Nov. 5, 2015

The Displaced: Hana

At 4:45 in the morning on a Saturday in early August, stars were still bright in the sky above a refugee settlement in rural Lebanon where Hana Abdullah, a 12-year-old girl from Syria, now lives. [...] Many mornings Hana was up at 4 o'clock. She worked in the nearby fields of Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, picking fruits or vegetables, and everyone started early. [...]

Today they were picking cucumbers. Earlier in the season, which began in the spring, they picked almonds, a job Hana sometimes missed — at least the trees offered some shade from the sun. [...]

At 5:45, they arrived at the cucumber field and spread out along the rows of vegetables. They would work there for the next five or six hours, until they went home for their midday break. [...]

Hana came from Mabrouka, a small town in northeast Syria. She last saw her home three years ago, when she was 9 — so long ago, in the life of a girl her age, that she had forgotten as much as she remembered. From the fields where she picked cucumbers, she could see the mountains that divide Lebanon from Syria; a long drive past those mountains was her childhood home in the country. It was almost certainly rubble now, a pile of rocks burying all they left behind: Hana's favorite doll, dressed like a queen, with long hair down to her waist; the crystal glasses the family rarely used; the proper mattresses; the flush toilet. Towels. Closets. [...]

It troubled Hana's father, she knew, that her 5-year-old sister, Haifa, thought this was how they had always lived: in this makeshift settlement, in a tent of nylon and wood, alongside some 40 other tents, most of them inhabited by members of Hana's extended family. In summer, they felt claustrophobic inside the airless homes; in winter, they worried about the roofs collapsing from the weight of the snow. [...]

Inside the settlement, Hana was someone. She was a hand-on-hip kind of girl, the kind whom other children naturally let mediate their disputes. She pierced girls' ears — only she had the stomach for it — and when she finished her own work in the field, she rushed to help Ala'a and Ala'a's twin sister, Wala'a, so they, too, could have a break.

It is illegal for the Syrian refugees to work in Lebanon, which meant the supervisors could treat them badly — sometimes they didn't pay them after they worked long days. One afternoon, Ala'a and Wala'a came back from picking chickpeas looking wild-eyed. The supervisor who was renting the land had been furious with the group, ostensibly for asking for cold water, but most likely because he realized he had waited too long to harvest his chickpeas, and now they were useless. Who would Hana grow up to be? Her father never looked more discouraged than when he talked about Hana's prospects. "Yes, she is smart," he said one afternoon, sitting on a bench outside his tent, his shoulders slumped. "But what good will it do her?" He waved out toward the settlement, gesturing vaguely toward its inhabitants. "It's a lost generation." When Hana thought about the future, no clear image emerged: She found it too painful to try to hope for a return to life in Syria. But she did not think much about her future in Lebanon, either.

Her cousin Khitam, a 14-year-old beauty, had been the strongest student in class back home, with every intention of going to college, with the support of her family. But now, her parents settled for something secure for her. She was married off to Hana's brother Ibrahim, a skinny young man, also 14, with faint stubble on his chin. Once married, most girls in refugee camps stopped

attending school — they could be mothers soon enough.



Hana liked to imagine that she might become a doctor one day, but if her family remained in the settlement for another few years, it seemed very likely that she, too, would be married there, maybe even raise children there, instead of dreaming of college or medical school.

Susan Dominus, *The New York Times*,
Nov. 5, 2015