

Abdi, a Somali Entrepreneur in South Sudan



IOM helps foreign nationals in the Protection of Civilian site with applications for a South Sudan Temporary Stay Permit. © IOM South Sudan, 2015

Abdi, a 29-year-old Somali national, was in South Sudan for only two months before civil war broke out in 2013 and put his life on hold.

In Somalia, Abdi worked for an international aid agency providing humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations. However, after most of the agency's staff was evacuated in 2013 due to security concerns, Abdi decided to leave Somalia. His family feared for his safety and encouraged him to go. "I loved my country, but I felt I had no choice but to leave," he explains.

In October 2013, he moved to South Sudan (which became an independent state only in July 2011) to join a relative running a small business in Bor, the capital of Jonglei State. Before the war, Bor was a thriving market town.

Abdi had planned to work in Bor for two years to save money to open up his own shop and then pursue a university degree.

Unfortunately, fighting broke out in Juba, the capital of South Sudan, on 15 December 2013 when conflict between political rivals sparked a civil war that is ongoing to this day. The war, which has

been marked by violence against civilians and human rights abuses in many areas, has killed more than 50,000 people, according to a 2014 estimate by the International Crisis Group.

Within days, the conflict spread to Bor, which experienced gruesome clashes and ethnic targeting. When the fighting began, Abdi was forced to abandon his shop and run to the nearby UN Mission in the South Sudan peacekeeping base, along with thousands of others, to seek protection. “On 18 December, [armed groups] started shooting at us and I had to run from the bullets. I couldn’t take anything with me, and, within minutes, our shop was destroyed and looted,” Abdi remembers.

Abdi stayed at the UN base in Bor, which came to be known as a protection of civilians (PoC) site, for several weeks until the UN relocated Abdi and other foreign nationals to a UN PoC site in Juba. For 18 months, Abdi lived in the Juba PoC site, relying on assistance from the humanitarian community for basic needs, such as food, shelter and access to clean water. “Life in the PoC sites was very difficult. Imagine, one day you are running a business and then in a matter of minutes, you have zero.” However, he and others felt safe there.

In the chaos of the fighting, Abdi and many other foreign nationals lost their passports and other legal documentation as they fled. Recognizing their unique vulnerability and precarious status, IOM helped many achieve legal standing. With IOM’s support, Abdi obtained a temporary stay permit and a passport to allow him to stay in legally in South Sudan.

In August, the UN facilitated the departure of foreign nationals from the PoC site in Juba. At this time, Abdi received a cash stipend of USD 300. He pooled his funds along with those of three other foreign nationals who were living in the PoC, and they now live in a one-room apartment in Juba. “I have good friends, and we are surviving together.”

They have all tried unsuccessfully to find employment in Juba, where the economy is failing and criminal activity is on the rise. Abdi is frustrated after more than four months of looking for work, but he recognizes that he is young and healthy and still has hope for his future. Most of all, he wishes to continue his education and study medicine. “I am still young myself and I need education and safety. I wish that one day I will survive this life.”

Credit: IOM South Sudan