

African lioness

SUDAN: Southern rebel widow Rebecca Garang picks up her husband's mantle—and a government post
| *Jamie Dean* | February 18, 2006

Six months after her husband's death, Rebecca Garang still thinks of John Garang as a Moses for southern Sudan. Mr. Garang, the indefatigable leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) for 22 years, was the pivotal figure in negotiating a 2004 peace treaty with northern Sudan that promised to let his people go. But Mr. Garang wouldn't live to see the full results: On July 30, 2005, three weeks after being named vice president of Sudan under the peace agreement, Mr. Garang, 60, died when his helicopter crashed on a return trip from Uganda to New Site, his compound in southern Sudan.

The SPLM quickly endorsed Salva Kiir, Mr. Garang's deputy, as its new leader. But it was Mr. Garang's widow who would emerge as a Joshua figure for southern Sudan, exuding strength in grief and promising to continue her husband's legacy. Standing next to Mr. Garang's coffin with their six children at his funeral, Mrs. Garang, 49, comforted mourners, urging them to accept the leader's death as God's will and saying: "The lion is dead and we will see what the lioness will do."

Six months later, the lioness sat in the First Lady's box at the 2006 State of the Union address on her first diplomatic mission to the United States as a newly appointed Cabinet member of the Sudanese government. During her visit to the capital this month, Mrs. Garang told **WORLD** that she had "no political ambitions" before her husband's death, but accepted a Cabinet position late last year in order to help build the southern Sudan for which her husband toiled: "My husband and I were partners for peace, and we were going to be partners in development."

Mrs. Garang's new governmental role is far from a symbolic position: She serves as minister for roads and transportation for southern Sudan, a vital developmental post in the war-ravaged south, where decent roads, schools, hospitals, and infrastructure are largely nonexistent: "My husband used to say that southern Sudan has never seen a tarmac road since its creation." Mrs. Garang says the lack of passable roads into the south helped fuel



a major famine in 1998 that killed thousands: "People were starving in the south while food was rotting in the north."

Connecting Sudan with itself and its neighbors through roads and transportation is the first step to developing the poverty-stricken region, says Mrs. Garang, "but we're starting from scratch." Starting from scratch requires a staggering amount of money, but Mr. Garang thought of that when negotiating the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) with the north before his death.

The CPA, which was designed to end two decades of bloody civil war and free non-Muslim Sudanese in the south from the demands of Islamic law, was also designed to give the southern region a share of Sudan's multibillion-dollar oil revenues. So far, that part of the agreement has only been partially fulfilled, according to Mrs. Garang: "We were supposed to get \$1.5 billion from oil so far, but as of now we've received \$350 million . . . that's barely enough to fund our army."

Mrs. Garang hopes the international community will be "a watchdog for the CPA" and will urge the Sudanese government to keep its commitments to the south. Fostering development in the south will foster development across the entire nation, she says: "We don't need to solve the problems of Sudan piecemeal. We need to take a holistic approach. . . . The CPA doesn't belong to southern Sudan or northern Sudan alone. It belongs to the entire country. It belongs to the world."

The world's attention has been focused on Sudan in recent days for another reason: ongoing genocide against civilians in the western region of Darfur by Sudanese-backed militias that has left as many as 300,000 dead and 2.5 million homeless. Jan Pronk, the top UN envoy to Sudan, said in January that efforts to stop killings, rapes, and looting in the region have failed. He called for a UN peacekeeping force of up to 20,000 to disarm the militias and provide security. The UN Security Council asked Secretary General Kofi Annan on Feb. 3 to prepare to authorize such a force, signaling recognition that the African Union's 7,000-troop contingency has been unable to stem the violence. Mrs. Garang says promoting development in the south could have a "profound effect" on stability in the west by giving civilians in Darfur incentive to negotiate.

But Mrs. Garang doesn't see promoting development in Sudan as the job of government alone. Long before she became a government official, Mrs. Garang was personally initiating development in the south by starting a privately funded primary school for children, especially those orphaned or disabled.

Eight years later, the school has 785 students, ages 5 to 18, and Mrs. Garang is raising money to build a high school. Though she has tapped a colleague to oversee the school while she serves in government, Mrs. Garang hopes to return to running the school and replicating the model in other regions. She's enthusiastic about the school's success: "The students at our bush school perform better than students in government schools."

Mrs. Garang is also enthusiastic about cultivating progress for women in her role as minister of roads and transportation, and told *WORLD* she plans to be the first Sudanese official to hire a female driver. She is also personally teaching 25 women how to drive.

While Mrs. Garang presses on with her husband's work in southern Sudan, a Sudanese inquiry team presses on with its investigation of the crash that killed Mr. Garang last July. Abel Alier, head of the inquiry, said the team hopes to complete its report by the end of February. Some southern Sudanese have speculated that Mr. Garang's death was

not an accident, but an attempt by enemies to thwart the peace agreement he brokered. Mrs. Garang won't speculate on whether foul play was involved, but says, "We have to be patient for the results. . . . I am waiting with the people of Sudan and the rest of the world. We all want to know what happened to Dr. John."

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February 18, 2006, Vol. 21, No. 7