



The Forum

OF FARGO - MOORHEAD

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Pushing for democracy

One of Fargo's Lost Boys fears for his life as he seeks free elections in South Sudan

By C.S. Hagen
The Forum

Fargo

For 16 years, Joseph Akol Makeer wandered through refugee camps as a Lost Boy of South Sudan. In Kenya, he learned English, and at about 23 years old found safety in Fargo.

Now, he's lost again, but this time targeted for death by the regime he supported since the country's independence 10 years ago.

"They will look for us by any means, and kill us, unless the United States declares its support for us. My coalition is seen as the main problem," Makeer told The Forum, adding that the price on his head was said to be \$2 million.

Makeer's coalition, the People's Coalition for Civil Action (PCCA), is a pro-democracy civil rights movement pursuing peaceful political change in South Sudan. The coalition says there's widespread corruption in the government, and is calling for peaceful elections, which have not occurred since the nation became independent 10 years ago.

Many PCCA leaders have been jailed for speaking

out against President Salva Kiir Mayardit's administration, said Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., before Congress on Jan. 6, naming Makeer as one of the people who is on the run for his life. Their assets have been frozen. They've been targeted for assassination, Leahy said.

"I'm in hiding," said Makeer, who wouldn't disclose his current location. "Some of my colleagues are also hiding. They're not U.S. citizens, so they're hiding somewhere in Africa. We are mobilizing people now to go into the streets for peaceful protests."

In a nation rich with oil, coal and diamonds, the criticism began as a top secret report that cowboy-hat-wearing Mayardit asked Makeer to conduct. Makeer shared the five-page document with The Forum in the hopes of raising awareness about his situation.

As a lieutenant colonel in the South Sudanese Army and a director for the Internal Security Bureau, Makeer was tasked to be the "eyes of the government" and to alter documents in favor of the government, he said.

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Special to The Forum

Joseph Akol Makeer, a Lost Boy of South Sudan who immigrated to Fargo, is pictured here at the National Prayer Breakfast in February 2020 during Donald Trump's presidency. Makeer is part of a coalition advocating for democracy in his homeland.

Sent here as 'punishment'

Regular guy from S.C. becomes the King of Fargo



MIKE MCFEELY

Fargo was supposed to be punishment for Collins Moe, a fantasy football loser from Charleston, S.C. Instead, he came here without knowing a thing about the town or a soul who lives here and will leave with everything but the keys to the city.

There's still time, Mayor Mahoney. We know what you're

thinking. I just called Collins a loser. No, no, no. Not at all the case. He was a loser in a fantasy football league, which is how he ended up in Fargo this weekend.

His buddies sent him here thinking he was going to return to

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Contributed photo

Collins Moe of Charleston, South Carolina, poses with Thundar the Bison mascot at Saturday's North Dakota State men's basketball game.

A fresh start

New manager breaks out of the gate at North Dakota Horse Park

By Wendy Reuer
The Forum

FARGO — A new general manager from outside the state, but with inside industry experience, is taking the reins of North Dakota Horse Park, the Fargo-based horse racing track.

Hugh Alan Drexler began work as the general manager earli-

er this year after Horse Race North Dakota, the nonprofit organization that manages the horse park and live racing, opened a nationwide search for a new general manager.

Horse Race North Dakota secured a matching grant of up to \$80,000 over two years from the North Dakota Racing Commission in late 2021 as an effort to attract qualified candidates.

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LIFE: Board game popularity continues to grow. **PAGE B5**

Minnesota rural hospital workers feel the strain as colleagues leave, COVID stays

By Catharine Richert
MPR News

AITKIN, Minn. — Nurses often juggle a lot of duties at once. So when Donna Corey had to manage the care of a patient one day last week, she didn't hesitate, even though it's a job she wouldn't normally do as a nursing supervisor.

Over the last two years, Corey has had to take on more responsibility, more often. Her colleagues at Riverwood Healthcare Center in Aitkin are doing the same, as they manage

pandemic-related labor shortages.

It's the work on top of the work that's been hard, Corey said. Every shift is a sprint to fill in for missing workers and to care for a crush of ill patients.

"It has been stressful. And as we have nurses out sick, and (with) more community-based needs, those (responsibilities) increase," she said.

Signs of that extra work are everywhere at Riverwood — like the pager Corey carries with her.

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Derek Montgomery for MPR News

Internal medicine doctor and hospitalist Dr. Joselito Burgos, left, talks to patient Kathryn Lathrop at Riverwood Healthcare Center in Aitkin, Minnesota, while pharmacist Travis Sporre, right, takes notes on a tablet.

MCFEELY

From Page A1

balmy South Carolina frozen like a Popsicle and whimpering like a child who'd just seen a ghost. How else would a Southern boy react to visiting the land of the Abominable Snowman?

Here's the deal: Collins is in a 12-man fantasy football league with some buddies back home and each year the last-place finisher is exiled to some faraway, usually cold locale as a joke. Last year, the loser went to Duluth, Minn. (which is actually a wonderful city).

Collins finished last this year and the vote was to put him on a plane to — yuck, yuck — Fargo. What could be more miserable than that? What would shame the 27-year-old worse than stepping off an airplane onto the frozen, desolate tundra of Fargo, North Dakota?

A funny little thing happened on the way to young Collins shivering in the dark frigidty of the Wind Chill Capital of the World, though.

On his connecting flight in Chicago, Collins talked to some fellow passengers. One happened to be Rich McFarlane, a North Dakota State University graduate who teaches high school in Grand Forks. Collins told McFarlane his story and McFarlane began passing it down the line to his NDSU buddies in North Dakota.

Adam Jones, brainchild of the Dakota Marker Trophy. Pat Thiel, elementary teacher and assistant football coach at Fargo Shanley. Justin Swanson, honcho with the NDSU Foundation.

Next thing you know, Collins had an invite for lunch and beers at the Bison Turf and the offer of a ticket to the NDSU basketball game against Kansas City.

So when he arrived in Fargo at 10 p.m. Friday, dropped his bag at the Jasper Hotel downtown and walked across the street to Dempsey's Public House, Collins already had a



Collins Moe of Charleston, South Carolina, drops the ceremonial puck at the Fargo Force game Saturday night at Scheels Arena.

few plans for Saturday. Better than nothing. At least he wasn't going to shuffle around the frozen sidewalks by his lonesome, asking where his life went wrong.

That's when Fargo began to envelop him with warmth and smother him with kindness.

"I can't believe how nice everyone here is. I mean, unbelievably nice," Collins said at halftime of the basketball game at Scheels Center. "I have had a blast. I met some new friends on the airplane here and they said, 'Hey why don't you come to the game?' I didn't know these guys. But they're so nice. And here we are. It's been an awesome day."

The cold, he admitted, was a shock. Collins had never been this far north. Had no idea what to expect. How could he? It was around 0 degrees when he landed.

"I mean, I step outside and I have never felt that cold before," he said. "It's been crazy. It is very cold. I didn't know it could get this cold."

Some of the folks on the airplane in Chicago teased him about his lack of North Dakota-worthy clothing.



Moe poses with some of his new Fargo friends like Pat Thiel, left, Connor Johnson, back right, and Justin Swanson, front right, at the Bison Turf on Saturday.

"They said I wasn't dressed appropriately," Collins laughed. "How could I be? It was 80 degrees when I got on the airplane in Charleston. I can't fly on a plane with layers on. You're going to be inside when it's this cold, right?"

Well ...

Anyway, some of Collins' new Fargo friends alerted me to his tale. I sent a message to him on social media that we should talk. Might

make a good story.

So when we met between halves of the basketball game, I snapped a selfie of us and posted it on Twitter with his story. It went mini-viral with retweets and likes. Collins became one of the best stories of the day.

By that time, Collins had already had a burger and some beers at the Bison Turf and was sporting a snappy NDSU pullover. He'd posed for a picture with Thundar

the mascot because of course he had.

He referred to the Bison as "we" when I asked what he thought of the first half. Smooth, this guy.

There were plans to go to a brewery and have some more fun Saturday night.

He had no idea.

The Fargo Force junior hockey team saw my Twitter post. The team contacted Collins and had him drop the ceremonial puck at its game against

Sioux City. There was Collins standing on the blue carpet on the ice at Scheels Arena, holding the puck high for all to see before dropping it and then shaking hands with the players.

I didn't get a chance to ask if he'd ever been to a hockey game. Not sure there's a hockey team in South Carolina, although Collins travels throughout the South in his job in retail development.

Collins appeared on a Twin Cities radio show Sunday afternoon to recall his exploits in Fargo.

Not bad for a guy who says our city was literally not on his radar before his South Carolina buddies planned his exile.

"Never heard of it," he said. "And I never watched the movie once I knew I was coming here. I didn't want to watch it because I knew there was some type of murder involved. I didn't watch it. I'd never heard of it. Had no inclination about how big the city was."

"I am more than impressed. I would hope that if anyone comes to visit Charleston, South Carolina, we're as nice as everyone has been here."

At last check, plans were in the works to get Collins and his fantasy football pals to Fargo for a Bison football game this fall. It would include tailgating, of course. And probably more food, beverages and handshakes with a "nice to meet ya" than they could possibly imagine.

"It's been a blast. I can tell you, it's not a punishment. It's been fun," Collins said. "If I lose again next year, I am going to push for them to make me come out here again. It's been so fun. Everyone is so nice and welcoming. Over the top nice. It's been a great time."

From shamed fantasy football loser to the King of Fargo.

Collins flew home Sunday morning, so he'll have accomplished this feat in less than 36 hours.

Take a bow, neighbors. This is a story that only happens here. How Fargo of us.

MAKEER

From Page A1

"This, I failed to do," Makeer said. Instead, he wrote his findings in a top secret document directly to his boss, Gen. Akol Koor Kuc.

"After we disowned friendly countries who are wishing South Sudan well, particularly the USA and some European countries, our country is left vulnerable for hyenas to feed on. This political turbulence is a business celebratory for both domestic and international organized criminals," Makeer wrote in his report, which also advocated for Mayardit and other vice presidents to step down from office.

"The current leadership of five vice presidents has failed at the (get go) and has placed our nation on 'intensive care,'" he wrote.

He filed his report with the government May 18, 2020. The report was "lost," but was later leaked and reappeared at a conference held in 2020 with Mayardit attending.

Makeer's discoveries were compiled into a final report that called for an end to violence, for the resignations of Mayardit and First Vice President Riek Machar, for reinstatement of elections to be overseen by an outside agency, and for a national constitution to be drafted.

"We believe that the most patriotic thing for them to do, is to prepare for their exit from politics with the honor, dignity and legacy of having been the founding fathers of the independent nation of South Sudan," the report stated.

In a recent interview, Makeer said: "Unfortunately, the leadership is corrupt, and much of the money that has poured into the country has gone into the pockets of these leaders instead of being used to provide jobs, to build roads, schools, and hospitals and develop the country as a democracy."

Over the last 10 years, the U.S. government has given more than \$3.3 billion to South Sudan, according to Congressional records.

Makeer, still a U.S. citizen, said he "loves this country (America) so much," and considers North Dakota his home. But he is compelled to help bring democratic change to South Sudan.

During his years working for the government, he said he witnessed South Sudanese government officials accepting bribes in exchange for favors to extract the nation's natural resources.

"It makes me upset. We have a lot of oil and coal and diamonds, and the people doing this business now are foreign and enemies of the United States," Makeer said.

On Wednesday, Feb. 16, the reported ongoing crackdown on free speech prompted a senior presidential advisor, Gen. Kuol Manyang, to reprimand Mayardit, according to South Sudan's Eye Radio.

"All of the Lost Boys and South Sudanese in America wanted to go back home and build a country, but because of bad leadership nobody is going home," Makeer said. Last year, he tried to organize a protest, but the government shut it down with tanks and martial law.

The Lost Boys, and a smaller number of Lost Girls, are survivors of the Second Sudanese Civil War, which ran from 1983 to 2005.

Lost Boys began arriving in Fargo in the early 2000s. With help from volunteers and Lutheran Social Services, they attended school and found work locally.

Makeer's calling, however, sent him back to South Sudan after earning a degree in criminal justice at North Dakota State University.

"It's very disturbing and that's why Sen. Leahy is sending a statement," Makeer said. "I'm calling out my senators from North Dakota to do the same thing."

Leahy reported to Congress that the PCCA is a peaceful organization seeking honest and capable leadership, and that the current leaders should step down.

"The repressive actions of the South Sudanese government should outrage each of us, especially considering the billions of dollars American taxpayers contributed to secure South Sudan's independence and put the country on a path to a prosperous future," Leahy said.

The Forum reached out to the office of Sen. Kevin Cramer, R-N.D., but did not receive a reply in time for publication.

Sen. John Hoeven, R-N.D., sent a statement

to The Forum, saying that he supports Makeer's efforts in South Sudan, and called for the current president to listen to the people.

"President Kiir is an unelected leader who was appointed to his post when South Sudan gained independence. Instead of blocking fair elections, engaging in corruption and persecuting his opponents, President Kiir should allow the people of South Sudan the opportunity to freely choose their leaders without further delay," Hoeven said.

"Joseph Makeer is a brave individual who has risked his life to bring peace and build democracy in his homeland in South Sudan. We are inspired by his courage and support his efforts to help the people of South Sudan establish a stable and democratic country. In fact, the Senate unanimously approved a resolution in December to show support for these efforts in South Sudan," Hoeven said.

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