

Peter Pan, a character created by J. M. Barrie, had companions called the Lost Boys. The Lost Boys of Neverland were orphans looking for a home. They ran from pirates and a cranky crocodile and flew with the help of pixie dust. In the 1990s, the Lost Boys of Sudan were orphans, too. But their story does not involve pirate adventures or pixie dust—it is a true story of heartbreak and extraordinary survival.

Conflict and War

Tensions had been high in Sudan since the 1950s, when the British combined two hostile territories into one before abandoning its rule of Sudan. In 1983, events in Sudan erupted into another civil war. The tensions mounted in 1987, when warring soldiers attacked communities, leaving behind nothing but death and destruction. These attacks changed the children of Sudan. Many Sudanese boys became known as the Lost Boys.

All over the south of Sudan, soldiers burned village after village to the ground and killed everyone in them. Many of the boys survived because they were out working in the fields or tending cattle when the soldiers attacked. After the attacks, many of these boys had no possessions and no family remaining. In Sudan's civil war, nearly two million people were killed, and millions more were forced to leave their homes. Whereas the boys were alone and in constant danger, the situation was not any better for the girls of Sudan. Many of them were killed or forced into slavery.

Lost Boys

Not knowing where to turn, many boys began walking in the direction of the rising sun. Older boys had been told by family members that this direction would lead them toward Ethiopia. The children had no other options than to look for safety in another country. Individuals banded together to form small groups. Small groups became bigger ones, all joining together to flee the danger in their home country. Eventually more than 20,000 boys were on the move, searching for safety. Older boys helped carry smaller ones, who were sometimes as young as four years old, across the thousand-mile trek.



Sudan was a large country made up of two groups of people. The country shown above has now been divided into two countries: Sudan and South Sudan.

Unlike the crocodile in Peter Pan, the crocodiles that the Lost Boys encountered during their trek were no laughing matter. Crocodiles were a real danger, as were lions and other carnivorous predators of the sub-Saharan wilderness. In addition, the boys also had to avoid being spotted by soldiers who were attacking communities. If soldiers spotted the boys, they would shoot to kill. Nobody knows for sure how many began their journey and never made it. Often eating only grass and mud, many became too weak to complete the three-month walk and died along the way. Others did not know how to swim and were blocked by the crocodile-infested rivers. Some estimate that thousands of boys never finished their journey.

Escape to Ethiopia

While unknown numbers of boys died while fleeing Sudan, many others survived long enough to arrive at a refugee camp in Panyidu, Ethiopia. It was here that the survivors received the name “Lost Boys” from aid workers, who watched an endless line of children appearing from out of nowhere. They reminded the workers of Peter Pan’s troop of orphaned boys. With no home, no real destination, and no families with them, they were very much lost boys. At the camp, what little food and water was available was quickly given out. With thousands of children to feed, the workers struggled to provide adequate meals.

Lost Again

In 1991, Ethiopia’s government crumbled, and the boys were forced to flee again. Kenya offered a refugee camp, but it meant another long journey by foot back through a portion of Sudan. Once again, the thousands of Lost Boys set out to find safety. They helped one another just as they had the first time. But again they suffered, as they lost one another to sickness and exhaustion and dodged bullets from warring soldiers. As before, the lions and crocodiles waited for the weak.

Those who survived the second journey wondered what other dangers they would encounter. Finally, they entered Kenya, and the boys found rest.

Fleeing to Kenya

The refugee camp at Kakuma, Kenya, consisted of buildings for food, supplies, and schooling. There were also small, metal-roofed homes lined up in rows. The



Refugee camps in Kenya offered the boys food and shelter, but the living conditions were still difficult.

makeshift houses were large enough to fit small groups of boys but had no running water or electricity. The camp offered food, clothing, shelter, and even school. The United Nations (UN) provided math, science, and English instruction to the children. Outside of school, though, there was very little to do.

Although many of the Lost Boys from the 1990s are still living in Kenya today, the UN began to relocate many of the refugees after the Sudanese civil war ended. Workers were sometimes able to reunite the boys with their families, but without phone lines or official papers, it was often very hard to find out if family members were still alive and in Sudan. Also, the UN did not have enough funds to help boys travel to their families. The UN workers had to first pay for food and supplies, and little money was left over for travel expenses.

Lost Boys Get New Opportunities

Many boys wanted to start new lives, but it was very hard for them to find work because leaving the camp was too dangerous. In 1999, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the United States gave the boys a new opportunity. They began to move 3,700 Lost Boys to the United States. When the boys arrived without paperwork or records of any kind, they were all given the same official birthdate: January 1. This date of the start of a new year became the symbol of the start of the boys' new lives.

Through the years, more Lost Boys have found their families or started new lives. Many came to the United States to get an education so that they could return to Sudan and educate others. After many years of living without families or homes, the boys were finally able to start rebuilding their lives. Still, it has been difficult for some of the Lost Boys to return to Sudan. South Sudan became a nation independent from Sudan in 2011, but that does not mean there are friendly relations between the two countries.

New Conflicts, New Lost Boys

In 2012, violence continually interrupted peace talks between the two countries. Neither side respected the newly created Sudan/South Sudan border. Just like 20 years before, families again began sending their children away from the chaos to a refugee camp in Yida, South Sudan. Although the children did not have to walk for months like the first Lost Boys, many still traveled days on foot to get to safety.

The United Nations, some former Lost Boys of the 1990s, and numerous organizations are striving to make sure that history does not repeat itself. They remember the lessons learned from the experiences of tens of thousands of children who walked weeks and months to safety. The innocence, childhoods,

and families of these children may have been stolen, but the surviving young men have proved that humanity, compassion, and determination can never be completely lost. Theirs is a story of hope.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** How did the Lost Boys get their name?
 - A.** The boys did not know where they had come from.
 - B.** They got lost on their way to Ethiopia.
 - C.** They lost an important battle in the civil war.
 - D.** They reminded aid workers of Peter Pan's Lost Boys.

- 2.** Choose the correct journey that the original Lost Boys ultimately took.
 - A.** Sudan→Kenya→Ethiopia→Sudan
 - B.** Sudan→Ethiopia→Kenya→Sudan
 - C.** Sudan→Ethiopia→Sudan→Kenya
 - D.** Sudan→Kenya→Sudan→Ethiopia

- 3.** According to the passage, what did many boys do with the education they received in the United States?
 - A.** They hoped to travel to Mexico to learn another language.
 - B.** They traveled to other countries and attended other schools.
 - C.** They returned to Sudan to educate others.
 - D.** They traveled to Sudan to overthrow the government.

- 4.** The Lost Boys traveled hundreds of miles and had very little help along the way. Describe the help that the Lost Boys did finally receive. Then, decide how you think governments and individuals should respond when there are refugee crises. Use details from the reading passage in your answer.