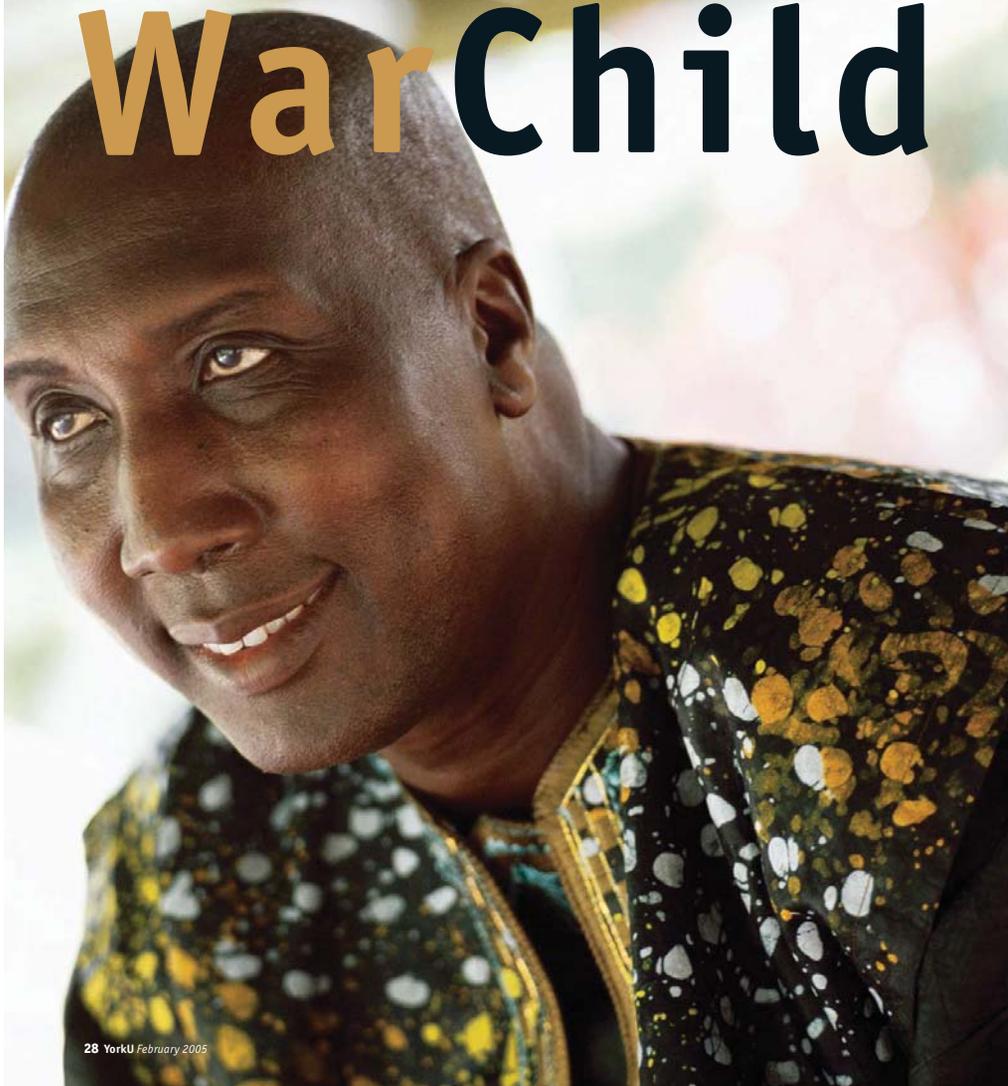


**'It's always dangerous,' William Deng Deng says of his work disarming African rebels for the UN. He should know. His formative memory is of surviving a massacre.** BY MARTHA TANCOCK

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GEOFF GEORGE

# WarChild



**W**ILLIAM DENG DENG, third son of the second wife of a Dinka of the Panyer clan, was only five when soldiers burst into his boarding-school compound one night and went on a killing spree. First they killed the nuns, then they killed the boys, dormitory by dormitory. When they reached his dorm, he was scared stiff. "I couldn't run." Hours later, in the deathly quiet of dawn, the boy crawled out from under four dead classmates and stumbled, caked with blood, into the village in southern Sudan. He was the sole survivor of a school massacre that would haunt him for the rest of his life, drive him into exile and ultimately steel him for the dangerous job of disarming rebel militias in deepest Africa.

The massacre happened in 1967. It was a symptom of a civil war between the Muslim north and Christian south that has festered since Britain granted Sudan independence in 1956. These days, it's raging in Darfur.

Two years after the massacre, another school attack left Deng Deng again fearing for his life. He joined other frightened Christian boys – aged from only 6 to 15, but all potential rebels in the eyes of their persecutors – and fled to Ethiopia without telling his parents. For days, the boys trekked through dense forest and swamp, surviving on fruit and berries, huddling close at night. "One of us was attacked by a lion and one was eaten by a crocodile," remembers Deng Deng, now 42 and still reticent to talk about the experience. "It was a long walk."

He pushed on to Kenya with a couple of friends. There the eight-year-old threw himself into schoolwork, depending on the charity of churches for food, clothing and books. He learned more than the lessons in his textbooks. "Whether you like it or not, you have to grow up. You're forced to be responsible, you're forced to think properly before you act. To say you have failed is not an option, because education is the only way to get out." Over the next 10 years, the child refugee passed primary, secondary-school and advanced-level exams. He never wanted to return home. "For me, the memory of the school massacre was so unbearable, so vivid, I couldn't go back."

He did once, against his will. Sudanese secret police kidnapped him in Nairobi, where he had been agitating against the Sudanese government, flew him to Khartoum and jailed him as a political dissident. Three years later he walked free after a coup – and decided to leave Africa.

His ticket out was a one-year scholarship to the College of Staten Island, which he'd read about in a brochure at an American information centre in Nairobi. He spent the year in New York, then, faced with the unhappy prospect of having to return to Sudan, he took a bus to Buffalo, made his way to the Peace Bridge and applied for political asylum. "I thought I would be safer in Canada."

As soon as he had his immigration papers, he enrolled at York, drawn by its African studies and human geography courses. He was 29. By 36, he had earned an honours BA in political science ('95) and a master's degree in environmental studies ('98). He had also forged enduring relationships with his graduate studies adviser, Peter Penz, and his wife. "They're the only people when I'm far away who will be inquiring about me," says Deng Deng, now a Canadian. "Their support has been instrumental in all my success." With help from Penz and Prof. Howard Adelman of York's Centre for Refugee Studies, Deng Deng raised the fee for a three-month internship with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Geneva after he graduated. It launched his career – "York made it all possible."

For the next few years, Deng Deng did consulting work for various UN agencies and governments. Travelling to hot spots around the world, he produced reports on food self-sufficiency in refugee camps and on reintegrating child soldiers. He trained Rwandan government officials in environmental rehabilitation and devised a much copied disaster-response plan for Kenya. In 2002, the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations came knocking at his door. Could he go to the eastern Congo and disarm foreign armed rebels? He decided he could.

As a team leader for the United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Deng Deng ferrets out and demobilizes Rwandan-backed rogue militias, then negotiates their reintegration into society. These are fighters who never went home after a five-year war ended between Congo and Rwanda in 2002, but who continue to loot and terrorize border villages. "It's always dangerous," he says.

Just last spring, Deng Deng and his team of 11 UN peacekeeping soldiers rushed to a village to disarm a band of willing insurgents. Instead, he was greeted by 125 rebels pointing rocket launchers, machine guns, Kalashnikov rifles and grenades at him. "I did not panic," says Deng Deng, who speaks softly and towers above most mortals. It took him eight hours to persuade the rebels to release his team, and even then there was an exchange of gunfire. "We were ready to fight our way out. I knew we were outgunned, but you can't just let go."

Deng Deng admits he's lucky to be alive. But he vows to continue. Back in the troubled heart of the Africa he was so desperate to escape, he is confronting the culture of violence that forced him run for his life, never to see his family again. "I'll continue because of conviction. You have to be convinced that what you're doing has changed the life of somebody." It has, judging by villagers' relief when the rebels relinquish their weapons. "You see the faces of women and children change in front of you. I know exactly how these people feel." ■