

Dominic Nahr – Blind Spots

At the age of 33, Dominic Nahr has already been reporting for ten years from the world's conflict zones. His photographs are published in magazines like *Time*, *National Geographic* and *Stern*. He has received numerous awards and is the holder of a World Press Photo Award for General News. Nahr was born in Heiden, Appenzell, in 1983 and grew up in Hong Kong. He discovered his calling at the age of 22, having followed violent mass protests with his camera for days when working for a Hong Kong newspaper. Attracted by the intensity of the events and their historical significance, he became their eye witness and chronicler. In 2009, he moved to Nairobi, Kenya, and from then on concentrated on the African continent.

South Sudan, Somalia, Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo: four African states that fail to comply with their populations' need for security and basic supplies. Many of their problems were caused by external factors rooting in the history of colonialism. As unstable constructs, they continue to be exposed to the profit interests of outside forces. Since its independence in 2011, South Sudan, the world's youngest nation, has been immersed in a war for resources, above all oil, with devastating consequences for the civil population. For the first time in six years, the UNO in February 2017 declared a famine in parts of the country. In the civil war in Somalia, militias of the radical Islamic Al-Shabaab are fighting the peace troops of the African Union as well as the Somali state. The government only controls a few areas outside the capital city of Mogadishu. In Mali there is a paralysing stalemate situation as a result of a conflict between Islamist rebels in the north and the government, in which western states – especially France and Germany – have been involved since 2013. In the Democratic Republic of Congo a violent conflict is raging which goes back to the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 and is further fuelled by highly sought resources.

The exhibition “Blind Spots” also raises the question of the status of photography in the media system and in the depiction of misery and terror. The end of the Cold War and the media crisis in the early 21st century have resulted in a loss of diversity in reporting, especially when it comes to Africa. The media system exhibits a lot of blind spots – perception gaps and defence mechanisms in the face of which photographers are also powerless. Against this backdrop, Dominic Nahr's photographs raise important issues: What can, what must be shown in a photograph? What for does it need so as to draw our attention? Released from the utility value of reporting on current affairs, the pictorial idiom and deliberate composition of Nahr's photographs shift impressively to the fore. Just how beautiful may a terrifying image be? Can we be sure of not falling victim to a kind of gloomy fascination? Do the photographs fail to have an impact when repeating a well-known negative image of Africa? And how can we bear the enchantment of what is depicted when we hear that the reality is of an almost unsurpassable bleakness?

Peter Pfrunder, Sascha Renner

Special events:

Sunday, 25 June, 11.30 am, Dominic Nahr guides visitors through his exhibition.

Sunday, 20 August, 11.30 am, *Failed States – Fotografie, Fiktionen und Fakten*.
Exhibition tour with David Signer and Sascha Renner.

Wednesday, 6 September, 6.30 pm, Dominic Nahr guides visitors through his exhibition.

Sunday, 17 September, 11.30 am, *Nicht wegschauen können. Fotografie und Gewalt*.
Exhibition tour with Valentin Groebner and Peter Pfrunder.

Culture Night in Winterthur: Saturday, 23 September, 7 pm, *Where's Africa?*
Jazz concert with Omri Ziegele (alto sax) and Yves Theiler (e-piano).

South Sudan¹

With independence on July 9th 2011, South Sudan became the youngest nation of the world. It was the result of a series of civil wars and conflict lasting over decades. Soon after, though, South Sudan fell back into a cycle of conflict.

Formerly under Anglo-Egyptian colonial rule, Sudan – including today's South Sudan's territories – gained independence in 1956. The dominantly Arab government in Sudan's capital Khartoum overall showed little sympathy to the southern regions, home to a vast diversity of mainly Christian tribes. A lack of investment in the South, and disputes over control of oil rich regions sparked unrest. The following civil wars claimed the lives of more than two million people, leaving some four million displaced.

A peace agreement, signed in 2005 under the pressure of the international community, brought South Sudan more autonomy. Some regions in the border area remain disputed due to a failed referendum over their affiliation to the north or the south.

Rebels from the Nuba Mountains, situated on the Sudanese side of the border, continue to defend their positions against the relentless attacks from Sudanese government under Omar Hassan Al-Bashir. Since the 1990's frequent clashes and air raids by the Sudanese Armed Forces threaten the Nuban population.

In 2012, South Sudan briefly took control over some oil-rich regions on the Sudanese side of the border, including the town of Heglig.

Following a power struggle between President Salva Kiir and his deputy, Riek Machar, civil war broke out in December 2013. Political and military movements formed along tribal lines. Kiir, a tribal Dinka, and Machar, a Nuer, split the country. A lack of central control led to heavy fighting between government (SPLA/M), the opposition (SPLA/M-IO), and smaller militias. Countless atrocities against civilians were recorded.

A peace agreement from 2015 failed to be implemented. Shortly before the fifth anniversary of independence, renewed fighting broke out in the capital Juba in July 2016 and spread throughout the country.

Tens of thousands of people were killed since 2013, more than 3.5 million people have fled the violence, about half of them to neighboring countries. The United Nations in February 2017 declared a famine in parts of the country. Oil-rich South Sudan is currently home to the largest refugee crisis in Africa.

Dominic Nahr first arrived in South Sudan in 2010 to cover the road to independence, from the referendum in January 2011 to the declaration of the republic six months later. In the following years Nahr focused on the conflict in the bordering regions of South Sudan and Sudan. Since 2015 he focuses on the humanitarian crises in following the ongoing civil war in South Sudan.

¹ The following texts are from Dominic Nahr and Anna Mayumi Kerber.

Somalia

A former British protectorate and an Italian colony, Somalia gained independence in 1960. Military rule, followed by civil war, terrorism and drought led to the fall of the state.

After gaining power in a military coup, Siad Barre ruled the country for almost 20 years. With the overthrow of his regime 1991, the country collapsed into civil war. Somalia degenerated into a failed state, without a functional central government over decades.

The northern states of Somaliland and Puntland declared autonomy in the 1990s, none of the regions being internationally recognized until today.

From 2000 on, internationally backed transitional governments were formed but struggled for internal recognition and to establish control in most of the southern and central regions. By 2006 a coalition of Islamists groups took control of the capital Mogadishu.

The militant wing of the union, known today as the terrorist group Al-Shabaab – translated as “The Youth” – started taking up an insurgency against the government. Al-Shabaab, with acknowledged ties to Al-Qaeda, would later advance into southern and central Somalia.

Initially, Ethiopia intervened, followed by a peacekeeping mission of the African Union (AMISOM) with troops from Uganda, Burundi, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Sierra Leone, and later Kenya. Currently around 22 000 AU troops are based in the country.

Following conflict and drought, the United Nations in 2011 declared a famine. More than 250 000 people died, half of which were children under the age of five.

In 2012, a new constitution was passed and the first formal government since more than 20 years installed. However, the conflict with Al-Shabaab insurgents has continued in the south-central regions of Somalia as well as inside Mogadishu with frequent suicide attacks and ambushes. With Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed ‘Farmajo’ a new and unprecedented popular president took office in February 2017. His administration is facing an ongoing drought and the still fragile situation. Currently more than six million people – or half of the population – are affected by the drought. The country has declared a national disaster.

Dominic Nahr first arrived in Somalia in 2011 to cover the famine and military offensive in Mogadishu and surrounding regions. Since then he has returned several times to continue documenting the military and political progress in the failed state. Nahr’s last trip to Somalia was in February 2017 to cover the severe drought.

Mali

Since its independence from France in 1960, Mali suffered from drought, rebellions, and decades of military rule. With democracy the country experienced economic growth but remains among the poorest countries in the world. Rebels and Islamist insurgents destabilizing parts of the country led to major international military interventions in recent years.

Following a military coup in 1986 the military rule lasted for 23 years. The one-party-system implemented under his rule was contested by multiple movements throughout the years, finally leading to him being ousted. In 1992, democratic multi-party elections were held, followed by economic growth in an atmosphere of relative social stability.

Mali, one of Africa's largest countries, is sparsely populated with a population of only 15 million. Settled along the Niger River, people mainly engage in agriculture, including cattle and camel herding. Mali also is one of the major cotton producers on the continent. The landlocked country, however, remains among the poorest countries in the world and heavily depends on foreign aid.

In recent years the political and security situation has declined. Tuareg rebel groups rebelled against the government in Bamako demanding autonomy of northern territories. Additionally, Islamist insurgents further destabilized the north. Fighting peaked in 2012 with rebels seizing towns and territories, and outbreaks of fighting between groups.

Dissatisfied with the government's handling of the conflict soldiers in Bamako staged a military coup. An interim government was installed a few weeks later, released after elections were held in the following year.

In January 2013, as Islamist groups threatened to take over Bamako, France launched a military intervention with an aerial bombing campaign against rebels, while hundreds of French troops were deployed. The United Nations sent a stabilizing mission (MINUSMA) in 2013, with currently more than 12 000 uniformed personnel. Since then, almost 120 blue helmets were killed, making it the deadliest UN-mission. Germany supports MINUSMA with up to 1000 troops, making it its biggest mission abroad next to Afghanistan.

A peace agreement between government and rebel coalitions was signed in 2015, its implementation remains a challenge and the security situation fragile. Attacks through jihadist groups not only target peacekeeping and Malian forces but frequently also civilians.

Dominic Nahr first traveled to Mali in 2010 to follow the footsteps of a famous 14th century explorer, Ibn Battuta. He returned in 2013 to document the French intervention. In 2016 he made several trips to Mali to document a country stuck, unable to move forward. He also embedded with German troops in Gao, in the north of the country, where fighting prevails.

Democratic Republic of Congo

After an uprising by the people, the former Belgian colony gained independence in 1960. What followed was a military coup, decades of authoritarian rule, one of the deadliest civil wars and numerous conflicts over resources.

The Russian backed government was in 1956 overthrown by rebel leader Joseph-Désiré Mobutu. Mobutu quickly seized complete control of the country. His corrupt dictatorship would last for some 30 years.

After the Rwandan genocide in 1994, in which at least 800 000 people were killed, conflicts between ethnic Hutu and Tutsis in Congo continued. Headed by revolutionary Laurent-Desiré Kabila ethnic Tutsi rebels overran the country from the east. In 1997 Congo-born Kabila took office as president.

He soon cut himself off from his allies leading the country into the Second Congo war, involving numerous rebel groups and various African governments. After his assassination in 2001, Kabila was succeeded by his son Joseph Kabila, holding office until today.

The war officially ended in 2003, however hostilities and conflict have since continued. The death toll remains disputed with estimates ranging over three million war-related deaths. Congo has an abundance of natural resources, especially in the east, including gold, coltan, and cassiterite. Due to mismanagement, corruption and ongoing fighting over control over resource rich areas it ranks among the poorest countries in the world.

The eastern part of the country remains plagued by instability, with rebels waging war, some allegedly backed by neighboring countries such as Rwanda and Uganda.

In 2007 the Congrès national pour la défense du peuple (CNDP) rebel group with several thousands of fighters was formed. The following year the fighting intensified. The CNDP came within kilometers of Goma, the capital of the troubled eastern province North-Kivu at the Rwandan border. A fragile peace treaty lasted for a few years.

By 2012, former CNDP rebels surfaced as a new group. They called themselves March 23 Movement, or M23. In November, the rebels took control of Goma but withdrew shortly after. Currently over 2.2 million people are displaced within the country, many of which from the eastern provinces of the country due to the numerous conflicts in these areas. Today the DRC has the largest and most expensive UN peacekeeping mission (MONUSCO) which has more than 22 000 personnel and an annual budget of \$1.2 billion.

Dominic Nahr first arrived in Africa to cover the civil war in the eastern regions of Democratic Republic of Congo in 2008. Since then, he has returned to cover numerous times travelling across the vast country. Nahr's last trip to the DRC was in 2012 to cover renewed fighting in Goma after rebels seized control of the town.

Dominic Nahr

Dominic Nahr was born in Appenzell, Switzerland in 1983 and grew up in Hong Kong. In 2008 he graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Ryerson University's School of Image Arts in Toronto, Canada and moved to Nairobi, Kenya in 2009.

In 2004 Nahr started to work as a photographer for the *South China Morning Post* in Hong Kong. He left the newspaper in 2006 to cover the civil unrest in East Timor for Agence France-Presse, before returning back to his studies. Since graduating, Nahr has devoted himself to documenting conflicts, humanitarian crises and critical social issues. He has worked on extensive photographic essays in Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, South Africa, Haiti, Egypt, Gaza, Iraq and Japan.

Nahr joined Magnum Photos as a nominee in 2010 and became a contract photographer for *Time Magazine* a year later. His clients include *National Geographic Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, *Stern*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Schweizer Illustrierte* and Médecins Sans Frontières amongst others. In 2016, he co-founded Namara Represents, a commercial agency based out of Toronto and New York. Nahr is currently represented by Contact Press Images in New York and Focus Agentur in Hamburg.

Among numerous honors, Nahr has received a World Press Photo Award, Pictures of the Year Awards, Oskar Barnack Newcomer Award, Swiss Press Photo Awards, Magnum Foundation Emergency Fund, a Marty Forscher Fellowship Fund for Humanitarian Photography, and was twice nominated for the Prix Pictet. In 2015 he was named Swiss Photographer of the Year by the Swiss Photo Academy in Zurich.

His photographs have been exhibited internationally in solo shows, at such places as Les Rencontres d'Arles, twice at Visa pour l'image in Perpignan, NRW-Forum Kultur und Wirtschaft in Düsseldorf and Ryerson Image Centre in Toronto. His work is represented in the permanent collections of the National Gallery of Art, Fotostiftung Schweiz, Magnum Photos, Ryerson Image Centre, The Ransom Centre, The Wedge Collection, Getty Images and various Private Collections. Nahr is represented by Circuit Gallery, Toronto.

Nahr is a guest lecturer at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts at the Hochschule Hannover, Germany and teaches photography workshops for professional photographers in developing countries such as Mali and Myanmar.