

The 14-Mile Area

Describes events through 25 October 2014

From 2005 to 2011 the 14-Mile Area was one of the most contested zones on the Sudan-South Sudan border, as the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) repeatedly tried to dislodge Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) positions along the River Kiir. The area is located between Northern Bahr el Ghazal (NBeG) and East Darfur, and contains important grazing territory for the Malual Dinka—the area's principal inhabitants—and the Rizeigat, the largest transhumant group in East Darfur, who annually migrate into the area. During the first seven months of South Sudan's civil war, the territory was relatively tranquil, as both the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS) focused on internal conflicts elsewhere. However, since August 2014 the civil war has spread into the Bahr el Ghazal region, and affected the 14-Mile Area. Members of the SPLA's 3rd and 5th divisions, from NBeG and Western Bahr el Ghazal (WBeG) respectively, deserted from their bases, and made their way north through the two states, crossed the 14-Mile Area, and entered the Bahr el Arab region of East Darfur, where they were joined by forces under the command of Dau Aturjong, the highest-ranking Dinka officer to join the Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA-IO) thus far. The SPLA-IO presence just above the 14-Mile Area has led to tension with the Rizeigat, who fear that the rebels' presence in their territory will damage their relationship with the Malual Dinka and the NBeG state administration, and thus threaten their access to crucial grazing areas inside South Sudan. With the dry season beginning, there is a real risk of further clashes in the 14-Mile Area that threaten to pull Sudanese communities who live along the border into South Sudan's internal conflict.

In theory, the 14-Mile Area should be demilitarized. On 27 September 2012 the GoS and the GRSS committed to the creation of a Safe Demilitarized Border Zone (SDBZ). It is supposed to stretch 10 km on either side of a—currently contested—centre line, along the entire 2,010 km border, with two exceptions: Abyei, and the 14-Mile Area, where the SDBZ should extend 14 miles south of a border located along the River Kiir. This southerly limit of the 14-Mile Area corresponds to what is known as the Munro-Wheatley line (created in 1924 by Patrick Munro, the governor of Darfur, and Major Mervyn Wheatley, the governor of Bahr el Ghazal, to delimit the extent of Rizeigat grazing in what is now NBeG). The GoS insisted that the 14-Mile Area be included in the SDBZ because it wished to cut Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) supply lines that extended through the north of NBeG, and force an SPLA withdrawal from important strategic positions within the 14-Mile Area at Kiir Adem, Warguit, and Sumayah.

After limited initial aerial reconnaissance over the 14-Mile Area, the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism (JBVMM)—which is designed to verify the demilitarization of the SDBZ—was suspended in November 2013. On 4 November a JBVMM flight over the east of the 14-Mile Area detected SPLA forces in Warguit. The South Sudanese monitors refused to sign a report on this violation of the SDBZ that was written by the Sudanese and United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) members of the patrol. South Sudan insisted that the SPLA presence at Warguit was actually outside of the SDBZ, a claim that turns on the ongoing disagreement about the location of the centre line from which the SDBZ's extent can be measured. On 22 November the SPLA sent UNISFA a letter announcing that South Sudan would suspend its involvement in the JBVMM until the centre line was determined. The JBVMM then suspended operations.

On 27 May 2014, the GRSS announced that it would resume its participation in the JBVMM, though the centre line has still not been determined. The GRSS's exit and re-entry of the JBVMM are part of a diplomatic calculus. The GRSS's initial withdrawal occurred just after the alleged detection of SPLA forces in the SDBZ, and prevented further patrols detecting more SPLA violations of the demilitarized zone. The GRSS's May announcement that it would resume its participation in the JBVMM came just after the SPLA-IO had launched a successful attack on Bentiu, Unity state, from what the GRSS alleges are rebel bases in South Kordofan, Sudan. The decision to re-join the JBVMM seems likely to be motivated by a desire to draw attention to the presence of SPLA-IO troops in the SDBZ, and connections between the SAF and rebel forces. The GRSS about-face indicates the degree to which the implementation of the SDBZ is secondary to internal security concerns for both governments.

The JBVMM resumed minimal aerial reconnaissance on 16 June. Helicopter patrols left from Kadugli and inspected Bebenis, in the east of the 14-Mile Area, without detecting any military activity. However, these JBVMM aerial patrols are not able to accurately verify the demilitarization of the 14-Mile Area: they fly too high to accurately see the situation on the ground, and are hamstrung by having to request prior governmental approval for the patrols, which allows both sides to conceal their troops in the demilitarized zone. Prior patrols in 2013 in the 14-Mile Area failed to detect troops whose presence was attested by witness reports and satellite imagery. Accurate assessment of the SDBZ will not occur until the JBVMM can undertake ground patrols, which will require force protection.

On 29 May 2013 the UN Security Council (UNSC) passed resolution 2104, to provide force protection for the JBVMM. This resolution expanded UNISFA's force from 4,200 to 5,325, with the additional troops supposed to give force protection to the JBVMM. Eighteen months after the resolution was passed, only 117 troops have deployed. This advanced party initially deployed to the UNISFA headquarters in Kadugli, with 38 of the troops later deploying to the JBVMM base in NBeG at Gokk Machar on 25-27 June 2014. On 10 August the GoS finally sent JBVMM monitors to the base at Gokk Machar, which would enable the mission to carry out verification missions, if it had force protection. As of the beginning of October, UNISFA has 29 monitors participating in the JBVMM, Sudan has 32, and South Sudan has 34.

Despite this deployment, the JBVMM can still not undertake ground patrols in the 14-Mile Area. One of the principal challenges that must be addressed before the force protection mandated by UNSC resolution 2104 can deploy is the absence of accommodation for the force. The construction of the four bases for these troops is now 15 months behind schedule, and construction work has only started at two of these bases.

In Gokk Machar, the GRSS provided land for the base on 26 March 2013, and on 17 April an advance party of UNISFA monitors arrived. However, as of mid-October 2014, the base still isn't finished. A UN call for tenders for construction that was announced on 5 August 2014 asks that the 'contractor shall prepare the site clean [*sic*], cut trees, roots, any hard materials, rocks, and level to start the work', indicating that the base is far from being completed. The UN now claims that the base should be finished by March 2015, and delivery of accommodation units for the UNISFA forces should begin in December 2014, after the end of the rainy season and with the ensuing improvement in road conditions in NBeG.

While the JBVMM remains ineffective, the 14-Mile Area is becoming increasingly militarized. After Paul Malong, the long-serving governor of NBeG, was appointed SPLA chief of staff on 23 April, fractures emerged in the state's political landscape that had long been suppressed under his governorship. On 30 May Dau Aturjong, a former major general in the SPLA, became the highest ranking Dinka officer to join the SPLA-IO. He had previously unsuccessfully competed against Paul Malong for the governorship of NBeG in 2010. Aturjong hails from Aweil North county, which contains Gokk Machar, and a large part of the 14-Mile Area. His rebellion was bolstered in July by 300 armed youths from Aweil North, under the command of Chief Deng Geng, who was dismissed from his position in the NBeG state administration earlier in the year. These forces are composed of SPLA soldiers recently returned from the frontlines in Jonglei and members of the gulweng—armed Dinka youth that traditionally guard a community's livestock. These defections indicate the discontent felt in the north of NBeG with the caretaker governor, Kuel Aguer Kuel, and represent a significant setback in the demilitarization of the 14-Mile Area. The SPLA cannot demilitarize an area it only partially controls, and internal security concerns and the need to strike against the SPLA-IO in the area will likely trump any GRSS commitment to the demilitarization of the area. On 10 September clashes occurred between Aturjong's forces and the SPLA's 3rd division around Warguit, in the east of the 14-Mile Area. These clashes likely presage further conflict in the coming months, as the dry season arrives and transport conditions improve.

A number of deserters who left SPLA military bases in NBeG and WBeG have joined Aturjong's rebellion, partly due to anger that their wages have not been paid, and partly due to fears of ethnically targeted killing. These desertions underline the fragility of SPLA in a period of ethnic tension. The deserters moved north through NBeG and were joined by more deserters from the SPLA's 3rd division, who had left a base at Wunyik, NBeG, in protest at an alleged massacre of Nuer trainees at

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the SPLA's training camp in Mapel. Following sporadic clashes as the deserters moved north, these forces crossed through the 14-Mile Area into Sudan at the beginning of August.

The 14-Mile Area thus remains heavily militarized. The SPLA retains important military positions at Kiir Adem, Warguit, and Sumayah. To their north, the SPLA-IO forces have been in contact with SAF, who visited them in Abu Matareq, in the Bahr el Ghazal region of East Darfur. Recent [leaked documents](#) from inside the GoS security services suggest that the National Congress Party (NCP) is prepared to support the SPLA-IO in its struggle with the SPLA. Furthermore, the GoS has long attempted to dislodge the SPLA from its positions on the River Kiir, and the SPLA-IO may be considered a tool to achieve that end. However, the exact nature and extent of GoS support for the SPLA-IO cannot be determined at this time. With the dry season approaching it is possible that the 14-Mile Area will be an important front between the SPLA and the SPLA-IO.

The SPLA-IO activity in and around the 14-Mile Area leaves the Rizeigat in a difficult position. Of all the northern transhumant groups that migrate to South Sudan, the Rizeigat have had the best relationship with their southern hosts. In 2013, they refused to join SAF-backed militias in order not to disrupt their relations with the NBeG state administration. In a period of internal conflict in Sudan, they have also joined the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North and JEM in increasing numbers; with the GoS's strength in the region increasingly on the wane, the Rizeigat have looked to other alliances to maintain their form of life and access to grazing resources inside South Sudan. They fear that the SPLA-IO presence in their territory will make the Malual Dinka become increasingly hostile, and treat them as part of the rebel forces.

In an effort to ward such an eventuality, on 10 October Rizeigat fighters attacked SPLA-IO forces in the Bahr el Arab region of East Darfur.

In one respect, what is currently occurring in NBeG is the mirror image of an earlier development in Sudan. From the formation of the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF) in late 2011, South Sudan became an important resource for the rebels in Sudan. Both NBeG and Unity state provided resources and supply lines, as well as rear bases, for the rebels. Much of the GoS's motivation for attacking SPLA positions on the border in 2011–14 was to cut SRF supply lines. Since mid-2014, the SPLA-IO has increasingly relied on rear bases inside Sudan to re-supply and to wait out the rainy season. In this fashion, the border zone between the two countries has become the site at which the two civil wars meet. The overlap makes the end of either harder to envision, and suggests that the 14-Mile Area will be the site of increasing military tension in the months to come.

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