



## **The Safe Demilitarized Border Zone**

On 27 September 2012, the presidents of Sudan and South Sudan committed themselves to establishing a Safe Demilitarized Border Zone (SDBZ), to run along 10 km on either side of a centre-line, set out on a map created by the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP). Eighteen months on, the SDBZ remains militarized, and the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mission (JBVMM)—designed to verify the demilitarized zone—was suspended after South Sudan withdrew from participation in the JBVMM in November 2012. With the attention of both countries directed at ongoing conflicts inside Sudan and South Sudan, there is no prospect of an SDBZ being implemented in the near future.

Problems with the SDBZ initially arose because the AUHIP map, upon which the demilitarized zone was to be based, did not indicate a centre-line with sufficient fidelity, from which the 10 km demilitarized zone on either side of it could be measured. In mid-2013, the African Union (AU) established the African Union Border Technical Team (AUBP-TT) to determine the centre-line. However, due to protests by local communities—which worried that the centre-line would affect their communities—and continuing disagreements between the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS), the team was unable to complete its work.

During the second half of 2013, both countries made repeated commitments to the establishment of an SDBZ, without substantive changes on the ground. An AU-sponsored workshop on the SDBZ, held on 13 November, ended in disagreement, as did a meeting of the Joint Security Committee (JSC), held in Khartoum from 26-27 November. More JSC negotiations, originally scheduled for mid-January, were to be held in mid-December. They were cancelled following the outbreak of violence in Juba, and the JSC has not met since. On 6 January 2014, at a meeting between South Sudanese President Salva Kiir and Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, there were again commitments to establishing a centre-line, but without any substantive agreements on where it would lie.

Without a centre-line, the SDBZ is unworkable, as either side can claim its forces are actually outside the SDBZ, depending on where one asserts the line should be. In fact, both sides have vested interests in not determining the location of the centre-line. The Sudan Armed Forces maintains troops around the oil installation of Hejlij, which is crucial for Sudanese oil interests. Some of these troops are likely to be located inside the SDBZ. The Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) maintains troops within the 14-Mile Area that are vital for ensuring that trade routes between Northern Bahr el Ghazal and East Darfur remain open, and occupy strategically important positions along the river Kiir. The continuing uncertainty about the location of the SDBZ allows both sides to maintain these forces, while criticizing the other side for maintaining forces in the SDBZ.



Even if both countries were to agree on the centre-line of the SDBZ, demarcating it on the ground would prove problematic. Local communities within the zone already blocked the work of the AUBP-TT in August. In part, this was due to a misunderstanding: local communities widely fear that the SDBZ will mark the final border between the two countries. While the zone is intended as an interim measure with no effect on ongoing border negotiations, their fears are justifiable in that, should the SDBZ be determined and border negotiations fail, the SDBZ could end up being the de facto border, which would mean the absence of military support for an indefinite period. In both Upper Nile and Unity states, for example, demilitarization would mandate the withdrawal of Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) protection in areas that experienced heavy raiding during the second civil war.

The current conflict in South Sudan has made agreement on a centre-line even less likely. For both Riek Machar's rebel forces and the SPLA, questions of internal security and short-term military advantage take priority, and any agreement—or adherence to—an SDBZ will remain secondary to these concerns. The current focus of both the international community and Sudan and South Sudan on the talks in Addis Ababa make it unlikely the centre-line of the SDBZ will become an object of diplomatic interest in the near future, despite the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) call on 14 February 2014 that both countries renew their commitment to the establishment of the SDBZ.

The prospect of monitoring a SDBZ, should it ever be established, is also problematic. Prior to November 2013, the JBVMM was unable to verify that the SDBZ was demilitarized because it was unable to undertake ground patrols, as the mission lacked the necessary force protection. On 29 May 2013, UNSC Resolution 2014 augmented the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) from 4,200 to 5,326 personnel, to supply the requisite manpower to offer force protection to the JBVMM. However, as of 15 March 2014, ten months after the resolution was signed, only 117 soldiers of this extra force have deployed to the main JBVMM base at Kadugli, and this force is not sufficient to undertake ground patrols.

There were to be four companies of UNISFA troops that deployed to four JBVMM bases (at Buram, Gokk Machar, Kadugli, and Malakal). As of March 2014, only the main base at Kadugli, and the base at Gokk Machar (Northern Bahr el Ghazal) are relatively operational, despite a commitment in the 8 March 2013 implementation matrix that all the bases should be in use by 8 June 2013. The Kadugli headquarters of the JBVMM is affected by ongoing conflict in South Kordofan, which disrupts supply lines and threatens the base; Kadugli and the surrounding area were shelled on 14 December 2013, and 8 January 2014. Work on a fully operational base at Gok Machar is ongoing. Eight months after construction began, UNISFA has now transported prefabricated hard-wall buildings



to the base from Kadugli. Construction work at the bases in Buram, Darfur, and Malakal, Upper Nile, has yet to begin.

As of the end of January 2014, there are 25 UNISFA monitors, along with 34 from Sudan, and 33 from South Sudan, deployed to Kadugli. Two additional South Sudanese monitors, and two from UNISFA, are deployed to Gokk Machar. The deployment of the rest of the force protection authorized by UNSC Resolution 2014 has been put on hold, pending the reactivation of the JBVMM, which was suspended after South Sudan withdrew in November 2012.

In the absence of ground controls, the JBVMM conducted aerial monitoring missions up until November 2013. One of the problems with the aerial missions is that they require all the monitors present to agree on what is being seen. During the last such mission, a JBVMM flight over the 14-Mile Area on 4 November detected a SPLA presence in the territory. However, the South Sudanese monitors on the flight refused to sign a report written and signed by UNISFA and the Sudanese monitors. Arguments over the presence of troops in the SDBZ again turned on the centre-line of the demilitarized zone. On 22 November, UNISFA received a letter from the SPLA announcing that South Sudan would suspend its involvement in the JBVMM until the centre-line of the SDBZ is determined. Following the GRSS withdrawal from the JBVMM, the mechanism stopped reconnaissance flights, and the JBVMM was suspended, pending an agreement on the centre-line, which, as noted, will not be forthcoming in the near future.

18 March 2014