



The Crisis in Abyei

Tensions in Abyei are now at their highest point since the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) invasion of the territory in May 2011. The annual Missiriya migration into the area is ongoing, amid an almost total breakdown in community relations, which has resulted in intermittent clashes between the Ngok Dinka residents of Abyei and the northern pastoralists. Clashes are occurring in the context of a continuing impasse in political negotiations over the territory's future and both the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS) are accusing each other of involving their armies in the conflict in the territory, in contravention of the 20 June 2011 Addis Ababa agreement, in which both sides undertook to demilitarize the territory.

The end of February 2014 saw a series of clashes in northern Abyei, culminating in skirmishes on 1 March around Maker, 17 km north-west of Abyei town. The circumstances are heavily contested. Kuol Monyluak, the head of Abyei's Ngok Dinka administration, claimed that Missiriya militias mounted in 4x4 'technicals' attacked the village, leaving at least 14 people wounded and one dead. Local authorities in Abyei later revised these numbers, with reports of more than 100 Ngok Dinka dying on 1 March alone. Reports of Missiriya casualties also vary, with Khair al Fahim, the Sudanese co-chair of the Abyei Joint Oversight Committee (AJOC)—the body with political and administrative oversight in the territory—claiming that ten Missiriya died in the clashes. Fighting continued on 3 and 4 March around Dungop (north-east Abyei) and Maker, with casualty estimates again varying widely. Both villages were the scene of Missiriya militia attacks in the first half of 2011, before the SAF invasion.

Precisely who is involved in the clashes is unclear. In a statement on 2 March, the South Sudanese ambassador in Khartoum, Mayan Dut Waal, claimed that recent clashes between the Missiriya and the Ngok Dinka were the result of tensions over grazing in northern Abyei and that neither national army was involved. However, on 4 March, Deng Biong, a South Sudanese official, argued that the forces that initially attacked Maker included SAF troops and SAF-sponsored militia forces under the command of Thomas Thiel, a Twic Dinka who was responsible for attacks in Abyei in 2007 and 2008. Deng Biong further claimed that these attacks targeted civilians, and that they were designed to push the Ngok Dinka out of northern Abyei—in a repetition of the SAF strategy following South Sudan's 2011 referendum on secession. On 17 March, Kuol Monyluak warned that the SAF was planning to invade Abyei, and cited two recent SAF attempts to enter the territory, which UNISFA repulsed. Any future SAF attack would exploit the GRSS preoccupation with internal security to press home its claim to Abyei.

Ahmed Khamis, governor of Western Kordofan, claims that recent clashes involved the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which attacked Missiriya positions north of the



Kiir. Khair al-Fahim accused the GRSS of deploying the SPLA in Abyei, in violation of the 20 June 2011 Addis Ababa agreement.

At the time of writing, the Small Arms Survey could not confirm the involvement of the SPLA or SAF in the recent clashes. However, both militaries retain a presence within Abyei. Sudan maintains a force of oil police at Difra, Abyei's sole oil complex. On 14 February 2014, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) issued a statement asserting that the SPLA was present in Abyei, and that the SPLA forces attacked Missiriya pastoralists on 3 February at Luki, in central Abyei, resulting in the death of three livestock. A subsequent report of the UN Secretary-General, distributed on 25 February, notes that the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA)—the force tasked with ensuring Abyei's security—observed approximately 600 SPLA personnel in Abyei, including 300 at Maker Abior and 70 in Dungop, both important sites within the area of Missiriya migration. According to the Secretary-General's report, these forces were armed with small arms and told UNISFA that they deployed following the Ngok Dinka referendum on Abyei's political future, held in October 2013.

The South Sudanese deputy co-chair of AJOC, Deng Mading Mijak, denies these charges and maintains that the SPLA withdrew from Abyei following the 20 June 2011 Addis Ababa agreement and has not returned since. However, during the first half of 2011, the Abyei administration also insisted that the SPLA had no troops within the territory, although Abyei police positions were manned by the SPLA. As of March 2014, UN sources in the territory insisted that the SPLA was present in Abyei. The UNSC's claims contribute to a growing atmosphere of discontent among the Ngok Dinka over UNISFA. Clashes that have occurred in the territory since December 2013 have cast doubt on UNISFA's ability to uphold its mandate effectively and to ensure the demilitarization and security of the territory.

Debates over the military presence in the territory threaten to overshadow the dangers posed by the almost total breakdown in relations between the Missiriya and the Ngok Dinka. The current Missiriya migration is the first since the assassination of Ngok Dinka Paramount Chief Kuol Deng Kuol in May 2013 by a Missiriya involved in a stand-off with the UNISFA convoy carrying the paramount chief. This event led to a total impasse in political negotiations over the territory's future, and the destruction of already strained ties between the two communities.

From the beginning of this season's migration, in December 2013, the situation between the two groups has been tense. As during the last dry season, the UNISFA strategy is to funnel Missiriya migrants into the eastern and western migratory corridors, while forming a buffer zone above the areas near Abyei town that contain the greatest concentration of Ngok Dinka returnees. This strategy was largely successful last year. Given the greatly



increased number of Ngok Dinka returnees since the referendum, and greatly strained ties between the two groups, UNISFA has been unable to prevent clashes. In December, at least one Missiriya was injured, and at least one Ngok Dinka civilian was killed and three injured, all in the north of Abyei, along Missiriya migratory routes. Violence continued in January 2014, with one Ngok Dinka killed at Miyen Kur, north of Abyei town; the current Ngok Dinka paramount chief, Bulabek Deng Kuol, declared that 18 Ngok Dinka were killed in the last week of January, during almost daily clashes. These clashes continued during February, with Missiriya pastoralists accusing the Ngok Dinka of carrying out attacks around Missiriya pastoralist camps at Goli, north of Abyei.

Both Missiriya pastoralists and members of the Ngok Dinka community are responsible for launching attacks, in what seem to be tit-for-tat skirmishes. A complex set of dynamics underlies these clashes. During prior migrations, joint meetings between the northern pastoralists and their southern hosts determined the migratory routes taken by the Missiriya. But the Ngok Dinka blame the Missiriya for the death of the paramount chief, and for blocking the territory from joining South Sudan following their unilateral referendum—which the Missiriya deeply resented. The usual meetings between Missiriya pastoralists and Ngok Dinka host communities, which normally determine grazing routes and regulate relations between the groups, have not occurred.

The Missiriya now move under UNISFA protection and largely without Ngok Dinka consent. The new atmosphere of open animosity is reflected in the 20 January decision by the Abyei administration to refuse to reopen joint markets for the Missiriya and the Ngok Dinka. Kuol Monyluak, the head of Abyei's administration, stated on 19 February that until the Missiriya issue an apology for Kuol Deng Kuol's assassination and the full inquiry into his death is released, relations between the two groups will not be restored. The Abyei Area Joint Investigation and Inquiry Committee, established by the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council to investigate the assassination, submitted its report to the AU in October 2013. Its findings and status are unclear. The GRSS refused to sign the final report and provided a separate analysis of the assassination, while the GoS signed the report but expressed doubts about the recommendations it contained.

Acute water shortages in Abyei and West Kordofan, along with Southern instability, are intensifying prevailing animosities in the territory. It is now the height of the Missiriya migration—when the northern pastoralist are farthest south in the territory. As of February 2014, there were an estimated 55,000 Missiriya moving southward through Abyei, with approximately 700,000 livestock. Complicating matters is the flow of people who are fleeing violence in South Sudan and heading into Abyei. Some 600 families reportedly arrived from Unity state in January 2014.

With the attention of the GoS and the GRSS focused on the continuing political crisis in



South Sudan, there has been no progress in negotiations over Abyei's political future. The GoS continues to insist that the establishment of a joint administration is a prerequisite for future talks. However, since the Ngok Dinka referendum, the Abyei administration refuses to accept anything other than immediate political negotiations. Moreover, it fears that the establishment of a joint administration would be unacceptable to the local population—which has already expressed its desire to join South Sudan and sees no need for further negotiations—and would lead to the indefinite deferral of a political resolution to the Abyei crisis. The AJOC has not met since the May 2013 assassination of Kuol Deng Kuol, despite repeated UN appeals.

The role of UNISFA in Abyei is coming under increased scrutiny. On 17 February 2014, reports circulated that UNISFA had evacuated Ngok Dinka households in Todac, following clashes in the area. UNISFA denied this, stating on 19 February that the civilians had left of their own accord, due to fears that they would be attacked by Missiriya pastoralists. However, on 20 February, Kuol Monyluak reiterated the contentions, arguing that UNISFA was relocating Ngok Dinka from the north of Abyei and thus—wittingly or not—aiding Missiriya and GoS attempts to obtain the north of the territory for exclusive Missiriya use. This claim indicates a growing dissatisfaction with UNISFA among the Ngok Dinka community, which views the primarily Ethiopian force as incapable of defending the civilian population of the territory and as biased towards Sudan.

UNISFA is struggling to play a meaningful role. In the absence of an Abyei police service, negotiations over which are also at an impasse, the peacekeepers must take on responsibility for mediating between the two groups, a role that they are ill equipped to perform. The force continues to pursue the demilitarization of Abyei and repeatedly disarmed civilians from January through March 2014. Yet with tensions between the two groups extremely high, political negotiations at an impasse, and the grazing season ongoing, the possibility of further clashes in Abyei remains very real.

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