



The Crisis in Abyei

On 30 May, just over a year after the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) occupied Abyei, its troops withdrew from the territory. The move came as Sudan and South Sudan resumed talks in Addis Ababa following a series of clashes between the two countries along the disputed border.

The last two months have seen repeated Sudanese air and ground assaults on South Sudanese territory, while the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) captured—and withdrew from—Heglig. In response to these clashes, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed Resolution 2046 on 2 May, calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities between the two countries and demanding that both sides remove their forces from Abyei and resume talks within two weeks, under threat of sanctions.

Both sides responded by pledging to cease cross-border attacks, although the SPLA says SAF subsequently attacked sites in Upper Nile, Unity, and Northern Bahr al Ghazal. SAF has said it reserves the right to retaliate if South Sudan occupies positions inside Sudan. With no agreement on border demarcation or on whether Heglig is in Sudan or South Sudan, this statement could be used to justify attacks.

Despite continuing clashes, talks resumed in Addis Ababa on 29 May, two weeks after the deadline stipulated by the UNSC. But the negotiations did not begin on a promising note. Each side accused the other of attacks ahead of the meeting and remain far apart on the key issues of border demarcation, oil transit fees, and the status of Abyei.

In Abyei itself, South Sudan responded to the UNSC resolution by withdrawing its police force. The United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) confirmed that 700 Southern Sudan Police Service (SSPS) personnel had withdrawn from Abyei by 10 May, and moved to Warrap state, inside South Sudan. Following the SPLA's earlier withdrawal from Heglig, the redeployment was designed to focus international attention on SAF's continued occupation of Abyei.

The Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) said the withdrawal of the SSPS from Abyei did not affect South Sudan's claim to the territory. On 11 May, South Sudan's government released a map, showing the divergences between its border claims and those of Sudan. Abyei, along with Heglig and Kafia Kingi, were placed within South Sudan. Riek Machar, South Sudan's vice-president, said the two countries had only agreed 40 per cent of the border—much less than the 80 per cent claimed by Sudan.

Sudan said the inclusion of areas like Kafia Kingi within South Sudan was not based on any evidence. Abd-Allah al Sadiq, the Sudanese chairman of the joint border demarcation team, said on 14 May that the border should be the same as the one in 1956. This statement places Abyei in Sudan and is not consonant with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which states that the territory should be the area of the nine Ngok Dinka chiefdoms transferred to Kordofan in 1905—



an area delimited by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in a decision to which both Sudan and South Sudan agreed to be bound.

On 17 May, a day after the deadline for both forces to redeploy outside Abyei, the UNSC issued a [strongly worded statement](#) demanding that Sudan immediately and unconditionally withdraw its troops. It is unclear what effect this had on SAF's decision, but following the SPLA withdrawal from Heglig, and the SSPS withdrawal from Abyei, the international community was particularly unsympathetic towards SAF's presence.

On 28 May, just one day before negotiations were due to start again, SAF spokesman Al Sawarmi Khalid said the Sudanese army would redeploy. □ On 30 May, UNISFA confirmed that SAF had withdrawn its forces from the area. However, the SPLM immediately disputed this, claiming that SAF had only made a partial withdrawal, and was keeping troops inside the territory. This was later confirmed by SAF, who told Sudanese state media that 169 Sudanese police officers would remain in the territory until the Abyei police force is established. The United Nations Secretary-General immediately called for Sudan to remove its remaining armed forces. Even if the police officers do withdraw from the territory, recent SAF and NCP statements have reiterated Sudanese claims on Abyei, suggesting that a solution is still remote and unlikely during the upcoming talks.

On 9 May, the Sudanese government offered the Ngok Dinka Sudanese citizenship, in an attempt to attract them into Sudan. Given the degree of hostility felt by most Ngok Dinka towards SAF and the Sudanese government, the measure has little chance of succeeding, and is more indicative of Sudan's ongoing efforts to undermine South Sudanese claims on Abyei.

The establishment of the Abyei Area Administration (AAA) is still stalled. Both sides agreed to form a new AAA, along with an Abyei police force, as part of the [Addis Ababa agreement](#) of 20 June 2011. But they disagreed over the composition of the entity, with Sudan claiming that South Sudan rejected all its nominees for the position of deputy administrator, while some Ngok Dinka leaders complained that Sudan was nominating National Congress Party (NCP) members from Khartoum, rather than people from Abyei.

South Sudan's leadership is growing increasingly frustrated with the lack of progress in negotiations over Abyei. Prior to the SAF announcement on 15 May, Luka Biong Deng, the co-chair of the Abyei Joint Oversight Committee, said that if SAF did not withdraw by 15 May, South Sudan would consider military action. While this threat must be seen as part of South Sudan's campaign to increase international pressure on Sudan to withdraw, it also shows there could be further clashes in the territory.

The Ngok Dinka share Juba's frustration. On 21 May, to mark SAF's invasion of Abyei, they demonstrated against the continuing occupation. Chol Deng Alaak, South Sudan's designated ambassador to Russia, said the international community should consider military intervention if SAF did not withdraw.



UNISFA, now the sole remaining military force in the territory, had its mandate extended for six months on 17 May, under UNSC Resolution 2047. The mandate was previously expanded, on 14 December 2011, from providing security in Abyei to ‘assisting’ in the creation of a demilitarized border zone. As of May 2012, given the clashes all along the highly militarized border, this part of the mandate had yet to be implemented. UNSC Resolution 2047 calls for a review of UNISFA’s mandate after four months, and a possible reconfiguration of its duties, depending on the situation on the ground.

UNISFA has been able to maintain security in the Abyei region. According to the force, there are now 5,300 returnees living in Abyei, although the rate of new arrivals is slowing. This is due in part to the imminent onset of the rainy season: without crops in the ground, and with almost no health services or infrastructure, sustaining life in Abyei during the next six months will be very difficult. SAF withdrawal occurred at the worst possible time for the Ngok Dinka. It is unlikely there will be an imminent full-scale return without the establishment of services first. The majority of the 110,000 people displaced by the SAF invasion remain in Agok, south of Abyei.

Over the last month the Missiriya began to return to their rainy season grazing in and around Muglad, South Kordofan, marking the end of their migration season. Historically, this is when cattle raiding increases as the Missiriya look to augment their herds. This year raiding has been relatively subdued; UNISFA reports that on 9 May, some Missiriya stole 500 cattle from a group of Ngok Dinka, although the UN force managed to recover some of the animals. There have also been reports of similar raids on 1, 3, and 10 May.

In fact, the end of the Missiriya migration could provide an opportunity for large-scale Ngok Dinka returns, as they would not have to cross paths with the Missiriya. But without intense humanitarian intervention, the rainy season is likely to deter many Ngok from returning before October-November 2012.

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