



The Unresolved Crisis in Abyei

Several weeks after the completion of the referendum on Southern Sudan, the unresolved crisis in Abyei continues to pose a major security threat in the contested and militarized North–South borderlands. The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) promised Abyei a referendum to decide whether the territory will join Northern or Southern Sudan, to be held simultaneously with vote on Southern independence. The Abyei vote did not occur due to a heated dispute between Khartoum and Juba over which populations residing there should be eligible to vote. Without the referendum, the current and future status of the territory and its peoples remain uncertain. As the single most volatile post-referendum issue between the two CPA parties, the Abyei dispute could block or altogether derail the North–South negotiations set to conclude before the widely expected Southern declaration of independence in July 2011.

Despite attempts by the National Congress Party (NCP) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) to negotiate new security arrangements in the territory following clashes in early January between armed Misseriya militia forces and the Joint Integrated Police Unit (JIPU),¹ the situation in Abyei has not improved. Panic among the Ngok Dinka, who claim native rights to the territory, and the semi-nomadic Misseriya herders, who rely on its fertile land for grazing, is perpetuating an impasse on the ground, where the main routes through Abyei remain blocked to trade from the North and to thousands of Southerners who wish to return home from Northern Sudan. The blockade is enforced by discontented Misseriya seeking the removal of the Abyei JIPU, which they view as an extension of the Southern Sudanese security apparatus.

This dynamic is likely to impact the Misseriya migration south in the coming weeks,² when herders will attempt to move with their cattle through southern Abyei, where they could encounter resistance from Ngok Dinka and allied Southern security forces. A locally brokered grazing agreement signed on 14 January 2011 between Ngok Dinka and Misseriya elites and elders may not be implemented, given the ever-mounting mistrust between the two sides and divisions within both camps. The agreement promised that Ngok Dinka villagers would receive ‘blood money’ from representatives of the Misseriya herders who migrate through Abyei as compensation for the deaths that occurred during last year’s migration season. It was also agreed that the Misseriya herders would migrate through Abyei without their weapons.

Against the backdrop of Abyei’s cancelled self-determination vote and high tensions in the area, prospects for a resolution of the impasse remain grim.

The pre-referendum period: broken promises and escalating tensions

As the South’s independence vote approached, the bitterness and fear publicly expressed by the Ngok Dinka residents of Abyei over their own cancelled vote and thus uncertain future led to rumours that the Ngok Dinka would unilaterally declare independence on 9 January, the day they should have begun voting. In a televised interview with Al Jazeera days before the Southern referendum began, Sudanese



president Omar al-Bashir threatened war if the Ngok Dinka attempted to join the South. As has happened in the past in Abyei, rumours may have provoked the violence that erupted, when on 7 January armed Misseriya struck a police post 15 km north of the Abyei administrative centre.

The clashes: a sign of what is to come?

Misseriya and Ngok accounts of the violence that subsequently ensued on 8–9 January and resulted in more than 30 deaths remain contradictory, with no independent confirmation of what actually took place. The Abyei Area Administration has steadfastly blocked access to Maker Adhar, the police post that was attacked, as well as Maker Abyior, a village directly south of the post, where civilians fled due to the fighting. The UN Mission in Sudan sent patrols to the scene from its base in Abyei town immediately after the fighting, but was stopped and turned back by members of the JIPU. All international and Sudanese journalists who approached the Abyei Area Administration in the week after the fighting were prohibited to go north of Abyei town to investigate the clash.

What is known is that both the armed Misseriya militia forces who carried out the attack and the JIPU members who repulsed them were well organized, heavily armed, and intent on holding their ground. Misseriya leaders claim that herders (as opposed to militia members) were initially fired upon by the JIPU; some international officials believe the attack was carefully planned. The pattern of the three-day attacks suggests some strategic planning on the part of the militia forces—which Southern officials and residents of Abyei claim were supported by Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Popular Defense Forces with both troops and weapons. The JIPU that kept the Misseriya from launching an outright assault on Abyei town is likewise made up of relatively well-trained men equipped for the front line.³ It seems that some of these troops were young, new recruits, while others may have been members of the SPLA contingent of the JIU that was removed from the Abyei area following clashes in 2008 between the SAF and SPLA.⁴ The fact that the clashes did not spark a larger conflagration may partly be due to their timing, and the desire of both the NCP and SPLM to downplay the violence, albeit for different reasons: the NCP was keen to distance itself from the Misseriya attackers, while the SPLM was determined that the violence should not derail the Southern referendum.

Local and national agreements: possible only on paper

Following the local grazing agreement signed on 14 January, a second deal was brokered and signed by the Northern and Southern ministers of the interior and representatives of the SAF and SPLA in Kadugli, the capital of South Kordofan State. This agreement addressed security arrangements in Abyei in light of Misseriya attacks in January on convoys of Southern Sudanese returnees attempting to pass through Abyei to return to Southern Sudan.⁵ The parties to the deal agreed to guarantee the security of returnees on their journey by opening two routes through Abyei that are currently blocked and escorting returnee convoys that were stranded in northern Abyei and South Kordofan. The escorts are to be provided by the SAF and JIPU north of the 1956 border line, while the SPLA will take over protection once the



convoys enter Southern Sudan. Neither of these routes has been unblocked to date, resulting in escorted convoys having to take a long detour through Unity State to avoid passing through Abyei. Another provision of the agreement called for the JIPU to be replaced with new battalions from the JIUs. Three battalions have reportedly since been deployed, although it remains unclear where to exactly. There has been an ongoing dispute between the Abyei Area Administration and the South Kordofan government about where the soldiers should be stationed leading to a delay in removing the police force.

Even if fully implemented, neither of these agreements addresses the root causes of Abyei's conflicts. While the community-level deal between Ngok Dinka and Misseriya leaders could facilitate Misseriya migration through Abyei, in practice both groups are grappling with internal divisions and neither can control the actions of its most radical, disenfranchised—and hence desperate—members. Some of the executive chiefs of the nine Ngok Dinka kingdoms do not trust Paramount Chief Kuol Deng Kuol's leadership, and fear he will be unable to convince his Misseriya counterparts to uphold the deal. Equally, the Misseriya elders and elites who attended the Kadugli meeting clearly are not in control of the armed men shooting at returnee convoys.

At the same time, the food security situation in Abyei remains serious, as the main trade routes to northern markets have been blocked for weeks.

The UN reported in late January that the pace of returns to the South has slowed since the corridors were blocked, although there have been no new reports of attacks on returnees since a 17 January incident in Abyei, when armed Misseriya fired on a returnee convoy of 65 buses near Diffra. More than 25,000 Ngok Dinka have returned to Abyei from the North in recent months but thousands more wait in Khartoum, anxious to make the journey but fearful of the security situation in their homeland.

What next?

When President Bashir and Government of Southern Sudan president Salva Kiir met on 30 January in Khartoum to discuss the Abyei situation, the only public resolutions that emerged were messages via South African ex-president Thabo Mbeki that the two leaders had resolved to reach an agreement as soon as possible. Sources privy to the details of the meeting say that the presidents have agreed to attempt to broker a settlement on Abyei by March, and that both sides were intent on setting a date for such a settlement in order to communicate to their respective constituencies that Abyei has not been forgotten. But with neither of these leaders firmly in control of his constituencies, just how soon a sustainable accord can be brokered remains unclear.

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¹ According to the Abyei Roadmap (June 2008), signed by the NCP and SPLM following violence that erupted in Abyei in May 2008, the security forces that are officially allowed to operate in the area are a Joint Integrated Unit (JIU) battalion comprised of Sudan Armed Forces and Sudan People's Liberation Army troops that are 'constituted from new elements other than those elements of the former Abyei JIUs battalion [which fought each other in the May violence]'. This JIU battalion is supplemented by



‘[p]olice [that will] be deployed in the area after consultation between the National Minister of Interior and [the] Minister of Internal affairs of [the] Government of Southern Sudan’.

² This annual migration typically begins in late November, but has been delayed this year because a grazing conference to address compensation issues for the violence during last year’s migration was delayed for months; the migration ends in late April, when herders head back north through Abyei.

³ The JIPU is composed of mostly Ngok Dinka and Southern Sudanese, although the ‘joint’ force is supposed to be made up of forces from both Northern and Southern Sudan. Officially it has 300 members, but the real number is believed to be much higher.

⁴ In May 2008 fighting between SAF and SPLA forces from the JIU stationed in Abyei caused more than 60,000 residents of Abyei town to flee. Human Rights Watch documented deliberate killing of civilians by SAF troops and SAF-allied militias during the violence. The SAF barred access to the Abyei area after the violence, so a verified death toll is not known. See

<<http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2008/07/21/abandoning-abyei?print>>.

⁵ In January, the UN reported multiple attacks on convoys of Southern Sudanese returnees moving from Khartoum south through South Kordofan state and Abyei.