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George Athor's Rebellion, Jonglei State

Lt. Gen. George Athor, a dissident Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) commander and unsuccessful 'independent' candidate for the governorship of Jonglei state, launched a self-proclaimed armed rebellion against the Government of South Sudan (GoSS) in the aftermath of the April 2010 elections. George and his forces orchestrated numerous clashes following the announcement of his election defeat. The first incident on 30 April, involving an attack against the SPLA's base in the tense Doleib Hill area south-west of the Upper Nile state capital, Malakal, left at least eight dead; subsequent clashes resulted in a substantial deterioration in the security situation in the north-western corner of Jonglei state. Under the banner of his South Sudan Democratic Movement (SSDM) and its military wing the South Sudan Army, George is considered the most powerful of the post-election insurrectionists.

Negotiations in October 2010 between the SPLA and a delegation representing George were cause for initial optimism that this post-elections dispute could be resolved prior to the January 2011 referendum and potentially pave the way for broad political and military reconciliation among Southerners. The talks quickly reached a stalemate, however, prompting GoSS president Salva Kiir to issue a presidential decree on 2 December ordering direct talks between George and a government delegation to be led by church leaders at an undisclosed location. The talks took place in late December (without George); at the same time, the SPLA clashed with his men in Pigi county, claiming the lives of up to 20 soldiers, according to the army. This figure has not been independently verified, but the clash has since been repeatedly cited as permanently damaging to prospects for a durable political settlement between the two distrustful parties.

A week later, credible rumours surfaced that former allies of George's within the SPLA were frustrated with his refusal to accept a deal. A last-minute agreement was then brokered just days before the start of the Southern referendum. On 5 January, Vice-President Riek Machar, who had not been publicly involved in any of the mediations, presided over a ceremony in Juba where delegations representing both sides signed a 'permanent ceasefire agreement'.

While the agreement was initially well received, perhaps due to the overriding imperative of stability during the referendum, it did have a number of weaknesses that have become even more apparent in retrospect. Despite providing a timeline for the assembly and reintegration of George's forces, it did not include consequences if its terms were not implemented. Nor did it resolve a key question that repeatedly led to stalemates during previous rounds of mediations, namely the rank at which George, a former deputy chief of staff and lieutenant general, would be reintegrated. These unresolved issues and a lack of planning for the implementation of the agreement are among the reasons why the ceasefire has collapsed. A more deep-seated cause of the agreement's failure, however, is the enduring political and military rifts within the SPLM/A that continue to pit powerful leaders and commanders against each other in high-stakes competitions that, in the case of the current SPLA-George conflict, are leading to scores of civilian deaths.



In the immediate aftermath of the 5 January accord, George failed to travel from an undisclosed location near Malakal to meet the SPLA leadership in Juba. On 9–10 February, days after the official results of the referendum were announced in Khartoum, his men were involved in heavy fighting in Fangak county, including in the village of Dor, which was one of the ‘co-location’ sites named in the ceasefire agreement. George’s forces were to have assembled in Dor and a number of other sites to wait there ‘pending [the] integration process’ into the SPLA. It is unclear what led to the outbreak of fighting, partly because the accounts given by both sides differ dramatically.

George claims that his forces were attacked by the SPLA on 9 February in several places in Fangak county—namely Dor, Koliet, and Kolnyang—where they had assembled, and that his men ‘pursued’ SPLA troops to New Fangak (the county headquarters), where a serious two-day fight ensued. However, SPLA spokesman Colonel Philip Aguer says that George’s forces attacked Dor and Fangak first, killing scores of civilians in addition to Southern security forces (police, prison guards, and wildlife wardens). According to the SPLA, George’s men temporarily captured New Fangak, while assorted security forces fought haphazardly to recapture it. Southern officials are now saying that more than 200 people were killed in New Fangak (with hundreds more injured), twice the number initially given by the SPLA; officials say civilians drowned after they ran into a tributary south of the Nile to flee the fighting. Since then, other clashes have reportedly occurred, including at Diel (near Dor) and Atar (about 50 km south-east of Malakal), but the details remain unclear.

On 27 February, fighting in Fangak county resumed, with the SPLA and George giving widely divergent death tolls from the clashes, which George told journalists by satellite phone had occurred in three locations. Several weeks later, the SPLA announced—and George confirmed—that it had dislodged him from his bush hideout in Pigi county. The rest of the two sides’ accounts of the fighting varied, but international security sources in Juba say that the SPLA attack appears to have pushed George and his forces eastwards, toward the Ethiopian border. No direct fighting has been reported between the two sides since 7 March, when George claimed that he captured several SPLA tanks in heavy fighting, while the SPLA asserted it had pushed his forces out of key bases in Pigi; details on possible civilian casualties are unavailable as the SPLA has broadly succeeded in blocking UN and humanitarian access to north-western Jonglei. George has since claimed that fighting in mid-March in neighbouring Upper Nile state between the SPLA and the Shilluk militia leader Captain Olonyi was part of his rebellion.

Another Khartoum-backed commander that swears allegiance to George is General Bapiny Monituel, a former Nuer militia leader loyal to Paulino Matiep. He became a SAF Brigadier General after the CPA, refusing to join the SPLA after the 2006 Juba Declaration, and associated himself with other civil war-era southern militia commanders, including Gordon Kong and Gabriel Tang-Ginye. Bapiny, who was rumored to be supplying assistance to the various insurgencies in Unity in the post-April 2010 elections period, declared that he was joining forces with George's SSDM



in mid-March. Bapiny told reporters in Khartoum that he had sent 1,000 of his men south to Mayom county in March, with the understanding that they would be integrated into the SPLA and provided with food by the GoSS. The integration did not go ahead as planned, Bapiny asserts, while the SPLA later claimed that locals in Mayom were complaining of Bapiny's men setting up taxation systems and imposing martial law. The accounts of what happened next differ but three days of heavy fighting ensued, in which Bapiny's men held their ground and the SPLA suffered casualties. Bapiny has also said that he intends to launch an attack on Bentiu, and that his men will remain loyal to Georges' new umbrella movement.

Background on George Athor

George joined the SPLA in 1983, in the early stages of its war against Khartoum, and fought on various fronts throughout the conflict. After the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed in 2005, he was promoted to the rank of major general and appointed divisional commander in Upper Nile, where he was widely suspected of involvement in a local conflict near the Upper Nile–Jonglei border in the Atar–Khorfulus region. He was also involved in a violent SPLA-led civilian disarmament campaign in 2006, which claimed more than 1,500 lives. He was then promoted to the rank of lieutenant general and made divisional commander in Jonglei, as well as SPLA deputy chief of staff for political and moral orientation. In early 2010, he launched his gubernatorial bid before the April 2010 elections.

While his initial support base was in the Canal–Khorfulus area, the SPLA announced in September 2010 that it believed he had moved eastwards across Jonglei and was in hiding near the Ethiopian border. He is Padeng Dinka, a sub-clan culturally close to the Nuer from this area of Jonglei.

Rumours abound as to the sources of his support. In contrast to other leaders of post-election insurrections, he has not necessarily needed the support of external actors. Indeed, he ranked high in the SPLA, enjoyed the loyalty of the military and local populations in his home area, and reportedly acquired significant wealth through corruption during his time as divisional commander of Jonglei. After he ceded his post as the top SPLA official in Jonglei, rumours spread that he had been accounting (and thus receiving salaries) for many more soldiers—in the thousands, according to some—than he had under his command in the state. He may also have armed his supporters with weapons collected during the SPLA's disarmament attempt in Jonglei in 2006, as well as post-election clashes with the army.

The GoSS and SPLA have repeatedly alleged that he receives support from the Khartoum government, with the most recent accusations made by the secretary-general of the SPLM, Pagan Amum, on 15–16 February. In mid-March, Pagan repeated these allegations when he announced the withdrawal of the SPLM from post-referendum negotiations with the National Congress Party, citing Khartoum's 'plot' to overthrow the GoSS by backing proxy forces such as George's. Allegations have also circulated regarding possible alliances with other dissident Southern political and military figures.¹ There is no independent evidence to support any of these claims,

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however. Furthermore, localized discontent in Jonglei over the GoSS's and SPLM/A's handling of the violence seems to be mounting. Following the February attacks, local government officials and a GoSS minister, James Kok, accused the SPLM/A leadership of failing to protect Fangak. For this reason and others, SPLM/A accusations of Northern involvement in the recent fighting should be viewed with some scepticism.

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¹ The 5 January ceasefire called for integration of George's forces at particular assembly points both within and outside of George's known operating areas in Jonglei. In addition, the ceasefire provided for assembly and reintegration points in other areas in Greater Upper Nile that are known to be held by other insurrection leaders, including David Yauyau and Gatluak Gai. These include Koch county in Unity state, where Gatluak launched several post-elections attacks, and Pibor county in Jonglei, the headquarters of David's insurrection.