



Gatluak Gai's Rebellion, Unity State

Origins and capacities

A Nuer from Koch county in Unity state, Gatluak was not a high-ranking SPLA officer before he launched his insurgency in late May 2010 by attacking an SPLA base at Awarping, Abiemnom county. (The SPLA claims that he was previously on the payroll of the Unity state prisons department.) He reportedly had aspirations to be Koch county commissioner prior to Taban Deng Gai's appointment as governor following the 2008 Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) convention. After Taban rejected this bid, Gatluak apparently grew resentful and eventually became one of the campaign managers for 'independent' candidate Angelina Teny—wife of Vice-President Riek Machar—perhaps with the hope of gaining the county commissionership if she proved successful. The Government of South Sudan (GoSS—now the Republic of South Sudan or RoSS) was convinced that he was linked to Teny and thus perceived him as a threat. Consequently, the GoSS deployed additional SPLA troops to the oil-rich state, particularly in Mayom and Pariang counties (seasonal destinations of the migrating Missiriya) and along the border with South Kordofan.

After Taban's re-election, in what was widely seen as a flawed process, Gatluak and his forces attacked Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) installations in May 2010 and engaged in fighting in Mayom and Abiemnom. These counties are strategically significant, partly because they have histories of anti-SPLA sentiment and are frontline border areas. Of particular interest is Mayom, home of the former militia leader and current deputy commander-in-chief of the SPLA, Paulino Matiep.

Many rumours circulate in Unity about the sources of Gatluak's ample forces and the weapons needed to launch attacks on significant SPLA installations. Some Khartoum press reports have suggested that SPLA fighters defected to join him, while SPLA officials in Bentiu and GoSS officials have alleged that the National Congress Party sent civilians, namely armed Missiriya from South Kordofan, to fight in the rebellion. The SPLA has also alleged that former southern militia leaders who are part of the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), such as Maj. Gen. Gabriel Tang Gatwich Chan (also known as 'Tang-Ginye'),¹ have backed him. He may have simply engaged heavily armed civilians in his areas of operation. Like George Athor,² he had proven successful in exploiting local grievances to further his own aims, harnessing the resentment of young unemployed men to participate in violence.

Associations with other insurgent forces

Shortly after the SPLA and George Athor signed a 'permanent ceasefire agreement'³ on 5 January 2011, Gatluak's forces were implicated in a clash with the SPLA in Mayom county, which later became the principal area of activity for the rebels loyal to Peter Gadet,⁴ a Khartoum-backed wartime militia leader who was a high-ranking SPLA officer until his defection in late March. The SPLA says Gatluak's forces attacked one of their installations on 7 January and that a counter-attack by the army killed four and wounded six of Gatluak's men. Gen. Acuil Tito Madut, inspector general of the South Sudan Police Service, said that 32 fighters from Gatluak's group



were captured by the Southern military and were to be brought to Juba to be interrogated. The men were reportedly in possession of 30 AK-47 assault rifles, one machine gun, and one rocket-propelled grenade launcher.

Another lesser-known dissident operating in Unity, Kol Chara Nyang, who is believed to be in hiding in Heglig, may be responsible for several more recent armed incidents in the Mayom area. Kol Chara and his supporters had appeared to be quiet since August, until the location of a 2 December 2010 ambush of the SPLA—north-east of Mayom—raised suspicions regarding their re-emergence. This activity may have been part of an attempt to disrupt the registration and polling processes before the January referendum. Kol Chara is not the only anti-GoSS militant with unclear allegiances and support bases operating in the Mayom area. The presence until very recently of SAF forces serving in the Joint Integrated Units (JIUs) stoked suspicion within the SPLA of support lines from the JIUs to these leaders. The SPLA heavily fortified its bases in the Mayom area and deployed more troops along the road between Mayom and the state capital, Bentiu, as a result.

Reconciliation stalls

On 8 June 2010, the SPLA announced that Gatluak’s rebellion was defeated and that it had captured more than 50 of his forces, several of whom were SPLA soldiers who had defected. Like George Athor, he was offered an amnesty by GoSS president Salva Kiir at the end of September 2010. In November 2010, GoSS vice-president Riek Machar and his wife visited Bentiu. At a rally, Riek publicly endorsed a state-level reconciliation process and later travelled with a delegation that included Angelina and Governor Taban Deng Gai throughout Unity to encourage citizens to participate peacefully in the referendum. As in other strategic areas of Greater Upper Nile, however, where reconciliation attempts have not been followed up quickly with efforts to increase political space and redress violations committed by state security forces during and after the 2010 elections, Unity remains extremely insecure, with several militias operating there. It is unclear where the blame lies for the stalled, seemingly defunct reconciliation process, but the recurrent violence in several counties in Unity suggests that at least some of the grievances that initially sparked Gatluak’s insurrection and caused broader insecurity in the state have not been substantively addressed by Governor Taban’s leadership.

On 17–19 March 2011, fighting broke out in Mayom county once again near the border with the contested Heglig oilfields. The circumstances have not been clarified, but the SPLA claims a reconnaissance group clashed with militia forces fighting under Matthew Pul Jang (also known as ‘Ko Jang’). Both SPLA and international sources said more than 70 army and rebels were killed.

Matthew had agreed in late February, after consultations with former Mayom county commissioner John Madeng, to bring his forces to an assembly point in Riak payam to begin reintegration into the SPLA. When it appeared to the SPLA Command in Unity that he was not serious about assembling his forces, it sent a team from Mayom northwards towards Heglig to investigate, and this team was then ambushed.

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Although Matthew and his forces have not spoken publicly about why they abandoned the integration plan, several possibilities for their pullout circulated. As in the cases of the other southern rebellions, no concrete or verifiable evidence of Khartoum’s involvement with or support for the armed movement exists; one theory is that SAF offered it better support and hence it abandoned the integration plan.

Ceasefire and death

After the Republic of South Sudan declared independence on 9 July 2011, the Unity state government—led by Governor Taban—initiated talks with Gatluak. On 20 July, Taban called on militia leaders operating in his state to participate in the new country’s nation-building process and announced that talks were already underway with Gatluak and his forces. In very short order, Gatluak and the SPLA reached a deal in the state capital of Bentiu. Under the terms of the agreement, Gatluak would join the SPLA at the high rank of lieutenant general, and his forces would integrate into the army. Days later, on the morning of 23 July, Gatluak was shot and killed near the village of Pakur in Koch county, where some of his forces were assembled.

The SPLA claims that before their ‘high-level delegation’ could reach Gatluak following the Bentiu agreement, the commander changed his mind. SPLA spokesman Col. Philip Aguer stated that Gatluak was then assassinated by his second-in-command, Marko Chuol Ruei, and other officers who disagreed with Gatluak’s decision to abandon the ceasefire and integration deal. In contrast, the spokesman for Peter Gadet, another Unity state rebel commander, claims the SPLA killed Gatluak, but did explain why the army shot him days after signing the ceasefire. The disposition of Gatluak’s men remains unclear.

Whatever the circumstances, Gatluak’s death raises questions about the ability of the new Southern government and the SPLA to make good on outstanding amnesty offers to other insurgents commanders at large—who are likely to be increasingly wary of such deals. Two of the most significant commanders—Peter Gadet and George Athor—continue to resist them.

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¹ See <<http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/pdfs/facts-figures/armed-groups/southern-sudan/emerging/HSBA-Armed-Groups-Tang.pdf>>.

² <<http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/pdfs/facts-figures/armed-groups/southern-sudan/emerging/HSBA-Armed-Groups-Athor.pdf>>.

³ See <<http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/pdfs/facts-figures/armed-groups/southern-sudan/emerging/Ceasefire-Agreement-Jan-2011.pdf>>.

⁴ <<http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/pdfs/facts-figures/armed-groups/southern-sudan/emerging/HSBA-Armed-Groups-Gadet.pdf>>.