

Gabriel Tang Gatwich Chan ('Tang-Ginye')

Gabriel Tang Gatwich Chan (often referred to as 'Tang-Ginye', a nickname meaning 'long pipe'), a Nuer from Fangak county in Jonglei state, is synonymous with a brutal chapter of the history of Sudan's second civil war (1983–2005). Deadly 'South–South' violence resulted in some of the worst atrocities committed during the war and deepened internal rifts among Southerners that have not been resolved in the six-year interim period that began with the 2005 signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

Wartime roles

Considered one of the first generation of Southern guerrillas, Tang-Ginye began his military career in a faction of the Anyanya movement during the first civil war (1956–1972). Suspicious of the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement, he quickly rebelled again, joining one of the mainly Nuer militias known as Anyanya II. In 1984, together with other Anyanya II leaders such as Paulino Matiep and Gordon Kong, he formed an alliance with the Khartoum government, led by Jaafar Nimeiri, hoping to create a Nuer army to fight the 'Dinka' Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). He and his Jebel forces remained allied to Khartoum in 1988, when a large number of Anyanya II defected to the SPLA under the leadership of the late John Garang. His forces aligned with Riek Machar's Khartoum-backed Nasir faction following the SPLA split in 1991, and then were absorbed into the South Sudan Defense Forces (SSDF) as part of the 1997 Khartoum Agreement, with direct links to Military Intelligence in Khartoum.

Tang-Ginye played a key role in Khartoum's devastatingly effective divide-and-rule strategy to weaken the SPLA. The policy resulted in massive intra-Southern conflict in the 1990s, mainly along Nuer–Dinka and Nuer–Nuer lines in Greater Upper Nile (now Unity and Upper Nile states). Although many of the strongest pro-Khartoum Southern militia commanders—including fellow Nuer Paulino Matiep—signed the 2006 Juba Declaration and integrated into the SPLA with high ranks, Tang-Ginye maintained his allegiance to Khartoum throughout the CPA's interim period.

Considered a hardliner within the SSDF, he was condemned for his commanding role in a brutal campaign in the Shilluk Kingdom on the western bank of the White Nile in 2004. The campaign of ethnic cleansing, which took place after Lam Akol's defection from the government back to the SPLA in late 2003, was designed to rid the area of remaining SPLA support. Tens of thousands of civilians were displaced in a campaign of burning and looting villages with hundreds killed.

Post-CPA activities

Since the signing of the CPA, Tang-Ginye largely remained in Khartoum as a major general in the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF)—a post he was granted in 2004, some say as a prize for his consistent loyalty—only occasionally visiting the South. Two of these visits, in November 2006 and February 2009, caused the most serious violations of the CPA-mandated ceasefire and illustrated the fragile relationship between the SAF and SPLA components of the Joint Integrated Units (JIUs).

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On both occasions, fighting between different JIU contingents broke out in Malakal, leading to significant casualties and looting carried out primarily by SAF members of the JIU. The 2006 clash left an estimated 150 dead, while the 2009 took more than 60 lives. Human Rights Watch (HRW) investigated the 2009 clashes, stating that the violence ‘underscore[d] abiding concerns about the ability of the JIUs to remain integrated and exercise command and control, particularly over its members who are former militia’. In reality, the SAF and SPLA contingents in Malakal were never integrated; they were merely co-located, at opposite ends of the town, with only a few officers from both sides present in a so-called ‘joint headquarters’. In both instances, the violence reportedly broke out over anxiety that surfaced within the SPLA JIU contingent after Tang-Ginye’s arrival in Malakal. In the 2009 clashes, HRW reported that only SAF JIU members who were former members of Tang-Ginye’s militia had participated. Both incidents illustrate the destabilizing role he continues to play in the South, and his ability to rapidly alter the security situation in his areas of influence.

Back to the SPLM/A?

In September 2010, Tang-Ginye was included in the amnesty offer made by Southern president Salva Kiir, although he was not involved in the post-election insurrections. The following month he visited Juba and Bentiu, the capital of Unity state, and reportedly agreed to rejoin the SPLA, holding meetings with senior Nuer members of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM), including Government of South Sudan (GoSS) vice-president Riek Machar and Unity state governor Taban Deng Gai. After this conciliatory visit, Tang-Ginye returned to Khartoum, however, remaining quiet for several months while the GoSS struggled to negotiate a ceasefire with Lt. Gen. George Athor, former SPLA deputy chief of staff (as head of Political and Moral Orientation) and the most powerful of the insurrection leaders who launched revolts after the April 2010 polls in Sudan. There were no subsequent public announcements from either Tang-Ginye or the SPLM/A, and in late 2010 some of the Southern officers within the SAF contingent of the JIU in Malakal who remained loyal to him became increasingly concerned about their uncertain future after South Sudan’s independence in July 2011.

In early February 2011, several different SAF JIU contingents stationed throughout Upper Nile fought among themselves, leaving more than 50 dead. The deadly dispute began in Malakal when fighting broke out between Southerners in the SAF JIU contingent, some of whom opposed Tang-Ginye’s rumoured integration into the SPLA. The fighting then spread to other towns in Upper Nile, including near oil fields in Paloich. These armed disputes remained limited to the SAF JIU contingents and did not involve SPLA members, unlike in 2006 and 2009.

It is unclear what caused the breakdown of relations between Tang-Ginye and the SPLM/A following their October 2010 agreement. Even before the South’s January 2011 self-determination referendum, rumours began to circulate that he was not going to keep his promise to rejoin the SPLA. A clear indication that he was not fully committed to the amnesty offer was his failure to assemble his troops in a SPLA-held Dinka area on the eastern bank of the Nile. Internal UN security reports have since confirmed his movement with a group of armed men from White Nile state across the

North–South border into Upper Nile and down the western bank of the Nile toward Panyikang county.

In mid-February 2011, the secretary-general of the SPLM and GoSS minister for peace and CPA implementation, Pagan Amum, broke the silence and told reporters in Juba that Tang-Ginye had returned in January to the South accompanied by around 300 armed men driving trucks with mounted machine guns. Pagan said Tang-Ginye had received the weapons and equipment from Khartoum and suggested that he was on the move to Fangak county in north-west Jonglei, which borders Upper Nile, to join George Athor’s rebellion.

As of early April, Tang-Ginye had assembled some of his men at a reintegration site at Kaldak on the White Nile river south of Malakal and before the village of Phom el Zeraf. On 20 April, a senior officer loyal to Tang-Ginye reportedly refused to integrate his forces into the SPLA and was killed. Three days later, Tang-Ginye’s forces clashed with SPLA under the command of the Malakal-based SPLA JIU Division 8 commander Brig. Gen. Peter Gatwich Gai. According to statements by the SPLA at the time, 7 SPLA and 57 of Tang-Ginye’s men were killed. The next day, Tang-Ginye ‘surrendered’ to the SPLA with 1,300 men and indicated his intention to continue with the integration of his forces into the Southern army. It was not clear at the time whether the amnesty extended to him earlier would remain on offer.

Since then, Tang-Ginye has been under house arrest in Juba. He is reportedly being held at the SPLA JIU headquarters in Juba, though the SPLA has not officially disclosed his whereabouts. An Associated Press (AP) investigation into the Kaldak clash between Tang-Ginye and SPLA forces published on 2 June cited UN reports that the number of civilian casualties in Kaldak is likely to have been much higher than initially reported.¹ The AP report also cited the SPLA spokesman, Colonel Philip Aguer, who said that the SPLA had not yet achieved ‘100 percent discipline,’ a reference to ongoing command-and-control problems within the Southern army.

The clashes were part of an almost simultaneous wave of violence in Upper Nile and Jonglei in late April, which also included clashes between the SPLA and Peter Gadet’s forces. Early estimates suggested about 165 combatants had been killed in the violence, and some 3,800 displaced. The UN says that the SPLA is currently battling seven different rebel movements across the oil-producing Greater Upper Nile region. On 7 June, Lise Grande, the head of UN humanitarian operations in the South, said that more than 1,500 people have died this year in violence in South Sudan.²

Updated June 2011

¹ See <http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20110602/ap_on_re_af/af_southern_sudan_civilians_killed>.

² See <http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20110607/wl_nm/us_sudan_south_violence>.