



SPLM/A–Shilluk Conflict in Upper Nile

Since the April 2010 elections, the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) has been engaged in a conflict with elements in the Shilluk kingdom of Upper Nile state that it fears threaten SPLM hegemony within the Government of South Sudan (GoSS). The conflict began with the SPLA suppression of four victorious parliamentary candidates from Lam Akol’s opposition SPLM-Democratic Change (DC) party following the elections in April 2010. From May to July 2010, armed Shilluk banditry in Fashoda county was met with severe SPLA counter-measures that hardened—and possibly expanded—Shilluk resistance to the SPLA and the GoSS. At the same time, only parts of the Shilluk community embraced the militarization of pro-SPLM-DC elements, heightening divisions within it. These recurrent divisions resurfaced most recently in fighting in early March 2011 between the SPLA and a Shilluk commander known only as Captain Olonyi in two locations in Upper Nile, including the state capital.

Pre-election period

The recent history of the Shilluk, a minority tribe residing almost exclusively in Upper Nile, is closely related to the exploits of wartime Shilluk leader Lam Akol, who has played a central and divisive role in the community. Lam was a former high-level SPLA commander who split with the rebel army in 1991, forming SPLA-Nasir together with Riek Machar. He then separated from Riek to form SPLA-United in 1993 and signed the Fashoda Agreement with Khartoum in 1997. He remained on the government side until rejoining the SPLM/A in October 2003. Following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005 he became the movement’s appointed minister of foreign affairs (2005–07) in the Government of National Unity, but then split from the SPLM once again. He launched the opposition SPLM-DC in June 2009 on a reform platform. Although some traditional leaders and elites supported him, other key Shilluk figures, including the *reth* (king), endorsed the mainstream SPLM. When Lam ran against Salva Kiir for the presidency of South Sudan in April 2010, divisions between his supporters and his opponents deepened.

From its inception, the SPLM-DC has met with open hostility from the SPLM/A, which fears Lam’s ongoing connections with the North, his public complaints about Southern corruption and lack of democracy, and the threat he could pose to the party’s control of the Southern government. Lam’s support for unity with the North also undermined the SPLM’s increasing public calls for separation. In the months following the SPLM-DC’s establishment, the SPLA disrupted its events, detained and reportedly beat its representatives, denounced the party as an illegitimate organ of the National Congress Party (NCP), and tried to ban it from taking part in the elections (Sudan’s constitutional court rejected the ban). The SPLM/A has repeatedly accused the SPLM-DC of being an armed militia—dressed up as a political party—under the control of both Lam and the NCP, while Lam and his party have consistently denied these claims.



SPLM-DC electoral victories, suppression, and subsequent violence

The April 2010 elections proved to be a watershed moment both for Lam and the Shilluk. When four Shilluk SPLM-DC candidates for parliamentary positions in the South Sudan Legislative Assembly (SSLA) were elected in Upper Nile, the SPLM/A refused to accept the outcomes and instead arrested and detained them in late May. It was not until 31 August that the SSLA voted to restore their immunity as elected members of parliament. By that time, however, local Shilluk violence had erupted and SPLA counter-repression had led to a wave of deaths and injuries.

In May and June 2010, banditry increased in the Nile River corridor north of Malakal, particularly in Fashoda county. Then, on 25 June, unknown armed elements attacked a barge near Kodok (the capital of Fashoda) that was carrying South Sudan Police Service officers who were protecting a sizeable sum of money from the Constituency Development Fund (a decentralization and local development initiative created by the GoSS in 2008 and funded by Southern oil revenues, but accused of being a vehicle for corruption). The funds were intended for delivery farther up the river. When the SPLA engaged the attackers, three soldiers were killed and three others wounded.

The SPLA was quick to blame supporters of Lam and the SPLM-DC under the command of Robert Gwang, who is reportedly a former Upper Nile prisons officer. The army then deployed 7th Division infantry to, in the words of SPLA spokesman Kuol Deim Kuol, ‘clear the area of the Lam Akol militia’ in Fashoda county, particularly the Kodok area, where the river banditry was concentrated.

But the SPLA appears not to have discriminated between SPLM-DC supporters and others when deliberately retaliating against the Shilluk as a group. Human rights observers reported the army engaging in summary executions, rape, destruction of property, and looting—all accusations the SPLA rejects. For its part, the SPLA says that Shilluk youths led them to Robert’s hideout, where the army acknowledges killing 11 armed supporters. The sharp contrast between these differing accounts calls for more investigation.

The events of May–July increased divisions within the Shilluk community. Upper Nile governor Simon Kun offered to support reconciliation efforts at the political level; initial discussions between Shilluk traditional leaders began with the state government in Malakal in early September 2010 on both internal issues and ongoing land conflicts between the Shilluk and Dinka communities. Since then there has been little follow-up at either the higher political or local community levels on these talks, with Shilluk communities on the western bank of the Nile still complaining of marginalization and exclusion by what they perceive as a Dinka/Nuer-dominated state government.

In October there were rumours in Malakal that young soldiers formerly loyal to Robert Gwang had agreed to join the SPLA and were to be transferred by river to Malakal for reintegration; this movement was related to a ceasefire signed by Robert and the SPLA, which called for the reintegration of his troops along with reconciliation talks between the Dinka and Shilluk communities affected by the post-

elections violence. What followed remains disputed. Officials in Malakal believe the troops did not stop in Malakal, but were instead transported farther south on the river in the direction of George Athor's former base in the Fangak region near Doleib Hill. Suspicions that Robert's former forces may have joined George's men instead of the SPLA raised serious concerns in Malakal and elsewhere.

Months later it is clear that the failure to implement the ceasefire—specifically to integrate Robert's forces into the SPLA, in tandem with progress on resolving Shilluk–Dinka land disputes—has resulted in a resurgence in violence in Upper Nile in early 2011. On 6 March, Shilluk militia forces loyal to Captain Olonyi clashed with SPLA forces in Panyikang county, resulting in the deaths of more than 50 people, according to the SPLA.¹ After the fighting, Olonyi's forces regrouped and attacked Malakal early on 12 March, storming the northern side of the town, razing huts belonging to SPLA soldiers stationed next to the airport, and engaging in heavy fighting in the streets of Malakal for most of the morning. After six hours of reportedly heavy but intermittent clashes, the SPLA repelled Olonyi's forces and took control of the town, but a 'mop-up operation' continued throughout the day and into the evening, as the army attempted to expel militiamen hiding throughout the town. In the days following Olonyi's raid, numerous reports emerged of Shilluk civilians in Malakal being targeted, detained, and harassed, apparently as part of this operation. SPLA and UN officials have since confirmed that more than 30 people, mainly militiamen, were killed. No numbers have been released for civilian casualties.

After the fighting, George Athor declared that Captain Olonyi's forces were loyal to him. Whether this move is an effort by George to superficially strengthen his own cause or is a truthful statement about the linkages among the multiple southern rebel movements is unclear; Olonyi himself has not made any public or press statements since the recent clashes.

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¹ Olonyi was identified by the UN Mission in Sudan in November as one of the Shilluk commanders who may have been involved in training militia forces.