

The Conflict in Unity State

Describing events through 22 September 2014

On 8 May 2014 the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) retook the Unity state capital, Bentiu, following five days of clashes. On the following day South Sudanese president Salva Kiir and Riek Machar, the leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army in Opposition (SPLM/A-IO), signed an agreement in Addis Ababa that recommitted both sides to the agreement on the cessation of hostilities that they had signed on 23 January. Since then the SPLA has retained control of Bentiu, as well as Abiemnom and Pariang counties, while the SPLA-IO dominates the southern counties of Panyijar, Mayendit, Leer, and Koch. Since May, when the last pitched battle between the SPLA and SPLA-IO was fought, the conflict in Unity state has increasingly become a series of occasional clashes that are sometimes unconnected to the broader strategy of either side and to the negotiations in Ethiopia.

Despite both sides' repeated commitments to a ceasefire, the last four months have seen continued clashes in the state, although not at the scale of the first four months of 2014. The fighting has centred on Mayom county—the home area of many of Unity's most important politicians—and on Guit and Rubkona counties, where the SPLA-IO controls much of the area around Bentiu. At present, neither side is militarily strong enough to control the whole state, and with negotiations stalled over a disagreement about the framework for these negotiations, an uneasy *détente* prevails in Unity, punctuated by occasional clashes.

The battle over Bentiu and surrounding areas

The SPLA-IO reoccupied Bentiu on 15 April, reversing some of the gains that the SPLA had made in Unity during the previous two months. Shortly afterwards the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS) came under increasing pressure to end the conflict, with US secretary of state John Kerry flying to Juba on 2 May to try and pressure South Sudanese president Salva Kiir to come to the negotiating table. In the run-up to negotiations and the signing of the 9 May agreement, both sides intensified their military operations and attempted to maximize the territory under their control before recommitting to January's ceasefire agreement. As is often the case in both Sudan and South Sudan, the prospect of a peace agreement became the spark for an intensification of conflict rather than its suspension.

On 4 May the SPLA, supported by fighters from the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), entered Bentiu, while also launching an attack on SPLA-IO forces in Nasir, Upper Nile. On 5 May an SPLA-IO counter-attack recaptured Bentiu. These clashes drew widespread condemnation, with the US government criticizing the SPLA's violation of the agreement on the cessation of hostilities. On the same day the United States announced sanctions against Marial Chanuong, the commander of Kiir's presidential guard, and Peter Gadet, the SPLA-IO military governor of Unity state, as a means to pressure the two sides to end the conflict. On 8 May the SPLA and JEM attacked Bentiu once again, and the SPLA-IO withdrew. Despite the peace agreement that was signed the next day, over the next week former South Sudan Liberation Army (SSLA) fighters allied to the SPLA pursued retreating SPLA-IO troops into Guit county.



In Unity, as in Upper Nile state, the new South Sudanese conflict revives earlier conflict dynamics. During the second civil war the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) controlled the urban areas of southern Sudan thanks to its superior firepower, while the SPLA controlled the countryside. In the present conflict the SPLA holds the urban areas while the SPLA-IO largely controls the rural areas of Unity and Upper Nile states.

Since the SPLA recaptured Bentiu in May most of the clashes in the state have focused on the area immediately around Bentiu, as the SPLA-IO attempts to retake the state capital and the SPLA tries to break up rebel positions. On 11 June the SPLA attacked SPLA-IO positions in Guit county, while on 4–5 July clashes occurred at Wangkai, on the border between Mayom and Rubkona counties. These clashes presaged a series of SPLA attacks against SPLA-IO positions in Guit and Rubkona counties in mid-July.

As of mid-September, the last heavy fighting in Unity occurred in mid-August. On 11 August there were clashes in Kaljak *payam* (district), Rubkona county. On 13 August the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) reported fighting to the south-east of Bentiu and the SPLA-IO attacked SPLA positions near Nhialdiu, to the south-west of Bentiu. Fighting continued in the area around Bentiu until 16 August. Each side blamed the other for initiating the clashes; however, according to monitors from the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), SPLA-IO attacks on SPLA positions in Rubkona initiated the conflict. However, since May 2014 IGAD monitors have found both sides responsible for repeated violations of the agreement on the cessation of hostilities. As of mid-September 2014 the SPLA remains in control of Bentiu, while SPLA-IO forces are close to the state capital.

Each side accuses the other of planning further attacks. Most recently, after the SPLA said it had uncovered SPLA-IO battle plans, on 11 September the rebels issued a statement saying they were not preparing attacks in Unity state. Nevertheless, clashes around Bentiu will likely continue in the month ahead. The area is heavy militarized, and with ongoing negotiations at an impasse, both sides will seek an advantage on the battlefield.

Mayom county and beyond

Mayom county has also seen heavy clashes since May. A strategically crucial area in the west of Unity state that provides the SPLA with vital supply routes into Warrap state, Mayom is also politically central to the struggle for the state. It is home to both Joseph Nguen Monyuel, the current governor of Unity, and Peter Gadet. Both men, like Matthew Puljang, the head of the SSLA, are Bul Nuer, which indicates the degree to which much of the fighting in Unity is intra-Nuer.

Fighting in Mayom has been focused in villages on the border with Rubkona county, such as Wangkai, where over twenty civilians were killed in clashes at the beginning of June, and in *payams* on the border with Warrap state. At the beginning of July Peter Dak Khan, formerly the member of parliament for Mayom and now a member of the SPLA-IO, accused the SPLA of killing 37 civilians in Mankien *payam* and burning down over 400 houses. It has not been possible to definitively confirm these numbers. There were further clashes in Wangkai, Mankien, and Rier (on the Warrap border) between 11 and 16 July, with each side blaming the other for



initiating the violence. The IGAD Monitoring and Verification Mission (MVM) has not made a public statement about these attacks.

While the MVM has found both sides guilty of breaking the agreement on the cessation of hostilities, a statement of its most recent findings blames the SPLA-IO for more violations. The SPLA-IO accuses IGAD of supporting the GRSS and facilitating GRSS spies in the Monitoring and Verification Team (MVT) that is mandated to monitor the implementation of the agreement on the cessation of hostilities. These accusations came just after six members of the MVT were detained in Mayom county on 23 August; one ceasefire monitor died of a heart attack while in detention. The SPLA-IO claims that the UNMISS helicopter carrying the monitors landed without permission and without the MVT's rebel contingent. The SPLA-IO component of the MVM also filed a petition in July asking IGAD to relocate the main MVM base to a neutral country, because its monitors were being harassed in Juba.

Elsewhere in the state, Pariang—historically an SPLA stronghold—and Abiemnom counties remain firmly under GRSS control. Lieutenant General John Riak commands the SPLA in Abiemnom, while the SPLA loyalist forces in Mayom county are under the command of Matthew Puljang. Part of the SPLA-IO's strategy is to blame ceasefire violations on the SSLA, JEM, and the Ugandan troops fighting with the government. These accusations call into question the extent to which Kiir is actually in command of his own forces and draw attention to the SPLA's reliance on external parties.

The SPLA's response to the SPLA-IO accusations is to counterclaim that SAF backs the rebels. This is a sensitive accusation: during the second civil war Riek Machar's faction of the SPLA received weapons and supplies from Khartoum. On 18 August John Malok, the GRSS Unity state security adviser, claimed that the SPLA-IO was moving new recruits to Hejljij, where they were supplied with weapons by the Government of Sudan (GoS). SAF denies these accusations, and the precise extent of its involvement in the South Sudanese conflict cannot be established at this time. Both the SPLA and SPLA-IO are trying to draw attention to outside involvement in the conflict in order to weaken support for their opponent.

Regardless of any SAF support to the SPLA-IO, there are tensions between SAF and the SPLA on the South Kordofan–Unity state border. On 4 August four SAF soldiers were killed in an SPLA ambush after they were caught trying to steal copper cables from the El Naar oil field in Pariang county. It appears that the SAF soldiers were acting independently and not as part of a concerted GoS campaign to occupy northern Unity state.

The SPLA also often has only a loose control of the soldiers putatively under its command. This is one of the reasons that the agreement on the cessation of hostilities is so rarely adhered to—neither side is in total control of its own forces. While mutinies and desertions have affected the SPLA in Unity much less than in Northern and Western Bahr el Ghazal states, soldiers have nonetheless preyed on local communities, as in Rubkona in July, when SPLA forces raided the cattle camps of communities that they believed were loyal to the SPLA-IO. The SPLA-IO forces are not better disciplined. On 19–21 August SPLA-IO forces from Guit and Rubkona raided livestock from communities in Mayom county. Economic circumstances in the state are straitened and soldiers are increasingly preying on local communities to survive.



Humanitarian situation

The humanitarian situation in the state is dire. As of mid-September 2014 some 289,300 people have been displaced in Unity due to the conflict, which has also made it difficult to provide aid supplies. A truck carrying humanitarian supplies hit a land mine on 6 June between Bentiu and Rubkona, and aid organizations complain of armed groups looting their supplies at airstrips and at impromptu roadblocks. The conflict has also blocked trade routes, causing higher prices throughout the state. For instance, much of Koch county remains under the control of the SPLA-IO, and the the central trade route to Bentiu is thus blocked. Supplies come into Koch from Mayom county, but prices are extremely high. The whole state has been affected by heavy rainfall, which since April has been 150 per cent of normal, causing flooding in Panyijar county in July that led to crop failure. At the beginning of August thousands of people were displaced in Mayom county due to heavy flooding. On 8 August Médecins Sans Frontières said that over 40,000 people were living in flooded conditions at the UNMISS base in Bentiu.

IGAD mediators continue to struggle to reconcile the opposing sides during ongoing negotiations in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. In such a situation, with neither side able to win militarily, the humanitarian crisis in Unity looks set to continue, amid intermittent clashes.

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