

The Conflict in Unity State (18 March 2014 update)

Since the SPLA regained control of Bentiu, the state capital, on 10 January, government forces have made steady progress against the rebels. While the north and west of Unity saw the most clashes in the first month of South Sudan's conflict, Abiemnom, Rubkona, Guit, and Pariang counties are now firmly under government control, though there is still a rebel presence in Mayom county. In February and March, the conflict in Unity centred on the southern and central counties of Koch, Leer, and Panyijar: areas that—along with Mayendit county—are the main areas of rebel support in the state. Following the SPLA's attack on Leer at the beginning of February, much of the rebel movement fled into the bush. This gave the conflict a new tempo, as detached rebel units intermittently clashed with SPLA forces, but neither side engaged the other in pitched battles. While the SPLA is now in control of much of the state, it remains highly unlikely it will be able to return Unity to pre-conflict level of security without a political solution—the territory in question is simply too large, and the enemy elusive. In the meantime, Unity state is struggling with a humanitarian emergency that the oncoming rainy season threatens to exacerbate.

Following the SPLA's successful capture of Bentiu, most of the remaining rebel forces fled south, while pro-government troops looted and burned much of Bentiu and the surrounding area, including almost all of Rubkona market. By 13 January, Joseph Nguen Monytuel, the caretaker governor of Unity state, entered the capital, with his ministers. Over the next two months, civilians returned to Bentiu. By 4 February, the UN reported that over half of the people seeking shelter at the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) compound had returned to the town, and by 10 March, the Bentiu market had re-opened. Despite this improvement in life, the situation remains tenuous: by 14 March, more than 6,000 people were again seeking shelter at UNMISS, in anticipation of future clashes, and the number was rising.

The rebel's loss of Bentiu engendered a loss of confidence among members of the SPLA's 4th division who had defected to James Koang Chuol's rebellion. The number of troops that deserted and returned to the SPLA is contested. Mabek Lang, the deputy caretaker governor, claimed that 250 soldiers returned to Bentiu at the end of January, while Colonel John Malok, a state security advisor, put the number at 700 on 27 January. These desertions have not been confirmed.

Following the capture of Bentiu, the SPLA forces followed the retreating rebels. The next two months would see fighting focused on Koch, Leer, and Panyijar counties, as the SPLA moved south. On 24 January, just one day after both sides signed a ceasefire agreement in Addis Ababa, the SPLA attacked rebel positions at Dan Dok, 50 km south of Bentiu. On 31 January, government forces retook Thar Jath, the oilfield run by Sudd Petroleum Operating Company (SPOC) where clashes first occurred on 20 December. The conflict in Unity also spilled across its borders; at the beginning of February, suspected rebel forces based in Mayendit county, conducted a cattle raid in Tonj North county, Warrap state, killing 24 people. A further attack targeted Tonj East county, in the same week, killing nine people.

The SPLA advanced through Koch county at the end of January, attacking Leer town, the administrative centre of Leer county, at the beginning of February. UN satellite imagery from 2 February indicates that a large portion of the town was burned down, including 1,556 residential structures. The attack on Leer was particularly destructive because around 40,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) had fled to Leer County, some 130 km from Bentiu, following January's clashes. The SPLA attack forced many of these IDPs further south. Médecins Sans Frontières evacuated the town on 31 January, just before the clashes began. On their return, they discovered that Leer hospital was largely destroyed, leaving southern Unity without a single operative hospital for more than 250,000 people.

Following the SPLA's conquest of Leer, the GRSS appointed Stephen Taker Riek as commissioner. Riek was previously commissioner of Leer, until Taban Deng Gai—the former governor of Unity, and one of Riek Machar's closest supporters—dismissed him, following local protests against his rule. He is locally unpopular, as is the presence of the SPLA. Leer county is Riek Machar's home county, and some of the excessive use of force in Leer is no doubt intended as a psychological blow against the rebel leader. The rebel forces accuse the SPLA of executing Nuer chiefs in Leer: on the 1 March, they claim, Nhial Chakuoth Malek and Machek Ninrew Lieh were taken from their houses in Gou payam, and killed, mirroring previous targeted executions in Panyijar county in February. These executions have not been confirmed, but they would be consonant with the SPLA's targeted killing of ethnic Nuer civilians elsewhere in the state.

SPLA forces from Lakes state also attacked rebel positions in Panyijar county at the beginning of February. On 7 February, attacks on a series of villages in the area killed 29 people, and forced the IDP's present in Panyijar to flee once again, into the wetlands around the White Nile. Approximately 45,000 IDPs have fled to areas around Ganyel and Nyal towns, where they lack basic supplies.

Rebel forces are now dispersed in Guit, Koch, Mayendit and Leer counties, and the SPLA has control of most of southern Unity state. Clashes were reported in Guit and Koch counties on 16 February, and there is continuing insecurity in Leer and the surrounding counties. Many people in southern Unity are living in very difficult conditions in the bush, whilst as of 3 March, Leer town remains deserted, in part because of local fears that the town will be subject to renewed clashes. Rebel forces have attacked SPLA troops holding Leer town at least twice in the last month, once on 10 March, leaving 21 dead and again on 14 March: in both cases, the SPLA repelled the attackers.

The west of Unity, in Mayom county, witnessed some of the worst violence in January. Mayom town, the county's capital, remains deserted. According to UN satellite imagery, taken on 11 January, some 1,801 houses were burned in clashes that began on 27 December, when rebel forces were attacked by the SPLA and by South Sudan Liberation Army troops under the command of Matthew Puljang. By mid-January, the SPLA had secured control of most of Mayom county. However, rebel groups remain active in the bush. On 8 February, nine civilians were killed on the road into Bentiu. As transport routes through southern Unity—as well as into western Upper Nile—are largely cut off to the government, due to rebel activity, the westward

ARCHIVE
visit smallarmssurveysudan.org
for more recent updates



route to Warrap state is crucial to supplying Bentiu, and thus is a target for rebel groups. Further attacks occurred on 16 February, when rebel forces attack an aid convoy plying the route between Mayom and Yida, resulting in three contractors being kidnapped.

The humanitarian situation in the state is dire. There are 70,484 people at Yida refugee camp, as of 8 March 2014, and insecurity in Unity threatens aid supplies. In Pariang county, the security situation is calm, but as of 12 March, the UN estimates there are approximately 20,000 people displaced in the territory. In total, as of 13 March 2014, there are approximately 186,000 people displaced in Unity. On 25 February, the UN reported that it had managed to provide food to 30,000 IDPs. With the first rains coming early this year, and the March-April planting season disastrously interrupted, the food security situation in the state has the capacity to become even worse.

While rebel forces have now been displaced from the Thar Jath oil field, production has not yet resumed, with SPOC claiming that the security situation needs to be resolved, and even then, repair and maintenance work will need to be carried out. The Unity oil field—the largest in the state—was shut down from 19-22 December, and the oil facilities were damaged in the clashes of the last few months. The Greater Pioneer Operating Company, which runs the oil field, has now sent security staff back into the field, but even if the security situation remains stable, production will not resume in the next few months. For the GRSS, further diminution of its oil revenue could have disastrous effects on its ability to sustain itself during the conflict, and—most crucially—pay the remnants of the SPLA still loyal to the government. As of 6 March, the SPLA are carrying out security operations around the oil fields, to eliminate the remaining rebel presence.

18 March 2014