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The Conflict in Upper Nile State (18 March 2014 update)

Three months have elapsed since widespread conflict broke out in South Sudan, and Malakal, Upper Nile's state capital, remains deserted and largely burned to the ground. The state is patchwork of zones of control, with the rebels holding the largely Nuer south (Longochuk, Maiwut, Nasir, and Ulang counties), and the government retaining the north (Renk), east (Maban and Melut), and the crucial areas around Upper Nile's oil fields. The rest of the state is contested. The conflict in Upper Nile began as one between different factions within the SPLA but has now broadened to include the targeted ethnic killing of civilians by both sides. With the status of negotiations in Addis Ababa unclear, and the rebel's 14 March decision to refuse a regional peacekeeping force, conflict in the state shows no sign of ending in the near future. With the first of the seasonal rains now beginning, humanitarian costs of ongoing conflict are likely to be substantial.

Conflict began in Upper Nile on 24 December 2013, after a largely Nuer contingent of the Sudan People's Liberation Army's (SPLA) 7th division, under the command of General Gathoth Gatkuoth, declared their loyalty to former vice-president Riek Machar and clashed with government troops in Malakal. Fighting continued for three days. The central market was looted and shops set on fire. Clashes also occurred in Tunja (Panyikang county), Wanding (Nasir county), Ulang (Ulang county), and Kokpiet (Baliet county), as the SPLA's 7th division fragmented, largely along ethnic lines, and clashed among themselves, and with armed civilians.

The SPLA regained control of the state capital on 27 December. Government forces received support from General Johnson Olony, whose forces accepted an amnesty in June 2013. Olony then moved his 3,000 troops into Kodok, Fashoda county, on the west bank of the Nile. Just as in Unity state, where the former rebel forces of the South Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SSLM/A) are fighting alongside the SPLA, shifting state-politics have pushed Olony's largely Shilluk forces into closer alliance with the SPLA.

There is continuing animosity between Olony's troops and the now-rebel Nuer forces that, before December 2013, were SPLA troops deployed in Manyo county. These forces had previously been under the command of the Bul Nuer commander Peter Gadet, who is now leading the rebellion in Jonglei state. These forces repelled Olony's 2011 attack on Owachi, in Panyikang county—the headquarters of the SPLA's 7th Division—and then detained and harassed Shilluk civilians in Malakal in 2010-11. What was a hostile relationship between the Shilluk and the SPLA—prior to the outbreak of the rebellion—has now been transformed into clashes between Olony's forces and the former-SPLA, now rebel troops stationed in Manyo county.

As the SPLA regained control of Malakal, the rebel forces withdrew to Ulang county, and from there to Nasir county, the former stronghold of Riek Machar during the second civil war. Gatkuoth is a Gajiok Nuer from Nasir county who previously served as an advisor on security issues for the governor, Simon Kun Puoch, who also hails from Nasir. This indicates the degree to which, despite the high levels of inter-ethnic violence experienced by Upper Nile state, the conflict is as much intra-ethnic, as rival Nuer commanders fight each other.

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Sporadic clashes continued in the state in early January, with the SPLA pre-emptively splitting in Fashoda county to avoid violence, and splits also emerging in Adong, Baliet, and Obel. In many cases, these splits do not seem to be motivated by a grand strategy, but are dictated by anxiety and tension on the ground—soldiers fear if they do not pre-emptively split and declare their loyalty to the relevant faction, they will be attacked.

Following rebel attacks on 12 January at Gorachell and Adong, some 80 km south of the state capital, the rebels managed to recapture Malakal on 14 January, bombarding the city early in the morning and recapturing it during the afternoon. Dissident elements of SPLA's 7th division were supplemented by large groups of young Nuer fighters recruited in Longochuk, Maiwut, Nasir, and Ulang counties. Witnesses reported several thousand fighters were involved (rebel claims of 20,000 fighters have not been substantiated). When the rebels captured Malakal, they engaged in widespread looting and the killing of civilians—often on an ethnic basis.

On 20 January, the government again recaptured Malakal, and the SPLA also looted and burned civilian properties, this time carrying out the targeted killing of Nuer men. Despite the ceasefire agreement both sides signed on 23 January, clashes continued in Upper Nile. On 5 February, Gatkuoth issued a statement indicating that he rejected the ceasefire arrangement and would continue fighting until Kiir left office. James Dak, Machar's spokesperson, claimed that Gatkuoth's statement was misconstrued, but subsequent events indicated that Gatkuoth had little intention of abiding by the cessation of hostilities agreement.

Clashes continued at the beginning of February, with the rebels making steady gains against the SPLA. On 11 February, the rebel forces attacked Owachi, the SPLA 7th division headquarters. While the SPLA claimed they repulsed the rebels, officials in the local administration claimed that the rebels overran the government forces. In subsequent days, the rebels attacked positions at Baliet, and gradually encircled the state capital, advancing to Doleib, just south of Malakal, on 15-16 February.

The rebels again recaptured Malakal on 18 February, in an attack that began early in the morning from three directions, with rebel forces advancing from the south, north, and east. Troops fighting with Olony, who was defending the south of Malakal, reported that Nuer soldiers still aligned with the government in the north and east of the city left their positions during the attack, cutting off radio contact with their fellow fighters in the south. On 21 February, the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS) claimed that this was a 'tactical withdrawal' to the southern part of the city, but other sources inside the state government claim that the SPLA troops fled west and north. During the attack, Olony was shot in the neck but survived. Garang Tong Atak, a Malual Dinka from Northern Bahr el Ghazal and a respected SPLA brigadier, was killed in the attack.

The damage to the town after the battle of 18 February was extensive. Looting continued, and on 20 February, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) said that displaced people were reporting the rape and killing of their relatives. Human Rights Watch subsequently said that there were credible reports of rebel forces killing people within

Malakal hospital, with MSF reporting that patients were shot in their beds. As of mid-March, Malakal is almost entirely deserted, and its pre-conflict population is living in the UN base at Malakal and in the surrounding villages, with the UN reporting that some 116,300 people are displaced in the state as a whole as of 13 March. With the rainy season now beginning, humanitarian resources are extremely stretched, and—given that March is normally the beginning of the planting season—the absence of a harvest this year could have catastrophic effects.

Following their recapture of Malakal, the rebels initially moved north-east, towards Akoka county, on the road to Upper Nile's principal oil installation at Paloich. Akoka fell to the rebels on 20 February. Clashes also occurred around Melut, to the west of Paloich. Some rebel forces also moved east, to Guel Guk, on the border of Maban county, and only 30 km south of Adar, one of the state's main oil fields, where clashes broke out on 24 February. The SPLA rebuffed rebel attacks on Adar and Paloich in February, however.

Witnesses in Malakal report that at the beginning of March, rebel forces announced their intention to capture the oil fields, presumably to attempt to use them as a source of income. But without the technical staff, and the Government of Sudan's acquiescence, the oil fields, and the oil processing facility at Paloich, cannot be used by the rebels. Cutting off GRSS access to vitally needed oil income by shutting down the fields is an important strategic goal for the rebels, however, and would be an important card at the negotiating table.

The ongoing conflict in the state has impacted oil production, but not as drastically as in Unity, where oil extraction has already stopped entirely. On 20 February, an official in the GRSS oil ministry said that production in Unity had fallen to 170,000 barrels per day (from 200,000 before the conflict—80% of South Sudan's total oil production) due to difficulties getting technical assistance and supplies to the oil field. Clashes in Malakal hindered road access, and leaving the GRSS reliant on unreliable river transport.

The high political stakes associated with the oil fields are indicated by the controversial sacking of Francis Ayul from his position as state minister of petroleum in Upper Nile. On 21 February, Ayul told Bloomberg that oil companies were shutting down production at the Adar and Gumri oil fields, and evacuating foreign workers to Juba. The next day, the GRSS denied that this was the case, and claimed that the national government had not been consulted on those decisions. Three days later, GRSS President Salva Kiir sacked Ayul without comment. While it has not been determined whether Adar has fully shut down, several of the international oil companies have removed their personnel, hampering extraction operations. In contrast, as 17 March 2014, all the Upper Nile state oil fields remain in the hands of government forces.

Since the end of February, the rebel's advance in Upper Nile has slowed, and clashes are more geographically dispersed. On the west bank of the Nile, there were initially few clashes, with initial battles limited to Manyo County, where there were battles on 18 January at Wadakona, leading up to a rebel occupation of the important port of Kaka. On 24 January, government forces retook Kaka. There were further clashes in

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Manyo county on 10 February.

Despite initial splits in the SPLA in Fashoda county, which is led by the Nuer commander, Thomas Tut, Fashoda remained calm through February. Fashoda is Olony heartland, and his forces largely guarantee the security of the area. On 28 February, however, rebel forces crossed the Nile, and attacked Fashoda county, though they were repulsed. The deleterious effect of the clashes in Fashoda—which is principally Shilluk—is compounded by the presence of refugees from South Kordofan around Kodok, the county capital. The refugees are particularly at risk of attack from rebel forces, as they are accused of being members of the Sudan Revolutionary Front, which the rebels claim is working with the SPLA. As of 15 March, however, Fashoda, like much of the west bank of the Nile, remains firmly in the hands of the SPLA. Ironically, this is partly because the SPLA troops that attacked Shilluk communities in the area in 2010-11 are now largely part of the rebel forces.

Maban county, which borders Blue Nile in Sudan, is also firmly in the hands of the government. However, tension has risen in the area after SPLA forces from Melut—which has also declared its loyalty to Kiir—occupied part of Maban, around the edge of the Gumri and Adar oil fields, leading to a war of words between the two county commissioners in the middle of February. Maban county, just north of the rebel heartlands of Longochuk and Nasir, has announced it will organize defense forces against external threats.

Instability in Upper Nile has also spilled over into the large refugee camps in Maban. On 3 March, five refugees from Blue Nile were killed in clashes between Ingessana refugees at the Yusuf Batil camp, and host communities in Maban county. At least another person died in further clashes at the Jendrasa camp on 6 March. These clashes are partly motivated by greatly increased tensions in the state at large, and by the subsequent difficulty in getting food into the state, with transport between Ethiopia and South Sudan frequently interrupted, leading to food shortages, and aggravating tensions between refugees from Blue Nile and the host community.

Renk, in the north of Upper Nile State, was largely unaffected by clashes in the first two months of the conflict, and remains a bastion of government support. However, the county received large numbers of refugees fleeing Malakal, Ajoka, and Baliet. Road transport from Malakal to Renk was also disrupted due to the attacks in January and February. By the end of February, many people in Renk started to flee north, towards Sudan. This situation will no doubt be aggravated by the 10 March decision by the state government of Upper Nile to temporarily move the state capital to Renk because of the rebels' occupation of Malakal. On 10 March, there was a rally against this decision in Renk town, and community leaders of the Abialang Dinka subsequently filed a petition to the county commissioner asking the state government to reverse its decision; the community fears that if Renk were to become the state capital, it would invite rebel attack.

The largely Nuer counties in the south of Upper Nile state, bordering Ethiopia and Jonglei state, are the basis for the rebel's support, and provides many of the fighters currently in combat elsewhere in the state. The importance of Nasir county, in particular, was indicated on 2 March, when the GRSS spokesman at talks in Addis

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Ababa claimed that the Machar delegation refused to allow Nasir to be included in the list of areas that to be monitored by ceasefire observers. On 4 March, Nasir county ordered all police forces in the area to report to Nasir town, pending redeployment to Malakal—this included the forces from Longochuk, Nasir, and Ulang counties.

As of mid-March, several areas of Upper Nile remain contested, including Payikang county, where there were ongoing clashes in Tonga Payam at the beginning of March, and Malakal county, at Lelo and south of Akoka. The clashes south of Akoka on 5-6 March indicate that prior rebel advances are not irreversible. These clashes are reportedly between rebel forces and local Dinka community fighters. Guel Guk, south of the Adar oil field, is also still contested. On 14 March, the SPLA launched yet another attack on rebel-occupied Malakal from the north and east of the city, with fighting on 17 March centred on Khor Nyingara, to the north of Malakal town. As of 18 March, the rebels retain control of Malakal.

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