



## **The Conflict in Upper Nile State**

*Describes events through 9 October 2014*

On 9 May 2014 the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army in Opposition (SPLM/A-IO) recommitted to the 23 January agreement on the cessation of hostilities. However, while the onset of the rainy season reduced the intensity of the conflict over the next four months, clashes continued. Neither side has established a decisive advantage. The Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) retains control of Malakal, the Upper Nile state capital, and much of the centre and west of the state. The period from May to August saw intermittent clashes around Nasir, as the SPLA-IO unsuccessfully attempted to recapture the town, which had been the centre of its recruitment drives during the first four months of the conflict. The main area of SPLA-IO operations is now around Wadakona in Manyo county, on the west bank of the Nile. In September rebels based in this area launched repeated assaults on Renk county near the GRSS's sole remaining functioning oil field at Paloich.

Oil production in Upper Nile was seriously reduced by clashes in February and March 2013, and stopped altogether in Unity state in December 2013. The SPLA increasingly struggles to pay its soldiers' wages. On 6 September fighting broke out in the south of Malakal after soldiers commanded by Major General Johnson Olony, who had previously led the principally Shilluk South Sudan Defence Movement/Army, complained about unpaid wages. Members of the Abialang Dinka, who live close to Paloich, report that the SPLA is training 1,500 new recruits due to desertions and troops joining the rebels. Losing control of Paloich would cut the GRSS's last major source of income and make funding its army extremely difficult. Breaking SPLA control of Paloich is accordingly the SPLA-IO's principal military objective in Upper Nile.

As of 28 September 2014 Renk county and the oil-producing parts of Melut county remain under SPLA control. The area is currently defended by troops from the SPLA's 1st Division and 'oil protection forces' made up of local Abialang Dinka militias. In September and October these forces will be assisted by Chinese peacekeepers deploying under UN Security Council Resolution 2155, who are mandated to protect areas at high risk of conflict, including the oil fields. The deployment is controversial because China has an enormous economic stake in oil production in both Sudan and South Sudan—it has the largest stake (40 per cent) in the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company that runs the oil field. Furthermore, in July the arrival in Mombasa, Kenya, of a shipment that included 10,000 Chinese-made Type 56 rifles and more than 20 million rounds of ammunition destined for Juba also complicated China's engagement in the South Sudan crisis. Critics allege that the Chinese peacekeepers will effectively be partisan supporters of the GRSS.

Since April 2014 the rhythm of the conflict in Upper Nile has been dictated by the timing of peace negotiations in Ethiopia. When negotiations are about to begin, clashes tend to occur in the



state, as both sides attempt to maximize the territorial area under their control before the putative resumption of the ceasefire agreement. As the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) special envoy, Seyoum Mesfin, put it, such clashes can also create a sideshow ‘aimed at derailing the peace process’. As of 9 October with negotiations stalled in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia, this pattern is likely to continue.

### **The battle for Nasir**

In the run-up to negotiations on 9 May the GRSS redoubled its assault on Nasir town, a strategically important site for traffic on the Sobat River, which is an important tributary of the White Nile. In the first four months of the conflict Nasir was also the base for the SPLA-IO’s recruitment of the so-called ‘white army’ (*jiech mabor*), i.e. temporary Nuer militia mobilizations originally created to defend local communities against attack. Disrupting the SPLA-IO’s capacity to recruit new members remains a high priority for the SPLA.

The SPLA seized control of Nasir on 4 May, with IGAD’s Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (MVM), which was designed to oversee January’s agreement on the cessation of hostilities, blaming the GRSS for initiating the violence. Paul Malong Awan, the SPLA chief of staff, later admitted that government attacks on SPLA-IO positions in Baliet, Ulang, and Nasir counties at the beginning of May were intended to seize territory in advance of the GRSS’s 9 May recommitment to the agreement on the cessation of hostilities. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees stated that the SPLA’s attack on Nasir sent over 11,000 mostly Nuer refugees fleeing into Ethiopia in fear that the SPLA would target civilians because of their ethnicity. In Maban county the SPLA’s offensive also led to a wave of desertions, as Nuer soldiers left their posts and crossed into areas controlled by the SPLA-IO.

The rebel forces then mobilized new recruits in Longochuk, Maiwut, Nasir, and Ulang counties in order to attack SPLA positions around Nasir town. These four counties constitute the wellspring of SPLA-IO support in Upper Nile. The rebels launched unsuccessful assaults on Nasir town on 31 May and 3 June. The SPLA attacked SPLA-IO positions around Nasir from 16 to 25 June, with the SPLA-IO retaliating on 26 June. SPLA forces retained control of the town.

In the face of these attacks the GRSS attempted to strengthen its control of the county. On 18 July Simon Kun Puoc, the governor of Upper Nile, appointed Liech Bany to the position of Nasir county commissioner and made the previous commissioner, Dak Tap, the state minister for physical infrastructure. Bany, who has extensive military experience, is considered an appropriate appointment as a wartime commissioner.

There were more extensive clashes around Nasir from 20 to 23 July. SPLA-IO forces commanded by Gathoth Gatkouth and principally composed of members of the *jiech mabor* attacked Nasir early on 20 July, crossing the Sobat from the east and forcing the SPLA to



withdraw to the outskirts of the town. By 23 July, however, the SPLA had retaken control of Nasir, with at least 100 people estimated killed in the clashes. SPLA sources claim that more than 1,000 fighters were subsequently sent to reinforce its forces in Nasir.

On 10 August the SPLA-IO again attacked Nasir and was again repulsed in clashes that left at least 30 rebels dead. The SPLA-IO claimed that the SPLA initiated these clashes by advancing on its positions south-east of Nasir town, but the findings of the MVM do not support this claim. As of the end of September an uneasy détente prevails in the Nuer south of Upper Nile. The GRSS retains control of Nasir, but the SPLA-IO controls much of the countryside around it.

### **Ethnic tensions in Maban county**

Maban county was relatively peaceful during the first five months of the South Sudanese conflict, although it struggled to cope with the consequences of Sudan's civil war over the border. The county is home to three refugee camps that house at least 125,000 refugees from the conflict in neighbouring Blue Nile state, Sudan. In part due to straitened economic circumstances in the county, tensions between the refugees and host communities increased in March and April 2014.

James Pasha, then the Maban county commissioner, expressed his concern in May about deepening ethnic divisions within the SPLA. The army has increasingly divided its soldiers by ethnicity to avoid altercations in the ranks, with Nuer soldiers transferred from Jemaam to the county headquarters at Bunj and Dinka soldiers redeployed to Jemamm. The criticism clearly touched a nerve. On 18 July Simon Kun Puoc, the governor of Upper Nile, sacked Pasha and replaced him with Tumati Nau, who the state government sees as a more pliable commissioner.

Ethnic tensions in the state increased at the end of July after SPLA-IO troops moved towards the Adar Yiel oil field on the border between Baliet and Maban, attacking SPLA positions in the area. On 3 August clashes broke out in Bunj between Nuer SPLA soldiers and members of the Maban Defence Force (MDF), a state-sanctioned local militia. Sources in the SPLA claim that the clashes started because the SPLA soldiers had recently been transferred from Renk and the MDF was uncertain about their loyalty to the GRSS. The clashes left between four and 12 people dead. Following the clashes, groups of Nuer soldiers deserted, and the MDF and Nuer SPLA deserters clashed intermittently around Bunj as the soldiers moved north towards the agricultural areas on the Maban–Renk county border line.

On 4–5 August the MDF targeted Nuer civilians in Bunj, killing at least seven, including staff members of Relief International and Norwegian People's Aid. After these attacks 240 aid workers were evacuated and most humanitarian organizations temporarily suspended their operations in the county. Several NGO compounds were subsequently looted, undermining the



county's ability to cope with its refugee population. On 6 August the arrival of 500 refugees from Blue Nile at the Gendrassa refugee camp exacerbated this situation.

By 24 August humanitarian agencies had resumed work in the county. While the Maban county commissioner indicated that the MDF would be disarmed, on 1 September David Kwara, the member of Parliament for Maban county, said that the MDF was a legal entity and would not be disarmed. As of the end of September the MDF remains active, which is indicative of a more general trend in Upper Nile. With government forces unable to secure a decisive victory over the SPLA-IO, many communities have begun organizing themselves into local militias, e.g. there are Shilluk defence forces on the west bank of the Nile and Dinka militias in Renk. In the absence of effective state power, these militias indicate the degree to which an increasingly important part of the current conflict is determined by a series of local and relatively autonomous military actors.

### **The struggle for Renk and the Doleib hills**

As of 3 October Renk county is the site of the most intense military clashes in Upper Nile. Renk is an important transport site for trade with Sudan and riverine traffic with Malakal. It is also home to a number of mechanized agricultural projects that make it one of South Sudan's most productive food-producing counties. Most importantly, it is close to the oil pipeline that runs from the Paloich field in Melut county.

The SPLA-IO has made Wadakona, in the Shilluk part of Manyo county, its base of operations, from where it launches attacks on SPLA positions in Renk county, on the east bank of the White Nile. On 13 May the SPLA-IO launched coordinated attacks on SPLA positions 45 km south of Renk town and in the Doleib hills south of Malakal. Fighting continued until 16 May in Manyo and Renk counties, with the SPLA-IO concentrating its assault on Bambay. The SPLA successfully repelled all the SPLA-IO attacks.

The Doleib hills are a strategically important location on the major road from Jonglei state to Malakal, on the northern bank of the Sobat. Doleib's proximity to Jonglei means that the SPLA-IO can launch attacks on SPLA positions in the hills from its bases at Canal and Khor Fulus in Pigi county, Jonglei. The SPLA-IO need to take the Doleib hills before it can advance on Malakal. Attacks on the SPLA in Renk are frequently twinned with attacks on the Doleib hills, indicating that the SPLA-IO retains a degree of military coherence in Upper Nile and reaffirming its two principal military targets in the state: Malakal, the state capital, and Paloich, Upper Nile's remaining functional oil field.

On 6 June the SPLA-IO redoubled its assault on Renk, attacking SPLA forces at Abu Khadra, north of Renk town, and Majak, to the south of the town, while shelling Renk town itself. The SPLA retained control of these areas subsequent to these clashes, which continued through 9



June. However, the SPLA's 1<sup>st</sup> Division has suffered from persistent desertions. In part, this is due to the SPLA's erratic payment of its troops. After 2005 the 1st Division absorbed Nuer militia troops from the South Sudan Liberation Army, many of whose commanders are now fighting for the SPLA-IO. These troops' increasing alienation from the administration in Juba is another reason the 1<sup>st</sup> Division is experiencing so many desertions.

At the end of August, in the run-up to negotiations in Addis Ababa, clashes broke out again. On 21 August the SPLA-IO launched an attack on SPLA positions in the Doleib hills. On 3 September there were further clashes in Renk county and the SPLA pushed the SPLA-IO back to the west bank of the White Nile. The latest series of intensive clashes began on 18 September. The SPLA-IO launched simultaneous attacks at Gongbaar, Dukduk, and Jerbaga, north-east of Renk town, on SPLA positions on the eastern bank of the Nile in Renk county and in the Doleib hills south of Malakal. The SPLA-IO forced the SPLA to withdraw from the three villages north-east of Renk. Approximately 45,000 people fled Renk town, fearing an SPLA-IO assault. The next day government forces counter-attacked and the rebels withdrew north. Following these attacks the SPLA reinforced the 102nd Battalion of the 1st Division, which is deployed along the border with Sudan in Upper Nile.

This deployment comes amid GRSS claims that the SPLA-IO troops involved in the attacks north-east of Renk came from Sennar state in Sudan. Sources also report that large numbers of rebel fighters were seen in northern Blue Nile moving towards Sennar in the run-up to the clashes. After the assault on north-east Renk injured SPLA-IO troops were treated at Damazin military hospital in Blue Nile.

The SPLA echoes these reports, claiming that large numbers of SPLA-IO fighters are in Blue Nile and that the Government of Sudan (GoS) is actively supporting the rebels. The SPLA further alleges that the SPLA-IO withdrew from Renk to Jebalyn, just over the border in White Nile state, Sudan, where it now has around 700 troops. At the beginning of October local sources in Renk reported that the SPLA-IO was recruiting among civilians at the Renk–White Nile border-crossing point.

Following these clashes the GRSS paraded on national television SPLA-IO hostages supposedly captured during the clashes around Renk and claimed that the GoS was supporting the rebels. The SPLA-IO dismisses the SPLA's claims as groundless, while the GoS also denies supporting rebels inside South Sudan. However, it seems increasingly likely that the GoS is offering support to the SPLA-IO. If confirmed, this development is in part due to the SPLA's ongoing close relations with the Justice and Equality Movement, which is a Sudanese rebel group, and in part a means of exerting further control over the oil-rich border region in Upper Nile.

As of 28 September the SPLA retains control of both the Doleib hills and the areas around Renk, with the SPLA-IO based on the west side of the Nile around Wadakona, and to the north and east



of Renk town. The oil field at Paloich remains under GRSS control. Abialang Dinka militias recruited after December 2013 largely constitute the force protecting the oil field. The Abialang Dinka have suffered retributory attacks, with the SPLA-IO killing more than 25 civilians at the end of September in villages south of Renk town. While the Abialang Dinka remain loyal to the GRSS, they are increasingly disgruntled with the state government. On 2 September a delegation from the Abialang Dinka called for the removal of Simon Kun Puoc, the governor of Upper Nile, and the division of the state into smaller units to better represent its communities and to counter the marginalization of the Abialang Dinka. The chief of the community also complained about the insecurity caused by the rebel presence in the state and the non-payment of wages to the 'oil protection forces'. The loss of this force due to desertion would be a heavy blow to the SPLA. On 18 September a group of community leaders from Maban echoed the Abialang Dinka's call for Puoc's removal and complained about their lack of representation in the state government.

These displays of disaffection indicate the degree to which there is growing discontent with state government in Upper Nile. With negotiations in Ethiopia stalled and the SPLA-IO still moving troops into the areas around Renk, the stage is set in the coming months for a series of clashes over Upper Nile's oil fields.

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