

The Conflict in Blue Nile

Along with fighting in South Kordofan and the occupation of Abyei, the Blue Nile conflict is a ‘frontline’ in post-CPA intra-Sudanese military conflict. Of the three, Blue Nile has received comparatively little attention, despite the state’s strategic significance. Three-quarters of Nile waters enter Sudan in Blue Nile and the state sits at the crossroads of Western Ethiopia, South Sudan, and the Northern Nile Valley. Since its eruption in September 2011, fighting in Blue Nile pits the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and its allied militias against the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N). The forces that make up the SPLM-N are historically northern but maintain strong ties to their old comrades in South Sudan.

History of conflict through 2005

The region that now encompasses Blue Nile state was once the heartland of the Funj kingdom; under 19th century Ottoman-Egyptian colonial rule it became a target for slave-raiding. In modern times, President Ja’afar Nimeiri (1969–85), imposed top-down agricultural reforms in Blue Nile as a source of exports for the Middle East and Africa. His real intention was to use the introduction of mechanised agriculture to establish firm political control over the rural peripheries where Sudan’s traditional parties opposed his dominance in Khartoum. The reforms eroded their grip, but the programme ended up displacing thousands of small landholders and pastoralists.

When the SPLM/A invaded Kurmuk in 1987 during the second Sudanese civil war, many locals—often those previously displaced by Nimeiri and his functionaries—joined the rebel war against Khartoum. The regime of *Sheikh* Hassan al Turabi and President Omar al Bashir inherited the conflict, but intensified it when they declared Blue Nile a model province for Islamizing Sudanese society and crushing secularist forces. From 1995 onwards, thousands of Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers backed the SPLM/A in this conflict. Despite this regionalization of the war, Khartoum managed to control most of the state but could not prevent the second fall of Kurmuk in 1997. While fears about a possible attack on the Roseires Dam and the Nile Valley never materialized, the SPLM/A held on to Blue Nile’s southernmost tip and effectively wore down SAF in the Western part of the state. Thousands died during almost 20 years of bitter civil war in Blue Nile.

Comprehensive Peace Agreement period

Reaching agreement about how to resolve the deep crisis in Blue Nile—while protecting all parties’ strategic interests—proved one of the most difficult elements of the peace negotiations that led to the CPA. SPLM/A chairman John Garang and local commander Malik Agar saw the region as critical to the SPLM/A’s ‘New Sudan’ project of transforming the state and decentralizing wealth and power; for the Sudanese regime, Blue Nile was the frontline of its Islamist state-building project.

The final provisions of the CPA covering Blue Nile satisfied almost no one. A six-year power-sharing arrangement included a vaguely worded ‘popular consultation’, intended to give residents a voice in how to restructure their relationship with Khartoum and address the conflict’s root causes. A tenuous peace held in the state for five years, with the SPLM/A and the National Congress Party (NCP) co-existing

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under the governorship of Malik Agar (SPLM/A) and his deputy Ahmed Koromino (NCP), one of the local leaders of the Islamization campaign during the war.

Contested state elections of April 2010, which returned Agar to the governorship, exposed the unresolved underlying conflicts. The NCP accused the SPLM/A of fraud; the SPLM complained that Khartoum had refused to invest in the state or transfer promised peace funds to mitigate ongoing massive poverty. The heightening of the Roseires Dam, critical for Sudan's electricity supply and its ambitious plans of reviving irrigated agriculture, became another focus of tension. The project displaced tens of thousands of local residents, often for the second or third time, with little or no benefits accruing to the state.

The first round of popular consultation culminating in January 2011 revealed a widening divide between NCP supporters, who mainly lobbied for more investment and development aid for the state, and SPLM/A supporters, who demanded the highest possible degree of autonomy from NCP-controlled Khartoum. A proposed February 2011 visit to state capital Al Damazin by Ali Osman Taha, Sudanese vice-president and driving force behind the Islamization effort of the 1990s, was abandoned amid growing protests. On the eve of South Sudan's independence, conflict broke out in neighbouring South Kordofan between SAF and the SPLM-N, raising tensions across the entire border region, already militarized.

In a last ditch attempt to save the peace, Malik Agar and NCP Deputy Chairman Nafie Ali Nafie concluded a Framework Agreement on political and security arrangements in Blue Nile and South Kordofan on 28 June under the auspices of African Union High Level Implementation Panel led by Thabo Mbeki and Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. But under pressure from hardliners in Khartoum, Bashir refused to endorse the agreement. Meanwhile, Government of South Sudan President and SPLA Chairman Salva Kiir refused to disarm the thousands of Blue Nile fighters who had fought with the South for a New Sudan.

The resumption of conflict

On the evening of 1 September 2011 fighting erupted in and around Al Damazin. SAF MiG fighter jets bombed SPLM-N strongholds across the state the following morning, while dozens of tanks and artillery—backed by thousands of fighters linked to the paramilitary Popular Defence Forces (PDF)—assaulted key positions in Al Damazin, including the governor's mansion, the residence of the commander of Blue Nile's Joint Integrated Units, and Malik Agar's popular cultural centre. SPLM-N, armed primarily with AK-47s, machine guns, and some light artillery, were quickly overwhelmed. Agar, ousted as governor by Bashir, was soon appointed commander of the SPLM-N forces.

The exact circumstances of the re-eruption of conflict remain unclear, with both sides accusing each other of carefully planning aggression. Yet within days of the initial fighting, the Sudanese government captured some 60 per cent of the state, with civilian rule suspended following Bashir's declaration of a state of emergency. Dozens of SPLM-N loyalists were arrested and have since disappeared. The rebels held swathes of Kurmuk and Bau locality, but Kurmuk town fell in early November after SAF and the PDF launched their 'Eid al Adha' offensive. The capture of the last



major urban centre in Blue Nile appeared to signal the complete defeat of Agar's forces. Bashir, who had promised a swift victory and performed Eid prayers with SAF recruits in Kurmuk, was buoyed among many Sudanese. But the conflict soon moved into a new phase.

Following SAF's initial triumphs in Damazin and Kurmuk, the conflict morphed into an unpredictable insurgency. SPLM-N forces—estimated to number between 2,500 and 4,000—stage hit-and-run strikes, seeking to expand their areas of control from the Ingessana Hills in Bau locality and the Yabus region in the southern tip of the state. As of July 2012 the SPLM-N claims control of 25 per cent of Blue Nile, while Khartoum puts that figure at 5-10 per cent.

The much better equipped SAF and PDF have grown increasingly frustrated with the continued insecurity since early 2012, as evidence mounts of South Sudan's financial, logistical, and military support to the northern rebels, who established rear bases in Upper Nile (South Sudan). As in South Kordofan, SAF aircraft engage in irregular bombardments of areas with an SPLM-N presence, triggering rebel claims of a policy of ethnic cleansing. It is hard to verify these claims, but the worsening humanitarian situation inside the state and in the refugee camps outside Blue Nile underline the severity of the current crisis.

Humanitarian impacts

Some 120,000 people—almost 20 per cent of the population—are thought to have fled Blue Nile into Upper Nile, to locations such as Jamam refugee camp, situated on a floodplain. The 40,000 people there are facing 'horrific living conditions' according to Médecins sans Frontières, which warned in July 2012 that mortality rates in the camp are nearly double the threshold for an emergency—due mainly to widespread malnourishment and unhygienic living conditions. Perhaps only one-third of all those displaced can access safe drinking water.

An estimated 30,000 refugees are also living in camps in Ethiopia's Assosa region, where they fled after September 2011. While some began returning to Sudan after the fall of Kurmuk, this trend seems to have been reversed since March 2012, with thousands of new arrivals escaping the fighting and the SAF bombardments. UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Gutierrez said in July that UNHCR operations in Upper Nile and Unity are 'close to breaking point' due to logistical challenges, lack of financial support, and, most crucially, the political impasse. It was only in late June that the Sudanese government, under heavy international pressure, accepted a UN humanitarian operation in SPLM-N held areas, giving aid workers access again to key areas inside Blue Nile where food insecurity is high.

Prospects for a resolution

While the conflict in Blue Nile has complex and deep local roots, its most important characteristic today is that it is an integral part of the 'war of attrition' that Khartoum and Juba have been waging after Southern secession in July 2011. Bashir's regime is relying on a combination of an economic blockade through a closed border, support for proxy forces, and ethno-regional tensions to force concessions from South Sudan. Juba is hoping that the growing economic crisis in the North—exacerbated by the

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South's decision to stop producing oil—will end Khartoum's willingness to continue the conflict and will trigger a popular movement to oust the NCP from power.

Meanwhile, on-and-off negotiations in Addis Ababa, under the auspices of the African Union, have made little progress. Both sides continue to believe in a 'winner takes all' strategy of proxy wars, even if both Khartoum and Juba have committed themselves to negotiating 'security arrangements first' (as underlined by UN resolution 2046), which would require an end to mutual destabilization in frontline states like Blue Nile. The SPLA and GoSS are unlikely to abandon Malik Agar and their northern comrades; Khartoum is equally committed to suppressing the rebellion in the state. At present, a political resolution remains difficult to envision.

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