



The Crisis in South Sudan:

A Podcast with HSBA Consultant Joshua Craze

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Interviewer: What was the political crisis that began the conflict?

Joshua Craze: From 2005-14, South Sudan was effectively a one-party state. Disagreements and compromises within the ruling elite had to be worked out under the umbrella of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), which from 2005 onwards, began making an uncertain transition from a guerrilla movement to a political party with state power.

The current South Sudanese president Salva Kiir came to power in 2005 following the untimely death of John Garang, then the head of the SPLM. Kiir initially pursued an inclusive strategy, and attempted to assimilate the dissident voices of South Sudanese politics within the party. In a structurally similar move, he also absorbed a variety of militia forces within the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). However, after South Sudan's formal secession on 9 July 2011, Kiir increasingly centralized power and relied on a diminishing number of confidantes, as it became apparent that a number of figures within the SPLM would challenge Kiir for the leadership.

Over the course of 2013, Kiir dismissed a number of important political actors from their positions within the government, including Pagan Amum, the Secretary-General of the SPLM, Riek Machar, the Vice-President, and Taban Deng, the governor of Unity State—all of whom will later form part of the opposition. Much of last year's struggle over the political future of the country took place through the SPLM's internal mechanisms. It was an intra-party conflict. Kiir proceeded to suspend these internal mechanisms, including the political bureau, leaving little space for political dissent. In December 2013, this political battle became public, and violent.



Interviewer: So what happened in December?

JC: On 6 December, a rough-hewed coalition gave a press conference challenging Kiir's grip on the SPLM. The coalition included Rebecca Nyandeng, the wife of John Garang, Pagam Amum, and Deng Alor Kuol, one of the most important Ngok Dinka politicians, from the region of Abyei, which is contested by Sudan and South Sudan. What brought these figures—and others within South Sudan's political elite—together was not a unified program of political reform, but discontent with Salva Kiir.

Interviewer: Why were these politicians unhappy with Kiir?

JC: Kiir has gradually centralized power since 2005, blocking many important South Sudanese political constituencies from influence (and resources), and replacing them with people he felt would not pose a threat to his reign. He removed the governors of Lakes and Unity state, before finally dismissing his entire cabinet in July 2013. These tensions over power had become particularly acute after Kiir's decision to turn off oil production in 2012, which removed much of the government's income, and reduced its ability to absorb dissident forces within the ranks of the SPLA. Equally, many politicians, reflecting broader sentiments felt throughout the country, thought Kiir's government had failed to improve conditions—economically and politically—within South Sudan. Finally, there was (and is) a tension within the SPLM over South Sudan's relationship with its northern neighbour, with many senior figures (including those who now constitute the opposition), continuing to feel that until Sudan's ruling National Congress Party is removed from power, the Sudanese government remains a threat. This issue came to head in heated debates over the extent to which South Sudan should support the Sudan People's Liberation Army-North (SPLA-N) rebel force, which is active in Blue Nile and South Kordofan states, Sudan, and whose members previously formed part of the SPLA during the twenty-two year long civil war with Khartoum.

The day before violence broke out in Juba, there was a meeting of the SPLM's highest decision-making body, the National Liberation Council, which ended in acrimony.

What happened on 15 December remains contested. The SPLM claim that fighting



erupted as part of a coup-attempt planned by Riek Machar. There is no evidence for this claim. More likely, fighting began after an altercation between members of the Presidential Guard—a fighting force that answers directly to the presidency—and that quickly spread to Bilpam, the SPLA headquarters, and throughout Juba, South Sudan’s capital city. During these clashes, members of the SPLA targeted Nuer men and women, in a period of five days that saw massive numbers of extra-judicial killings, and left thousands of Nuer civilians fleeing to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). These attacks on Nuer civilians by principally Dinka members of the SPLA represent both latent ethnic tensions, and a sense that it was centrally a series of Nuer actors behind the alleged coup attempt.

Word of these attacks on Nuer civilians quickly circulated in South Sudan, and became the spark for rapidly escalating violence, as the conflict spread to Jonglei state on 16 December, when SPLA General Peter Gadet joined the rebellion, and thence to Unity and Upper Nile states. The rapid spread of these revolts indicates both a genuine sense of grievance at the killings in Juba, and also the degree to which the country was already riven by political and military fault-lines.

As of May 2014, negotiations in Addis Ababa are the primary arena for debates about the political crisis that began the South Sudanese conflict. Thus far, one of the prime debates has circled around whether the focus should be on a new transitional constitution, and a more general debate about government, or on a power-sharing government, and an immediate end to the violence. The negotiations in Addis Ababa also include figures in the SPLM that have refused to endorse the Sudan People’s Liberation Army-In Opposition (SPLA-IO), as the collective anti-government forces and political leaders have become known, and any developments in these negotiations are largely a—not unimportant question—of SPLM politics, whose developments may not directly tally with the development of the war on the ground.

Interviewer: How did this crisis morph into a military conflict?

JC: There was already a military crisis prior to the outbreak of conflict in December 2013. In large part, during the second civil war the SPLA was a series of groups

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whose primary loyalty was to their commanders, and their ranks were often drawn from the local population in the areas in which they operated: thus, for instance, the SPLA's 3rd division is based in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, is largely—but not entirely—Malual Dinka (a group that composes the state's principal residents) and largely loyal to Paul Malong Awan, who was the general in control of the region during the war, and, in 2005, became the state governor. Following 2005, there was some effort to deploy troops outside their home area, with mixed results. For instance, former South Sudan Defence Force (SSDF) fighters who had been absorbed into the SPLA's 7th division were primarily Bul Nuer, from Mayom county, Unity state. They were deployed in Upper Nile state, on the west bank of the Nile, in primarily Shilluk areas. While this could have been a move towards establishing a standing army that was not locally organized, it actually accentuated ethnic antagonisms, as, operating outside of local structures of responsibility to chiefs and local politicians, the SPLA's 7th division committed numerous attacks on Shilluk civilians, during clashes that continue to affect the landscape of civil-war Upper Nile state. At the beginning of the current conflict, the Shilluk militias that had been only recently absorbed into the SPLA sided with the government, in part because the SPLA's 7th division, against which they had such grudges, was now fighting on the side of the rebels.

Interviewer: So have militias played a big role in the breakdown of the SPLA?

JC: The fractional nature of the SPLA was also accentuated, post-2005, by the tendency of the SPLA to offer deals to militia leaders, and absorb them within the SPLA. This was part of Salva Kiir's initial 'big tent' policy, which attempted to accommodate everyone within the framework of the SPLM/A. There are three primary reasons that 2005-11 saw the emergence of so many militias in South Sudan. Some were directly sponsored by the Sudanese government, in an effort to destabilize the nascent nation-state. Some, like the Shilluk militias on the west bank of the Nile, were motivated by a genuine sense of local unhappiness with the government, due to what were perceived as state-sanctified land grabs of Shilluk territory by Dinka settlers. Most injuriously, breaking away from the army formed part of a cycle of what political scientists would call rent-seeking activity: in the hope of more money, or in order to achieve a higher rank, a militia leader would break away from the

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SPLA, in the hope of later reabsorption in an amnesty deal that he could parlay into more influence. Peter Gadet, for instance, now the SPLA-IO military commander in Unity state, repeatedly led short-lived revolts against the SPLA, both during the second civil war, and post-2005, before being repeatedly reabsorbed. As an indication of one of the effects of this cycle of disassociation and reabsorption, it is worth remembering that the SPLA has more generals than all the US military services combined: after Russia, it has the second highest numbers of generals in the world.

The breakdown in the political system during 2013 largely accentuated this process: in Unity state, Taban Deng was replaced by Joseph Monytuel, the brother of Bapiny Monytuel, one of the leaders of the South Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SSLM/A), a rebel group that had accepted an amnesty offer in April 2013. After the SPLA's 4th division separated, largely along ethnic lines, with the majority of Unity state's forces joining the rebels, it was the SSLA, under Matthew Puljang, that provided the bulk of military support for the Government of South Sudan. Similar dynamics can be observed in Jonglei, where the government has been eager to ensure that commander David Yau Yau (a powerful former insurgent, currently aligned with the SPLA) and his forces do not join the rebel side once more. These moves are opportunistic and tactical, and do not represent a stable set of alliances. During the second civil war, commanders often moved sides repeatedly, depending on the nature of the alliance offered, and in today's contemporary conflict, these movements threaten to prolong the conflict, as they indicate the ease with which fighters can break from the army, and initiate another cycle of violence.

It is important to remember that, in 2005, the SPLA had not even won the war within Southern Sudan. After the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) with Sudan, the question it faced was not simply how to turn a guerrilla force into a national army, but what to do with the myriad militia groups within the country. These groups, cut from Sudanese support and without rent-generating activities, could begin a revolt against the SPLM. It should be noted that, in 2005, there were actually more militia fighters in South Sudan than there were members of the SPLA—but under the terms of the CPA, the SPLA was deemed the winner of the internal

Southern struggle for overall leadership of the rebellion, and all competing militias



were made illegal. The SPLA's strategy, as it has been subsequently, was to absorb these other fighters into it. Most importantly, in the Juba Declaration of 2006, the SPLA attempted to absorb the South Sudan Defence Forces (SSDF): these troops, under the command of Paulino Matiep, were active in Greater Upper Nile—the region that now composes Jonglei, Unity, and Upper Nile states—and had guarded oil fields for the Sudanese government. These troops, however, were not substantively integrated into the SPLA—they remained largely ethnic units loyal to their previous militia commanders.

Thus, when the fighting broke out in December 2013, the disaggregation of the SPLA was already waiting to happen, and largely cleaved to civil-war-loyalties. It is striking to note that the current areas under SPLA-IO's control are broadly the areas controlled by the SSDF during the second civil war, and that the commanders of the SPLA-IO, with the exception of the military commander of Unity state, James Koang Chuol, are all SSDF commanders.

Interviewer: And what is the military situation in the country at the moment?

JC: In South Sudan today, the two central military targets for both parties are the main urban centres, and the oil fields. These are the most contested spaces in South Sudan. The capitals of Unity, Jonglei, and Upper Nile states have all changed hands multiple times during a conflict in which neither side has the military capacity to win outright.

At the moment, in Upper Nile the military situation is that the SPLA-IO is in control of much of the south of the state, including Longochuk, Maiwut, Nasir, and Ulang counties. All of these counties are principally Nuer, and are the well-spring of support for the informal Nuer militias, the *jiech mabor*, that provide the bulk of the opposition's fighting force in the state. The counties on the west bank of the Nile—Manyo, Fashoda, Panyikang—are contested, and much rides on who a variety of Shilluk militias decide to support. While the northernmost county of Renk was affected by clashes during the last month, it remains under SPLA control, as do the eastern counties of Melut and Maban. The centre of the state, around Malakal and



Baliet, has seen the brunt of the fighting so far, and remain contested. Upper Nile is where one can see most clearly the fractures of the second civil war continuing to bear on the situation.

The SPLA-IO has its most disciplined and organized forces in Upper Nile. The situation in Unity state is more uncertain. The north of the state, around Pariang, is home to the Rueng Dinka, and while during the second civil war much of Unity state was divided up between rival militias, Pariang remained under the control of the SPLA. It remains staunchly SPLA, and is also vital to Darfurian Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) troops, which use it as a supply-line into South Kordofan, where it is active on the side of the SPLM-N rebels against Sudan's armed forces. JEM remain loyal to—and slightly dependent upon—the SPLA. The principal bases of SPLA-IO support in Unity state are the southern, largely Nuer, counties of Koch, Leer, Mayendit, and Panyijar, though all these counties have been attacked by SPLA units moving south from Bentiu, the state capital. Unlike in Upper Nile, however, mobilization of the *jiech mabor* has been less successful, and its forces less organized. Abiemnom, in the west of Unity state, bordering the contested territory of Abyei, is firmly in SPLA hands. Mayom county, just south of Abiemnom, remains contested. Much of the political elite of the state are Bul Nuer from Mayom, including Monytuel, Puljang, and Gadet. This indicates the degree to which much of the fighting in Unity, after the SSLM/A decided to side with the government, is intra-Nuer.

The situation in Jonglei has changed rapidly over the last three months. Fighting has taken place along multiple fronts, but the Juba-Bor road, linking the national capital with the Nuer-controlled rebel heartland, has seen the brunt of battle. Territorial control has swung back and forth between SPLA and rebel hands, with incremental gains for the SPLA over time, largely thanks to support from the Ugandan People's Defence Forces (UPDF). The conflict has been increasingly marked by targeted and indiscriminate ethnic violence, prompting mass civilian displacement and defections. While the rebels have lost some territory in southern Jonglei in the last few weeks, they have managed to secure support from various Nuer communities in Jonglei. The



evolution of the conflict from a two-party war to one that has incorporated tribal and ethnic dimensions is similar to dynamics seen in Upper Nile and Unity states.

As I have noted, the focus of the conflict is on the old Greater Upper Nile, which was the focus of both the split within the SPLA in the 1990s, and the zone of SSDF control. It is important to remember that the second civil war was as much a battle within South Sudan, as it was a battle with the Sudanese government. In 2014, this dynamic has been resurrected. In the west of the country (Western and Northern Bahr el Ghazal), despite some recent defections, the population remains largely loyal to the SPLA, and will remain so unless the loss of the Unity and Upper Nile oil fields means soldiers' pay stops. Equatoria, in the south of the country, and the third of South Sudan's major regions, is more circumspect. During the second civil war, many major Equatorial politicians were aligned with the Sudanese government. At present, Equatoria is controlled by the SPLA, but that is not an enduring equation.

Interviewer: What is likely to happen in the near future?

JC: In the coming months, the rains will arrive and conflict will diminish, even if the ceasefire doesn't hold. This follows a long-held pattern in South Sudan, as the rainy season makes roads difficult to pass with vehicles. With neither side able to control to the Greater Upper Nile region, the balance of power will rest on a set of economic and international considerations. At present, oil production in Unity state has shut down, but it continues in Upper Nile, where the SPLA remains in control of a number of fields. If the SPLA-IO consolidates control of all Unity and Upper Nile's oil fields, it would force a crisis in the SPLA that could lead to a more general withering of support for Kiir. The other important extra-military question is that of support from international actors. It is largely due to Ugandan support that the SPLA has been fairing better in Jonglei than elsewhere in Upper Nile. (The rebels know this, which is why the UPDF's withdrawal is a precondition for peace talks, which the government will never agree to.) Sudanese support for the SPLA-IO, which has been alleged but not proved, or greater Ugandan support for the SPLA, could be decisive in future clashes.

Interviewer: How has that military conflict involved other armed groups, and affected social and ethnic tensions in the country?

JC: There are so many different groups in South Sudan, and so many overlapping tensions and divisions, it is hard to give a simple answer to this question.

There has certainly been accentuated ethnic tension within the country, and targeted killings in multiple states. On occasion—such as when Darfuri merchants were killed in a mosque on the SPLA-IO assault on Bentiu, 13-14 April—this is because those targeted are held to be members of—or representative of—an opposing military faction. The Darfuri merchants were thought to be members of, or supporting, JEM, the Darfuri military faction that supports the SPLA, and had been actively involved in combat on the side of the SPLA. The same is true of the killing of Nuer civilians by the SPLA-IO in Bentiu, who were thought to be not enthusiastic enough about the rebels' recapture of the city, and thus were accused of being government supporters.

One thing not noted often enough is that in 2005, there was probably not a man (or woman) alive in South Sudan who had not been part of either the SPLA, the Sudan Armed Forces, or one of a myriad of other local military groups. People frequently joined, and then left the SPLA. In the south of Upper Nile, it is quite possible to be a farmer, draw a salary as a member of the SPLA, and also be member of the *jiech mabor*, with a position within its hierarchy. Creating overly distinctive lines between these categories is thus problematic. What this also means is that, as horrific and unjustifiable as many of the killings in South Sudan have been, the line between civilian and soldier is not always clear, and nor is the relationship between being a member of a community, and being a member of a militia force. The name commonly given to the *jiech mabor*, the 'white army' is deceptive. The *jiech mabor* is not an army. It is a temporary mobilization of everyday members of the Nuer community.

The initial killings of Nuer in Juba, in December 2013, were horrific. They were also motivated. The killings did not simply represent some sort of ancient ethnic tension. Rather, they were killed because the Dinka members of the presidential guard thought



the Nuer were the main participants in a coup: ethnic and political identity was made congruent, with devastating results.

One result of these killings was to set in motion a set of revenge attacks. Cycles of intensifying group anger, and subsequent revenge attacks, were common in Jonglei well before December 2013, between the Murle and Lou Nuer. In fact, if you look at the incidences of reported violence, there were actually *fewer* clashes in December—January 2014 than there were in July 2013. Part of what is forgotten in the current international attention on the Sudan-South Sudan crisis is that from 2005-13, much of South Sudan was exceptionally violent, and that the current civil war is largely an intensification of those patterns, rather than a qualitatively new development.

Interviewer: Are communities arming themselves during the current crisis, as we saw during the last civil war?

JC: Along with the revenge attacks, the current conflict has produced another phenomenon that was widespread during the second civil war: civilian militias. For instance, Renk county, Upper Nile is home to the Abialang Dinka, a riverine group of Padang Dinka (along with the Ngok Dinka of Abyei and the Rueng Dinka of Pariang). At the end of April, they formed themselves into local defence forces, with some of these militia troops guarding the oil fields near Paloich, and others present around Renk. Just as with the Shilluk forces on the west bank of the Nile, these groups seem principally defensive in nature, and while they are currently SPLA-backed, the SPLA forces in Renk are largely Nuer, and clashes between the militias and government forces are not inconceivable. These defensive groups have also emerged among the Shilluk, on the west bank of the Nile. They are largely concerned with defending their own communities, but can also work with one (or the other) of the two sides. The *gulweng* and *titweng* Dinka militias of Warrap and Lakes states, for instance, now form Salva Kiir's most steadfastly loyal troops, and effectively constitute the president's private army.

Much of the SPLA-IO force in Upper Nile is constituted by the *jiech mabor*—temporary militia mobilizations, designed to defend Nuer communities in times of

attack. The SPLA-IO cannot entirely rely upon these forces, which have a distinct organizational structure, and whose aggregations are designed to be temporary, and not part of a permanent standing army. SPLA-IO commanders acknowledge that they are not entirely under its control, and is motivated primarily by anger at the killings of Nuer civilians in Juba in December, and a sense of ethnic loyalty, rather than allegiance to Riek Machar, the leader of the SPLA-IO. Still, the differences between the two forces should not be exaggerated: commanders frequently have both formal roles in the SPLA-IO, as well as leadership roles in the jiech mabor. Equally, many members of the informal militias have experience in the SPLA, or were part of the SSDF.

In terms of the logic of the conflict, the participation of these militia forces means that ceasefire agreements made in Addis Ababa may not be adhered to, as the jiech mabor, amongst others, has a different organizational and motivational structure to those negotiating in Addis, and, as we have seen from the conflict in Jonglei, the communitarian dynamics of revenge and attack can be extremely hard to stop when set in motion. For the involvement of these forces also gives a markedly communitarian accent to the violence, and contributes to the massive social and ethnic upheaval in the country, as the lines between being the member of a community, and being a fighter, continue to be blurred. At present, with Nuer civilians seeking anxious refuge with UNMISS, and revenge attacks continuing in all the states of the Greater Upper Nile region, social and ethnic tensions within South Sudan are extremely high. However, it is important to underline that these tensions do not explain the conflict on their own. In Unity state, for instance, the tensions are intra-Nuer, and not ethnically based, but dynamized by a struggle for power and influence in the state.

Interviewer: What are the prospects for resolution of the conflict?

JC: Negotiations in Addis Ababa have produced little thus far, other than two cessation of hostilities agreements that were both violated the day they were agreed upon. The impasse in negotiations has multiple causes. The military landscape is tumultuous, and as long as the rains don't prevent movement, it is likely that both sides will attempt to maximize their territorial advantage on the battlefield before



rainy season negotiations under international pressure. However, as we saw in January, cessation of hostility agreements can placate the international community, and are not necessarily reflective of the substantive situation on the ground. Furthermore, even if Riek Machar gave orders to halt hostilities (as he did not in January) it is not necessarily the case that the military leadership of either the SPLA-IO or the *jiech mabor* would follow his instruction is either party thought there was something to gain by continuing fighting: while the SPLA-IO is currently fighting under one name at the moment, its aggregations are unstable, and we could still witness a splintering of the armed opposition into multiple factions—a development that has already occurred in the political opposition to the SPLM, which has made negotiating in Addis Ababa more difficult.

Recent international pressure, culminating in the visit of US Secretary of State John Kerry to Juba, has been for a month-long ceasefire, and promises of negotiations over a transitional power-sharing government. While some sort of power-sharing government that puts Kiir and Machar again in control of South Sudan is likely to be the only way to bring hostilities to a temporary close, it is unlikely to be sustainable. The larger issues of how to organize politics within the SPLM (and more broadly South Sudan) have not been addressed, and a power-sharing government might ironically make resolving these issues less likely, as it would itself be an example of the type of cycle of rebellion and reincorporation that South Sudan needs to break away from.

There is no easy solution to South Sudan's problems. The current crisis is exceptionally difficult to deal with because it occurs at the centre of three overlapping crises: a political crisis about the nature of government (and the SPLM) in South Sudan; a military crisis about rent and incorporation, and an intensified communitarian crisis. Resolving this will require substantive shifts in the SPLM, rather than a hasty peace deal.

Most international attention to the crisis has been counter-productive for precisely this reason: its temporal perspective is extremely limited. Recent US sanctions on individuals involved in the conflict are tokenistic: they are not broad enough to make

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a difference on the ground, and—like structurally similar sanctions on individuals involved in the Darfur crisis—are likely to be ignored if those targeted are in any way necessary to the peace process. The IGAD effort is hamstrung by Uganda’s active involvement in the conflict on the side of the SPLM. Calls for international courts and justice for those involved in the 10,000 deaths in South Sudan ignore the impossibility of legal cases taking place outside of a political framework that will need to be forged by the very individuals responsible for these deaths.

While the UNMISS bases in South Sudan have been vital (though imperfect) for protecting civilians, recent decisions to raise the number of peacekeepers in South Sudan are again tokenistic. No amount of peacekeepers will protect civilians outside UNMISS bases: the peacekeeping forces lack the motivation to engage in actual combat.

The only likely scenario is a power-sharing government, compromised by all those who caused the tremendous loss of life in South Sudan over the past four months. It will reaffirm the power that splitting from the government gives one (higher ranks, more money), and will be a temporary affair, before the cycle starts again.

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