

The Conflict in Unity State

The rebellion that broke out in Unity state on 20 December 2013 is in disarray. Forces loyal to South Sudanese President Salva Kiir's government control the northern county of Pariang, and the western counties of Abiemnom and Mayom. By 2:30pm on 10 January, the rebels forces had retreated from Bentiu, the state capital, and government forces were in control of the city. At the political level, proposed negotiations between the government and the rebels in Addis Ababa have not materialized.

Tensions in Unity increased after President Kiir dismissed the state governor, Taban Deng Gai, in July 2013, amid allegations that the governor supported the former vice-president, Riek Machar, who also hails from Unity. Salva Kiir appointed Joseph Nguen Monytuel as caretaker governor, partly as a concession to the South Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SSLM/A), whose forces accepted an amnesty offer from the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS) in April 2013. Monytuel is the brother of SSLM/A commander Bapiny Monytuel. Taban Deng Gai is now leading Riek Machar's negotiating team in Addis Ababa.

After fighting broke out between members of the presidential guard on 15 December 2013, Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) commander Peter Gadet—a Bul Nuer from Unity with a history of rebellion prior to his re-integration into the army—defected to head the Jonglei faction of a rebellion led by Riek Machar.

Fighting in Unity first broke out on 19 December, at an operating base of the Greater Pioneer Operating Company—the joint operating company responsible for oil extraction in the state—and continued on 20 December, at the Thar Jath oilfield, in Leer county. Sixteen people died in what Mabek Lang, the deputy state governor, claimed were targeted attacks on Dinka employees.

Fighting continued on 20 December in Bentiu and Rubkona, as the SPLA 4th division, which is based in Bentiu, began to break up along factional lines in anticipation of clashes. On the evening of 20 December, MSF reported that the Bentiu Ministry of Health Hospital received 42 wounded. Fighting continued on 21 December in both towns. On 24 December, the South Sudanese Red Cross reported that they had collected 34 bodies in Bentiu and 82 in Rubkona.

On 21 December, the Bul Nuer commander of the SPLA's 4th division, James Koang Chuol, defected from the army, named himself governor of Unity, and appointed an interim administration the next day.

The current military picture in the state is complicated. The oil fields around Leer county remain in the hands of the rebel forces, which were augmented on 23 December, when 64 SPLA troops defected from Rumbek East (Lakes state) and went to the southern Unity county of Panyijar. Following Koang Chuol's assumption of power in Bentiu, a minority of the SPLA's 4th division, still loyal to the GRSS, went west to Abiemnom county under the command of Lt. General Jok Riak, where they were reinforced by SPLA troops from Western Bahr el Ghazal's 5th division, under

the command of Maj. Gen. Manyok Barach, and from Northern Bahr el Ghazal's 3rd division, under the command of Major General Deng Wol. Together, these three men would lead the 10 January assault on Bentiu.

In the north of Unity, Pariang county is currently in the hands of the SPLA. Pariang is home to the Rueng Dinka—the only Dinka group in the state. While during the second civil war much of the state was divided up between competing militias, many of them supported by the Sudanese government, Pariang remained controlled by the SPLA. It is also the home county of Mabek Lang, currently acting deputy governor in Monytsel's caretaker administration. Mabek Lang was formerly the county commissioner of Pariang, before being dismissed by Taban Deng Gai in 2012 on charges of 'disunity.' He ran the county during the war, and is extremely influential in the area, which is considered an SPLA bastion. It is notable that when Koang Chuol appointed an interim administration on 22 December, he did not name a commissioner for Pariang county.

Fighting broke out in Pariang on 20 December, when some SPLA troops defected to the rebels. Over the next week, the county was contested, and on 24 December, an estimated 400 defectors moved southwards from Jaw, the SPLA's northernmost operating base, attacking the villages of Biem Alony and Dien Koich before clashing with SPLA-loyalist forces in the village of Panyang. Parts of the village were razed before the rebels moved towards positions held by SPLA forces loyal to Koang Chuol. Fighting continued on 25 December, just west of Pariang town, and on 27 December, in Agrek payam. As of 26 December, the SPLA claimed they had destroyed 37 rebel vehicles in Pariang county. In large part, the fighting in Pariang county was due to forces loyal to Koang Chuol moving southwards from Jaw, through SPLA areas. From 6-10 January 2014, Pariang county was largely quiet, and in the hands of the SPLA. There are conflicting reports about the allegiance of the SPLA forces at Jaw.

The clashes in Pariang have badly affected the humanitarian situation at the refugee camp of Yida, with the UN and all other humanitarian organizations evacuating their international staff on 22 December. The conflict in the north of Unity also threatens supply lines for the Justice and Equality Movement's (JEM) operations in South Kordofan, which are partly reliant on supplies from South Sudan. On 28 December, Koang Chuol accused JEM of supporting the SPLA, and moving into Pariang county. On 30 December, JEM issued a statement denying this, and said that it would not interfere with internal conflict in South Sudan. But aid workers at Yida reported seeing JEM vehicles moving south to Pariang on 27 December. It is unlikely that JEM will want to play a prominent role in the conflict in Unity given the precariousness of its position and the government of Sudan's (GoS) frequent complaints about GRSS support for the Sudanese rebels. But it can be expected that JEM will attempt to ensure its supply-lines remain open.

Mayom county has seen the most entrenched clashes in the state, with both sides making repeated claims that they are in control of the county. The day before Koang Chuol assumed the governorship, Nguen Monytsel dismissed Peter Dak Khan, the commissioner of Mayom county, who was then immediately reinstated by Koang Chuol. Many of the most important politicians in Unity come from Mayom County,

including Nugen Monytuel, and much of the SSLM/A. Following the defection of the majority of the SPLA's 4th division, Monytuel escaped to Wankai, on the Mayom-Rubkona county border, and thence into Mayom county itself.

It appears that Mayom county was initially under the control of the rebel forces, while the remaining elements of the 4th division still loyal to Salva Kiir regrouped in Abiemnom county. The SPLA-loyalists received a boon when SSLA forces, led by the Bul Nuer commander Matthew Puljang, decided to support the SPLA. Puljang, who had previously fought against the GRSS—including under Peter Gadet, the current rebel commander of Jonglei—accepted an amnesty offer in April 2013. The SSLA loyalty to the SPLA, despite its previous history, is a dividend of Monytuel's appointment to the governorship.

This complicated political maneuvering indicates the degree to which political dynamics, rather than ethnic animosities, dominate the conflict in the state, as Bul Nuer commanders fight against each other.

On 27 December, the combined SSLA/SPLA force clashed with rebels in Mayom town, leading to extensive destruction, including of the main market. Mayom is an important trading hub for Sudanese traders bringing vital supplies into Unity. These transport routes are now almost entirely disrupted, with more than 280 Sudanese traders fleeing to Abiemnom county during the devastation, having endured extensive financial losses. Fighting continued in the first days of 2014, with the SPLA claiming they had captured six vehicles from the rebels on 4 January. By 6 January, Mayom town was almost entirely destroyed, and the front lines had moved east, towards Tumur. Peter Dak announced to Radio Tamazuj that he fled Mayom town on the evening of 7 January. On 9 January, SPLA forces attacked rebel positions at Tor al-Abyad, about 30 km to the west of Bentiu.

The advance of the SPLA caused consternation in Bentiu. On 8-9 January, thousands of civilians fled the city, in expectation of further clashes. The rebels became increasingly disorganized. On 8 January, much of the rebel forces staged a retreat, destroying ammunition dumps along the way, to stop them falling into the hands of the SPLA. In Bentiu, fighting erupted among the rebels in the main barracks in Rubkona, allegedly over a disagreement about whether the bridge linking Rubkona and Bentiu should be destroyed. Bentiu town is now largely deserted, with UN officials reporting that the market was looted and almost completely destroyed. Aid agency vehicles and supplies are also being stolen, and banks and shops in the city are being looted.

On 10 January, fighting recommenced on the outskirts of Bentiu, with the town largely deserted. The SPLA force attacking Bentiu was composed of reinforcements from the 3rd and 5th divisions, and the remnants of the 4th division still loyal to the government. The SPLA forces entered Bentiu in the afternoon, with the rebel forces, including Koang Chuol, in full retreat. By the end of the day on 10 January, had secured the city, while fighting was ongoing at Kilo 13, just outside Bentiu. In Addis Ababa, Lul Ruai Koang, a member of the rebel delegation, told the media that they had made a 'tactical withdrawal to avoid civilian casualties.'



The humanitarian situation in the state is dire. Aid agencies suggest that 1,850 people have crossed into South Kordofan, while around 2,000 people have arrived in Abyei. At least 9,000 people are currently sheltering in the United Nations Mission in South Sudan compound near Bentiu.

Clashes in Unity have also significantly impacted South Sudanese oil production, which—even before the clashes—was 60,000 barrels per day (BPD) below the levels it achieved before South Sudan shutdown production in January 2012. Workers at the Unity oilfields were evacuated to Hejlij, South Kordofan, and Juba. All the oil fields have now ceased production, with emergency shutdowns—that damage the pipes—occurring at least at four facilities. On 23 December, the day that Unity oil field—the state’s largest oil field, capable of producing 115,000-120,000 BPD at full capacity—shut down, Riek Machar claimed that the rebel forces would use income from the oil fields under their control. However, given Salva Kiir’s meeting with Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir on 6 January, it seems unlikely that the GoS would allow Machar’s forces to export oil through Sudan, even if the engineers necessary to turn production back on were able to return, which also seems highly unlikely. A new refinery in Unity was due to come online in January 2014; this will now be delayed.

As of 10 January 2014, the rebellion in Unity is in tatters. With little territorial control no income, and no transport links to Gadet’s forces in Jonglei, the rebellion will struggle to mount an effective challenge to the SPLA. But, just as during the second civil war, the possibility remains of government control of the urban centers, and a dissolute and fractured rebellion taking control of the rural areas, a situation that, without a political resolution of the conflict, could be interminable.

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