



The Crisis in Abyei

As clashes between Sudan and South Sudan continue, a resolution to the crisis in Abyei seems more distant than at any point since the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) brought an end to Sudan's long second civil war.

On 23 April, Sudanese President Omar al Bashir told soldiers in Heglig that there would be no further negotiations with South Sudan, as the only language it understood was that of "guns and ammunition." His words may have been intended for internal consumption and to boost the morale of the beleaguered Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) holding the devastated town. But new Sudanese incursions into South Sudanese territory, and Sudan's insistence that South Sudan must pay reparations for damage to an oil processing facility during the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) takeover of Heglig, make the recommencement of negotiations unlikely in the near future.

Negotiations over Abyei ground to a halt weeks ago. The Abyei Joint Oversight Committee meeting, which was supposed to take place on 20 February, has now been suspended three times by Sudan. The last postponement was at the end of March, and no new date has been scheduled. There is also still no agreement on the composition of the Abyei Area Administration, and, given the conflict over Heglig, prospects are dim for any accord. Meanwhile, the Sudanese government is stirring up nationalist sentiment in Khartoum. On 8 April, all residents of Abyei were told to obtain a citizenship certificate from the government—a demand that constitutes an open claim on the sovereignty of Abyei, which the CPA indicates should be decided by referendum.

With political negotiations paralysed, preparations for war in both countries have been gathering pace. On 30 March, South Sudan's President Salva Kiir instructed the governors of the country's five border states to mobilize the public. The BBC quoted Salva Kiir as saying: "Anybody having a gun can come with his or her gun. The rest who do not have, we will come and provide them." There have also been reports of forced conscription in Agok, south of Abyei. Some conscripts have said they spent days in fields with thousands of other men, waiting for training. Multiple sources say large convoys of South Sudanese troops have been heading north, and members of the SPLA have appeared in public with members of Darfur's Justice and Equality Movement and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N): forces that, one month ago, the SPLA insisted it was not backing.

Sudan is also mobilizing. One of the reasons the SPLA made advances in South Kordofan is because SAF is facing a critical lack of manpower, and has military forces who are less than committed to fighting the SPLA. In an attempt to address this shortage of manpower, on 11 April Bashir ordered each of Sudan's states to set up camps for new recruits to the paramilitary Popular Defence Forces (PDF). In Muglad, South Kordofan, the government has been actively recruiting Missiriya for the PDFs, offering small arms,



motorbikes, and money to young men who wish to join. Given the weakness of the ruling National Congress Party in South Kordofan, it is not certain that the Missiriya will want to fight the SPLA. There are also reports of the South Sudan Liberation Army (SSLA), a Khartoum-supported rebel group in South Sudan, teaming up with SAF and SAF-backed militia along the border of Unity state and South Kordofan. The SSLA recently said it had captured Lalop, in Unity state, and was advancing towards Bentiu, also in Unity.

On 16 April, the UN secretary-general condemned the build-up of militia forces in and around the Abyei area. However, after years of seeking the support of the international community on Abyei, the South Sudanese response was unusually strident. On 11 April, Daniel Awet Akot, one of the deputy speakers in South Sudan's National Assembly, said his country was tired of the international community's silence about Sudan's occupation of Abyei, especially when compared to its denunciations of the SPLA's temporary occupation of Heglig. The Government of South Sudan seems to feel that withdrawing its troops from Abyei has achieved nothing, as the international community has continued to blame both parties equally for the situation in the territory.

On 12 April, in an explicit statement of Southern discontent, Salva Kiir informed the South Sudan National Assembly that he had told UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon that "if you are not moving these forces of Bashir out of Abyei, we are going to reconsider our position and we are going to head to Abyei."

The chances of renewed conflict in Abyei are very real. The remaining SAF forces number between 400-500 troops, while there are around 720 heavily armed South Sudan Police Service (SSPS) officers in and around Agok, and a large SPLA brigade headquarters at Mijan Kuol, just 3 km south of the territory.

Following international condemnation of the SPLA's occupation of Heglig, and its subsequent withdrawal on 20 April, the SPLA is unlikely to attack SAF in Abyei without provocation. The UN Security Council (UNSC) discussed the possibility of sanctions against South Sudan shortly after the occupation of Heglig, and would likely do so again if the Southern army moved into the territory again. Further Southern military action in and around Abyei risks alienating crucial international allies, notably the United States.

However, following the SPLA's withdrawal from Sudan, SAF have continued both ground and air assaults on South Sudan: repeatedly bombing in and around Bentiu, Unity state, and sending ground troops into the sovereign territory of South Sudan. The Government of South Sudan has said these attacks constitute a declaration of war and that it reserves the right to respond, telling the media that this may include retaking Heglig.

If the conflict between the two countries continues to spread along the border, calculations about Abyei may change, as South Sudan would risk less international opprobrium if it attacked Abyei during a more generalized war. Attacking SAF positions



in Abyei would be consonant with the SPLA's desire to occupy all the territories it considers part of South Sudan.

Whether the 3,800 Ethiopian peacekeepers stationed in the territory would resist such an attack is unclear. While little in the mandate of the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) indicates that they would be prepared to intervene in a conflict between two sovereign countries, there were reports earlier this month that, during the conflict in Heglig, several hundred SPLA soldiers entered Abyei, before withdrawing following negotiations with UNISFA.

For the moment, Abyei has been spared the violence that has blighted other border regions. On 31 March, the Sudanese air force dropped a bomb on Um Khariet, injuring one person. For most of the residents of Abyei interviewed by UNISFA, the media, and the Small Arms Survey, this attack, combined with the current conflict in Unity, has reinforced the sense that conditions are not yet in place for a permanent return to Abyei.

According to UNISFA, there are now 5,100 returnees in Abyei, but it is unclear whether they have permanently returned or are just visiting their former homes. In Agok, the majority of the 110,000 people displaced by Sudan's invasion of the territory in May 2011 do not want to return yet, fearing landmines, the presence of SAF, and an absence of infrastructure and food.

The Missiriya migration into the territory continues. As of 15 March, there were more than 110,000 Missiriya migrants, with more than two million head of cattle in Abyei, concentrated in the west and east, near Alal and Um Khariet, respectively. A low level of violence has accompanied the migration, with eleven cattle killed by an unidentified armed group on 13 February after some Missiriya failed to gain authorization from the joint security committee before moving their livestock to Cwein. On 22 February, a group of Missiriya attempted to travel to the banks of the River Kiir. UNISFA successfully convinced them not to go. During the negotiations, a large group of SSPS officers arrived on the other side of the river, armed with heavy machine guns—a reminder of the tensions that UNISFA must manage when dealing with the migration.

Given the current situation in Unity state, which has effectively blocked some of the traditional migration routes, the pressure on the Missiriya to migrate south of the River Kiir will increase, though the displaced Ngok Dinka population at Agok is hostile to this possibility.

UNISFA has been patrolling the territory of Abyei, and has been largely successful in handling the tensions of the migratory season. There are 3,800 of the total 4,200 soldiers mandated by the UNSC present in the territory. UNISFA's current mandate ends on 27 May 2012, and the latest UNSC report recommends a six-month extension. It is unclear what UNISFA's role would be in a situation of open war, in Abyei, or, more broadly,

ARCHIVE
visit smallarmsurveysudan.org
for more recent updates



along the border—which UNISFA’s expanded mandate was supposed to allow it to protect with the help of both countries.

Updated 26 April 2012

Click [here](#) for more detailed background on the Abyei crisis.