

Violence in Abyei, February–March 2011

As the impasse over Abyei's political future continued, February-March saw the worst violence in Abyei since 2008, with 154 people dying in militia attacks on police positions.

Early in the morning of 27 February, a police post in Todac, a village 15 km north of Abyei, was attacked and seven police officers were killed. A second attack that afternoon left ten dead, leaving the total casualties for the day at 17.

On 28 February, Todac was attacked again. Raids in the morning and the afternoon left 90 dead. During these raids, huts in Todac were burned.

On 2 March there was fierce fighting over Maker Abyior, the village at the centre of clashes in January. Attacking forces overran a police position outside the village, killing all the officers on duty. After burning the village, attackers crossed the Nyamura River and burned down the village of Wungok. Forty-one people died in these clashes.

One member of a Missiriya militia force subsequently died in a skirmish with police units on 7 March, and five civilians died in Dungop, 10 km to the east of Abyei town, during a militia attack on 21 March.

During these clashes, the Joint Integrated Units (JIUs) that had been stationed in Abyei following the 17 January security meeting in Kadugli did not get involved. Local government officials indicate that there is a great deal of tension between Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) commanders within the JIUs, and that their involvement might have led to outbreaks of fighting between the SAF and SPLA JIU contingents.

After the clashes on 27 February, the National Congress Party (NCP) initially held that Missiriya herders were attacked by SPLA units disguised as policemen. The NCP position shifted later in the week when it was claimed that Missiriya militias with no backing from either the NCP or SAF had instigated the attacks, motivated by the SPLA's blocking Missiriya access to grazing routes through Abyei.

Multiple eyewitness accounts contradict these claims. Abyei police and civilians present at the attacks at Todac and Maker report that some of the attackers wore SAF uniforms, and others uniforms of the Central Reserve Police.¹ Achuil Akol, Secretary for Finance in the Abyei Administration, said that the militias were using 12.7 mm machine guns mounted on land cruisers, 60 mm mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, and small arms. These claims correspond with other witnesses to the attacks. During the attacks on Maker, SAF military helicopters airlifted away injured fighters.²

Thus the SAF was heavily involved in the attacks, though the majority of the fighters were from Missiriya militias. These were composed principally Mezaghna, the Humr clan who spend more time in Abyei than any other Missiriya, and have their dry season grazing in Abyei itself, about 18 km east of Abyei town.

There is little agreement about who was attacked in these clashes. The Abyei Administration insists that police units were attacked, while the NCP claims that the SPLA is operating inside Abyei, in violation of the Abyei roadmap of 2008, disguising its soldiers as police officers. During the clashes, the Abyei Administration received reinforcements to its police force from South Sudan, but it remains unclear to what extent they are SPLA. All of the reinforcements interviewed by Small Arms Survey were recently part of the SPLA, but now claim to be police.

Abyei is in an intensifying crisis. People living in the villages that came under attack had already fled by the time of the clashes, leaving northern Abyei effectively uninhabited, populated only by JIUs and the militias. The northernmost civilian presence is now Abyei town itself.

Following the attack on Maker Abyior, residents began fleeing Abyei town, fearing a return to the violence of 2008, which saw half the town burned down. The streets were flooded with thousands of people fleeing, and by 4 March approximately 70 per cent of the town's population had fled south to villages around Agok. People are now beginning to return, and a recent relief convoy from Bahr el Ghazal has lessened the shortages of fuel and food.

Following the violence on 2 March, a meeting was arranged for 4 March between high-ranking members of the NCP, SPLM, and the Abyei administration.³ Officially, both claimed there would be a renewed commitment to the January security agreements. Given that these arrangements have already failed to prevent outbreaks of violence in February and March, it remains doubtful whether such an agreement will deliver security to Abyei.

Outside the compound of the United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) where the meeting took place, local Ngok Dinka protested, frustrated by the absence of progress in negotiations on the future of Abyei. The protest was also directed at UNMIS, which they felt was not fulfilling its responsibility to protect civilians. Late in the afternoon tensions boiled over, and protesters broke through the gates of the compound and vandalized vehicles. Later, protesters threw stones at the compound and a UN helicopter, and set fire to dry grass outside the compound's walls. A boy was accidentally shot in the hip by local police during the protests.

Events on the following day cast further doubt on whether the meetings would provide any improvement in the security situation. As the delegates were leaving Abyei, a militia force burnt the village of Tajalei, destroying around 300 huts. The village had already been abandoned by its inhabitants; there were no deaths. The forces involved in this attack were likely under a unified command—an indication of how difficult it will be to ensure that armed militias involved in these conflicts respect the January security agreements, even if the NCP and SPLM decide to honour them.

On 7 March, as Abyei Administration police moved back into position at Tajalei, they encountered a militia force; in the ensuing skirmish, one Missiriya fighter died. 21

March saw a further attack in Dungop, when residents report a militia force attacked the village at 2:00 am, killing five civilians.

The last week of March was relatively peaceful, but with negotiations on Abyei's future still ongoing and little chance of a resolution in sight, the situation remains extremely tense.

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¹ The Central Reserve Police is a heavily-armed force originally set up by the Interior Ministry for riot control, but has been massively expanded in Kordofan since the signing of the CPA.

² Interview with Achuil Akol, 9 March 2011, Abyei town; interviews with witnesses, 10-11 March, Abyei town.

³ In attendance for the NCP was Salah Gosh, the presidential advisor for security; Ahmed Haroun, governor of South Kordofan; Ibrahm Hamid, the minister of the interior; and ambassador without portfolio Ahmed Dirdeiri, among others. They met with Government of South Sudan (GoSS) minister of regional cooperation Deng Alor; GoSS minister for SPLA affairs Nhial Deng Nhial; the deputy director of GoSS Security, Kual Deng; and the chief administrator of the Abyei administration, Deng Arop.