



## **Gatluak Gai's Rebellion, Unity State**

Gatluak Gai's rebellion is linked to the complex and high-stakes politics of Unity state. The site of horrific violence and significant casualties during the civil war, Unity is home to political dynamics that mirror tensions at the highest levels of the Southern government. Given the ongoing armed banditry and insecurity in the state, these rifts, driven by wartime ties and longstanding tribal alliances, are unlikely to be resolved in the run-up to the South's independence on 9 July 2011.

Although Gatluak was not a major player in state politics prior to the April 2010 elections, the Government of South Sudan (GoSS) was convinced that he was linked to Angelina Teny—wife of Vice-President Riek Machar—who ran as an 'independent' candidate for the Unity governorship, and thus perceived him as a threat. Consequently, the GoSS deployed additional Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) troops to the state, particularly in Mayom and Pariang counties (seasonal destinations of the migrating Missiriya) and along the border with South Kordofan. The increased SPLA presence was motivated by suspicions about Angelina's political aspirations, as well as the army's intention to neutralize any potential security threats, such as the Missiriya. Oil-rich Unity, which shares a tense and militarized border with North Sudan, is of particular strategic importance to the GoSS.

Gatluak and his forces did not launch any attacks in Unity between June and December 2010. Nevertheless, the areas of the state where he initially operated—in and around Koch county, south of Bentiu, and in the centre of the state—continued to be insecure, with frequent incidents of banditry and armed violence. These include an ambush of an SPLA convoy near Bentiu on 2 December by an unknown armed group.

Shortly after the SPLA and George Athor signed a 'permanent ceasefire agreement' on 5 January, Gatluak's forces were implicated in a clash with the SPLA in Mayom county. The SPLA says his forces attacked one of their installations on 7 January and that a counter-attack by the army killed four and wounded six of Gatluak's men. Gen. Acuil Tito Madut, inspector general of the South Sudan Police Service, said that 32 fighters from Gatluak's group were captured by the Southern military and were to be brought to Juba to be interrogated. The men were reportedly in possession of 30 AK-47 assault rifles, one machine gun, and one rocket-propelled grenade launcher.

Neither the UN Mission in Sudan nor the SPLA has a verifiable figure for how many forces Gatluak had under his control at the height of the insurgency; like George Athor, he has proven successful in exploiting local grievances and insecurity to further his own aims.

Another lesser-known dissident operating in Unity, Kol Chara Nyang, who is believed to be in hiding in Heglig, may be responsible for several more recent armed incidents in the Mayom area. Kol Chara and his supporters had appeared to be quiet since August, until the location of the 2 December ambush of the SPLA—north-east of Mayom—raised suspicions regarding their re-emergence. This activity may have been part of an attempt to disrupt the registration and polling processes before the January



referendum. Kol Chara is not the only anti-GoSS militant with unclear allegiances and support bases operating in the Mayom area. The presence until very recently of Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) forces serving in the Joint Integrated Units (JIUs) stoked suspicion within the SPLA of support lines from the JIUs to these leaders. The SPLA heavily fortified its bases in the Mayom area and deployed more troops along the road between Mayom and the state capital, Bentiu, as a result.

A Nuer from Koch county, Gatluak was not a high-ranking SPLA officer before he launched his insurgency in late May 2010 by attacking an SPLA base at Awarping, Abiemnom county. (The SPLA claims that he was previously on the payroll of the Unity state prisons department.) He reportedly had aspirations to be Koch county commissioner prior to Taban Deng Gai's appointment as governor following the 2008 Sudan People's Liberation Movement convention. After Taban rejected this bid, Gatluak apparently grew resentful and eventually became one of the campaign managers for 'independent' candidate Angelina Teny, perhaps with the hope of gaining the county commissionership if she proved successful.

After Taban's re-election, in what was widely seen as a flawed process, Gatluak and his forces attacked SPLA installations in May 2010 and engaged in fighting in Mayom and Abiemnom. These counties are strategically significant, partly because they have histories of anti-SPLA sentiment and are frontline border areas. Of particular interest is Mayom, home of the former militia leader and current deputy commander-in-chief of the SPLA, Paulino Matiep.

Many rumours circulate in Unity about the sources of Gatluak's ample forces and the weapons needed to launch attacks on significant SPLA installations. Some Khartoum press reports have suggested that SPLA fighters defected to join him, while SPLA officials in Bentiu and GoSS officials have alleged that the National Congress Party sent civilians, namely armed Missiriya from South Kordofan, to fight in the rebellion. The SPLA has also alleged that former southern militia leaders who are part of SAF, such as Maj. Gen. Gabriel Tang Gatwich Chan (also known as 'Tang-Ginye'), have backed him. His sources of support remain unclear; he may have simply engaged heavily armed civilians in his areas of operation.

On 8 June 2010, the SPLA announced that Gatluak's rebellion was defeated and that it had captured more than 50 of his forces, several of whom were SPLA soldiers who had defected. Like George Athor, he was offered an amnesty by GoSS president Salva Kiir at the end of September 2010. Since then he has made no public statements on the amnesty offer.

In November 2010, GoSS vice-president Riek Machar and his wife visited Bentiu. At a rally, Riek publicly endorsed a state-level reconciliation process and later travelled with a delegation that included Angelina and Governor Taban Deng Gai throughout Unity to encourage citizens to participate peacefully in the referendum. As in other strategic areas of Greater Upper Nile, however, where reconciliation attempts have not been followed up quickly with efforts to increase political space and redress



violations committed by state security forces during and after the 2010 elections, Unity remains extremely insecure, with several militias operating there. It is unclear where the blame lies for the stalled, seemingly defunct reconciliation process, but the recurrent violence in several counties in Unity suggests that at least some of the grievances that initially sparked Gatluak's insurrection and caused broader insecurity in the state have not been substantively addressed by Governor Taban's leadership.

On 17–19 March 2011, fighting broke out in Mayom county once again near the border with the contested Heglig oilfields. Although the details of the clashes between the SPLA and a rebel force are not yet clear, both SPLA and international sources have indicated that the number of dead is more than 70. An army spokesman told journalists that an SPLA reconnaissance group clashed with militia forces fighting under Matthew Pul Jang (also known as 'Ko Jang') on 17 March, when the SPLA fell into an ambush; according to the SPLA, 30 members of the army and 11 militiamen were killed, although other reports suggest the number of SPLA killed may be higher.

Matthew had agreed in late February, after consultations with former Mayom county commissioner John Madeng, to bring his forces to an assembly point in Riak payam to begin reintegration into the SPLA. When it appeared to the SPLA Command in Unity that he was not serious about assembling his forces, it sent a team from Mayom northwards towards Heglig to investigate, and this team was then ambushed. Although Matthew and his forces have not spoken publicly about why they abandoned the integration plan, several possibilities for their pull-out are circulating. As in the cases of the other southern rebellions, no concrete or verifiable evidence of Khartoum's involvement with or support for the armed movement exists; one theory is that SAF offered it better support and hence it abandoned the integration plan.

The SPLA views the various armed groups in Unity as being tied to and coordinated by Gatluak, who remains in hiding; given that—unlike George Athor in Jonglei—Gatluak has not made any public statements and that there is no independent verification of this claim, it is difficult to assess its validity.

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