



Update on Abyei

A little more than a year has passed since the assassination of the former Ngok Dinka Paramount Chief Kuol Deng Kuol on 4 May 2013, by a Missiriya man involved in a standoff with the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) convoy carrying the chief. His death destroyed already fragile ties between the two communities, and contributed to an ongoing impasse in political negotiations over Abyei's future. The attention of the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS) is currently focused on internal conflicts, and a 4 April meeting between Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir and South Sudanese president Salva Kiir saw no progress in negotiations on Abyei's political future. On the ground, April saw a reduction in clashes between the Missiriya and the Ngok Dinka, but the situation remains extremely tense, and the joint local administration mandated by the 20 June 2011 Addis Ababa agreement has still not been established.

The GoS continues to insist that the establishment of a joint local administration is a precondition for talks on Abyei's future. However, since their unilateral referendum in October 2013, the Ngok Dinka community—and the GRSS-backed local administration—refuses to accept anything other than immediate political negotiations. The Ngok Dinka political leadership fears that the establishment of a joint administration would be unacceptable to the community—which has already expressed its desire to join South Sudan and sees no need for further negotiations—and would lead to the infinite deferral of a political resolution to the Abyei crisis. Meanwhile, neither government has recognized the result of the October referendum. The Missiriya, in any case, will attempt to block any move by the Ngok Dinka to join South Sudan, as they fear such a shift would mean the permanent loss of vital grazing land within Abyei. On 8 April, Omar al-Ansari, the National Congress Party-backed Missiriya member of the Awlad Kamil section, and a former militia leader, warned that the Missiriya were impatient. He demanded the implementation of the June 2011 Addis Ababa agreement—a development that, after the death of Kuol Deng Kuol, the Ngok Dinka community steadfastly refuse.

The situation is at such an impasse that the Abyei Joint Oversight Committee (AJOC), the body with administrative oversight in the territory, has not met since May 2013, despite repeated UN appeals. There is little likelihood that the Sudan People's Liberation Movement will support the Ngok Dinka community in its struggle for political recognition. The GRSS is at pains not to antagonize its northern neighbour as the Southern army battles a rebel force with historical ties to Khartoum. Under these conditions, there is no possibility of developments in negotiations over the territory's political future.

On 13 April the current Paramount Chief, Bulabek Deng Kuol, warned of increasing tensions in northern Abyei. The Ngok Dinka community feels that with the international community's attentions focused on the crisis in South Sudan, Abyei risks being forgotten, and that the GoS may take advantage of the area's low profile—and the GRSS's limited ability to respond—to



invade. February and March saw a series of clashes around many of the same northern villages—Maker Abyior, Dungop—that suffered the brunt of Missiriya-militia attacks in the first half of 2011. Both sides traded accusations as to who was responsible, with some South Sudanese officials arguing that the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) had moved troops into Abyei, and were backing the Missiriya, while the GoS retorted that the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) had moved troops into Abyei, and were attacking Missiriya positions north of the Kiir in violation of the 20 June 2011 Addis Ababa agreement. It remains unclear to what extent either army was involved in the clashes of February–March, but both forces had troops within the territory. In the first three months of 2014, UNISFA observed 600 SPLA personnel in Abyei, including at northern villages that constitute important way-stations for the Missiriya migratory herders. According to a United Nations Secretary-General’s report of 25 February, these forces were armed with small arms and told UNISFA that they deployed following the Ngok Dinka referendum on Abyei’s political future. Both SAF and the SPLA deny these claims, but during early March 2014, UN sources in the territory insisted that the SPLA was present inside Abyei.

As of 1 May 2014, SAF retain troops within Abyei, around the area of Diffra, the territory’s sole remaining oil field, in contravention of the Addis Ababa agreement and numerous UN Security Council resolutions. The SPLA withdrew its troops from the north of Abyei during March and April 2014. Immediately subsequent to their withdrawal, Missiriya forces attacked the village of Nyinchor, killing two and injuring three people, in an incident that is unlikely to reassure the beleaguered Ngok Dinka residents of north Abyei that the UNISFA will be able to protect them in the absence of the SPLA.

The Ngok Dinka–Missiriya clashes of the past three months are testament to the almost total breakdown in community relations between the two sides. During prior migrations, joint meetings between the northern pastoralists and their southern hosts would determine the Missiriya migratory routes. As of 2014, the Ngok Dinka blame the Missiriya for the death of Kuol Deng Kuol and for blocking the territory from joining South Sudan, and these joint meetings have been held. Kuol Monyluak, the head of Abyei’s administration, stated on 19 February that until the Missiriya issue an apology for Kuol Deng Kuol’s assassination and the full inquiry into his death is released, relations between the two groups will not be restored.

Instead, the Missiriya move under the UNISFA protection and largely without Ngok Dinka consent. As during the last dry season, the UNISFA strategy is to funnel Missiriya migrants into the eastern and western migratory corridors, while forming a buffer zone above the areas near Abyei town that contain the greatest concentration of Ngok Dinka returnees. While this strategy was successful last year, during the current grazing season, now coming to an end, the greatly increased number of Ngok Dinka returnees to the territory—and the resulting pressure on limited resources—has strained the UNISFA plan. This situation is accentuated by developments in South Sudan. While the Missiriya are successfully grazing their herds in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, their eastern migratory corridor into Unity is largely blocked due to the current conflict



in the state, and the Missiriya that have attempted to enter South Sudan that way have been subject to harassment and attacks. This has added pressure on the limited grazing resources inside Abyei, as the Missiriya remain within the boundaries of the territory for more of the season.

There is growing dissatisfaction among the Ngok Dinka over UNISFA's role. In February, UNISFA was accused of evacuating Ngok Dinka households in Todac, northern Abyei, following clashes in the area. UNISFA says the civilians left of their own accord due to fears they would be attacked. However, residents of both Tajalei and Noong—also in northern Abyei—claimed UNISFA also moved them away from their villages in mid-March. Kuol Monyluak, the head of the Abyei administration, reiterated these concerns, and argued that UNISFA—wittingly or not—is thus aiding Missiriya and GoS efforts to depopulate the north of Abyei, securing it for exclusive Missiriya use. If accurate, this would echo developments in the first half of 2011, when Missiriya militias attacked Ngok Dinka settlements, obtaining *de facto* control of the north of the territory in the run-up to SAF's May 2011 invasion of Abyei. While Ngok Dinka civilians in the north of Abyei wish to remain in their homes, especially as the planting season will soon begin, Missiriya raids in the territory, and the seeming inability of UNISFA to ensure security, means many have now left their villages for the south of Abyei.

The south of Abyei faces an intensified humanitarian situation. At the end of April, some 250 families arrived in the Majang Deng Kaya area, to the east of Agok, having fled conflict in Mayom and Abiemnom counties, Unity state. The International Organization of Migration estimates that Abyei has received some 2,500 refugees since the beginning of the South Sudanese conflict. At the beginning of April, health care workers and teachers complained that Agok—on the border with South Sudan—is suffering massive shortfalls in medical supplies and teaching materials.

With the migratory season drawing to a close, the next few months are likely to feature less conflict between the Ngok Dinka and the Missiriya, as long as the northern pastoralists withdraw from the north of the territory, as they customarily would do. Their failure to do so, and the suggestion of permanent Missiriya settlement in northern Abyei, would inflame local tensions, and produce conflict.

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