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The Conflict in Unity State

Describing events through 1 July 2015

Over the last two months, a Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) offensive swept through southern Unity state, razing villages, killing civilians, taking cattle, and abducting women. Initially, it seemed as if the offensive had effectively destroyed the Sudan People’s Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA-IO) as an organized military force in Unity state. In April and May 2015, the SPLA pushed south from Bentiu, the state capital, rapidly overrunning SPLA-IO positions in Guit and Koch counties, before attacking Leer county. These attacks displaced more than a hundred thousand civilians. SPLA forces also pushed northeast from Lakes state, and attacked SPLA-IO positions and villages in Mayendit and Panyijar counties. Having driven the SPLA-IO from southern Unity—the wellspring of rebel support in the state—much of the SPLA involved in the offensive withdrew to Bentiu, before attacking Panakuac, the main SPLA-IO military base on the Sudanese border, and routing the rebels, who fled into Sudan. During the SPLA’s southern offensive, the SPLA-IO generally chose not to engage, and its soldiers slipped into the bush. After the SPLA’s withdrawal, the SPLA-IO rapidly retook the territory it had conceded, and by the end of June, was again present in Leer and Guit counties, as well as in the southern counties of Mayendit and Panyijar.

In its campaign in southern Unity, the SPLA were aided by Bul Nuer fighters, recruited by Matthew Puljang, and promised a share in the spoils of war. In mid-June, the state government issued an announcement, which warned that anyone not aligned with the SPLA-IO should move their cattle to Bentiu. On 19 June, a force of approximately 8,000 Bul Nuer youth marched past the Bentiu Protection of Civilians (PoC) site on its way south. This force raided Guit and Koch on 20–25 June, and then moved further south, to Leer. Youth from Koch joined in this raiding, after they were promised a free hand in the south. These raids have the capacity to create serious intra-ethnic conflict between the Nuer of southern Unity and Bul Nuer from Mayom county that are already blamed for siding with the government. As of 1 July, Bentiu town stands empty of civilians, but occupied by some 70,000–100,000 head of livestock—the SPLA spoils of war, taken from southern Unity, as well as the cows of those aligned to the government, who brought them to the state capital for safekeeping, in line with the government’s prior announcement. According to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), Bentiu PoC contained 78,308 people as of 25 June, many of whom are the previous owners of the cattle now wandering the ruins of the state capital.

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Preparations for the southern offensive

At the beginning of April, the SPLA held Abiemnom and most of Pariang, the two predominately Dinka counties in Unity state, as well as Bentiu, and much of Mayom county, including the strategically crucial supply road from Warrap state. The SPLA-IO's main military base was at Panakuac, on the Sudanese border. The rebel forces also controlled the southern counties of Guit, Koch, Leer, Mayendit, and Panyijar. The frontline between the two forces lay in Rubkona and Guit counties, to the south and east of Bentiu.

Both sides had spent the early months of February 2015 preparing for a late dry season offensive. The SPLA moved troops east from Warrap into Abiemnom county, and then into Bentiu, while preparing forces in Lakes and Warrap states for an assault on the south of Unity. Meanwhile, South Sudanese President Salva Kiir made increasingly bellicose statements; in two speeches at the end of March, he proclaimed that the best way to deal with Riek Machar, the leader of the SPLA-IO, is to destroy his forces and make him come home, just like in 2002. The invocation of this date is a reference to a split within the SPLA that lasted from 1991–2002 and ended with Machar re-joining the rebel movement. For Kiir, as for much of the country, the current conflict has reopened old antagonisms from the second civil war. The SPLA-IO was also preparing for conflict, announcing a recruitment drive in southern Unity on 2 February in anticipation of intensifying hostilities.

January–March 2015 saw intermittent clashes around Bentiu, with the SPLA-IO frequently shelling the state capital, and altercations around the Toma South and Unity oil fields in Pariang and Rubkona counties. Most of the clashes of this period were between SPLA forces stationed in Bentiu and Rubkona, and SPLA-IO forces based south and east of the state capital, notably in Guit, and at Thow Mangor and Thaon. Such clashes were not part of a strategic assault, but were rather a calculated testing of the strength of SPLA-IO forces by the SPLA.

The character of these clashes changed on 23 March, when SPLA forces moved out from Bentiu, attacking SPLA-IO positions to the south and east of the state capital, and making some headway against the rebels. The clashes continued the next day, when SPLA forces moved further south, towards the SPLA-IO base at Nhialdiu, in an effort to consolidate their control of the area immediately south of the capital. SPLA forces also moved east towards Guit, clashing with the SPLA-IO at Kuergeny, some 20 km away from Bentiu. These attacks were a prefiguration of the route taken by the SPLA in April. Following the attacks of March, the SPLA withdrew to Bentiu. April would prove a different story.

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The push into southern Unity

In February and March 2014, the SPLA, aided by the elements of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), the Sudanese rebel group originating in Darfur, pushed into southern Unity, displacing thousands of people, capturing livestock, razing villages, killing civilians, and raping women. Last year's dry season offensive was designed to disrupt the SPLA-IO, punish its supporters, and acquire resources. Rather than the offensive being a series of military victories, fought against entrenched SPLA-IO positions, the assault was characterized by attacks on the villages of southern Unity—it was a demographic war, waged against the population, and carried out by raiding, with the livestock and resources carried back to Bentiu, and into northern Unity. The 2015 offensive repeated many features of last year's campaign. As in 2014, the SPLA knew that it would be unable to hold the areas through which it rampaged: their population is loyal to the SPLA-IO (and increasingly so, after each offensive), and any SPLA forces that remained in southern Unity would effectively be part of a military occupation, with territorial control possible only in the towns of the region. This pattern of dry season offensives echoes the conflict dynamics in much of southern Sudan during the second civil war: the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) controlled the urban spaces, and the SPLA—seasoned guerrillas—surrounded them. Dry seasons would see SAF breaking out and attacking the villages in rural areas. Thirty-two years after the outbreak of the second civil war, the situation is much the same, except now the SPLA is cast in the role of SAF.

The SPLA's 2015 campaign began on 25–26 April, when government forces moved out from Wangkai and Mayom town in Mayom county, and attacked SPLA-IO forces in Wicok, Mayom county, and Nhialdiu, in Rubkona county. A second wave of SPLA forces moved from Pariang county and Bentiu, and attacked Panakuac and Tor, on the border with Sudan. The SPLA's initial attacks on Panakuac were repulsed, but they pinned down the SPLA-IO at their main military base, and so enabled the government to sweep into southern Unity. A third wave of SPLA forces moved south from Bentiu, some attacking Nhialdiu in Rubkona county, and then attacking Koch county, with others moving through Guit and then into Leer county. A fourth wave of SPLA forces would later move out from Maper, in Lakes state, and attack Mayendit and Panyijar counties. (See the accompanying conflict map for a view of the SPLA sweeps from April to June.)

The SPLA-IO in southern Unity initially thought that the government's forces might move back into Bentiu after their initial sorties, as they had done in March. But the army continued to push south. Its force was composed of troops from Warrap and Northern Bahr el Ghazal states, the remnants of the 4th Division from Bentiu, and Bul Nuer fighters from Mayom county, which now constitute the core of the

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government's troops. The SPLA's campaign continued during the first week of May, with government forces taking Nhialdiu payam and Guit county, while also attacking SPLA-IO positions at Boaw, Rubkona county. By 8 May, the SPLA had reached Koch, 40 km north of Leer, and humanitarian organizations evacuated from much of the south of the state. Later that month, the SPLA took control of Leer, though, unlike elsewhere in southern Unity, the damage to the town was slight, with only a few buildings burned and aid supplies looted. The forced evacuation of aid organizations and the looting of supplies was part of the SPLA's strategy, designed to deny the residents of southern Unity the possibility of sustaining life in the region.

Almost simultaneously, the SPLA opened a fourth front, and began attacking SPLA-IO positions in the southern counties of Mayendit and Panyijar. Humanitarian organizations evacuated from Ganyel on 13 May, amid clashes. On the same day, the SPLA launched a morning assault on the port of Taiyar in Panyijar county, using boats in the initial attack. After the SPLA razed parts of the port, they came under attack from SPLA-IO forces, and withdrew to the port of Adok, further north on the Nile, before returning the next day to take control of the island port once again. Taiyar was an important trading hub for communities in Jonglei, Lakes, and Unity states, and was one of the few places in southern Unity where Nuer communities could obtain supplies from Lakes; Dinka and Nuer traders operated side by side there. The SPLA did not hold Taiyar but rather razed the remainder of the port, and then withdrew, in an action indicative of the logic of the SPLA offensive more generally. On 21 May, the SPLA moved south from Mayendit and attacked Nyal, in Panyijar county, after having entered Unity state from Maper, in Lakes state.

By the end of May, SPLA forces had seemingly won a consummate military victory, driving the SPLA-IO from southern Unity. However, the southern campaign was noticeable for its lack of actual military battles. The SPLA-IO troops tended to withdraw into the bush before the advance of the SPLA, and Simon Maguek Gai, the SPLA-IO commander of the 4th Division in Unity state (which the SPLA-IO call Lich state), reportedly restrained the Nuer youth of southern Unity, who were angry about the offensive and prepared to attack the SPLA. Militarily, this means that southern Unity is full of SPLA-IO forces that will now be able to wage a guerrilla war against the SPLA during the rainy season. Indeed, as of the end of June, there is an SPLA-IO presence in Guit, Koch, and Leer counties. For this reason, despite the thoroughness of the SPLA offensive, it has not substantively changed the balance of power in the state: the government forces are still militarily dominant, but the SPLA-IO control the rural areas of southern Unity once again. The only substantive changes wrought by the offensive are the resources extracted from the region and the massive disruption to civilian life caused by the SPLA's movement.

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With the SPLA-IO in hiding, the SPLA offensive was largely directed against civilians or—in cases when locals managed to slip into the bush—on almost-deserted villages. The SPLA’s strategy during the offensive was to raze villages that they believed supported the SPLA-IO, and accumulate resources. This strategy resulted in a trail of destruction in southern Unity, with massive amounts of livestock stolen, at least twenty-eight villages attacked, some of them burned to the ground, children killed, and many young boys and girls abducted. The offensive burned food supplies that could not be taken back to Bentiu, and looted aid stores, as part of a concerted campaign to disrupt the capacity of southern Unity to support its population. The SPLA, and its associated Bul Nuer fighters, targeted Nuer civilians and committed widespread sexual violence against Nuer women. On 18 May, the International Committee of the Red Cross said that the army’s attacks on Leer displaced some 100,000 civilians, who are now suffering from food shortages. The offensive’s effect on the civilian population in Unity state is exacerbated by the fact that it is planting season, and this disruption of the agricultural cycle will have an impact on food supplies in the coming rainy season.

The full extent of the damage caused by the SPLA’s offensive is difficult to evaluate. Since the offensive began, the SPLA has frequently restricted the movement of UNMISS peacekeepers and the monitors of the Monitoring and Verification Team that the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)—the regional trading bloc overseeing peace negotiations in Addis Ababa—tasked with monitoring 23 January 2014’s much-violated cessation of hostilities agreement. The SPLA has also blocked humanitarian relief missions, further targeting the civilian population of southern Unity.

Raiding as a tactic of war and the intra-Nuer civil war

Unlike 2014’s campaign in southern Unity, JEM and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army-North (SPLA-N) took no part in 2015’s offensive. SPLA-N sources report that this was partly because of the negative attention attached to their involvement in the previous dry season campaign, which was used to discredit the SPLA as being reliant on foreign assistance, and partly because of an absence of support to the Sudanese rebel movements from within the SPLA over the past year. Instead, 2015 saw the involvement of approximately 8,000 Bul Nuer youth, mobilized by Matthew Puljang, a Bul Nuer commander previously with the South Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SSLM/A), before he accepted an amnesty offer from the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS) in April 2013. The majority of the cattle seized in the SPLA offensive was taken to Bentiu, and the state capital is now a large cattle pen.

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On 19 June, Bul Nuer youths, some of whom were involved in the offensive, and others who came from Mayom, marched south in high spirits; it was now their turn to augment their herds, and take the resources and livestock that remain in southern Unity. The government invited the youth of Koch county—whose own cattle had been stolen by the SPLA—to join in this offensive. Such divide and rule tactics further entrenches deep divisions among the Nuer. These raids continued through to the end of June, before the Bul Nuer raiders withdrew, fearing an attack on Mayom county.

For the Bul Nuer youths, this campaign provided an avenue to increase their herds. Livestock is one of the central wealth indicators for many groups of transhumant Nilotic pastoralists, including the Nuer and Dinka. Bul Nuer raids on other Nuer communities are not exceptional, and have often occurred outside of a war setting. Such attacks can often start cycles of revenge attacks, which ultimately end with the payment of compensation for those who have died, and the creation of new alliances.

However, the current conflict changes the nature of these raids, and their political consequences. The prior military offensive in southern Unity has left villages undefended, and this means that on-going raids are likely to be much more intensive, and the targeted communities much less able to defend themselves. Equally, the brutality of the raids is likely to aggravate existing antagonisms. In the offensive of April and May, villages were burned to the ground, and both eyewitnesses and UNICEF report that large numbers of girls were raped, while young boys were castrated or abducted.

For many Dok, Haak, Jikany, Jagei, Leek, and Nuong Nuer, the last offensive and the current raiding is only the latest episode in a story of desertion and treachery on the part of the Bul Nuer, who are held to have deserted their Nuer kinsmen by siding with the government in December 2013, and are now taking part in attacks on southern Unity. In the Bentiu PoC site, Dok and Jikany Nuer refer to the Bul as ‘Dinka’, and talk openly about taking revenge once the war is over.

During the second civil war, the Government of Sudan (GoS) often sponsored Nuer militias in the Greater Upper Nile region, as part of a strategy of that saw some of the most intense violence of the period occurring between different Nuer groups; violence that the GoS could claim was communitarian, and had nothing to do with them. The 2015 SPLA offensive in southern Unity threatens a repetition of these dynamics. Politically, this has a number of consequences. While the on-going civil war in South Sudan began with a political crisis within the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM), it could set in motion a second war, whose root causes would require a level of diplomacy very different to the current IGAD endeavours in Addis Ababa. While

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not underestimating the challenges facing Unity state if a sustainable peace is to be created, it is important not to overstate the enmity felt towards the Bul Nuer. Both during and after the second civil war, the Nuer managed to resolve antagonisms produced by massive amounts of conflict, and their ability to resolve conflict using traditional mechanisms puts many an international peace-making effort to shame. The Nuer of southern Unity also experience Bul Nuer attacks on their community as part of a logic of raiding. The anger that many Nuer feel about the events in Juba of December 2013 is different to that felt towards the Bul Nuer. The former is a political anger: a unique event that demands retribution; Bul Nuer raiding, however, is relatively par for the course, even if given singular dimensions by the current conflict.

Current Bul Nuer dominance of the state's administration, however, makes a political solution to the conflict in Unity difficult to envisage. The enmity felt by the rest of the Nuer in Unity, and the degree of political and military control currently possessed by Matthew Puljang and Joseph Nguen Monytuel (the current governor, and also a Bul Nuer), makes it highly unlikely they would be willing to give up power within the state. Monytuel was the former Unity state governor under the National Congress Party, and is the brother of Bapiny Monytuel, who was one of the leaders of the SSLM/A. This political dominance means it is hard to see the SPLA-aligned Bul Nuer elite accepting a political settlement that would find a place for Taban Deng Gai, the former governor of the state and one of the SPLA-IO's lead negotiators. This situation is aggravated by the fact that Nguen Monytuel is a rival of Taban Deng Gai and the enmity felt between the two men was one of the reasons that Nguen Monytuel initially sided with the SPLA rather than the rebel forces. A political settlement, however, that leaves the perpetrators of the 2015 offensive in southern Unity in charge of the state is unlikely to be palatable either to the Nuer-majority of Unity, or to the political leadership of the SPLA-IO.

Equally, a military solution amenable to the major players in the state remains hard to imagine. During the second civil war, the most important Bul Nuer commander was Paulino Matiep, a senior officer in the Khartoum-backed South Sudan Defence Forces (SSDF), who joined the SPLA following the Juba Declaration in 2006. For many Bul Nuer, the inheritor of his mantle was Peter Gadet, who was the SPLA-IO's military governor of Unity state before his appointment as deputy general chief of staff for operations in December 2014. Military power in the state was passed to Simon Maguek Gai, who was appointed commander of the 4th Division. For some in the SPLA-IO command, Gadet's command in Unity was a failure, as he did not bring the Bul Nuer over to the SPLA-IO. Instead, they sided with Nguen Monytuel and Matthew Puljang; the latter is now the most powerful Nuer commander in Unity. Any future peace deal would likely have to find a place for both men inside the state—a task that risks inflaming an already violent military situation.

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The battle for Panakuac and discord in the SPLA-IO

The SPLA-IO used Panakuac, on the Unity–South Kordofan border, south of Kilo 30, to launch assaults on the oil fields of western Unity at the beginning of 2015. It achieved notable successes in January, and clashes continued around the fields for the first four months of the year. Panakuac was also central to SPLA-IO strategy in Unity because it provided access to rear bases in Sudan, as well as weaponry provided by SAF. The SPLA-IO’s use of Panakuac and the involvement of SAF recalls both Khartoum’s support of the SSDF as a way of weakening the SPLA, and the way the SSDM/A used Sudan for training and recruitment in the post-CPA era.

The SPLA-IO repulsed SPLA attacks on Panakuac at the end of April, though the rebels were pinned down and unable to support their comrades in the south. Following the conclusion of the southern offensive, SPLA troops withdrew to Bentiu. On 2 June, they then launched a coordinated assault on Panakuac, with Puljang’s forces moving north from Mayom, and 4th Division forces attacking from both Pariang county and from Bentiu, accompanied by 3rd and 5th Division forces from Bahr el Ghazal. The combined forces dislodged the SPLA-IO from Rot Riak and Lalop, before attacking Panakuac itself, forcing the rebels to flee into Sudan, along with an estimated 9,000–15,000 South Sudanese civilians currently sheltering in Kharasana, just across the border in South Kordofan.

Fighting continued for the first ten days of June, as the SPLA pursued the SPLA-IO into Sudan, causing a diplomatic incident, when SAF had to withdraw from three its own bases located in the Sudanese portion of the border zone. Concerned that the pursuit might trigger a wider confrontation between the two countries, the SPLA then withdrew from SAF’s bases and returned the heavy weaponry that they acquired there, with Matthew Puljang meeting the SAF Major General Mohammed Ahmed on 10 June to assure the Sudanese army that the SPLA’s encroachment into Sudan was not part of a broader northern offensive. This series of events provides obvious contradictions: while SAF and the SPLA are supposedly committed to a safe demilitarized border zone, the remaining SPLA-IO forces have at least tacit approval to remain on Sudanese territory.

Shortly after the SPLA dislodged the SPLA-IO from Panakuac, the South Sudanese minister of petroleum, Stephen Dhieu Dau, announced that Unity’s oil fields would soon recommence production now that the rebels could no longer threaten them in the north-west of the state. The oil pumps in Unity were turned off in December 2013, shortly after the outbreak of the civil war. Despite Dau’s claims, international staff involved in the oil fields privately say that they will need to see a much more sustained period of calm before work on the fields is able to recommence. Even if

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work does start, officials at the oil companies responsible for the Unity fields say it will take at least a year of work on the pipelines, which were damaged during the conflict, before oil production can begin.

There was discontent within the SPLA-IO following the SPLA's campaign, much of it directed at Simon Maguek Gai. Maguek was the speaker of the Unity state legislation under Taban Deng Gai before being dismissed by Monytuel in September 2013. He was previously Peter Gadet's deputy in the rebel command, before Gadet's appointment as SPLA-IO Deputy General Chief of Staff for Operations in February 2015. Some in the SPLA-IO claim that Maguek is unsuited for the position of commander of the rebels' 4th Division, as he is primarily a political figure, not a soldier. They further allege that his appointment was because he is Dok Nuer, like Riek Machar, the SPLA-IO's leader.

Discontent with Maguek is indicative of a growing cleavage between the SPLA-IO's political elite, which seems increasingly likely to make an agreement with the SPLM when negotiations in Addis Ababa restart in July, and the generals leading the rebel's military forces, who see the political leadership as self-interested, and are motivated by a desire for justice for the killings of Nuer civilians in Juba in December 2013. The SPLA-IO's military leadership is much more opposed to an accommodation with Kiir than the politicians who have been negotiating in IGAD-overseen talks in Addis Ababa. However, that leaves the generals at an impasse. While they are opposed to a political settlement that leaves Kiir's government in place, there is no figure among them with Riek Machar's political legitimacy.

As 1 July, the SPLA-IO finds itself with enough men to mount a guerrilla war in Unity during the rainy season. However, without an external source of weapons in greater numbers than those currently supplied by the GoS, it will be unable to achieve significant victories against the SPLA. The SPLA is in control of the state militarily, but cannot govern it. With Pagan Amum's rehabilitation into the SPLM at the end of June, and a militarily weakened SPLA-IO increasingly likely to make a political settlement, Unity state provides an indicator of the difficulties facing South Sudan. Even if a political settlement is reached, it is not assured that all of the SPLA-IO will accept it, and even if they do, the fractures and antagonisms that this war has produced in the state threaten to produce further conflict.

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