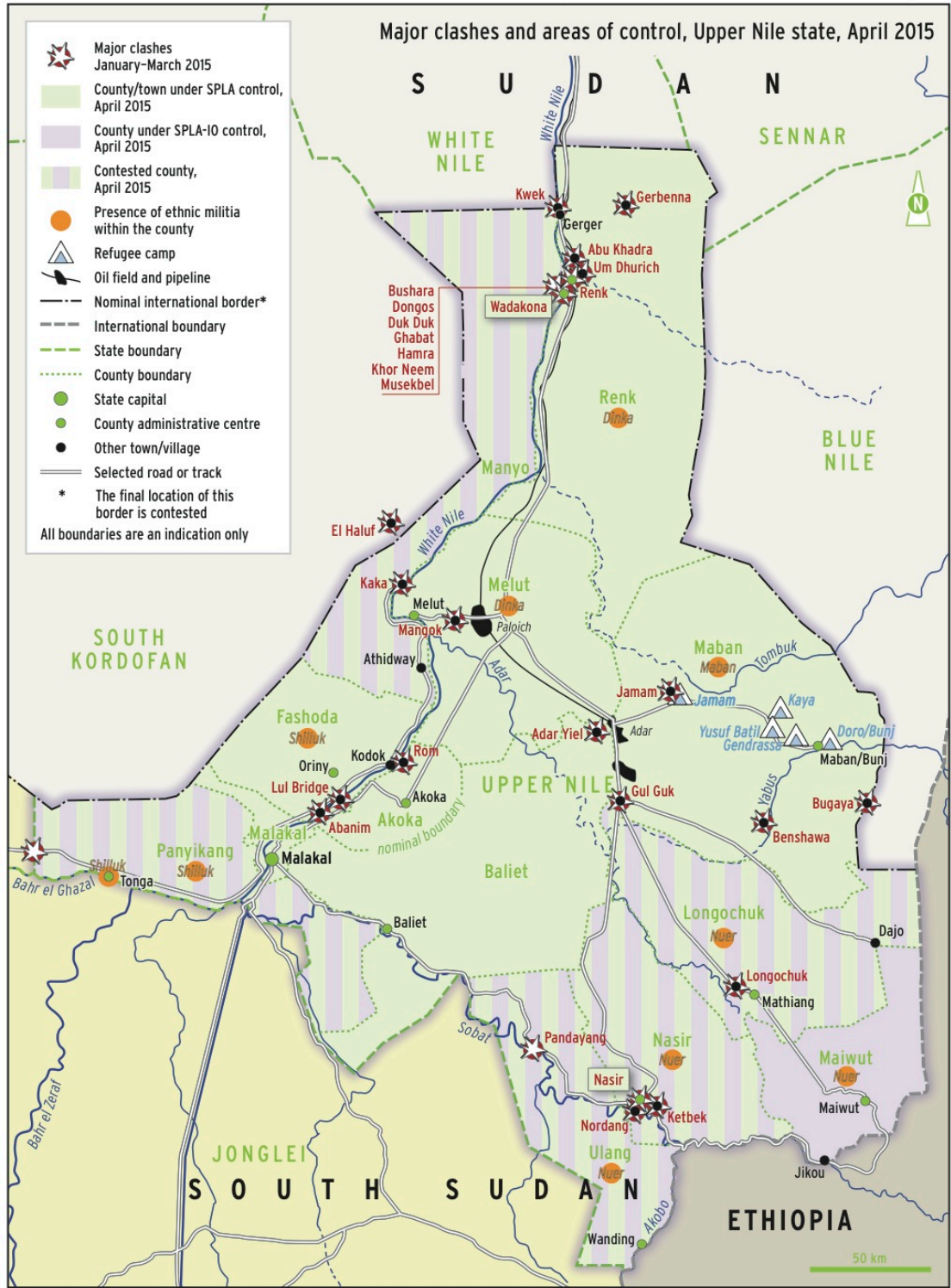


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The Conflict in Upper Nile State

Describes events through 9 April 2015



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Despite the two parties being granted a 24-hour extension period, a year-long series of negotiations in Addis Ababa ended with the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army in Opposition

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(SPLM/A-IO) failing to reach an agreement by the 5 March deadline imposed by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the regional trading bloc that oversaw the negotiations. Following the collapse of the talks, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) intensified its assault on SPLA-IO positions in the three states that constitute the Greater Upper Nile region (Jonglei, Unity, and Upper Nile).

The conflict in Upper Nile has two principal theatres. On 7 March, in the northwest of the state, the SPLA dislodged the SPLA-IO from Wadakona, the Manyo county capital, from where it had spent the rainy season shelling Renk town, on the opposite bank of the White Nile. In the south of Upper Nile, the SPLA is launching sorties against the SPLA-IO from Nasir town, which it held throughout the rainy season, towards Mathiang, in Longochuk county, and Maiwut town, in Maiwut county. Following the loss of Wadakona, these are the last two administrative centres in Upper Nile under SPLA-IO control.

As of 9 April, the SPLA control Akoka, Baliet, Fashoda, Maban, Malakal, Melut, and Renk counties, while the SPLA-IO maintains a rural presence in Longochuk, Maiwut, Manyo, Nasir, Panyikang, and Ulang counties—all of which are contested. The coming months will see intensified conflict as both sides seek to maximize the territory under their control before the onset of the first heavy rains in June. The SPLA is better armed and has better transportation. It is thus more likely to take advantage of the optimal fighting conditions of the last few months of the dry season. But while the SPLA may succeed in removing the SPLA-IO from the main towns of southern Upper Nile state, over the last few months its troops have antagonized a civilian population already sympathetic to the SPLA-IO.

The battle for Renk and Wadakona

Wadakona is the administrative centre of Manyo county, sitting on the White Nile across from Renk town. Its proximity to Renk allowed the SPLA-IO to shell SPLA positions on the east bank of the White Nile during the rainy season. SPLA-IO control of Wadakona also facilitated the movement of troops south from its training camps in Sudan, and allowed the rebels to threaten the important port of Kaka to the south. Kaka is the gateway to the crucial oil field of Paloich, currently the only productive field in South Sudan and thus the most heavily defended place in the country and the last source of meaningful income for the increasingly impoverished GRSS.

Over the last six months, the SPLA-IO has not managed to threaten the SPLA's control of Paloich. Instead, it has focused its military operations on the twin targets of Kaka and Renk town. The latter has been the scene of the fiercest fighting in Upper Nile so far in 2015. Renk is an important transport hub for trade with Sudan and for riverine traffic with Malakal. It is also home to a number of mechanized agricultural projects that make it one of South Sudan's most productive food-producing counties. Since the beginning of the conflict in Upper Nile, its agriculture has suffered from a lack of equipment, and trade has proved difficult. The passage north to Jebalyn, Sudan, and south to Malakal are frequently blocked by armed actors, and NGOs and the UN complain that there are roadblocks on the route running south, designed to extort resources and money from the aid industry.

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Renk town is also the base of the SPLA's 1st Division, reputed to be the army's best fighting force, and is heavily defended. Frequent SPLA-IO attempts to take the town have not succeeded. Holding Renk is a priority for the SPLA because the oil pipeline from Paloich runs through Renk county, and an SPLA-IO attack on the pipeline would be almost as disruptive as taking over the oil field itself.

Following a failed attempt to take Renk in September 2014, the SPLA-IO withdrew to Jebalyn, over the border in White Nile, Sudan. At the end of the rainy season (October-November), it recruited among the South Sudanese civilians who fled to camps in White Nile and Sennar states in Sudan. In November, these new recruits came south under the command of Peter Lim, a former member of South Sudanese President's Tiger Battalion, and clashed with the SPLA around Duk Duk, north of Renk town, losing 24 men. Intermittent clashes continued in December, when the SPLA-IO attacked Renk town on 4 December—and the United Nations Mission in South Sudan refused to allow fleeing civilians into its base—and on 12 December, when the SPLA-IO crossed the White Nile and attacked SPLA positions 40 km south-east of Renk.

The intensity of these clashes increased in January as the roads dried up, enabling the SPLA-IO to move more easily into South Sudan from its training camps in White Nile. On 17–18 January, the SPLA-IO launched coordinated ground assaults on Um Dhurich, north-east of Renk, and on Kaka, while it also shelled Abu Khadra (3 km north of Renk) and Renk itself.

These clashes established a pattern for the conflict for the next two months. The SPLA-IO alternately shelled Renk and the villages around it, periodically launching coordinated simultaneous ground assaults on Renk and Kaka. In its reports, the IGAD Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (MVM) frequently faults the SPLA-IO for shelling Renk and injuring civilians in violation of the Cessation of Hostilities (CoH) agreement that both parties signed on 23 January 2014. While this is certainly correct, the SPLA has also been shelling SPLA-IO positions on the other side of the river. For instance, on 17 January, as the SPLA-IO shelled Renk, the SPLA shelled rebel positions around Wadakona at Bushara, Dongos, Ghabat, and Musekbel. The IGAD MVM has not similarly condemned the SPLA for these actions.

This pattern of conflict continued into the next month. On 17 February, the shelling of Renk town became so bad that much of what remained of the town's population fled. This attack on Renk was part of another coordinated attack. On the same day, SPLA-IO forces overran SPLA positions on the west bank of the White Nile, southwest of Renk, and engaged SPLA forces around Haluf, near Kaka. The SPLA repulsed the rebels during the latter assault, and by 18 February the SPLA-IO had withdrawn to Odoud, with the SPLA in pursuit.

In February, there was a further repetition of this attack pattern. On 20 February, the SPLA-IO attacked an SPLA position at Aboudi, to the northwest of Kaka, and moved troops down from Tibol—an SPLA-IO and Sudan Armed Forces base on the border with Sennar state—to launch a ground assault on Gerbenna, to the north of Renk, while simultaneously shelling Duk Duk. The SPLA repulsed the rebels in both ground assaults.

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The conflict intensified on 2–7 March, before the Addis Ababa talks collapsed, when the SPLA responded to repeated SPLA-IO attacks on Renk and Kaka from December to February by launching an assault on Wadakona in order to prevent the rebels’ shelling of Renk and to drive them from one of their last urban redoubts. The bulk of the SPLA attacking force moved north from Kaka, where the SPLA had reinforced its positions during the last week of February. This force was under the command of Akwoc Mayong, a Shilluk who had previously been in charge of what is now Fashoda county, following the split in the SPLA in 1991. He remained loyal to Lam Akol, the Shilluk commander who formed SPLM/A-Nasir in 1991 with Riek Machar, until Akol rejoined the SPLA in 2003.

A smaller SPLA force moved south under the command of Johannes Okic, in order to trap the SPLA-IO at Wadakona in a pincer movement. Overall command of the operation was with Johnson Olonyi, who is stationed in Malakal. The SPLA forces on the west bank of the Nile are principally Shilluk, and often former members of the South Sudan Defence Movement/Army (SSDM/A), a rebel force only minimally integrated into the rest of the SPLA.

The SPLA took control of Wadakona on 7 March after five days of fighting, and the SPLA-IO’s 7th division withdrew to Bushara payam, some 10 km from Wadakona. The SPLA-IO claimed this was a tactical withdrawal, while the MVM noted that the capture of Wadakona was a clear breach of the CoH agreement. The SPLA-IO’s claim is not credible. Its forces lost a significant strategic town and immediately went on the counter-attack. It shelled Duk Duk on 5 March before launching an unsuccessful land assault on the village. It also continued to shell Renk and the surrounding villages. On 9–10 March, SPLA-IO forces then engaged the SPLA at Kwek, Khor Neem, and Hamra, on the west bank of the Nile. From 11–15 March, the SPLA-IO made some gains against the SPLA, taking the village of Ghabat. These gains proved temporary. The SPLA retook Ghabat on 15 March and attacked the SPLA-IO at Khor Athuoy and in Mangok, further south, in an effort to clear the rebel forces from Manyo county.

These clashes have caused a large number of displacements, with 4,000 refugees fleeing to White Nile between 8–13 March. Other civilians remain internally displaced in Manyo county. While the SPLA has strengthened its position in the north-west, and won some significant military victories against the SPLA-IO, it is unlikely to be successful in totally removing the rebels from Manyo. The county is extremely large, and often extremely difficult to access. Further, SPLA-IO bases in White Nile and Sennar states enable it to move across the border into Sudan when the SPLA attacks in South Sudan, and to reassemble there—while recruiting from among the refugees created by the SPLA’s attacks. So while SPLA-IO attacks around Renk might diminish in the short-term, it is impossible for the SPLA to entirely prevent them.

The battle for southern Upper Nile

Nasir is a strategically important port for traffic on the Sobat river, a tributary of the White Nile. It also holds symbolic importance for the SPLA-IO. In 1991, Riek Machar announced his split from the SPLA via the Nasir Declaration, and the faction created was known as SPLA-Nasir. During the first four months of the current civil war, Nasir was the wellspring for SPLA-IO recruitment of so-called ‘white army’



(*jiech mabor*) forces: temporary Nuer militia mobilizations originally created to defend local communities against attack. However, since it seized control of Nasir on 4 May, the SPLA has remained in control of the town and a series of defensive positions around it.

The rest of Nasir county is restive and supports the SPLA-IO. The SPLA's relationship with the area surrounding Nasir is turbulent. Often, clashes around Nasir involving the SPLA are not with the SPLA-IO, but with the local population. The SPLA responds to attacks from armed local Nuer youth by burning down local settlements, causing further altercations. From 29 December to 3 January, the SPLA harassed the population around Nasir, burning down their villages. On 19 and 21 January, it burned down a mosque and several market buildings in Nasir itself. It has also set fire to some buildings in the hospital complex and a World Food Programme depot. The SPLA presence in Nasir thinks of itself as an occupation, and is treated as such. This hostile relationship between the army and the local population has also caused tension for the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), as there are civilians sheltering at its base, and the SPLA has fired on the base and accused UNMISS of sheltering rebels there.

The conflict around Nasir is structurally very similar to that around Renk. The SPLA maintains control of Nasir and has the better weapons. The SPLA-IO takes up positions on the other side of the Sobat river and shells the SPLA, while also launching occasional ground assaults. In the north, the SPLA-IO occupied Wadakona; around Nasir, the SPLA-IO maintains positions just across the Sobat, and at Dhurding, Ketbek, and in the countryside surrounding Nasir. The principal difference between the two conflicts lies with the local populations: in Renk, among the Abialang Dinka, the SPLA have solid support, whereas in Nasir they are seen as occupiers, despite the support of Liech Bany Kuet, the county commissioner and a Jikany Nuer. The SPLA-IO accuses the commissioner of abandoning his people and supporting an enemy occupation.

The beginning of 2015 saw intermittent clashes around Ketbek and northwest of Nasir town. On 3 January, the SPLA moved out from its defensive positions and attacked the SPLA-IO at Hai-Pur Buob, Ketbek, and Thuk. On 9 January, the SPLA again attacked SPLA-IO positions around Nasir town. The SPLA-IO withdrew, but soon re-established control of the area around Nasir. Intermittent clashes continued throughout January and February. The SPLA repeatedly advanced on SPLA-IO positions, only for the rebels to withdraw and then return some days later, firing mortars against SPLA positions across the Sobat river. By 3 March, Nasir town was almost entirely deserted—aside from the SPLA—as the civilian population fled shelling and SPLA harassment.

The conflict intensified immediately after the failure of the Addis Ababa negotiations. On 6–7 March, a substantial SPLA-IO force (some 500 soldiers) attacked SPLA positions around Nasir, though it was not able to take the town. Subsequent to the SPLA-IO assault, the SPLA began a sustained dry season attack on the SPLA-IO. Its troops moved east from Nasir, as part of a campaign to take Maiwut and Mathiang, and cut SPLA-IO routes to its base at Pagak (the site of its leadership conference in December 2014), and to its rear-bases in Ethiopia. On 15 March, the SPLA attacked

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Gul Guk on the border of Longochuk. The SPLA then burned down the villages of Nordang and Pandanyang, just to the east of Nasir. The SPLA's tactic is to treat the southern counties of Upper Nile as hostile territory, and it is razing the villages that it moves through. The SPLA-IO does not have sufficient forces in southern Upper Nile to mount a significant challenge to the SPLA during the dry season. However, given the local population's anti-SPLA hostility, it will be extremely difficult for the GRSS to actually hold the southern counties of Longochuk Maiwut, Nasir, and Ulang.

Maban and the Blue Nile

Maban county was relatively peaceful during the first five months of the South Sudanese civil war, though it struggled to cope with the consequences of Sudan's civil war over the border. The county is home to four refugee camps that as of 1 March 2015 house 130,000 refugees from the conflict in neighbouring Blue Nile state, Sudan. In part due to straitened economic circumstances in Maban, tensions between the refugees and the host community greatly increased in the first few months of 2014, leading to the people of Maban county giving refugees from the Blue Nile an ultimatum in March 2014: leave within 24 hours or the Mabanese would force them out.

Tensions reduced during the second half of 2014, though they continued to simmer under the surface, with host communities angry about the amount of resources given to the refugees and a perceived asymmetry between the international NGOs attention to the refugees and to the people of Maban. These tensions emerged again in February 2015 when clashes erupted at the Gendrassa camp after a local farmer was killed by a group of refugees.

In many respects, Maban county illustrates a worst-case scenario for what could happen elsewhere along the Sudan-South Sudan border. Maban is increasingly at the mercy of the intersection of two civil wars. Host communities target Sudanese refugees in South Sudan, while the Sudanese government bombed sites in Maban county during 2014 and claimed that the SPLA was actively supporting the Sudan People's Liberation Army-North (SPLA-N) over the border in Blue Nile.

The SPLA-IO is also using rear bases in Blue Nile to train its troops, just as it is using sites in Sennar and White Nile. A large SPLA-IO force (approximately 5,000 fighters), along with a battalion of allied Maban militia forces, trained in Bout, Blue Nile, during the first half of 2014. Some of these forces were reportedly involved in attacks on Renk in mid-2014.

On 8 January 2015, some 3,000 SPLA-IO troops and associated Mabanese militia forces moved from Bout into Jamam. They attack SPLA positions around Jamam on 9 January. Local reports claim that the SPLA-IO attacked the SPLA from the west (the direction of the Adar Yiel oil field), indicating that they had already penetrated Upper Nile almost to the Baliet county line. The SPLA-IO torched a military base, which it claimed belonged to the SPLA-N—a claim that has not been verified—before the SPLA repulsed the rebels. Timato Nau, the Maban county commissioner, claimed that the SPLA-IO abducted at least four women during these attacks; the SPLA-N refutes these claims.



Following the SPLA-IO defeat at Jamam, there were intermittent clashes over the course of the next two months as the same rebel force engaged in hit-and-run attacks, often in order to gain supplies. The rebels attacked Benshawa at the end of February, and then Bugaya, right on the Blue Nile border, at the beginning of March, burning a health centre and taking large quantities of medicine. The path of the rebels indicates that the SPLA-IO forces have retreated back to rear bases in Bout following their failure to take Adar Yiel and Jamam.

In Maban county, both the SPLA and the SPLA-IO are using local militia forces. The Maban Defence Force (MDF) is a state-sanctioned local militia that targeted Nuer civilians in July and August 2014. The SPLA supports and arms the MDF but does not control it. In January 2015, tensions emerged between the SPLA and the MDF when the militia refused to integrate into the SPLA, and the army then attempted to replace its leaders with SPLA officials. The MDF remains primarily loyal to the Mabanese community and its political leadership, rather than the GRSS.

These militias are indicative of a more general trend in Upper Nile. With neither the SPLA nor the SPLA-IO able to secure a decisive victory, many communities have begun organizing themselves into local militias. There are Shilluk defence forces on the west bank of the Nile and Dinka militias in Melut and Renk. The *jiech mabor* play a structurally similar role for the SPLA-IO. These forces are often supported and armed by either the SPLA or the SPLA-IO, but their aims are very different, and they do not follow a direct military chain of command.

In the absence of effective state power, these militias indicate the degree to which an increasingly important part of the current conflict is determined by a series of local and relatively autonomous military actors. One of the more dangerous consequences of the rise of such militias is that the difference between civilians and armed fighters is obscured as communities organize their own defence and soldiers see civilians as fighters.

The politics of recruitment

Over the last four months, both sides have recruited intensively in preparation for dry season fighting. It is the SPLA's recruitment that has come under intense observation over the past two months, principally simply due to the difficulty international observers face in getting access to SPLA-IO controlled areas. On 15–17 February, hundreds of youths, some as young as 11, were conscripted from Wau Shilluk Payam, Malakal county, by forces under the command of Johnson Olonyi. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) claimed that these children were forcibly conscripted. These recruits were then sent to training camps in Malakal and Melut counties, with the intention of deploying them around the Paloich oil field.

UNICEF reported that the SPLA initially responded to these allegations by claiming that Johnson Olonyi is not part of the SPLA. Olonyi's forces were given an amnesty in April 2013, though by December 2013, when the South Sudanese civil war began, his forces had still not been formally integrated. The Upper Nile state government immediately sought to play down the idea that Olonyi was not part of the SPLA, with government spokesperson Gatluak Liphos insisting that "Olonyi's forces" were part of the SPLA, and had been formally integrated into the national army. The Upper Nile

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government's insistence is designed to convey an image of unity within the forces fighting for the GRSS.

The reality is more complicated. Even if Olonyi's forces are formally integrated into the SPLA, they remain answerable only to Olonyi rather than the SPLA command structure in Juba, and Olonyi himself is pursuing his own agenda rather than that of the GRSS. It would be as true to say that the SPLA is an instrument for Olonyi and his project, as it would be to say that his SSDM/A forces are an instrument of the SPLA.

Following UNICEF and Human Rights Watch revelations about child soldiers, the GRSS faced a public relations disaster. It had to insist on Olonyi's accountability within the SPLA chain of command while also distancing itself from his actions in the face of a predictable international reaction. The United Nations global education envoy, Gordon Brown, for example, called Olonyi's men "a terrorist group" that had offered to "allow them [the children] to sit their exams as long as they can then take them back as child soldiers."

The government initially denied that any children were forcibly recruited and demanded an apology from UNICEF. As the weight of international attention increased, the GRSS rapidly changed its stance, with Salva Kiir's spokesperson Ateny Wek Ateny claiming that Olonyi is the "Boko Haram of South Sudan." The GRSS then announced that Olonyi would be summoned for questioning in Juba by the SPLA high command. By 7 March, however, Olonyi has not appeared in Juba. He was instead directing the attack on Wadakona, and the SPLA said that he would address the charges against him "when he gets time."

The SPLA has little interest in preventing the recruitment of child soldiers, except to appease the international community. The use of child soldiers was extremely widespread during the second civil war and, while it involved conscripting children, the red army (*Jaish Ahmr*)—the name given to the battalions of child soldiers used by the SPLA from the 1980s onwards—also provided the possibility of education to thousands of children, many of whom joined voluntarily. Since the outbreak of the South Sudanese civil war in December 2013, both the SPLA and the SPLA-IO have extensively recruited child soldiers, with particularly intense recruitments by the SPLA reported in Mayom county, Unity state, and Malakal county, Upper Nile, while the SPLA-IO has recruited large numbers of child soldiers all over the south of Unity state. UNICEF claims that the two parties have recruited more than 12,000 child soldiers.

Shilluk-Dinka tensions within the SPLA

Even if the SPLA wanted to discipline Johnson Olonyi, it could not do so. He effectively runs much of the west bank of the Nile as a personal fiefdom, and answers to the broader Shilluk community rather than the SPLA in Juba. Olonyi, who is from Panyikang county, was an SSDM/A commander in June 2013, when he attacked the SPLA at Wadakona. In 2015, Olonyi directed the SPLA attack on SPLA-IO forces at Wadakona, but his motivations have not necessarily changed.

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Unlike many of the insurgencies that broke out in South Sudan between 2005 and 2011, the SSDM/A's was galvanized by Shilluk grievances against the SPLA. In the short-term, these included the SPLA's 2010 disarmament campaign on the Shilluk west bank, which resulted in the death of civilians and the razing of villages. The Shilluk rebellions of this period were also directed against what the community perceives as its marginalization in a state government that it thinks is controlled by Dinka politicians. Olonyi's struggle is neither for a united South Sudan nor for Kiir's government. Rather, the SPLA is a tool for him to carve out a Shilluk zone of influence that corresponds to what the community feels is its traditional area.

There are also tensions between the Shilluk community and the Dinka of Upper Nile that stretch back to the second civil war, when Dinka communities occupied land on the banks of the White Nile that the Shilluk consider their own. Many in the Shilluk community also claim that the creation of Akoka county in late 2011 was a way of giving Dinka settlements from the second civil war period political influence, and further marginalizing the Shilluk. At present, the Shilluk inhabit Fashoda county, and the Dinka, Akoka. Recent conflict between the two communities over land on both sides of the banks of the Nile goes back to 2008. Akoka's borders are sufficiently controversial that there is not an official state map demarcating the county.

At the end of March, clashes occurred on the border between Fashoda and Akoka, as Shilluk youth clashed with Dinka militia fighters over land claims. The situation got worse on 1 April, when Olonyi's deputy, James Bwongo, was killed by Dinka fighters at the Lul bridge between Malakal and Akoka counties, while on this way to investigate the disturbances. Twelve soldiers died in the ambush along with Bwongo. The Dinka forces in the area claimed that they thought Bwongo was the commander of the Shilluk youth, rather than a major general in the SPLA. Olonyi denies that his forces are involved in the clashes, and while he is clearly sympathetic to the Shilluk youth, it seems likely that the dynamics of these clashes are locally motivated; at this time, Olonyi has nothing to gain from alienating the SPLA by starting a conflict with the Dinka population around Malakal.

Following Bwongo's death, clashes continued. On 5 April, Dinka militia forces from Melut shelled government forces stationed at Abanim, on the Akoka-Fashoda border. These SPLA forces were recently moved into position in order to prevent clashes between the Dinka and Shilluk communities, and are composed of members of the Mathiang Anyoor—the Dinka militia recruited in Bahr el Ghazal in 2011–12. The presence of the militia indicates the degree to which the SPLA is actively trying to prevent a growing conflict between the Dinka and Shilluk communities that would divide the basis of its support in Upper Nile.

As of April 2015, there are two intersecting logics of conflict in Upper Nile. A resurgent SPLA seeks to dominate the last months of the dry season and push the SPLA-IO out of the state's urban centres in preparation for a long rainy season of intermittent raids. Shilluk, Mabanese, and Dinka forces are also intent on securing their own territory, either independently or as part of one of the two warring parties. The intersection of these two logics makes it difficult to envision an end to conflict in Upper Nile.

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