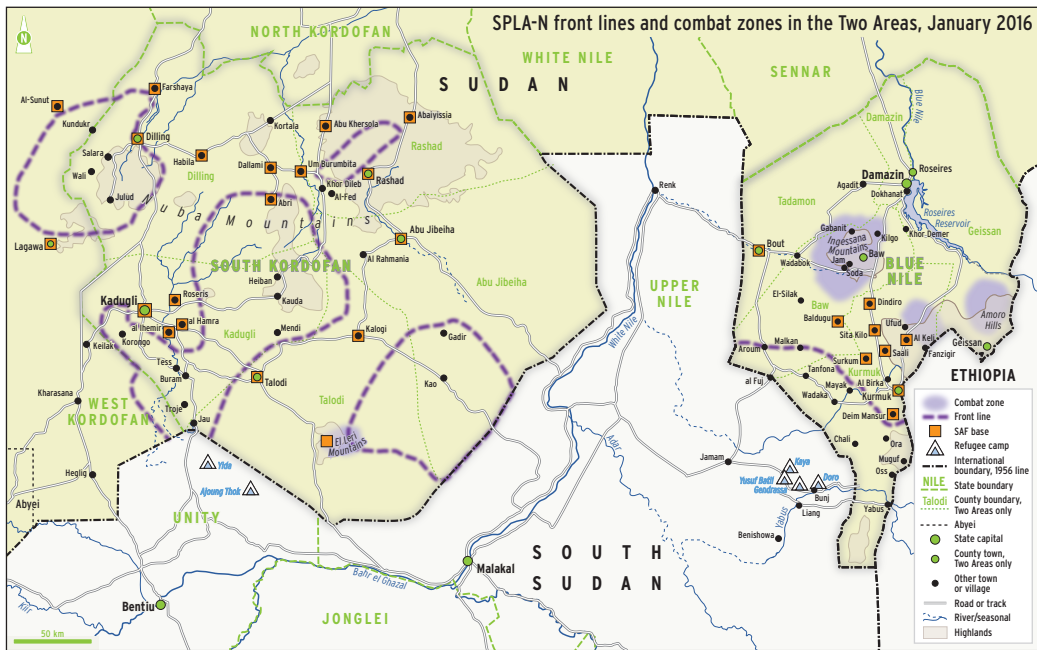


Conflict in the Two Areas

Security and political dynamics at the beginning of the fifth season of fighting

*Describing events through 24 January 2016
 Updated on 9 February 2016*

In the Two Areas—Sudan’s Blue Nile and South Kordofan states—the conflict between the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army–North (SPLM/A–N) has entered its fifth year. The fourth dry season of fighting—from December 2014 to May 2015—left both parties unable to provide a serious military challenge to the enemy. The front lines have not changed substantially since 2012. The exception is a new formation in the Ingeessana Mountains, Blue Nile, which took shape in March 2015, creating new conflict dynamics around the capital, Damazin, and widening the confrontation between the two forces (see the map).



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The dry season that began in November 2015 has ushered in another period of fighting, mainly in northern Blue Nile, although hostilities are expected along different fronts in South Kordofan, in response to developments in the peace talks. Fighting on the ground, accompanied by aerial bombardment and shelling by government forces, continued throughout the rainy season in northern Blue Nile, from June to November 2015, if on a smaller scale. In South Kordofan, the SPLA–N attacked the Abugrein and Gadir positions in Abu Jibeih on 12 August 2015, expanding its front line in the south-eastern part of the state. Observers expect hostilities to erupt in parts of South Kordofan in February 2016, as aerial attacks on the front lines, military positions, and civilian areas intensify, and following extensive repositioning of troops.

Throughout 2015, government aerial attacks targeted mainly civilians and active farms, limiting the people's ability to cultivate. As the humanitarian conditions for the people living in both government- and rebel-held areas deteriorated, exacerbated by alarming food insecurity levels due to a severe drought in parts of the states, both parties publicly showed a willingness to sign a cessation of hostilities agreement to support humanitarian access.

The African Union High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP) called a new round of talks in Addis Ababa on 19–23 November 2015, one year after the previous round, but the negotiations were adjourned without progress. Fighting did not stop during the talks. On 19 November, while the parties were sitting in Addis Ababa, the government attacked SPLM/A–N positions in Soda in Blue Nile (Kurmuk county). One Antonov reportedly flew over Kauda, the headquarters of the SPLM–N-controlled areas in South Kordofan, on the morning of 26 November, after a few months of calm. Subsequently, in December 2015, the parties held an informal round of talks, yet these also failed to produce substantive results.

The rebels—alongside other armed and unarmed groups in the country—have called for a cessation of hostilities on humanitarian grounds in advance of any comprehensive discussion on a political solution for all of Sudan. The GoS has rejected their demands, insisting instead on a negotiated ceasefire followed by political consultations in Sudan. Internal divisions within and among the opposition groups and within the GoS have affected their ability to achieve stated objectives. With their political power reduced, all the parties had reverted to military means to gain leverage ahead of the round of informal talks that were held in Berlin on 22–24 January 2016, without a positive outcome. Fighting is expected to resume on a larger scale in February, given the expiration of the unilateral, one-month ceasefire that President Omar al-Bashir had declared on 31 December 2015 in a speech marking the anniversary of Sudanese independence.

Conflict dynamics and armed groups

Fighting in Sudan traditionally follows dry-season patterns, with lulls during the rainy seasons, from June through November, when roads become impassable and movement in rural areas difficult.

By May 2015, the fighting that had started in December 2014 had more or less ended, although skirmishes continued in northern Blue Nile throughout the rainy season. Conflict dynamics in 2016 are expected to be similar to the previous year. In Blue Nile, fighting is expected to concentrate in the Ingessana Mountains and around Damazin, away from the front line; in South Kordofan, the clashes will probably be restricted to the central corridor. The GoS's declared intent is to regain control of the borders with South Sudan in both states, and of the rebel stronghold Kauda in South Kordofan. SPLA–N troops have declared their readiness to contain imminent attacks from the government.

In Blue Nile, GoS forces were mobilized mainly around the capital and in Bau and Tadamon. On 17–18 December 2015 government Antonovs repeatedly bombed and shelled civilian and military locations in Tadamon and Kurmuk, according to local

humanitarian monitors. The bombing of Khor Tombak village in Maban county (South Sudan), at the border with Chali *payam* in Blue Nile, killed a 14-year-old girl; the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS) has not officially commented on this fatality. On 19 and 26 December, GoS forces and militias attacked SPLA–N positions in Torda (50 km east of Bau). In response, the SPLM/A–N claims to have destroyed three mounted vehicles and captured 6 RPG-7 rocket launchers, 3 machine guns, and 10 AKM rifles.* The rebels also captured two prisoners of war. On 28 December, SPLA–N forces ambushed GoS positions between Al Birka and Saali (north of Kurmuk); they reported having seized ammunition, 9 AKM rifles, 1 RPG-7, and 1 DShK, as well as having destroyed one Toyota land cruiser.* Over the first ten days of 2016, heavy aerial bombardments in Kurmuk county targeted cultivated farms, compromising an already scarce harvest, and jeopardizing the safety of internally displaced persons (IDPs), according to local humanitarian organizations. In January 2016, SAF troops were seen moving southwards from the base at Bout, and from Damazin down into Kurmuk town, following patterns seen in 2015. On 22 January, while the parties were sitting in Berlin, SAF attacked the SPLA–N base in Aroum and was repulsed after two days of fighting that provoked considerable casualties on both sides.

In South Kordofan, eyewitnesses reported that the GoS started to build up and assemble its forces in the garrison towns of Abu Jibeiha (bordering northern Upper Nile state), Dallami, Dilling, El Leri, Habila, Kadugli, Kharasana, Rashad, Talodi, and Um Burumbita beginning in September 2015. Information from the ground suggests that some 2,000 army troops who had graduated in the last week of October 2015 in Abu Jibeiha were ready to be dispatched to the Al-Fed, Al-Rhamalla, and Khor Dileb areas, in the eastern part of the state. Military informants consider the government troops well equipped in terms of mounted vehicles and tanks. At least 60 mounted vehicles and eight tanks were counted in Talodi in November 2015; meanwhile, two tanks were reportedly spotted in Abri, ready to attack southwards. Heavy internal movements of troops, including militias, were reported in the second week of January 2016 around Talodi, eastern Kadugli, Kharasana, and Dallami counties. The SPLA–N and observers expect attacks around Buram, Kadugli, Talodi, Um Burumbita, and the Lake Jau–Troje corridor in the southern part of South Kordofan in February.

The movement of Antonovs has reportedly increased over Buram, Um Dorein, and Talodi counties since the beginning of 2016. On 1 January, the SPLM/A–N attacked GoS forces in the garrison town of Mazlagan, between Dilling town and Kundukr area. Both parties suffered considerable casualties. The rebels claimed to have destroyed four vehicles and captured ammunition.* On 2 January, the GoS's Rapid Support Forces (RSF) attacked civilians in Abaiyissia and looted properties on their way to the assembly areas in Talodi. Local human rights organizations reported on five rapes; the victims included of a 70-year-old woman and an 11-year-old girl.

Government forces

Government forces involved in the fighting are estimated at 30,000–40,000 soldiers—fewer than in 2014. In its offensive in 2014, the GoS had deployed a fighting force of some 11,000 troops in Blue Nile and 30,000 in South Kordofan. As in 2015, the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) are largely stationed around the garrison towns, while the Popular Defence Forces (PDF) and militias—and especially the local recruits who are

familiar with the territory—are leading the attacks. The militias are mainly organized as part of the RSF under the command of the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS). The total number of militias could not be ascertained because militias are not yet fully deployed. In 2014, after the first group of RSF, composed of Rizeigat from Darfur, failed to defeat the SPLA–N in South Kordofan, the GoS began to recruit locally in the Two Areas. While the Darfur militias have mostly returned home, and some were deployed in Yemen in the Saudi-led ‘Operation Restoring Hope’, the government’s economic incentives have also given rise to a plethora of small, locally based militias.

In the Two Areas, government recruitment of youths into militias and PDF continued throughout the 2015 rainy season. In South Kordofan, in addition to the Arab groups, all Nuba tribes were targeted, especially in Kadugli, Kalogi, Khartoum, and Rashad, as well as in Buram county. In October 2015, at least 200 Nuba youths from Buram were seen training in Shendi camp, northeast of the capital, Khartoum. A group of new PDF recruits was assembled in Jebel Awlia, in the outskirts of Khartoum, in the last week of October 2015, following the defeat of GoS troops in Blue Nile, but their destination remained unknown. Informants on the ground indicated that militias that deployed in convoys in South Kordofan are mainly newly recruits, both Nuba and individuals from elsewhere in Sudan. Foreign militias have mostly refused to fight in the area.

The number of militia forces expected to fight in Blue Nile is also unclear. Around 2,000 RSF troops from Darfur were seen assembling in White Nile in October 2015. According to the SPLA–N, they are well armed and equipped with vehicles, and thus a major threat to the rebel army. The majority of the fighters hail from Blue Nile itself. Various local militias are also organizing in the state, drawn from all tribes that are linked to the National Congress Party (NCP), but mostly from the Fellata group, following economic and political gains. One group—known locally as Kobagi and composed largely of defected SPLA–N soldiers, retired SAF, and former police—was seen fighting in the Surkum and Saali battles in 2015; according to local witnesses, they are moving between Agadit, El-Silak, Geissan, and Wadabok in government-held areas. They number around 200 men and are poorly equipped. The PDF is still active in the state, composed mainly of local Arab tribes connected to the ruling party. In the previous dry season (December 2014–May 2015), they were primarily employed alongside the militias.

In Blue Nile, the militias and the PDF are considered responsible for conducting widespread attacks and causing the displacement of civilians in the Ingessana Mountains since the beginning of the conflict. They began to expand the scale and scope of their operations in April 2015.

According to interviews conducted on the ground, the main incentive for young people to join the militias is economic, including the freedom to loot after a battle. In many cases, families force their children to join the government ranks. During the 2014–15 dry season, an RSF fighter was able to earn around SDG 2,500 (USD 400) per battle, while an officer could be paid up to SDG 4,000 (USD 650). Since the beginning of 2015, recruitment has been less successful, for two main reasons. First, the economic crisis has reduced the capacity of the government to pay the militias. In

October 2015, RSF looting in northern Khartoum showed that the militias had not been paid as expected. Second, youths and their leaders are frustrated because they have not received expected returns from their engagement over the past two years. In fact, youths are increasingly refusing to fight in government campaigns, and accounts of RSF desertions on the ground are becoming more common.

Despite difficulties on the ground, NISS forces continue to enjoy special consideration from the presidency vis-à-vis the army, and their status was legally elevated to that of a military force through constitutional amendments in January 2015. In the aftermath of the April elections and a substantial government reshuffle, NISS director Mohammed Atta and Minister of Interior Ismat Abdel-Rahman were reconfirmed. Lt.-Gen. Awad Mohamed Ahmed bin Awaf, previously SAF chief of intelligence, was put in charge of the ministry of defence. Except for the chief of staff, SAF officers were replaced with men who have security backgrounds and are thought to be less inclined to oppose the NISS's military activities.

The militias' status, their impunity, and their economic gains have fuelled discontent among SAF fighters. According to Sudanese and international analysts, SAF wants to have a more prominent position on the ground and is looking for a military victory. At the negotiating table in Addis Ababa in late November 2015, SAF members of the government delegation had a prominent position.

In the cabinet, President Bashir has favoured allies with a military, security, and Islamic background over party leaders. While religion is used instrumentally to secure allegiances, this tactic has not translated into a commitment to an Islamic political agenda. Instead, it has led to mounting divisions within the NCP, which Bashir has tried to suppress, partly by reshuffling posts. In the Two Areas, the governor of South Kordofan, Gen. Issa Adam Abakar, who comes from the security apparatus, replaced Adam al Faki, while NCP loyal Hussein Yassin Hamad, of the Wataweet Islamic tribe close to Khartoum, remained in power in Blue Nile.

Moreover, the political power of the Rizeigat, who make up the RSF, was recognized in the government that emerged from the elections of April 2015, when two Rizeigat governors and two state ministers were voted into office. The second vice president, Abdel-Rahman Hasabou (a relative of RSF commander Hemeti), comes from the Rizeigat Mahamid clan, from which the RSF originated. According to analysts, the appointments might also be a way to please Darfur Arab leader Musa Hilal, who was allegedly opposed the group's formation from the beginning but then entered into dialogue with elements of the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF).

Overall, the new government of Sudan is made up of security technocrats, which disempowers the ruling party and state institutions by recasting security activities as the government's main political tool. This composition also reinforces tribal and economic patronages that secure Bashir's control over power.

SPLM/A–N forces

The SPLA–N is fighting in the Two Areas using three active 'fronts'—the local term for 'divisions'. Front 1 is in South Kordofan under the command of Gen. Jogood Mukwar, who is also the SPLA–N chief of staff (CoS). Two fronts (2 and 4) are in

Blue Nile: Front 2 is commanded by Gen. Joseph Tuka, also deputy SPLA–N CoS for logistics, and Front 4 falls under Gen. Ahmed al Omda, deputy SPLA–N CoS for operations. Jogood and Omda were both chief negotiators for the SPLM/A–N in Addis Ababa in 2014; they have since been replaced by the SPLM–N secretaries of South Kordofan and Blue Nile. Front 3, meant to be deployed in Darfur, was dissolved in August 2015 and the troops returned to South Kordofan soon thereafter.

The chairman of the SPLM/A–N, Malik Agar, remains SPLA–N commander-in-chief, with Abdelaziz al Hilu as deputy. Abdelaziz is also the head of the SPLM–N civil administration in the Two Areas. With an estimated total of 25,000–35,000 troops, the SPLA–N has not undergone any substantial changes since the previous fighting season. In all fronts, the SPLA–N complements guerrilla incursions with mobile tactics learned from the Darfur groups ahead of their departure from South Kordofan in 2014. The new warfare tactic allowed the SPLA–N to make effective hit-and-run incursions beyond the front lines in both states throughout 2015.

Front 4 was created in March 2015 around al Fuj and dispatched to the Ingessana Mountains, where its 2,000 men began to alter the conflict dynamics in the state. The front was established following the SPLA–N’s successful attacks in Jam and Soda in February 2015. From the beginning of the conflict in the state in September 2011, and until early 2015, the SPLA–N had been confined to a small part of Kurmuk county, while a few platoons in Bau and Geissan counties conducted guerrilla-type operations. The fourth front was sent to support around 250 poorly equipped SPLA–N soldiers who were fighting in isolation in the mountains. Upon its formation, the new force reportedly attacked the garrison towns of Wadabok and Bout in Tadamon county, increasing its arsenal—especially of mounted vehicles and artillery—in the process. According to the SPLA–N, the front is now in possession of 30 mounted vehicles, while GoS troops in the area number around 5,000.

After the scale-up of the SPLA–N force, the intensity of the fighting with SAF in northern Blue Nile increased and the enemies clashed on a regular basis throughout the rainy season, from June through November 2015. On 10–14 September, fighting reached the outskirts of Damazin, in Dokhanat area. On 16–18 October, the SPLA–N and GoS fought around Kilgo, in Bau county. Two T-55 tanks were allegedly destroyed and weapons and ammunition seized. The SPLA–N claimed to have repulsed another attack in Kilgo on 29 October. On 2 November, the SPLA–N announced that it had ambushed militias sent to reinforce SAF’s Agadit and Gabanit garrisons, around 15–20 km from Damazin. The SPLA–N said it had seized 2 DShK heavy machine gun, 1 RPG-7, and 9 AKM rifles. By January 2016, the group claimed to have fought off a dozen of attacks around Kilgo area.

While the hostilities are approaching the state capital, the rebels continue to have a two-pronged approach: disrupting economic activities of government-related firms in the area (especially mining and agriculture), while also keeping the government forces away from the front line in the southern part of the state. Conquering—and holding—a big town such as Damazin is unviable for the rebels, whose declared aim is not expanding territory but undermining state power.

The SPLA–N forces in South Kordofan are scattered in different parts of the state,

holding the Nuba Mountains, or *jebels*, since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, and the corridor of Lake Jau–Troje into South Sudan since 2012. The SPLA–N also controls part of the western jebels, which includes areas that now belong to West Kordofan, a state that was re-created in July 2014. Most of the ground fighting stopped during the rainy season in South Kordofan, but shelling and aerial bombardment continued. The GoS holds the main cities in the state, including the capital, Kadugli, and the majority of the countryside.

Darfur armed groups allied with the SPLM/A–N through the SRF are no longer fighting in South Kordofan. Since mid-2014, these groups—overwhelmingly from the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM)—returned to their home areas, yet not before committing abuses against civilians and problematically recruiting Nuba (see [HSBA Working Paper 38](#)). The SRF does, however, maintain a joint military command under CoS Abdelaziz el Hilu.

Regional dynamics

The troops of the SPLA in Opposition (SPLA–IO) remain in the Two Areas—in Abu Jibeiha, El Leri, Heglig, and Kharasana in West and South Kordofan, and in Bout in Blue Nile. Yet the SPLA–IO did not engage in any military operation against the SPLA–N in 2015. According to reports from the ground, 2,000 SPLA–IO troops arrived in Bau area in the last week of October 2015 to join around 3,000 troops that were already there. Local and international observers note that this move might be an attempt to reinforce SPLA–IO lines ahead of the implementation of the Compromise Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan, mediated by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and signed in August 2015 between the GRSS and the SPLM/A–IO, as well as related security arrangements. SPLA–IO troops were flowing back and forth between Blue Nile and Upper Nile states in South Sudan at least until November 2015.

Different sources, both local and international, report that the SPLA–IO and SPLA were rearming and reorganizing on the ground, despite the peace deal. Several observers who were interviewed in Blue Nile and in Maban (Upper Nile, South Sudan) in November 2015 also reported a regular southerly movement of Antonovs, which allegedly provide government supplies to the rebels. In addition, reports from Unity state point to movements of GoS planes between SPLM/A–IO areas in Unity state and South Kordofan.

SPLA–IO troops also remain in Benishowa (Maban county, Upper Nile), in isolation, after repeated failed attempts to move northwards. In September 2015, they attacked the villages of Liang and Dangaji in Maban county (south of Bunj and the refugee camps), forcing some 2,000–3,000 IDPs to move to Bunj town, according to local humanitarian actors. Fighting continued between the Maban Defence Forces and the SPLA–IO throughout October 2015 in the area of Liang. The new influx of IDPs has increased the pressure on the host and refugee communities, stretching the limited resources provided by the humanitarian agencies. Reports from the ground indicate that women and children among the IDPs are moving towards Ethiopia, while young men remain in the area. Local analysts predict intertribal and retaliatory fighting between Mabanese and Nuer in the coming months, which would put the security of the refugees of Blue Nile at further risk. Tribal clashes between the two groups have

escalated since the beginning of the South Sudan conflict in late 2013. Relations between the refugees and the host communities deteriorated in 2015, as local people allegedly killed a number of refugees arbitrarily, according to humanitarian actors.

The presence of South Sudanese rebels in the Two Areas reflects complex regional and international dynamics that have a deep effect on Sudanese internal politics. Sudan and South Sudan continue to level allegations of hosting proxy militias and foreign armed groups against one another. The IGAD-mediated Compromise Agreement contains a provision that requires the GRSS to stop supporting the SRF (Paragraph 1.6 under 'Security Arrangements'), yet Juba continues to deny having provided such support. President Salva Kiir of South Sudan allegedly added this clause to his list of GRSS reservations to the Agreement. Analysts posit that, for Khartoum, Riek Machar's potential return to government may serve as a guarantee of the implementation of that provision (while part of the SPLM/A–IO leadership has arrived in Juba, the leader remains in Pagak, Upper Nile, delaying the formation of the transitional government on the grounds that the recent formation of the 28 administrative states in the country is a violation of the agreement). Yet, all parties have acknowledged the SPLA–IO presence in the Two Areas, and those troops should appear in the head count needed to implement the new security arrangements.

On 15 October 2015, the ministers of defence of Sudan and South Sudan, Lt.-Gen. Awad Mohamed Ahmed and Lt.-Gen. Kuol Manyang Juuk, respectively, met in Addis Ababa and reiterated their willingness to cooperate on border security, as agreed in September 2012. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how the control of the border between Sudan and South Sudan will be implemented.

Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni's historic visit to Khartoum in September 2015, after tense encounters with Bashir during the IGAD meetings in Addis Ababa, resulted in enhanced security cooperation aimed at ending Uganda's alleged support to the SRF and Sudan's alleged support to the Lord's Resistance Army. Khartoum recognized that Kampala was no longer harbouring SRF rebels in its territory, and in late October 2015 Uganda reportedly began withdrawing its troops from South Sudan, as required by the Compromise Agreement. The official rapprochement between the two countries has led to a regional detente that reveals converging political and economic interests with regard to South Sudan. By aiming to exert control over the new nation's borders, resources, and key people, regional players stand to further these interests.

Political and humanitarian agreements

As noted above, the AUHIP convened new talks in late November 2015. This 10th round of negotiations, which was to focus on security arrangements and humanitarian access in the Two Areas and Darfur, was called while both parties were preparing for the upcoming fighting season. It was the result of several months of consultations between AUHIP chairman Thabo Mbeki and both parties to overcome the impasse that had halted the talks in December 2014. In a significant departure from their slogans of the previous year, both the government and the SPLM/A–N had publicly expressed a willingness to sign a cessation of hostilities for humanitarian purposes, as mentioned above. Yet although the talks offered the parties a first chance to meet, they maintained divergent positions and expressed little will to compromise. The

delegations were led by NCP deputy chairman and assistant to the president Ibrahim Mahmoud (the position previously held by the foreign minister, Ibrahim Gandour) and SPLM–N secretary general Yasir Arman.

The AUHIP proposed a cessation of hostilities for humanitarian access—to serve as a confidence-building measure that would lead to the participation of all stakeholders in the ongoing National Dialogue in Khartoum, a topic that was not itself part of the talks. Meanwhile, the parties continued to work on the existing Draft Framework Agreement of 2014. The major stumbling blocks revolved around three issues:

- the GoS’s proposal of an immediate permanent ceasefire followed by the rebels’ participation to the National Dialogue vs. the SPLM/A–N’s push for a stand-alone cessation of hostilities for humanitarian purposes at the talks;
- the GoS’s support for humanitarian access across the front lines vs. the SPLM/A–N’s insistence on cross-borders aid, from South Sudan and Ethiopia, with openings for cross-line aid based on a cost efficiency argument, as was the case in the 2002 Būrgenstock agreement, which paved the way to peace in the Nuba Mountains; and
- the venue, participants, and agenda of the National Dialogue, which the rebels want to reform into a Constitutional National Dialogue with the participation of all Sudanese soon after the signing of the cessation of hostilities.

The talks were officially adjourned to give the parties more time to consult and, while rumours abound, a new round of talks has not yet been scheduled. As noted above, however, the German government, in coordination with the AUHIP, held informal consultations in Berlin on 22–24 January 2016. The timing of the talks, and of Bashir’s ceasefire pledge—which has already been violated on the ground—was relevant, given that the 26th African Union summit took place in Addis Ababa on 21–31 January 2016; the Sudan peace process was among points on the agenda.

The SPLM/A–N insists that a security solution is conditional on a comprehensive political solution to the conflicts in Sudan, including in Darfur. At the end of a meeting held in Paris on 10–14 September 2015, the SRF proposed a ‘Road Map on the Way Forward’ to solve the problems of Sudan, in which it declared its readiness to sign a six-month, United Nations-monitored cessation of hostilities agreement for humanitarian purposes in the Two Areas and Darfur, in order to create a conducive environment for the peace process and a comprehensive National Dialogue. Moreover, the SRF called for a preparatory meeting to discuss the participants in the proposed Dialogue, the chairmanship, the facilitators, the implementation mechanisms, the agenda, and confidence-building mechanisms. The ceasefire is thus dependent on the GoS’s willingness to implement confidence-building measures, such as the humanitarian cessation of hostilities and the promotion of basic freedoms in Sudan. The Sudan Liberation Army–Abdul Wahid, which is against negotiations with Khartoum, did not endorse the road map, nor did the faction take part in the last round of talks held in Addis Ababa in November 2015.

While continuing to reject the ‘two-track’ approach established by African Union Peace and Security Council Communiqués 456 and 539, which was to keep the issue of the Two Areas separate from that of Darfur, the GoS delegation led by Amin

Hassan Omer met with the Darfur armed groups, JEM and the Sudan Liberation Army–Minni Minawi (SLA–MM), on 22–23 November. Talks were adjourned without progress, however. Khartoum has called on the Darfur groups to endorse the Doha agreement, which concluded the last official peace process concerning the western region of Sudan and was signed in 2011 in Qatar. Meanwhile, recent losses on the ground, especially those suffered by JEM in April 2015, have reduced the Darfur groups’ standing at the negotiating table. The SPLM/A–N’s stance was crucial to bringing these groups to Addis Ababa. The outcome of a comprehensive solution for the Two Areas and Darfur thus depends on the SPLM/A–N’s ability to negotiate and to hold the SRF together.

In contrast to the SPLM/A–N, Khartoum wants to define security arrangements first, with AUHIP mediation. It expects a political solution to flow from the National Dialogue, which started in Khartoum on 10 October 2015, but was due to end on 10 February 2016. The government refuses any international involvement in the Dialogue process, especially from the AUHIP. The SPLA–N and other armed groups were given a full amnesty to attend the Dialogue, but they refused. In January 2015, the National Supreme Court of Sinja sentenced the leadership of the SPLA–N, along with 15 other members of the movement, to death in absentia, while it gave 46 SPLM–N members life in prison. In a previous perfunctory attempt at reconciliation, the GoS had offered the SPLA–N a unilateral two-month ceasefire as of 20 August 2015, and reiterated it on 22 September, but then repeatedly violated it on the ground.

The Dialogue was boycotted by the major opposition groups in Sudan, except for the Popular Congress Party of Turabi (whose members are not united behind their leader’s decision to join the forum, however). A few armed and unarmed groups left in November 2015, due to government’s objection to reform, yet four groups announced that they joined the Dialogue in January 2016. In interviews, several Sudanese analysts and politicians indicated that without the SRF, the future of the Dialogue would be at risk, especially without the SPLM/A–N and the Umma Party of Sadiq al Mahdi. The AUHIP had scheduled a meeting in Addis Ababa between the GoS and the Paris Declaration signatories—the armed groups JEM, SLA–MM, and SPLM/A–N, as well as the Umma Party—through the 7+7 National Dialogue coordinative mechanism (of seven parties allied with the government and seven opposition parties); the meeting was to take place after the peace talks but it never materialized. Sadiq al Mahdi had flown to Addis Ababa and engaged with SRF members in anticipation of the planned talks. Such a pre-dialogue meeting is precisely what the African Union Peace and Security Council called for in its decisions of 15 September 2014 and 25 August 2015—and what Khartoum opposed in March 2015.

The GoS had also previously refused to endorse an agreement between the 7+7 and the opposition on the constitutional process in Sudan, signed on 5 September 2014 under the auspices of the AUHIP. That unwillingness had led to the departure of the major Islamist opposition parties in the committee, including the Reform Now Party, headed by former speaker Gazi Salah El-Din Attabani, and the Just Peace Forum, chaired by Al-Tayeb Mustafa. The other signatories of the Sudan Call of December 2014—namely the opposition alliance National Consensus Forces (NCF) of Farouk Abu Issa and the Civil Society Initiative (CSI) of Amin al Makki Medani—were excluded from the meeting in Addis Ababa (with some members banned from

travelling). The GoS indicated that the NCF and CSI were free to meet in Khartoum and has urged them to join the National Dialogue process. The two opposition parties, however, met with the SRF in Paris on 10–13 November, ahead of the talks, and endorsed the SRF request for a cessation of hostilities for humanitarian purposes, followed by a comprehensive National Dialogue and peace in all of Sudan.

The Sudan Call, which had created unique political momentum for the armed and unarmed opposition in Sudan, largely by calling for an election boycott and a new transitional government, has lost its strength as a result of the GoS's tight security controls and internal disagreements and divisions among its members. After signing the Sudan Call, Amin al Makki Medani and Farouk Abu Issa were detained for four months in Kober prison in Khartoum. Political and civil society leaders insist that freedoms continue to be at stake in Sudan. On the 51st anniversary of the October Revolution (21 October 1964) in Khartoum, the NCF called for a social revolution to change the government. Sadiq al Mahdi's speech from Cairo on the same day presented a similar message.

Illegal detentions and other abuses have been widely reported by local and international human rights organizations (see [HSBA Working Paper 38](#)). In the last week of October 2015, members of the Sudan Congress Party were arrested for publicly criticizing the government. A decree calling for a death penalty was issued on traders who had been trying to cross into rebel territory in the Two Areas, and three traders were reportedly killed in October 2015 in South Kordofan. In Bau county of Blue Nile, a large number of villages were burned and people were forcibly displaced to the outskirts of Damazin, White Nile, and the refugee camps in South Sudan. According to humanitarian actors, the unprecedented level of forced displacements deprived thousands of people of food, water, and shelter, as well as humanitarian assistance. Local activists associate the government's attempts to depopulate the states with vested economic interests in land and mineral exploitation in the state.

Furthermore, the government's attempts to negotiate separately with members of the SRF and the Sudan Call are exacerbating internal divisions within and between the opposition groups. As a consequence, the chances of reaching a comprehensive political solution in Sudan are diminishing. The political cohesiveness of the SRF, which has been led by the SPLM/A–N since its inception in September 2011, has shown signs of weakness since mid-2015. It reached its lowest point in the aftermath of the SRF Leadership Council meeting of 13–17 October 2015, following a leadership struggle.

The chairmanship of the SRF has become a particular snag. The position used to be renewed by consensus every year, most recently in June 2015, when the Darfur members could not agree on an alternative candidate. At that Leadership Council meeting, the members agreed to set up a committee to amend the SRF constitution to include, among other issues, the election of the chairman by a majority of votes in an election. During the October meeting, the Darfur groups proposed JEM's leader Gibril Ibrahim Mohammed as the new chairman, yet the SPLM/A–N, the Beja, and the Umma opposed the decision on procedural matters—specifically because the chairmanship was not set to change before June 2016, and not before the

constitutional amendments. In turn, the Darfur groups, which viewed the change of chairmanship as conditional on their agreement on a candidate, accused the SPLM/A–N of a lack of transparency.

In the final analysis, the mounting mistrust between the groups reveals political objectives. The refusal of the SPLM/A–N to relinquish the chairmanship, contrary to what the movement has said in the past, exposes its fear that the Darfur groups may sign a deal with Khartoum on behalf of the SRF. According to Sudanese analysts interviewed, JEM is ultimately protecting an Islamic agenda and might find more answers in Khartoum than elsewhere, especially since the group has lost its military advantage and the likelihood of resolving the problems of Darfur by force is fading.

Amid parties' disagreement, the humanitarian conditions in the Two Areas after nearly five years of conflict are dire. United Nations Security Council Resolution 2046, adopted in September 2012, called for 'immediate, safe and unhindered' humanitarian access to people in need, but it was not heeded. Monitors of humanitarian aid delivery report that a poor and late rainy season has exacerbated food insecurity levels in parts of the states. Continuous insecurity due to government aerial bombardment, including the use of cluster bombs and the shelling of farms, has reduced the ability of the population to cultivate crops. Humanitarian access is still restricted by the GoS, in both government- and rebel-held areas. Attempts by the international community and the United Nations to gain access for a vaccination campaign in 2013 for the children in the Two Areas were obstructed by both parties.

Notes: * These claims could not be verified independently by the Small Arms Survey.

List of abbreviations

AUHIP	African Union High-Level Implementation Panel
CoS	Chief of staff
CSI	Civil Society Initiative
GoS	Government of Sudan
GRSS	Government of the Republic of South Sudan
IDP	Internally displaced person
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
JEM	Justice and Equality Movement
NCF	National Consensus Forces
NCP	National Congress Party
NISS	National Intelligence and Security Services
PDF	Popular Defence Forces
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudan Armed Forces
SDG	Sudanese pound
SLA–MM	Sudan Liberation Army–Minni Minawi
SPLA–IO	Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition
SPLM/A–N	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army–North
SRF	Sudan Revolutionary Front