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Conflict in the Two Areas

Describing events through 29 January 2015

The conflict in South Kordofan and Blue Nile, the so-called Two Areas, between the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army-North (SPLM/A-N), has entered its fourth year. While the conflict has reached a military stalemate, all efforts to bring about a negotiated settlement to the conflicts have failed, and a dry season offensive has already begun in South Kordofan and to a lesser extent in Blue Nile.

The seventh round of African Union High Implementation Panel (AUHIP)-sponsored talks between the rebels and the GoS began on 12 November in Addis Ababa, but the ‘one process, two tracks’ (Darfur, Two Areas) negotiations ended on 8 December without major progress. While negotiations were officially ongoing, on 1 December fighting erupted in South Kordofan, followed by heavy aerial bombardments. In January 2015, the Sudan Humanitarian and Aid Commission said some 145,000 people are expected to flee from SPLA-N areas in South Kordofan into government areas ahead of an expected GoS offensive. According to the SPLM/A-N, almost one million people in the Two Areas live under dire humanitarian conditions.

On 23 November, peace negotiations between the government and the two main Sudanese rebel factions—the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the Sudan Liberation Army led by Minni Minnawi (SLA-MM)—started in Addis Ababa (the other armed group in the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF), SLA-Abdul Wahid al-Nur (SLA-AW) did not participate). The two-track approach is supported by the international community and endorsed in the African Union Peace and Security Council Communiqué 456 of 12 September 2014. However, disagreement over the agenda prevented any substantive discussion and talks were adjourned indefinitely on 4 December. Generally, rebels want to address local dynamics in direct talks with Khartoum, including a cessation of hostilities for humanitarian purposes, before joining the government’s comprehensive National Dialogue process, while the GoS demands a ceasefire (with immediate disarmament of the rebels) ahead of any possible political agreement.

While the AUHIP talks drift, the SRF’s call for the democratic transformation of Sudan has gained political momentum, thanks in part to a painful economic recession. On 3 December 2014, armed and political opposition joined in the ‘Sudan Call’ statement released in Addis Ababa. Signatories included Minni Minnawi on behalf of the SRF, Farouk Abu Issa on behalf of the National Consensus Forces coalition of Sudanese political (unarmed) opposition parties, and Amin Mekki Medani on behalf of “civil society” actors. The Sudan Call reiterates the previous SRF-Umma ‘Paris Declaration’ of 8 August 2014 signed by chairmen Sadiq al-Mahdi and Malik Agar.

The renewed political declaration provoked a harsh reaction from the government. On 6 December, upon their return to Khartoum, two of the signatories—Amin Mekki Medani (age 76) and Farouk Abu Issa (age 82)—were arrested alongside Farah Agar, the former National Congress Party (NCP) political leader in Blue Nile. As of 28 January they were being held in Kober Prison under charges that carry the death

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penalty. On 11 December 2014, the Sudanese Minister of Defence re-launched its 'decisive summer campaign' to eradicate all rebellion utilizing locally recruited militias, heavy indiscriminate aerial bombardments against civilians, and the targeting of agricultural lands and food stocks. On 18 January 2015, President Bashir confirmed from El Geneina in West Darfur that general elections would be held on schedule in April 2015, despite the boycott announced by the Sudan Call's signatories.

The new dry season offensives

The SPLA-N and the government have both mobilized great resources for renewed fighting in the Two Areas. On the government side, the GoS has recruited an increasing number of National Intelligence Security Services (NISS)-affiliated local militias under President Bashir's direct control. While the reliance on militias as opposed to the regular Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) can be seen as an ongoing weakness in Sudan state's institutions, recent constitutional amendments have reinforced and protected this policy, and the NISS has even been formally integrated into the regular armed forces.

The government strategy for the new campaign has been to recruit local militias to defeat the rebels once and for all in their own difficult territory, especially in the Nuba Mountains where 10,000–15,000 Nuba—including underage youths—have reportedly been recruited. That strategy revives the government's long-standing 'divide and rule' tactic that has had the long-term effect of weakening the social fabric in the regions. The Rizeigat Rapid Support Forces (RSF) fighters used last year in South Kordofan (but not in Blue Nile) have in fact mostly returned to Darfur because they were unable to defeat the rebels in the Nuba Mountains despite the two strategic victories of Abri (Dallami county) and Atmur (Kadugli county). While their mobile tactics initially caught the SPLA-N by surprise, the 2014 offensive ended without substantive changes to areas of control—but did generate massive new displacements. The battle of Abri alone caused more than 20,000 to flee to caves in Dallami area. As of January 2015, the government controls all the major towns in the Two Areas, while the rebels defend their strongholds in the mountains and in the countryside.

In South Kordofan, the SPLA-N controls the central area from Dallami county to the border with South Sudan. The strategic victories of Jaw and Troji (Boram county) in February 2012 secured an important corridor for the passage of goods and people into their areas; government attempts to recapture it have failed to date. The rebels also hold positions in the western, eastern, and south-eastern Jebels (mountains), and in the western part of Kadugli, thanks to the SPLA elements in the former Joint Integrated Units that remained in their locations when the war started in 2011. According to the SPLM/A-N, a total of 40,000–50,000 government forces, including some 18,000 SAF plus Missyria and Hawazma Popular Defence Forces (PDF), Nuba militias, RSF from Darfur, and elements of the SPLA-in-Opposition (SPLA-IO), are positioned in the areas of Hejlj and Kharasana, and in Dallami, Talodi, and Abu Jibeha, ready to launch parallel attacks against the rebels' strongholds in Heiban, especially Kauda, and in the strategic areas of Troji and Jaw to cut their supply chain. An informed but unverified estimate puts the SPLA-N forces at 30,000–50,000 in South Kordofan.

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In South Kordofan, fighting already started in Lofu (eastern Kadugli) and in Al-Ithemir (Boram county) on 1 December 2014, when the GoS attacked SPLA-N positions. The two forces were engaged in parallel fighting through 15 January around Kadugli and north of Talodi. The GoS build up of forces around Kadugli had started earlier, on 11 November SAF troops arrived in Al-Atmur, 7 km south of Kadugli, and in early December around 1,500 troops arrived in Daldako, 12 km east of Kadugli, where they joined the Nuba militias already in the area. On 10 December the SPLA-N claimed victory over Daldako and Rosaries, 17 km east of Kadugli, while also taking control of the Jebel Nimir garrison, 7 km west of Kadugli. The SPLA-N also claimed successful attacks on three GoS convoys in January 2015: a military convoy in Daloka (8 km south of Kadugli) on 8 January, a paramilitary convoy near Angarto, 18 km north-east of Talodi on the next day, and a military convoy in El Geneziya, 15 km north of Um Sirdiba on 11 January. On 15 January the rebels claimed victory over Angarto and Um Turq Turq, north of Talod, that reportedly provoked, on 28 January, the mutiny of RSF with 80 vehicles and some 250–400 troops, in Talodi. Talodi has been a main target of the rebels since the beginning of the conflict, to control the strategic south-eastern territory and the border with Upper Nile, but it is well protected by Nuba forces historically allied with Khartoum and Arab militias.

The SPLA-N has provided evidence of substantive seizures of weapons captured in the battles fought at the beginning of January 2015. These include two mounted vehicles, two tracks, one T-55 main battle tank (another was destroyed), one ZU-23-2 cannon, and other light weapons that would greatly boost the rebels' materiel. An Iranian-made drone, was shot down on 1 December 2014 by the SPLA-N in Umdurein county and visually verified. Also claimed, but not confirmed, is the SPLA-N's capture in these battles of a new T-72 battle tank, six DShKM-pattern machine guns, and other materiel and ammunition.

In Blue Nile, as of 28 January, the dry season offensive had not yet begun but parallel attacks by SAF, Fellata, and Hausa PDF, plus militias (for a total of around 18,000 troops) are expected in the areas of Ulu, Malkan, and Kurmuk. The government's aim in Blue Nile is to further pry away long-held rebel territory in Kurmuk and Baw counties along the border with South Sudan. During the last dry season, the battles of Deim Mansur, Mofu, Kurmuk, Malkan, Surkum, and Rum resulted in an overall status quo. The SPLA-N's guerrilla operations continued during the rainy season in the Ingassana mountains in Baw county and in Geissan area, with about one full battalion on each front, to disrupt exploitation of natural resources (land, gold, and minerals). On 18 November the SPLA-N attacked a government garrison in Bek (north of Ingessana Mountains) and on 21 November it hit the Abugarn area, reaching 30 km west of the capital Damazin. The operations were conducted in retaliation for aerial bombardments against civilians in the areas of Chali and Yabus, while negotiations in Addis Ababa were ongoing. On 9 January the SPLA-N reportedly ambushed a military contingent in Khor Demer, 30 km south of the capital, seizing a 106 mm anti-tank recoilless rifle mounted on a Toyota pick up, six 106 mm shells, an RPG, five Kalashnikovs, and small arms ammunition.

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The SPLM/A-IO and SRF as proxies

The Two Areas are increasingly the theatre of what amounts to proxy war between Khartoum and Juba via their respective allied non-state forces. Both governments are aware that any direct confrontation in the border areas between the SPLA and SAF could rapidly escalate and, unlike the battle of Hejlij in 2012, will not be easily reversible. New conditions apply: there are far more and better armed non-state groups along the border zone, and the political situation in each country is far more fragile, making government control over militias even more challenging than before.

According to the SPLA and SPLA-N, Khartoum is hosting and training the SPLA-IO forces in the Two Areas. The SPLA-N claims some 5,000 SPLA-IO troops and around one battalion of allied Maban militias under Kamal Luma (a former PDF and then SAF commander who served in Damazin, originally from Gufa in Maban county and active in Blue Nile since August 2011), that also includes elements of the former South Sudan Defence Forces-affiliated militia under Muntu Mutallah Abdallah, are undergoing training in the area of Bout, a 'no man's land' in Al-Tadamon county. A first group of around 3,000 SPLA-IO arrived in the area in July 2014, from where they reportedly attacked Renk area, Upper Nile. International monitors witnessed SPLA-IO recruits repeatedly transiting from Longochuk/Maiwut counties through a corridor between Adar and Jamaam into Blue Nile. They were followed by around two battalions in November 2014, which passed through SPLA-N controlled Kurmuk area, Blue Nile. Another perhaps 7,000 SPLA-IO troops are believed to train in South Kordofan since the beginning of 2014, with the Bul Nuer under Brigadier General Michael Makal Kuol (head of SPLA-IO operations for Unity) in Hejlij and Kharasana, and with Upper Nile clans in Abujibeha and Rashad. While Khartoum denies any involvement, the SPLA-IO has admitted being hosted on some occasions by Sudan but denies receiving any military support. Their main objectives are the oil field in Adar Yiel, Phaloj airport in Upper Nile, and Bentiu airstrip in Unity, to weaken the SPLA's logistics and financial sources.

The SPLA-IO has stated that they have no intention of attacking the SPLA-N. However, according to the SPLM/A-N leadership and SPLA-N area commanders, during the last dry season, the Southern rebels were involved in the government's attack on the SPLA-N in Troje (Boram county) and in Abri (Dallami county) in South Kordofan. In July 2014 pro-Sudanese Nuer elements attacked an SPLA-N position in Baw area, Blue Nile, seizing one RPG-7 and one PK machine gun, and capturing one man. It remains unclear if that involvement was the result of individual actions or a concerted strategy to weaken the SPLA-N in response to Khartoum's presumed support to Riek Machar's forces. Some SPLA-IO are also believed to have acted in retaliation for alleged—but unverified—SPLA-N involvement in the Southern conflict. In December 2013 the SPLA-N leadership agreed in a leadership meeting to remain neutral in the conflict between their former Southern comrades, and it has few resources to fight in multiple fronts. There is, however, evidence that the SRF, and JEM in particular, was involved in the fighting in Unity state alongside the SPLA against the SPLA-IO, and that some Nuba also participated (discussed below).

In fact, the conflict in South Sudan has direct effects on the security of refugees from the Two Areas. Food distribution has been reduced since February 2014 as a result of

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the fighting in Upper Nile, forcing around 3,000 refugees to return to Blue Nile and putting further pressure on the already limited availability of food and water there. The conflict has also exacerbated existing ethnic tensions in Maban and between the host communities and refugees. With SPLA support, a militia of some 3,000 men organized in the area under the name of Maban Defence Forces (MDF) in January 2014, immediately after the fighting started in Juba, on the initiative of Moon Fan, the representative of the county in Upper Nile state assembly. On 3 August 2014 the MDF clashed with Nuer SPLA soldiers, and in the following days the militias killed Nuer civilians employed in INGOs in the refugee camps. While the militias fulfilled the SPLA's short-term objective in the area, they then began harassing Blue Nile refugees and locals at check points.

On 2 January 2015, the commander of the SPLA 1st Division, Stephen Buoy, arrived in Bunj with two APCs and 10 other vehicles that were sent northwards towards the border. By 5 January 2015 he claimed to have successfully reintegrated the MDF into the SPLA 101st Battalion. But the situation remains fragile. On 8 January 2015, around 3,000 SPLA-IO troops and around 900 Maban militias descended from Bout into Jamaam, heading towards the Adar Yiel oilfields, creating fear among the population of retaliatory attacks against the MDF that would involve the local and refugee population given the widespread presence of arms in the area. Reports from the ground indicate that those forces stationed in Benishawer and are successfully recruiting Maban civilians, with the support of former Maban commissioner John Jumaa who joined the SPLM/A-IO in the first half of 2013. In this context, the Southern SPLA's policy of arming local militias is extremely worrisome.

Between 2011 and 2014, JEM and the other Darfur groups operated in South Kordofan, carrying out joint and independent military operations in the name of the SRF. (They have so far remained inactive in Blue Nile due to the distance from their bases.) As a result of the rebels' misbehavior and repeated abuses against the population, including looting, raping, and forced recruitments of Nuba fighters, the SPLA-N leadership expelled them from South Kordofan. The expulsion was triggered by the conduct of the Darfur rebels in the aftermath of the battle of Abu Khershola in late April 2013 that marked the end of SRF joint military operations and threatened to dissolve the alliance. Towards the end of the 2014 dry season, the Darfur groups moved out of South Kordofan, with a last component of 200–250 SLA-AW fighters leaving at the end of 2014. JEM moved to Unity state, around Yida camp, where it had enjoyed a presence since 2010 by approval of former governor Taban Deng, currently a SPLA-IO leader. As the Southern crisis worsened, however, JEM stood alongside the SPLA in Bentiu and on other fronts. The SPLA-IO attack on Darfurian traders in Bentiu in April 2014 must be seen in relation for long-standing and broken relations between the two groups. After the attacks in Bentiu, JEM started moving towards Western Bahr al-Ghazal and Raja, the contested area between Sudan and South Sudan bordering South Darfur. In Raja it reorganized and recruited alongside SLA-MM and SLA-AW in preparation of the dry season fighting that started in Darfur in January 2015 (Darfur elements are still moving around Unity state). SPLA-N is also in the Raja area in what it is emerging as the SRF third front. In November 2014 JEM denied any involvement in South Sudan, while it admits having presence along the border with Sudan.

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Humanitarian needs and human rights violations

Widespread documented violations of human rights and international humanitarian law are an emerging feature of the conflict in the Two Areas, the vast majority reportedly committed by government or pro-government forces. This includes indiscriminate and targeted aerial bombardment of civilian areas, recruitment of child soldiers, the mass rape of women and girls, the illegal detention of citizens in government-held areas, and abuses against Blue Nile refugees in Ethiopia by Sudanese and Ethiopian security forces.

According to local humanitarian actors and the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, the humanitarian wing of the SPLM-N, more than half a million people have been displaced by the conflict in the SPLM/A-N controlled area, around 30% of the population. The GoS has downplayed the humanitarian crisis, but in January 2015 the Sudan Humanitarian Aid Commission requested assistance for 76,000 displaced persons, returnees, and people affected by conflict in Blue Nile government-held areas. In total, some 170,000 people from Blue Nile have sought refuge in South Sudan and Ethiopia, and almost 90,000 arrived in Unity state from South Kordofan. The coping mechanisms of the remaining population, particularly in Blue Nile, are limited given the severe underdevelopment of the region. Ground fighting and aerial bombardment have pushed the population away from they home areas, disrupted the food cultivation, and reduced the availability of clean water. Local monitors and other independent international sources state that an increasing number of bombs in 2014 were deliberately dropped on cultivated farms and food stocks, indicating the government’s intention of starving the population to weaken its support for the rebellion. On 17 December 2014, for example, two bombs were dropped on Samari area in Blue Nile, destroying 30 farms for around 600 feddans (some 620 acres), forcing around 3,000 people to flee.

As a result of insecurity and late and heavy rains in the last year, local authorities in both areas estimate that the population in South Kordofan (mainly Dalami, Heiban and Umm Durein) and Blue Nile (mainly Wadaka and Baw) will begin to experience severe food shortages in March 2015. Khartoum has denied humanitarian access in the Two Areas since the beginning of the conflict.

According to interviews with local community members in both areas as well as first hand observations, bombs are increasingly dropped away from military targets, over schools, hospitals, and villages. Three reconnaissance drones have been shot down since the beginning of the conflict in South Kordofan, the last one (an Iranian Zagil) falling on 1 December around Kurchi (Umm Durein). Between May and June 2014, around 60 bombs were dropped in Kauda area, targeting a local NGO and a clinic, miles away from the frontline. On 6 June, two bombs were dropped against an MSF medical facility in Farandalla in South Kordofan, injuring two staff, despite the fact that the INGO had communicated to the government the location of the facility. The attack was repeated on 20 January 2015 with 13 bombs.

The raping of women by SAF and PDF is reportedly common in Blue Nile. A group of 400 women and underage girls arrived in Maban refugee camps in November 2014 escaping abuses in government-held areas. According to interviews with eleven of them, including two girls, they had been victims of mass rape while collecting water

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and firewood in the areas of Mosfa and Khor Maganza between December 2013 and September 2014. One 20-year old woman, was reportedly raped by 10 men in December 2013, while in the bush collecting Arab gum, and again by five men two months later. None of the girls reported the abuses to the police or went to the hospital, for fear of retaliation. Family members of the escaped are reportedly beaten and harassed. Around 100 civilians are reportedly still detained in government facilities on charges of being SPLA-N supporters.

The recruitment of child soldiers by government or government-allied forces is also supported by qualitative interviews. This occurs due to the co-option of chiefs and local political leaders, and for financial incentives. Interviews with former child fighters and files captured by the SPLA-N in Daloka and reviewed by the Small Arms Survey suggest that underage children have been recruited into SAF and PDF. JEM is also accused of recruiting children in Yida camp and in South Kordofan, one reason the SPLA-N expelled them from South Kordofan. According to SPLA-N leaders and the local population around 600 youths were taken between 2012 and 2014. Around 200 Nuba youth (12–17 years old) were reportedly taken between January and March 2014 in exchange of money and pledges of honours and military rank. The numbers could not be independently verified. In general, recruitment was said to take place in the name of SRF.

Blue Nile refugees in Ethiopia have been reportedly victims of abuse by the local Ethiopian Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs and Sudanese security. In particular, refugees have no job opportunities and are not allowed to leave the camps if suspected to go to the SPLA-N areas, and that contravenes the international refugees law. According to interviews, young men cross the border at night in search of seasonal jobs in the gold mines or in Maban, to return to Ethiopia and sustain their families. Reportedly, on October 2014 a group of refugees entering Geissan county was stopped by Sudanese authorities and seven people were killed, including one woman after being raped, and eleven were arrested. According to refugees interviewed in southern Blue Nile, the raping of women by Ethiopian and Sudanese authorities is widespread.

30 January 2015