

Violence in Abyei, February–mid March 2011

In a situation of increasing political tension, February–mid March 2011 saw the worst violence in Abyei since 2008, with 149 people dying in militia attacks.

Early in the morning of 27 February, a police post in Todac, a village 15 km north of Abyei, was attacked and seven police officers were killed. There was a second attack that afternoon, which left ten dead, leaving the total casualties for the day at 17.

On 28 February, Todac was attacked again. Raids in the morning and the afternoon left 90 dead. During these raids, some of the huts in Todac were burnt.

On 2 March there was fierce fighting over Maker Abyior, a village that was at the centre of clashes in January. Attacking forces overran a police position outside the village, killing all the officers on duty. After burning the village, the attackers then crossed the Nyamura River and burnt down the village of Wungok. Forty-one people died in these clashes. One member of a Missiriya militia force subsequently died in a skirmish with police units on 7 March.

During the fighting, the Joint Integrated Units (JIUs) that had been stationed in Abyei following January's security meetings did not get involved. Local government officials indicate that there is a great deal of tension between Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) commanders within the JIUs, and that it was feared that if they had got involved, it would have led to outbreaks of fighting between the SAF and SPLA JIU contingents.

There is no agreement about precisely who participated in the attacks. After the clashes on 27 February the National Congress Party (NCP) initially held that Missiriya herders were attacked by SPLA units disguised as policemen. The NCP position shifted later in the week, however, when it was claimed that Missiriya militias with no backing from either the NCP or SAF had instigated the attacks, as a reaction to the SPLA blocking Missiriya access to grazing routes through Abyei.

The SPLM and officials from the Abyei administration claim that the Missiriya militias are backed by the NCP and given logistical support by SAF. Deng Arop, the chief administrator in Abyei, reported that SAF vehicles were disguised using mud and used in the attacks. The militias were said to be using 12.7 mm machine guns, 60 mm mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, and small arms. The principal *omodiya*¹ involved in the clashes was the Ajaira Mezaghna.

There is also little agreement about who was attacked in these clashes. Acuil Akol, the Secretary for Finance in the Abyei Administration, insists that police units were attacked, while the NCP claims that the SPLA is operating inside Abyei, in violation of the Abyei roadmap of 2008, and is disguising its soldiers as police officers. There is no independent corroboration of these claims.

What is clear is that the attacks were well prepared, and Abyei is now in an intensifying crisis. The people living in the villages that came under attack had

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already fled by the time of the clashes, leaving northern Abyei effectively uninhabited, and populated only by JIUs and the militias. The northernmost civilian presence is now Abyei town itself.

Following the attack on Maker Abyior, residents began fleeing Abyei town, fearing a return to the violence of 2008, which saw half of the town burnt down. The streets were full of thousands of people leaving, and by 4 March approximately 70 per cent of the town's population had fled south to villages around Agok. As of the time of writing, some people are now returning, but the markets remain largely shut and many residents continue to stay away.

Following the violence on 2 March, a meeting was arranged for 4 March between high-ranking members of the NCP, SPLM, and the Abyei administration.ⁱⁱ It was reportedly a difficult meeting, with little agreed between the two sides. Officially, both claimed there would be a renewed commitment to the January security agreements. Given that these arrangements have already failed to prevent outbreaks of violence in February and March, it remains doubtful whether such an agreement will deliver security to Abyei.

The meeting was held at the compound of the United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS). Outside, a protest took place, convened by local Ngok Dinka frustrated by the absence of progress in negotiations on the future of Abyei. The protest was also directed at UNMIS, which was not, it was felt, fulfilling its responsibility to protect civilians. Late in the afternoon tensions boiled over, as protesters broke through the gates of the compound and vandalized vehicles. Later, protesters threw stones at the compound and a UN helicopter, and set fire to dry grass outside the compound's walls. A boy was accidentally shot in the hip by local police during the protests.

Events on 5 March cast further doubt on whether the previous day's meetings would provide any improvement in the security situation. As the delegates were leaving Abyei, a militia force burnt the village of Tajalei, destroying around 300 huts. The village had already been abandoned by its inhabitants and there were no deaths. Officials suggest that the militia forces involved in this attack were not under a unified command. This indicates that ensuring the armed militias involved in these conflicts respect the January security agreements will be extremely difficult, even if the NCP and SPLM decide to honour them.

On 7 March, as Abyei administration police moved back into position at Tajalei, they encountered a militia force and a skirmish began that left one Missiriya fighter dead, bringing the total death toll for the previous eight days to 149.

The last several days have seen a lull in the fighting, but just how long this will last is uncertain. With negotiations on Abyei's future still ongoing and little chance of a resolution in sight, the situation remains extremely tense.

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- i The Missiriya are divided into two principle groups: the Zuruq and the Humr. The Humr are composed of the Ajaira and the Fallaita. There are a number of sub-groupings called *omodiya* within the Ajaira—the Fayarin, Awlad, Kamil, Mezaghna, Fadliya, Menama, and Addal. See Pantuliano, Sara, et al. 2009. *Put out to Pasture: War, Oil and the Decline of Misseriya Humr Pastoralism in Sudan*. Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute report. London: ODI.
 - ii In attendance for the NCP was Salah Gosh, the presidential advisor for security; Ahmed Haroun, governor of South Kordofan; Ibrahm Hamid, the minister of the interior; and ambassador without portfolio Ahmed Dirdeiri, among others. They met with Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS) minister of regional cooperation Deng Alor; GoSS minister for SPLA affairs Nhial Deng Nhial; the deputy director of GoSS Security, Kual Deng; and the chief administrator of the Abyei administration.