

The Conflict in Jonglei State

Describes events through 31 March 2014

The situation in Jonglei has changed rapidly over the last three months of SPLA and rebel clashes. Fighting has taken place along multiple fronts, but the Juba-Bor road, linking the national capital with the Nuer-controlled rebel heartland, has seen the brunt of battle. Territorial control has swung back and forth between SPLA and rebel hands, with incremental gains for the SPLA over time, largely thanks to support from the Ugandan People's Defense Forces (UPDF). The conflict has been increasingly marked by targeted and indiscriminate ethnic violence, prompting mass civilian displacement and defections. While the rebels have lost some territory in southern Jonglei in the last few weeks, they have managed to secure support from various Nuer communities in Jonglei. The evolution of the conflict from a two-party war to one that has incorporated tribal and ethnic dimensions is similar to dynamics seen in Upper Nile and Unity states.

The conflict began on 18 December when rebel forces under the direction of Peter Gadet, a Nuer commander in charge of the SPLA 8th Division and with a history of switching allegiances, launched a surprise attack using tanks, rockets, mortars and artillery on Panpandiar and Malual-Chaat military camps outside Bor town, forcing hundreds of SPLA loyalists to flee south. Gadet is originally from Unity state and is considered the founder of the South Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SSLM/A). Following his amnesty deal in 2012, the SPLA put him in charge of the disarmament of civilians in Pibor county, Jonglei. He was also in charge of the SPLA's counter-insurgency against David Yau Yau's Cobra Faction.

Immediately after the December attack, Gadet joined the opposition, leaving for Kolnyang to reorganize his forces. Almost simultaneously, Nuer youths in Akobo county, allegedly infuriated by reports suggesting that Dinka soldiers had killed Nuer civilians in Juba, attacked a UN base and killed two Indian peacekeepers and injured a third. An additional 30 Dinka civilians housed in the UN camp in Akobo were also killed. Within days, 20,000 internally displaced people from Jonglei fled to neighboring Lakes state, and another 14,000 sought shelter within the UN compound in Bor. By 1 January, President Salva Kiir had declared a state of emergency in Jonglei.

By 2 January 2014, control over Bor had shifted rapidly back and forth between pro-government and rebel forces. They also exchanged fire around a string of villages that straddle the Bor-Juba highway near the Jonglei-Central Equatoria border. In particular, the Pariak and Panpandiar areas marked the battle frontlines where forward operating soldiers traded artillery fire with their rebel counterparts. Fighting continued the next several days with pro-government forces receiving additional reinforcements from Yambio and advancing from Yebisak on 3 January to Malek, 15km south of Bor, by 5 January.

Gadet's forces retreated from Panpandiar to near Bor. According to one estimate, two rebel battalions returned to positions in and around Bor by the end of the first week of January, while one battalion remained south of Bor possibly to delay advancements made by pro-government

forces. Despite Gadet's assurances that rebel forces controlled territory up to Malek as of 7 January, artillery fire coming from SPLA controlled parts could be heard in Bor.

The rebels used their intimate knowledge of the SPLA—former colleagues or brothers-in-arms—to their advantage. They have used Bor as a staging area, from which they launched offensive operations south of Bor. In response, pro-government forces, led by the UPDF, unleashed an aerial bombing campaign. Fixed-wing MiG-29 aircraft and helicopter gunships were frequently sighted near Malek, Pariak and further south in Mangalla in Central Equatoria. By 17 January, overwhelmed by the air attacks, rebel forces fell back to north of Bor. The next day, Ugandan and SPLA brigades arrived in Bor to secure the town and reopen the airport. By 1 February, the SPLA and UPDF forces reported no sightings of rebel forces east of Bor along the Bor-Pibor road.

Rebels in the north of Jonglei close to Upper Nile have also operated somewhat independently from those further south, capitalizing on local grievances to recruit new members. Riek Machar allegedly moved around northern Jonglei continuously in order to encourage Nuer communities to support rebel forces, as well. This partly explains why the government's recapture of Bor did not lead to the destruction of the entire rebel system. Opposition forces remain in parts of Akobo, Uror, Nyirol, Fangak, Canal, and Ayod counties—all Nuer-areas.

The SPLA-rebel fighting in Jonglei has drawn other armed elements. Lou Nuer cattle youths ('white army') reportedly engaged in skirmishes with the SPLA in Bor South county and Anyidi to the east of Bor town towards the end of January. On 5 February, a group of armed Murle men, allegedly loyal to Machar, also attacked Kolnyang to the south of Bor, killing dozens, stealing livestock, and abducting children. It also appears that the SPLA in Jonglei has organized around different power centers. For example, in Pochala, there are several different self-identified SPLA groups—a Boma town cadre, a rapid action group, those SPLA that have been permanently stationed in Pochala, and new arrivals. The lines of command and control between these groups are unclear.

While defections have occurred on both sides, SPLA defections to the rebel side have been better documented. On 18 January, 80 SPLA soldiers defected to the opposition in Pibor, apparently because of the lack of food. One SPLA commander in Pibor also commented on the likelihood of another thousand defections because soldiers had not been paid in months. Yet, towards the end of March, several men under the leadership of Peter Ruach, a defected SPLA commander operating between Pibor and Akobo counties, abdicated to the SPLA. On 26 January, the South Sudan Police Service also reported that several of its members defected to the opposition. Furthermore, on 22 March, Nuer and Dinka SPLA soldiers in a military camp in Pochalla fought each other. Dozens of Nuer soldiers left the camp for Akobo.

In mid-February, a former State Law Enforcement Minister, Gabriel Duop Lam, also declared that he was joining rebel forces, the latest in a string of ministerial defections. Some other high profile defections include former Deputy Governor, Hussein Maar Nyuot, the Minister of Physical Infrastructure, Manawe Peter, and Minister of Education, Stephen Par Kuol—some of whom have publicly voiced their criticism of the current government in the past. County commissioners for Akobo, Fangak, Uror, Nyirol and Ayod are also considered rebel

sympathizers. Notably, these areas are largely Nuer-dominated, and as such have had strong historical ties with Riek Machar.

The position of David Yau Yau, who prior to December was the last and strongest of the militia leaders, remains ambiguous. Peter Ruach sought Yau Yau's help in late January, and managed to bring over his second in command, Arzen Kong Kong, and a group of fighters—though Kong Kong's ultimate allegiance is unknown. Rebels participating in peace talks in Addis Ababa have also been in touch with Yau Yau, attempting to bring him into alliance. But on 30 January, Yau Yau's South Sudan Democratic Movement/Defense Army (SSDM/A)-Cobra, signed a cessation of hostilities agreement with the government. Yet Yau Yau's loyalty to the government is tenuous. On 23 March, his group reiterated previously-voiced secessionist demands for a Murle home in Jonglei.

The humanitarian and governance effects of the conflict in Jonglei are significant. Bor town was almost entirely destroyed in the first round of fighting. According to one report, at least 2,500 people were killed in Bor in the first three weeks of the crisis, and numerous accounts indicate revenge killings along ethnic lines. Ugandan nationals working in Jonglei have been targeted, as have Eritreans. Most state government officials departed soon after the conflict began, and only now have begun to trickle back in. On 28 January, the Jonglei Director for Relief and Rehabilitation stated that local authorities had collected some 500 bodies. On 4 February, the Mayor of Bor announced that government authorities had buried more than one hundred bodies in a mass grave, and that more such burials were likely to follow. UN investigations also revealed similar graves or openly exposed bodies around Bor town, which remained deserted. On 26 February, the paramount chief of Duk County was abducted by rebel forces supposedly for criticizing their actions in the county. According to media reports, dozens of people were killed or injured in Duk county, and thousands displaced from Duk to Twic East county towards the end of March.

Despite a military surge by the regime and the opposition's counteroffensives, neither side has been able to project force decisively. If anything, the ongoing conflict in Jonglei represents a microcosmic reflection of the overall crisis across South Sudan. As in Upper Nile and Unity, neither the government nor the rebels in Jonglei have reached a decisive tipping point. Both parties to the conflict have resorted to the burning of tukuls, forced displacement, food blockades, sexual violence, and the deliberate killing of civilians. Furthermore, the SPLA has used banned munitions like cluster bombs. Food shortages have also prompted armed men to loot from local populations, and UN safe zones for civilians have been regularly targeted. As of the end of March, military operations within Jonglei continue.

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