

The Conflict in Northern and Western Bahr el Ghazal States

Describing events through 10 October 2014

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As of the beginning of October 2014 the Bahr el Ghazal region is experiencing its worst political crisis in recent memory. The failure of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) to pay the salaries of soldiers from the 3rd and 5th Divisions has caused waves of desertions in the region, increasing insecurity. Many of the deserters are congregating in Abu Matareq on the Sudanese side of the East Darfur–Northern Bahr el Ghazal border under the command of Dau Aturjong, the most high-profile Dinka member of the SPLA in Opposition (SPLA-IO). The coming of the dry season is likely to bring increased clashes between the deserters and the SPLA, while in both Northern and Western Bahr el Ghazal (NBeG and WBeG) the conflict in South Sudan has intensified political struggles that have been dormant since the end of the second civil war.

A change of leadership

The Bahr el Ghazal region was relatively peaceful during the first four months of the conflict, which centred on the Greater Upper Nile region of Jonglei, Unity, and Upper Nile states. During the second civil war these three states were largely controlled by the South Sudan Defence Forces (SSDF), which was absorbed into the SPLA in 2006, but never fully integrated. The SPLA–SSDF fault line has re-emerged since the beginning of the crisis in Greater Upper Nile; in contrast, the Bahr el Ghazal region was an SPLA stronghold during the second civil war. NBeG is also relatively ethnically homogeneous—it is 90 per cent Malual Dinka—and has not suffered from the deepening ethnic tensions that have characterized clashes in Greater Upper Nile. Instead, troops from Bahr el Ghazal have been involved in fighting outside the region. Since the outbreak of the conflict in December 2013 the SPLA's 3rd Division, based in NBeG, and 5th Division, based in WBeG, have been involved in clashes in all three of the Greater Upper Nile states.

On 23 April Bahr el Ghazal's political landscape shifted dramatically. South Sudanese president Salva Kiir appointed Paul Malong, then the governor of NBeG, as SPLA chief of staff. He replaced James Hoth Mai, who had been the highest-ranking Nuer member of Kiir's administration, but who was criticized for his handling of the conflict. Malong's appointment caused consternation among the SPLA's Nuer contingent. The dismissal of Hoth Mai, who was widely perceived as a loyal member of the SPLA, created anxiety among hitherto SPLA-loyalist Nuer soldiers, especially as Malong is alleged to have played a role in organizing the killing of Nuer civilians in Juba in December 2013.

Malong's appointment created political uncertainty in NBeG, long considered the most peaceful region in South Sudan. In part this lack of conflict was due to the strength of Malong's leadership in the state, which built on his command of the area during the second civil war. Following Malong's transfer to the SPLA Salva appointed Kuel Aguer Kuel as caretaker governor. Kuel is a

Malong loyalist who stood by him during the controversial gubernatorial elections in 2010 and during a political crisis in the state in 2012. However, he is not a military man and is widely seen as ill suited to governing the state in a time of political and military crisis. Since his appointment political dissent in the state—which Malong had previously managed to control—has risen. Kuel is struggling to deal with these challenges.

Desertions in Mapel and the long march north

On 25 April the previously peaceful Bahr el Ghazal region was plunged into violence following clashes at Mapel, one of the largest SPLA bases in South Sudan and an important army training centre. Precisely what happened in Mapel is contested. Most accounts of the clashes agree that events began in the market, when a number of Dinka members of the local community attacked a Nuer SPLA trainee, leading to further altercations in which three people were killed. This provided the trigger for further clashes at the Mapel SPLA training centre.

Several members of the SPLA have given contradictory accounts of what happened next. Rizig Zachariah Hassan, the governor of WBeG state, claims that following the clashes in the market a number of Nuer SPLA soldiers deserted, fearing further ethnic attacks, and in the ensuing clashes only three people were killed. Brigadier General Bak Akoon Bak, who commands the mechanized division at the Mapel training centre, claimed that the officers among the deserters were part of a plan to assassinate him that was discovered by the centre's administration, which in turn led to the clashes.

Brigadier General Gatwech Gach Makuach, who later deserted in Wau, claimed that after the attack in the market SPLA soldiers and civilians attacked the Mapel training centre, shooting at Nuer trainees, leading to 192 deaths. This story is echoed by a number of sources inside the SPLA-IO, who further claim that it was Bak Akoon Bak who led the attacks against the Nuer recruits. Different SPLA-IO sources report different death tolls.

The local press also reported widely varying death tolls, with one medical source claiming that 150 Nuer trainees were killed, while another stated that around 40 died. Following the clashes, between 100 and 500 Nuer SPLA troops deserted, although it remains unclear how many left Mapel in order to join the SPLA-IO and how many fled simply because they feared further ethnic killings.

Rumours of a massacre at Mapel had knock-on effects elsewhere in the state. A day after the events in Mapel at least 61 Nuer troops and four commanding officers fled from an SPLA base at Wau. The SPLA reports that three people died during clashes that occurred as the troops deserted. The deserters then moved west with the SPLA in pursuit. Many of the troops who deserted had recently returned from the front lines in Jonglei amid mounting frustration in the army over the lack of regular salary payments. Some of the troops who deserted had returned to Wau after a field commander in Jonglei refused to deploy them to the front lines because he feared they would join the SPLA-IO due to desertions from the 5th Division earlier that month. These events underline both the fragility of SPLA cohesion in a period of ethnic tension and the ease with which rumours can spark intensifying series of clashes and desertions.

The next few months would see further desertions in the Bahr el Ghazal region. On 1 May a group of soldiers under the command of Brigadier Peter Gatbel deserted from the SPLA's 3rd Division base at Wunyik, NBeG, in protest over the alleged massacre at Mapel. Gatbel and some of the troops who deserted with him then rejoined the SPLA on 6 May, following a disagreement with the other deserters. On 11 July the SPLA announced that 255 of the SPLA soldiers who deserted from Mapel in April had also recently returned to their barracks, suggesting that these desertions were due to fear of ethnic persecution rather than a desire to join the SPLA-IO.

The rest of the deserters from Mapel, however, have slowly made their way north, passing through WBeG into Aweil South county, NBeG. On 10 July these deserters raided a medical clinic in Awada *payam* (district), Aweil Central county. On 14 July they clashed with the SPLA at Moiny, near Gokk Machar, in Aweil North county. The county commissioner, Kuol Athuai, claimed that 28 deserters died in these clashes. On 15 July the deserters raided the village of Mayom Akueng, between Nyanboli and Marial Bai, as they continued their passage north. There were then heavy clashes from 15 to 18 July that left over 60 people dead, when the SPLA at Gotbulo attempted to stop the deserters crossing through the 14-Mile Area into Sudan. The SPLA reported that the defectors were armed with heavy machine guns and small arms.

At the beginning of August the deserters finally crossed into Sudan. Local sources in Abu Matareq, East Darfur, reported on 4 August that over 500 SPLA deserters had crossed into Sudan in the area of Hadida. There was no Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) presence in the area, although sources claimed that SAF troops later arrived to disarm the deserters.

While the Government of the Republic of South Sudan is referring to the deserters as rebels, it remains unclear whether they intend to take an active role in the conflict in South Sudan. It seems likely that this is not yet fixed: while reports indicate the deserters are tired and fleeing persecution, they have substantive reasons to become active against the SPLA if the opportunity arises. Their motivations for crossing into Sudan are unclear—they could simply be trying to escape the SPLA and ethnic persecution, but it seems more likely that they joined SPLA-IO forces under Dau Aturjong's command that have recently been massing on the NBeG–East Darfur border.

These ambiguities underline the very small difference between rebel activity and SPLA deserters in the Bahr el Ghazal region. In June over a thousand SPLA troops, mainly from Bahr el Ghazal, deserted from the front lines in Greater Upper Nile after months of not receiving their salaries. At the end of August the SPLA began operations in Aweil North county to disarm returning deserters. This county is of particular concern to the SPLA because it is the area from which Aturjong hails and is thus a vital source of supporters for the rebellion. On 16 July over 200 SPLA troops abandoned their positions and clashed with other members of the SPLA in disputes over unpaid salaries. In August SPLA officials indicated that the wave of desertions that occurred in June and July were due to salary arrears. These desertions reduce the SPLA's military capacity and provide a dangerous reservoir of armed men whose anger over salary payments could be exploited by the SPLA-IO, especially after the current harvest season ends and resources again become scarce.

The 'last of the 2010 rebellions'

In general, the growing insecurity in Bahr el Ghazal has very different dynamics from the conflict in the Greater Upper Nile region. In addition to the economic crisis in the SPLA that is leading to desertions—a problem for South Sudan in general—the South Sudanese conflict has caused a number of latent tensions in both NBeG and WBeG to resurface. On 30 May Dau Aturjong, a former major general in the SPLA, became the highest ranking Dinka officer to join the SPLA-IO. In a press conference in Nairobi he announced that he was joining the rebels in order to ‘liberate my people from Salva Kiir’s regime’.

In reality, Aturjong’s rebellion is likely to have much more prosaic motivations. A native of Aweil North county, Aturjong was a field commander with the SPLA during the second civil war and was active in WBeG and NBeG states. In 2010 he unsuccessfully competed against Paul Malong for the governorship of NBeG and alleged that the vote was rigged. He was removed from active service in the army in January 2013. Following the 2010 elections a number of disgruntled military leaders who unsuccessfully contested gubernatorial elections sought to use military revolt as a tool to leverage more important positions for themselves in state administrations. In a sense Aturjong’s recent decision to join the SPLA-IO is the last of the 2010 rebellions. Unlike in fractious Unity state, NBeG under Paul Malong’s control was too unified for a revolt to take hold. Aturjong lacks any natural constituency with the other SPLA-IO leaders and is both physically and ideologically remote from them. Aturjong will leverage his rebellion against the SPLA as a means to obtain greater control of resources in the state.

However, while Aturjong’s rebellion seems opportunistic and personally motivated, Paul Malong is gone and Kuel Aguer Kuel is unlikely to be able to keep Aturjong in check as his predecessor did. Kuel must also address opposition to Malong’s administration, which has been suppressed since 2005, and the economic crisis in the SPLA—both of which make a successful rebellion in Bahr el Ghazal more likely.

Thus far Aturjong has not attacked the SPLA in any serious way. There were minor clashes in June in the area around Baggari, and the SPLA has reinforced its positions in WBeG with forces from Lakes state. In July Aturjong’s troops were bolstered after 300 armed youths from NBeG under the command of Chief Deng Geng—who had been removed from his position in the NBeG administration earlier in the year—declared that they were joining the SPLA-IO. These forces were made up of SPLA soldiers who had recently returned from Jonglei and members of the *gulweng*—armed Dinka youth who are traditionally cattle guards for livestock. On 3 August Aturjong claimed that his forces numbered 5,000; this has not been confirmed. On 10 September sporadic clashes occurred between Aturjong’s forces and the SPLA’s 3rd Division at Warguit as some of his forces moved north to their main base at Abu Matareq in East Darfur.

The extent of Aturjong’s relationship with the Government of Sudan is not known at this time. It seems likely that the deserters from Mapel have joined Aturjong, and with the coming end of the rainy season there is a strong possibility that his forces will attack SPLA positions in NBeG.

Political tensions

Insecurity in Bahr el Ghazal has led to growing political tension in both states. On 30 June the Bahr el Ghazal Student Union issued a call for Salva Kiir to step down. Following the desertion of 300 youths from Aweil North county in July, the NBeG state government arrested a number of

government officials and other civilians believed to have supported Aturjong's candidacy in the 2010 elections. The state government has also imposed censorship and threatened to arrest journalists who report critically on security in the state. Disquiet with Kuel Aguer Kuel's governorship is already increasing. In September it was rumoured that nearly half the state ministers were going to resign over Kuel's reliance on his own family and his marginalization of several key political actors in the state. While the resignations did not occur, the rumour is indicative of the governor's precarious hold on power in the state.

On 11 August, in an attempt to staunch a series of desertions in Bahr el Ghazal, the police commissioners for NBeG and WBeG states were swapped, with Peter Mading Duor transferred to Wau and Akot Deng Akot reappointed to his previous position as NBeG police commissioner. Akot Deng comes from Aweil North, the same area as Aturjong, and was felt by the administration to be a stronger political figure with greater local appeal.

In WBeG, just as in NBeG, there is a great deal of dissatisfaction with the state governor. On 16 September the legislature presented a petition to South Sudanese president Salva Kiir that detailed Rizig Zachariah Hassan's alleged abuses of power and corruption, claims the governor later dismissed as being without basis.

The military and political dynamics in Bahr el Ghazal are distinct from those of the Greater Upper Nile region. However, they represent a more general trend in South Sudan towards fragmentation as each region looks to its own interests, and the dynamics of both are increasingly distinct from those of the country as a whole. With the economic crisis in the SPLA set to continue and the coming dry season likely to bring intensified clashes in NBeG, it is likely that the region is set for a prolonged period of political and military instability.

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