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Brewing Insecurity in Abyei

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Introduction

As South Sudan edges toward independence in July 2011, Abyei remains a critical flashpoint for conflict, as demonstrated by the recent intentional burning of villages by forces reportedly aligned with the northern government, and the displacement of 20,000 residents. Considered perhaps the most difficult issue in talks between North and South, the current security situation is reflective of age-old problems that continue to plague Abyei: a culture of impunity among security forces, abuse and neglect of civilian populations, culminating in the violence at Maker Abior, Tajalei, and Noong, among other places. Contested by the Ngok Dinka, aligned with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, or SPLM, and nomadic Misseriya groups that have historically aligned with the North, Abyei has been a point of conflict over land, oil, and identity. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement's Abyei Protocol has never been implemented effectively, with successive international mediation efforts rejected by Sudan's ruling National Congress Party.ⁱ

The high national stakes involved, and the catalytic role that a political deal on Abyei could play in unraveling post-referendum negotiations, threaten to reduce Abyei to nothing more than a "great game." Cognizant of this, communities on the ground are apprehensive about the future. These anxieties have transformed Abyei into a stage for violent posturing and maneuvering by civilians that fear their grievances are not being heard.

At this critical juncture, it would be dangerous for the international community, as well as the NCP and SPLM, to remain content with a series of stopgap security measures to address the deteriorating situation on the ground rather than a political solution to Abyei. These measures have sought to address escalating tensions on the ground by introducing into an already combustible environment new security forces, to negligible, or even harmful, effect. As security concerns take predominance over the political agenda, it is only a matter of time before tactics give way to full-scale war.

Faces of the Security Forces

The deployment of soldiers, mercenaries, police, and other armed non-state elements to Abyei has promoted a securitized approach to what is essentially a political problem. This has only served to exacerbate tensions on the ground while relations between these various armed actors, civilians, and the local administration remain unstable. Weak security mandates and vague guidelines have compounded problems, led to disorganization, and weakened rule of law institutions. The fact that some officers deliberately conduct intelligence and monitoring activities in plainclothes makes it harder for civilian populations to distinguish among the various security apparatus and identify who are friends and who are foes.

The Abyei crisis brings together many actors with diverging, sometimes opposing, sets of interests:

Joint Integrated Units, or JIUs – Brought in as part of the 2005 CPA protocol for security arrangements in the Abyei area, initially a total of 624 soldiers were deployed as part of the JIU unit. After the JIU units failed to prevent the May 2008 fighting in Abyei town, the unit was dissolved and a new set of soldiers was brought in. Yet the force of 624 soldiers was not enough to cover the entire area of responsibility. The Joint Defense Board approved for two more battalions to be sent to the Abyei region after clashes

broke out in January. As a result, 960 additional JIUs were brought from Wau, including 320 additional soldiers from Niama and Thimsa.ⁱⁱ Various accounts by civil society leaders suggest that the supplementary forces are part of the 31st brigade, a militia outfit that was largely responsible for wreaking havoc in Abyei town in 2008.

Today, the JIUs have been deployed to various parts of Abyei to fend off attacks on civilian populations.ⁱⁱⁱ But according to reports from the ground, the JIUs appear to have been negligent regarding civilian protection. In the most recent attacks in early March for instance, JIUs in Tajalei did not attempt to stop Misseriya attackers when they set fire to the entire village and killed one civilian. The excuse was that they were not mandated to do so.^{iv} There is a widespread belief that the JIU-SAF will not fight the Misseriya, who are considered proxies for the northern army, making them useless as a protective force in Abyei.^v

JIU-SAF forces continue to have difficulties with command and control structures. The SAF commander remains a figurehead while military intelligence officers carry out clandestine operations without the commander's knowledge.^{vi} Indiscipline is rampant, living conditions for the foot soldiers have been less than adequate, and there has been at least one case of suicide among the ranks.^{vii} This has led to a considerable loss of morale among troops, who have shown little to no interest in carrying out their military and humanitarian duties.

Police forces – Violent clashes between the JIPUs, the police variant of the JIUs^{viii}, and the Misseriya in various locations have given Abyei's policing force a notorious reputation.^{ix} Noteworthy are the 300 extra southern policemen who are distinct from the JIPUs, known commonly as the "Juba police." These police are seen to be aligned with the Abyei administration, made largely of SPLM. Deployed along traditional Misseriya migratory routes, the Juba police are viewed more as a coercive force rather than an impartial body with a rule of law mandate. Perceived as SPLA in police attire, they were positioned in Abyei after an appeal was made for larger security capacity, beyond the JIUs. Trenches around Maker Abior—reportedly built by southern police—as well as fighting between police and Misseriya militiamen, suggest a militaristic approach to the Juba police's law enforcement mechanisms. Their presence has politicized what was meant to be simply an extension of the security organ of the state in Abyei.

"The police problem is a political game people are playing," said paramount chief, Kuol Deng Kuol. "It is serving to delay the Abyei problem. The police should be defined locally as per the law and constitution. The police cannot be brought from outside." Police units have shared some overlapping powers with their military counterparts. They are often as heavily armed as the JIUs and sometimes move in civilian clothing doing espionage work. The 300 extra police have a markedly different security culture from the sort of penal policies practiced by the local police or other southern police units. This has made it difficult for local populations to distinguish the police from the military and worsened civil society's relations with law enforcement agencies.

The culture of impunity among the Juba police, and their tendency to use firearms without provocation, has only served to exacerbate the Abyei crisis. Misseriya nomads reserved special venom toward the police force. Their presence alone, some sources noted, was largely responsible for the Misseriya roadblocks set up earlier this year. "The police have provoked us, killed many of us, and prevented us from migrating to Abyei," said one disgruntled armed man at a Misseriya check point in Goli. "They shot our cows and ate them. So we have set up roadblocks. Until the police are pulled back, we will not lift the roadblocks."

Armed militias and criminals – Abyei continues to be inhabited by roving armed elements belonging to the Popular Defense Forces, Misseriya militias, remnants of a former faction of the SPLA the South Sudan Independence Movement, or SSIM, and criminals from the 31st brigade, a SAF-created fighting force that wreaked havoc in Abyei in 2008.

One such militia leader is Thomas Thiel, a Twitch Dinka. According to Abyei officials and residents, Thiel bears grievances against the Ngok Dinka and works for the North to destabilize Abyei.^x Formerly a driver with Kerubino Kuanyin Bol, one of the founding members of the SPLA, he later took over Kerubino's forces and became their self-proclaimed commander. In 2007, he was responsible for the deaths of 14 people in Abyei town. He fought in Abyei in 2008, and is said to have recently killed some returnees.^{xi} Thomas Thiel's men were sighted around town in JIU fatigues in January and February, resulting in widespread concern that they were there to cause trouble.

SAF has also devolved some of its own authority within the JIU to the infamous 31st brigade, known for its role in the fighting that destroyed Abyei town in 2008. "[The 31st brigade] does provocative things in town," said one civil society leader. "They come in crowds – five or 10 or more – carrying knives, chanting, and moving within town in a very irresponsible manner." Public perception is that SAF has purposefully re-empowered these men, metamorphosed as JIUs, to destabilize Abyei. The JIU-SAF has also demonstrated a troubling inclination to embrace these men as their own, with little regard for the negative psychological effects on the local populace, who, upon seeing them, are reminded of the incidents of violence from the May 2008 fighting.

Tensions between the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya

Among the Ngok Dinka there exist disconcerting debates about the Misseriya's aptitude for strategic thinking and capacity to make peace. They are viewed as a group that, although historically connected to the Ngok Dinka through shared land, has become increasingly irresponsible, uncontrollable, and incapable of acting rationally. They are said to "violate most agreements," be "illiterate," "uneducated," "lack leadership," and be preoccupied with "internal problems of their own." Taken together, these perceptions have led to the conclusion among many Ngok Dinka that the Misseriya are no longer people with whom they can come to terms.

Roadblocks organized by armed Misseriya nomads have further inflamed these cynical impressions. When questioned about their motives and what they hoped to accomplish by constructing these impasses, some nomads' answers revealed that roadblocks can serve as short-term retributive measures. "We have suffered for one year, and they are suffering since a short time because of the road block. They need to suffer," said one Misseriya spokesperson.

"Roadblocks are totally unnecessary for them, but they don't understand that," says one state official. "Even if the Misseriya block the road for a hundred years, it won't stop people from coming to Abyei or life from moving on." The Misseriya's seeming intransigence, according to many, fuels tensions in an already volatile area and threatens to deteriorate prospects for dialogue.

For their part, the Misseriya insist that the Juba police and other security forces regularly prevent their communities from migrating southward and attack any Misseriya nomad sighted – a point that some even in the Abyei administration quietly acknowledge. "Some of these police are not professionals. They are not trained in law and order; they are trained only to abuse people," said one official.

“We want to respect agreements,” said one Misseriya. “But when the police provoke us, shoot our cows and eat them, how can we? We have not been compensated.”

Effect on Civilians

The people of Abyei, continue to face an overwhelming host of security, economic and social problems, which only serve to feed into the milieu of crisis. Nearly everyone knows someone who has been killed or has left town out of fear. Abyei town’s market, once a bustling hub for Arab and southern traders to congregate, now remains abandoned. After the January violence in which Misseriya militia and police forces clashed, northern traders vacated their stalls, and prices of all goods sky-rocketed by more than 100 percent. “Most people have left, including traders,” said Usman Chol, chairperson of the Market Traders Union in Abyei. “They think: Why die here? This place no longer belongs to me.”

In addition to a lack of food supplies, the Abyei Area Administration has been confronted with a quickly growing IDP challenge. Between November 2010 and February 2011, more than 37,000 IDPs returned to Abyei, most of them returnees from the North.^{xii} Not only has this put a strain on limited local resources, it also increased the likelihood that any attack on large population centers would result in a higher number of casualties and wounded. Tens of thousands more people have been displaced from their homes, including returnees. With three villages burned to the ground,^{xiii} local officials have expressed concern that people will not be able to return even if they would eventually like to.

Continuing fears remain that the ongoing spurts of violence could lead to other rounds of military confrontation, while confidence in local authorities and security forces to protect civilians erodes. This became unambiguously clear to locals when, during clashes this month, U.N. troops and JIUs stood by and did nothing to offer help. People have lost faith in the security apparatus, which in turn has provoked a disturbing trend among disaffected youth to seek arms and new alliances. “Some of the youth have decided to take up arms,” said one local administrator. “They are protecting themselves. It is a defense mechanism – to protect ourselves when we are alone. The people from Muglad are coming with their own weapons. So the youth here are also arming themselves with their own private weapons to face them. The situation in Abyei has changed in terms of self-protection. People are arming themselves.”

Conclusion

Armed actors in Abyei continue to use low intensity conflict as a means to achieve personal and political objectives – a strategy that threatens to expand the conflict across a larger geographical area, especially given the recent escalation in military activity in the Abyei region.^{xiv} A wide range of tactical choices lie at the disposal of the various armed and interested actors, including but not limited to using proxy forces (as the NCP has done in the past with Misseriya militias) to spearhead operations and covert operations via national intelligence. Such methods of warfare in an already volatile area are unlikely to result in any significant political, territorial, or economic gains. On the contrary, it only serves to reinforce the traditional skepticism that locals have of the security forces.

In the last few months alone, low-level hostilities have led to a severe deterioration of the security situation. The vast majority of security officers operating in Abyei, whether JIU or JIPU, or SAF or SPLA, are viewed as outsiders and are not prepared or trained to develop genuine inroads with the local populace for successful security operations. Draconian methods of law enforcement, the continued use of undisciplined militias that act extra-legally, and pre-emptive military posturing only heighten the

possibility of a war breaking out through blunder or misperception. All in all, periodic skirmishes followed by large-scale internal displacement of civilians have become routine, and there is a real danger that any military effort in Abyei could easily grow out of control.

ⁱ For Enough's previous analysis on Abyei, see the following reports and pieces: Abyei: Sudan's Next Test by Colin Thomas-Jensen and Maggie Fick http://www.enoughproject.org/files/publications/Abyei_Paper.pdf ; Abyei: Sudan's Kashmir by Roger Winter and John Prendergast <http://www.enoughproject.org/publications/abyei-sudan%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Ckashmir%E2%80%9D> ; U.S. Leadership on Abyei: A Crucial Ingredient for Peace in Sudan <http://www.enoughproject.org/blogs/us-leadership-abyei-crucial-ingredient-peace-sudan#comments> ; Abyei: Sudan's Flashpoint In the Making? By Matt Brown <http://www.enoughproject.org/blogs/abyei-sudans-flashpoint-making> .

ⁱⁱ Enough interviews with JIU commander and local administration officials, February 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brigade headquarters are located in Abyei. Three battalions have been deployed into the field, each comprising of approximately 640 men. The first battalion covers the areas of Abyei town, Manyang, Goli, Diffra, and Baloom. The 2nd battalion is responsible for Namang, Makir Abior, Umkher, Janghai, and Sheghei. The third battalion monitors Tajalei, Domboloya, Umkrai, Dokura, and Denjur.

^{iv} Enough phone interview with JIU-SPLA Commander, March 2011.

^v Enough interviews with civilians and village chief in Tajalei, February 2011.

^{vi} Enough interview with JIU-SPLA Commander, February 2011.

^{vii} Enough visit to Dokura camp, where JIUs were stationed before being redeployed to other duty stations around Abyei.

^{viii} Theoretically, the JIPUs, which stands for Joint Integrated Police Units, are composed of civilian law enforcement officials from the North and South. In reality, this has not been the case. Most, if not all, of the police units have come from the South.

^{ix} JIPU forces collided with armed Misseriya groups in Sheghei on Jan 7th, Todach on Jan 8th, and Makir Abior on Jan 9th. The violence in Makir Abior left approximately 60 dead, and may have been politically motivated.

^x Enough interviews with Abyei government officials and civilians in Abyei town, Feb 2011

^{xi} Enough interviews with Abyei government officials and SPLA officers, Feb 2011. Thomas Thiel currently divides time between Niama and Thimsa.

^{xii} Internal UNMIS report seen by Enough, February 2011.

^{xiii} Satellite Sentinel Project, "Flashpoint: Abyei," March 2011.

^{xiv} Satellite Sentinel Project, "Frontline Abyei: Evidence of Military Escalation in Abyei Region," March 2011.