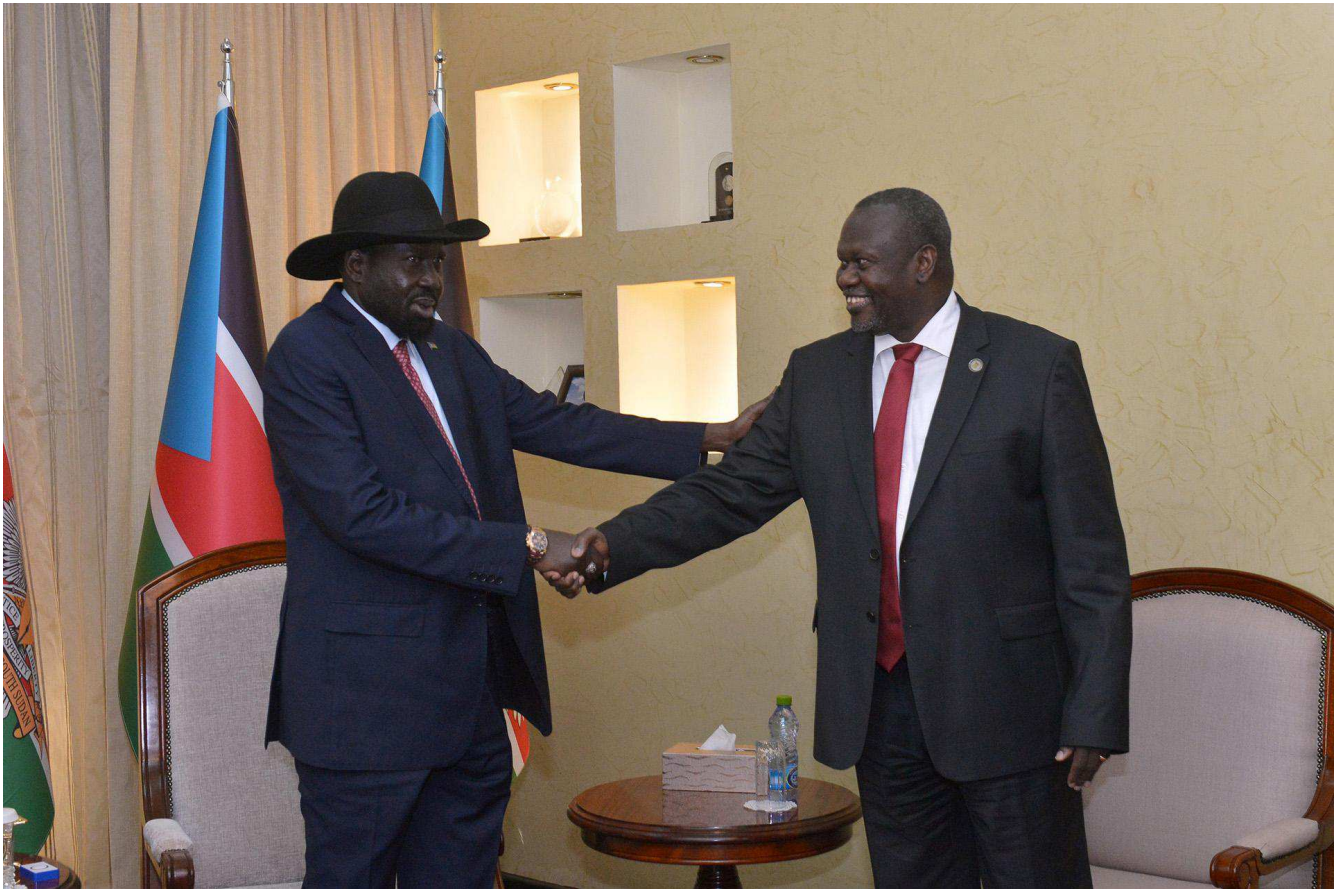


As elections loom, South Sudan's sluggish peace deal fuels further instability and violence

'If not the peace deal, then what? Reopen negotiations over a way forward? What does that look like?'



South Sudan's transitional government is due to wrap up in less than 10 months. Yet the country's future looks as bleak as it did in 2018 when rival parties signed a deal to end a crippling civil war that killed nearly 400,000 people.

The peace agreement was supposed to end the conflict, but progress continues to drag and [UN experts](#) now say the deal is actually driving violence. Clashes between the ruling party and the opposition have increased in recent months and could get worse ahead of elections tentatively being arranged – but not yet scheduled – for next year.

Meanwhile, humanitarian needs have spiked: Some 75 percent of the population are [in need of assistance](#), hunger is the worst it has been since the country gained independence in 2011, and years of unprecedented floods have forced nearly one million people from their homes, according to the UN.

And while the peace deal quelled large-scale fighting, clashes across the country never ceased. In fact, they are increasing – between February and April this year at least [70 people, including aid workers](#), were killed in Unity, one of the most conflict-affected states. The UN has also reported sexual assaults, beheadings, and civilians being burned alive by armed groups. Fighting between government- and opposition-aligned militia in [Western Equatoria state last year](#) killed hundreds and displaced some 80,000 people.

The Panel of Experts on South Sudan, a UN-mandated investigative group, reported in April that “almost every component of the peace agreement is now hostage to the political calculations of the country's military and security elites, who use a combination of violence, misappropriated public resources and

patronage to pursue their own narrow interests.” As a result, much of the peace agreement remains gridlocked by political disputes between its principal signatories.

‘The community is crying’

Cautious optimism followed the signing of the peace deal over three and a half years ago – the latest attempt to pull South Sudan out of five years of fighting that displaced millions and plunged parts of the country into [famine](#). A previous agreement signed in 2015 failed when renewed clashes erupted in the capital, Juba, forcing opposition leader Riek Machar to flee the country on foot.

Machar returned to the capital to form a coalition government with President Salva Kiir in February 2020, yet there were problems from the outset, including a shortage of funds and accusations that the ruling party lacked the political will to implement the agreement.

“We never trusted the agreement from day one.”

One of the key components, a unified national army – composed of 42,000 soldiers from both the government and the opposition – has not been established. Distrust with the deal was so high that both the government and opposition armies chose not to send most of their soldiers to the government-created cantonment sites, where soldiers could start the process of unifying into a national army. Instead, they sent low-level fighters or civilians who had never fought before. Of those in the training centres, “the majority [had] never participated in the war,” Lam Paul Gabriel, opposition spokesperson for the army, told The New Humanitarian.

It also took more than a year to create a parliament and fill local government positions. Many states where the power-sharing agreement has been implemented face political deadlock, with the ruling party accused of blocking appointees or undercutting decisions by opposition members, according to local authorities.

The peace deal’s slow implementation has had far-reaching implications. During a trip across the country in December 2021, South Sudanese civilians told The New Humanitarian they were no better off than when the country was at war; they didn’t feel the dividends of peace; and it was nearly impossible to rebuild their lives with no employment opportunities and no government support. Hundreds of thousands of people are still being forced from their homes due to floods or conflict, and tens of thousands more are too scared to leave [a UN protection site](#).

“There’s no peace in Malakal [town]. People are being killed and no one’s held responsible,” said Adam Ajak, an ethnic Shilluk chief who lives in a UN-run camp in the northern city of [Malakal where some 34,000](#) people seek refuge. In December, camp residents reported at least one person had been killed in the town a few weeks prior, and ethnic Nuer were being abused by the army.

In neighbouring Jonglei state, where years of floods have prevented the population from cultivating crops, people are reportedly starving to death. In October, a mother and her child died from hunger in a village outside Old Fangak, said Jeremiah Gatmai, the humanitarian representative for the government. “The community is crying,” he said, and notes that the local government has not received any of the \$10 million in flood support promised from Juba.

But while the population suffers, factions in the political elite keep vying for power ahead of elections and the ruling party continues marginalising Machar, encouraging and capitalising on his party’s defections. Last year, the opposition’s top generals left, creating their own splinter group before [forging an agreement with Kiir](#).

In recent months, government soldiers have been accused of attacking the opposition in Upper Nile and Unity states, according to [a joint statement](#) by the United States, Britain, and Norway, known as the Troika, which said it was concerned that “cycles of revenge attacks” risked greater violence. In March, the opposition announced it would stop participating in meetings related to security arrangements for the peace agreement because they were not productive, and as unprovoked attacks on their forces by the government showed no signs of ceasing. The opposition reportedly rejoined the meetings shortly afterwards.

Support wanes and frustration grows

Civil society leaders, religious leaders, and the international community are becoming exasperated at the listless peace deal and the increase in violence.

“These [peace] agreements have been deliberately undermined, and the way they’re being implemented – particularly the current one – [is] not taking the country anywhere and is just setting [it] up for more crisis and suffering,” said Rajab Mohandis, a founding member of the People’s Coalition for Civil Action (PCAA), a local umbrella group of activists. Members of his group [were detained by the government last year](#) after calling for [peaceful countrywide protests](#) to force the government to step down over failed leadership. Mohandis and others fled the country in fear of their safety.

Patience for the government is also waning from supporters abroad. In December, a group of American and British church leaders wrote an [open letter to President Kiir](#), saying the government was leading the country to “tyranny”.

“We are extremely distressed about the ways in which your government is taking a wrong road, a road that is taking South Sudan in a different direction from that of democracy,” they said in the letter.

But while everyone has a lot to say about the peace deal’s failings, few alternatives or attempts at solutions are being articulated.

“[The peace deal] is very messy and very ugly and very frustrating... The question we have to ask is, if not the peace deal, then what? Reopen negotiations over a way forward? What does that look like?” said one Western diplomat in Juba who did not want to be named.

Long road to elections

According to the 2018 power-sharing agreement, the transitional government – which officially ends next February – culminates in elections in December this year. Yet this is unlikely to happen on time, and there is concern that if elections did take place things could get worse.

“Until now, the country [has] no conducive environment for casting electoral votes,” said Edmund Yakani, executive director for the Community Empowerment for Progress Organization, a local advocacy group. “Without genuine transitional security arrangements... the chances of returning to war are high.”

The main parties still haven’t agreed whether to hold elections. The ruling party says it wants to cast ballots next year, although it hasn’t specified a date; while the opposition says certain conditions must first be met, such as the return of some two million refugees, the creation of a permanent constitution – as opposed to the transitional one currently in place – and security arrangements. Despite the lack of consensus, the ruling party has already started campaigning. Rallies have been held in 6 of 10 states, according to local media reports from May, which rights groups say is stoking tensions.



Sam Mednick/TNH

A group of women walking through the UN-run protection of civilian site in Malakal.

In March, the UN Security Council [renewed the peacekeeping mission's mandate](#) for South Sudan with the “significant” addition of providing support for holding elections. The head of the mission, Nicholas Haysom, encouraged all parties to put momentum towards completing the agreement’s remaining benchmarks.

Even if both parties agree to hold elections, it has been years since any resources have been put towards the bodies that would organise them. According to professor Abednego Akok, chairman of the National Election Commission, they would need 10 times as many staff as it has now and at least \$95 million – the budget estimated for the 2015 elections, which never took place because war erupted. The government owes more than \$500,000 in rent – three years’ worth – just for the building housing their offices, Akok added.

The UN says it will assist with technical and logistical support. However, neither they nor other countries have committed money to the process. Haysom warned that the window for completing the implementation of the peace deal is closing, and if elections occurred where the conditions were not

appropriate, it “would likely lead to violence before, during, and after”.

One of the most concerning parts about these elections is that they are being seen as an endgame rather than one step towards a broader political solution, according to aid workers familiar with the process and who agreed to speak on the condition of anonymity. One of the main problems is that there is no trust between political parties, or between the people and the government, making it hard to agree on a legal framework for holding them, they say.

Some locals say elections should not be held at all. “If there’s conflict now, how can elections be held?” said Alison Simon, a youth leader from Western Equatoria, where [fighting raged last year](#). “If there is not total peace in place, how can people contest?”

In March, the PCAA, the umbrella activist group, wrote a letter to the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, the east African regional bloc, proposing the creation of an Interim Public Trust Administration which would replace the current regime at the end of the transition in February 2023. The idea is that it would be led by people not politically aligned with the warring parties, according to the letter seen by The New Humanitarian.

Elections would then be held in December 2025, giving the country time to hold further political dialogue, rebuild public trust in the government, conduct a census, and return refugees and displaced people to their homes. “The whole country is up in flames,” reads the letter. “Violence is spreading uncontrollably and with it is death, displacements, hunger, [disease], and misery. Where is the peace?”

Edited by Helen Morgan.