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Situation Update | March 2023

Sudan: Deadly Violence in the Disputed Abyei Area

17 March 2023

Sudan at a Glance: 1 January-10 March 2023

VITAL TRENDS

- ACLED records over 130 political violence events and more than 90 reported fatalities from 1 January to 10 March 2023. Most of the violence was centered in Darfur region, where Darfur communal militias were involved in over 60 incidents of violence against civilians.
- Abyei had the highest number of reported fatalities, with at least 15 reported deaths. North Darfur and South Kordofan followed, with at least 13 and 12 reported fatalities, respectively. Violence involving identity militias resulted in 80% of the reported fatalities.
- Protests were the most common event type recorded by ACLED during this period, with over 220 events, followed by violence against civilians, with more than 100 events. Anti-coup demonstrations have continued in Sudan despite a transition deal signed in December 2022.



Deadly Violence in the Disputed Abyei Area

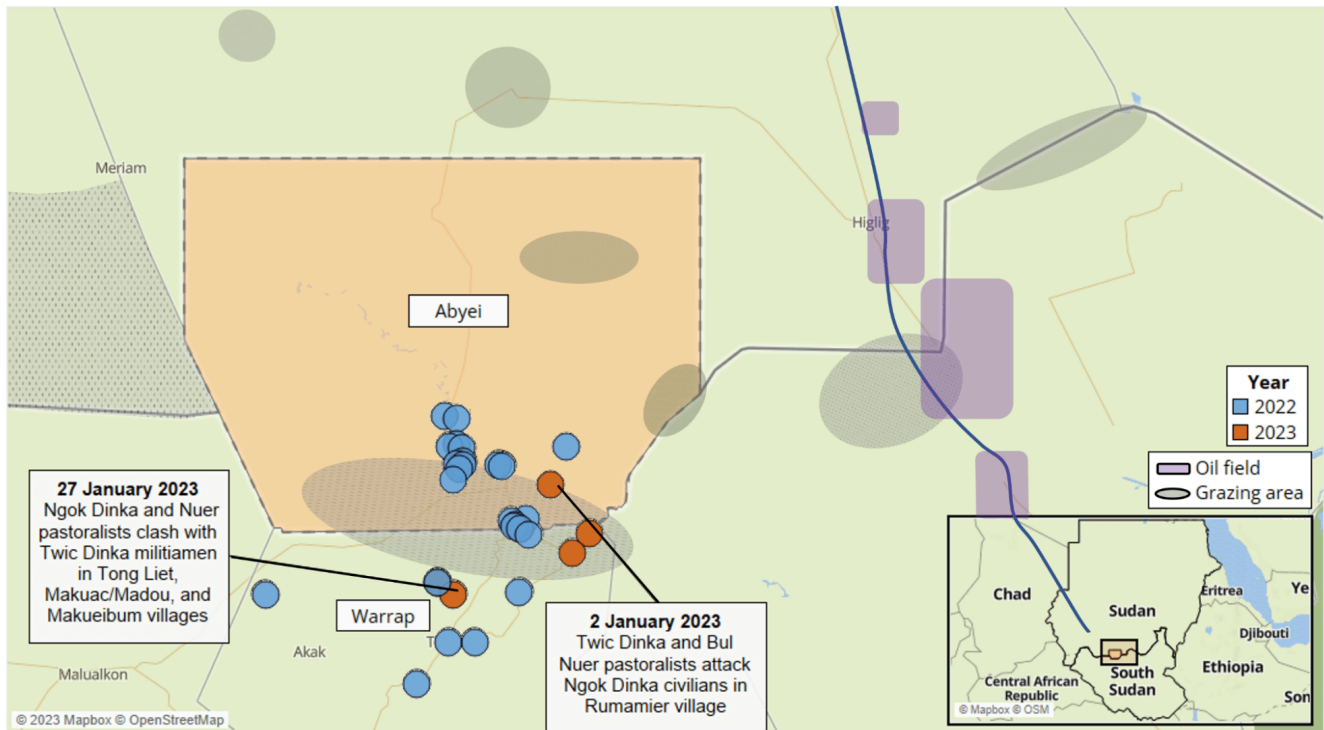
Abyei has been a center of tension and violence in recent years. This report focuses on the recent round of violence in and around Abyei, explaining the underlying causes of the conflict, the escalation of violence over the past year, and what likely lies ahead if political measures are not taken to address the unresolved political status of Abyei and local disputes over resource-sharing.

What Drives Violence in Abyei?

The oil-rich Abyei Administrative Area straddles the border between Sudan's West Kordofan state and South Sudan's Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, Warrap, and Unity states. The area has been claimed and disputed by both countries since South Sudan gained independence in 2011. Abyei is strategically important, home to oil fields, farmland, and pasture.¹ Violence has frequently erupted in the area since at least 2011 due to land and resource-sharing disputes between the communities inhabiting the region.² Civilians continue to bear the brunt of the violence, as the political status of Abyei remains unresolved and measures to manage inter-communal disputes are lacking. Thus far in 2023, dozens of people have been reportedly killed in violence between Twic Dinka and Ngok Dinka communities in Abyei (see map below).

Reported Fatalities From Twic-Ngok Violence in the Abyei Border Area

2022 - 2023



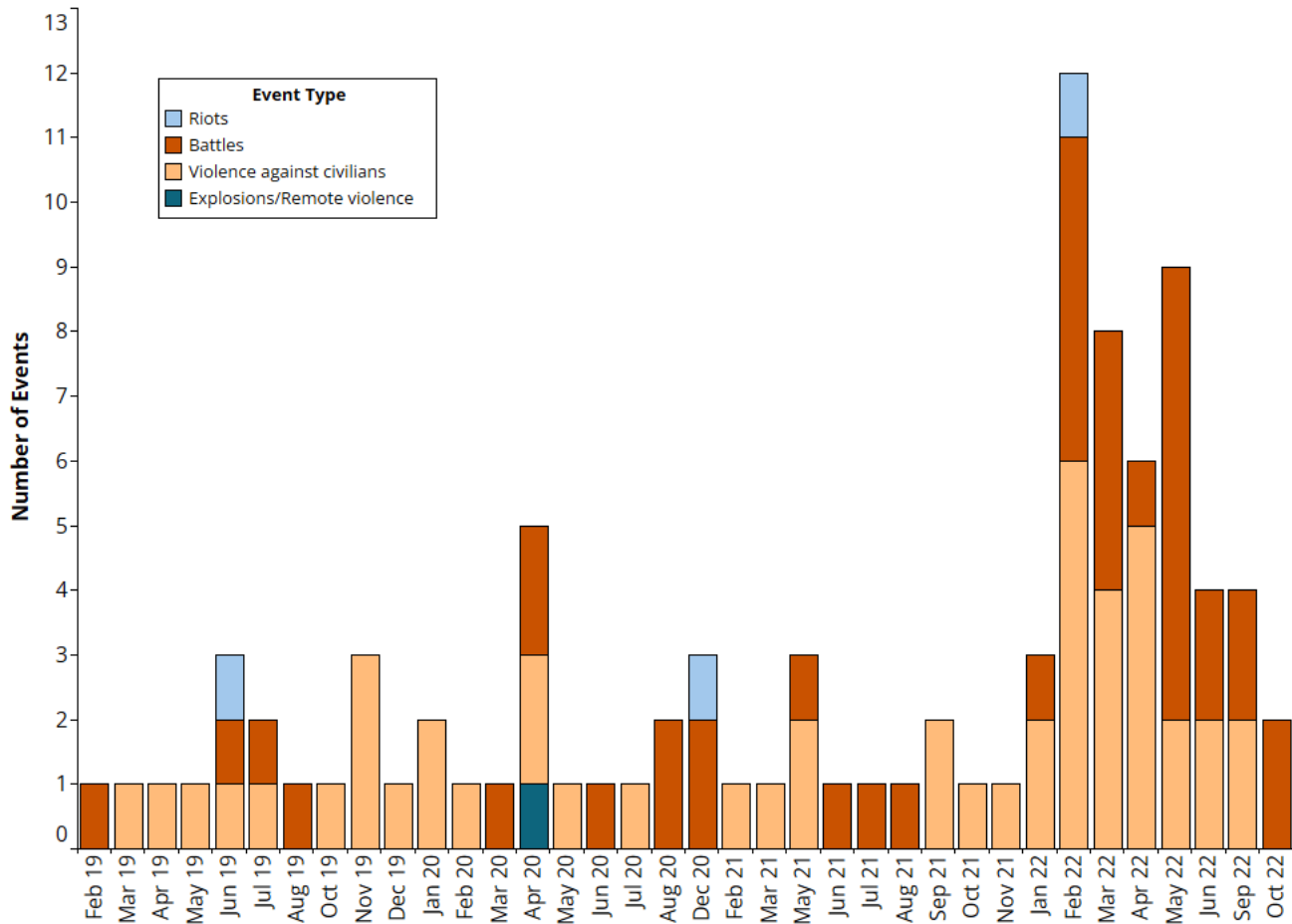
Inter-communal violence involving Twic Dinka, Ngok Dinka, and Misseriya communities accounts for most of the violence in Abyei, which is commonly triggered by territorial and resource-sharing disputes.³ While most of the area's inhabitants are from the Ngok Dinka clan, the Misseriya – Arab pastoralists from Sudan – have settled along the northern part of the Kiir river (also known as the Bahr al-Arab) in Abyei.⁴ The Twic clan claims ownership over the area south of the river.⁵ The dry season forces these pastoralist groups to move beyond their areas of inhabitation in search of pastures and water.⁶ Lacking cooperation between the communities and institutional capacity for resource management can lead to violent conflict over resources, such as water and land for grazing and cultivation.⁷ Amid failure at the political level to agree on the Abyei boundary demarcation, disagreements over the border issue further fuel violence, with groups accusing one another of encroaching on their land.⁸ In an unofficial, unilateral referendum held by the Abyei Referendum High Committee in 2013, many residents of the area voted in favor of joining South Sudan. However, the Misseriya boycotted the referendum, and both Khartoum and Juba criticized the vote.⁹

Violence on the Rise in Abyei

Last year, Abyei Administrative Area saw the highest number of political violence events recorded by ACLED for any year, with 48 events, higher than the totals for the previous three years combined (*see graph below*). The year 2022 was also the deadliest in Abyei since 2011. Half of the events recorded last year consist of armed clashes, and nearly all the remaining half of events are violence against civilians. Identity militia activity drove over 85% of overall political violence activity in Abyei in 2022.

Political Violence in Abyei

2019 - 2022



Between February and April 2022, attacks by Twic and Misseriya militias against civilians from the Ngok Dinka clan resulted in over 70 reported fatalities. In February, fighting erupted at Aneet Market after Twic militiamen attacked a group of government officials from Abyei who were conducting a land survey.¹⁰ In early March, a Misseriya assault on Ngok Dinka civilians left dozens dead. The violence was reportedly fueled by “longstanding territorial disputes, inter-tribal tensions, and revenge seeking” and led to the displacement of thousands.¹¹

In May, the South Sudan People’s Defence Forces (SSPDF) established a buffer zone to end inter-communal violence in the area. South Sudanese President Salva Kiir also formed a panel to investigate the root causes of the conflict.¹² However, after a bout of violence in June, conflict reignited again between Twic and Ngok Dinka militias in September and October over alleged land infringements, leading to dozens of casualties and thousands displaced. Consequently, the SSPDF deployed forces in the area to end the fighting.¹³ The following month, the Community Empowerment for Progress Organization, a South Sudanese non-profit, organized a dialogue between leaders of the Twic clan from Warrap state and Abyei’s Ngok Dinka clan to end the conflict.¹⁴ The sides agreed to stop the violence and hate speech, and to allow humanitarian access to areas affected by the violence. The agreement, however, failed to put an end to the fighting. In December, Twic and Ngok Dinka militias engaged in deadly clashes at Wou Chien along the disputed border between Twic county of South Sudan’s Warrap state and Abyei Administrative Area. It is currently unclear what triggered the violence.¹⁵

Is There a Prospect for Peace?

Inter-communal violence between Twic and Ngok Dinka clans has continued into 2023. According to the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA), in early January, around 200 armed herders from Twic Dinka and Bul Nuer militias attacked Rumamier village in southern Abyei, reportedly killing at least 13 civilians, including aid workers, and injuring four others. They also burned at least 27 houses in the village. The majority of the fatalities were reportedly from the Ngok Dinka clan. Following the incident, UNISFA launched



an investigation to uncover the circumstances that led to the attack.¹⁶ The Abyei chief administrator claimed that the South Sudan People's Movement/Army led by General Stephen Buay Rolnyang was behind the attack. The group has denied the accusation.¹⁷ General Rolnyang, a former commander of the fifth infantry division, was removed from the SSPDF in August 2019 and spent a year in jail for allegedly taking up arms against the current government in Juba.¹⁸

A week after the incident in Rumamier, gunmen, presumably from Abyei, launched what was likely a retaliatory attack on an agricultural scheme in Twic county of Warrap state, burning three people to death in their dwellings, and shooting and wounding two others. Another round of inter-communal violence erupted in and around the southern part of Abyei on 27 January, as cattle rustling by Ngok Dinka and Bul Nuer pastoralist militias from Abyei in Tong Liet, Makuac/Madou, and Makueibum villages in Twic county led to over a dozen reportedly killed and hundreds of cattle stolen. The attack was the deadliest event recorded between the Ngok Dinka and Twic Dinka communities since October 2022.

Abyei also witnessed a protest in mid-January against the removal of Abyei Chief Administrator Kuol Deim Kuol. Kuol left less than three years after his nomination, with the factors leading to his dismissal unclear. Last November, he had accused Juba of creating insecurity in the region and named five officials from Abyei and South Sudan's Warrap state as fueling inter-communal violence in Abyei.¹⁹

Although Sudan and South Sudan have recently improved bilateral relations, resolving the status of Abyei does not appear to be a priority to either country, as they continue to be engulfed in political and security crises domestically.²⁰ In March 2022, South Sudanese President Kiir and the chairman of Sudan's Sovereign Council, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, met in Juba and agreed to collaborate in developing oil fields, particularly in Abyei.²¹ In January this year, the two countries also agreed to deploy joint forces on their 1,800-kilometer border to bolster security, but the recent agreement did not address the political status of Abyei.²² A number of scholars had previously voiced concern that cooperation between the two would only address resource-sharing and neglect the unresolved political situation in Abyei, a concern that has proven valid.²³

Abyei is under direct monitoring of UNISFA, a UN peacekeeping force created in June 2011 with the mandate to protect civilians under threat of violence and the area from incursions by armed groups and ensure security, among other things. The UN Security Council extended UNISFA's mandate for an additional 12 months in November last year.²⁴ In early March 2023, UNISFA expressed concern about the reported presence of "South Sudanese uniformed personnel" in southern Abyei,²⁵ where clashes took place last month. These developments could be a sign of escalating tensions and a likelihood of violence reigniting in the region. This not only further complicates the mandate of UNISFA but also the rapprochement between Khartoum and Juba. As the situation in Abyei remains volatile, both governments should adopt measures to address the border demarcation issue and encourage communities and their leaders to engage in talks to settle disputes over the shared use of resources.

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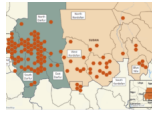
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