

The Conflict in Unity State

Describing events through 29 January 2015

It is now thirteen months since the beginning of the South Sudanese conflict. Both the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army in Opposition (SPLM/A-IO) have spent the rainy season reinforcing their military positions in Unity state—as elsewhere—in anticipation of a dry season military campaign. The beginning of 2015 has already seen clashes just south of Bentiu—the state capital—in Guit county, and around the oil fields of Rubkona and Pariang counties. As of January 2015, the SPLA maintains control of the northern and western counties of Pariang and Abiemnom, as well as of Bentiu. The SPLA-IO controls Unity's southern counties, and much of Guit and Rubkona. Mayom, a strategically important county that contains the road from Warrap state—along which SPLA reinforcements could travel—is largely under the control of the SPLA. As dry season begins, the frontlines are just south of Bentiu, in Guit and Rubkona, and just north and west of the oil fields in Rubkona and Pariang: both the oil fields and the state capital will be important SPLA-IO strategic targets in the coming months.

Peace negotiations, which continued during the rainy season, have failed to overcome the substantial divergences between the two sides' positions. An intra-SPLM dialogue recently took place in Arusha, Tanzania, and resulted in an agreement signed on 21 January by the SPLM, SPLM-IO, and the representative of the SPLM detainees, Deng Alor. However, the accord only contains a further commitment to the cessation of hostilities agreement that both the SPLA and the SPLA-IO have repeatedly violated since it was first signed in January 2014, and a series of rather vague commitments to comprehensive reform of the SPLM. Immediately following the signing of the agreement, the SPLM/A-IO reiterated its call for South Sudanese President Salva Kiir to step down, and Kiir responded by likening his opponents to beaten dogs. The signing of the agreement also took place amid skirmishes between the SPLA and the SPLA-IO in Unity state, and doesn't resolve any of the fundamental divisions separating the two military forces.

The bilateral peace talks taking place in Ethiopia, and mediated by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), are sputtering. A meeting between the two sides scheduled to take place on 18 January was suspended indefinitely, and informal meetings will now occur on the sidelines of an African Union summit to be held on 30 January. Following IGAD-backed talks in November, both sides returned to their respective constituencies for further consultations. In mid-December, the SPLM/A-IO held a conference in Pagak, Upper Nile, near the Ethiopian border. It concluded with a statement that indicated that the SPLM/A-IO would only accept a power sharing agreement if it were allowed to keep a separate army with its own command structure, and if the position of prime minister—set aside for Riek Machar, the head of the SPLM/A-IO—would have executive powers. Both are conditions that the SPLM/A have refused to entertain. Given this distance, and the conviction held by members of both sides that a military solution to the conflict is possible, there is a high likelihood of clashes in the months to come.

Pariang and the oil fields

Renewed fighting initially focused on the oil fields in Unity state. On 5 January 2015, clashes occurred 30 km north of Bentiu, around the Unity oil field in Rubkona county, when the SPLA shelled SPLA-IO positions. Four days of further clashes began on 21 January, at the Toma South oil field in Pariang county, and several oil production sites were badly damaged. The SPLA-IO attack overwhelmed the SPLA, which withdrew, leaving behind two tanks. On 28 January, the SPLA attempted to take SPLA-IO positions around the Unity oil field, at Kilo 30, before the rebels repulsed the government forces. These clashes are indicative of likely sites of future conflict in the months to come.

Pariang county, the site of several of Unity state's most important oil fields, is historically an SPLA stronghold, and is principally populated by the Rueng Dinka, a branch of the riverine Padang Dinka. Since the conflict began in South Sudan, it has remained under the control of forces loyal to the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS). Stephen Mabek Lang, the current deputy governor of Unity state, and the previous county commissioner, remains in effective control of Pariang, and continues to be the SPLM party chairman in the county.

In February and March 2014, following attacks on Rueng Dinka villages by SPLA-IO forces that were moving south after having split from SPLA battalions in Jaw and Pariang town, most of the population withdrew from the southern and eastern parts of the county, and resettled in Pariang town and the surrounding villages. The population has yet to return to the south of the county. In the east, at the strategically crucial site of Wunkor—on the border of Upper Nile and Jonglei states, and close to New Fangak, the scene of intense clashes in December 2014—the population has yet to return, though the area is under the control of the SPLA. This is also the case at Jaw, an important military base on the border with South Kordofan, along the Sudan People's Liberation Army-North's (SPLA-N) supply corridor, and that is under the control of Peter Badeng, a Nuer Brigadier General in the SPLA's 4th Division who remained loyal to the GRSS when the garrison at Jaw split in December 2014.

In the west of the county, the El Toor oil field is not heavily defended. The SPLA positions around the field are composed of 4th Division infantry drawn from the local Rueng Dinka population, and equipped with small arms. These troops have not been paid since June 2014, in stark contrast to the 4th Division forces in Bentiu. The non-payment of wages represents not only the GRSS's straitened circumstances, but also the relative security of the area. The SPLA prioritizes paying troops near the enemy, and the SPLA's frontline positions are further south, around the Unity oil field, and further west, around Toma South, which is the closest South Sudanese oil field to Hejlj, Sudan, where the SPLA-IO maintains forces and training bases. The low morale of the troops around the oil fields is nevertheless a concern for the SPLA, and contributed to the withdrawal of the SPLA forces when attacked by the SPLA-IO in January. The commanding officer who withdrew his forces from Toma South, Colonel Achuil Kiirnaar, was summoned to Juba after the skirmishes, and arrested on 26 January for dereliction of duty.

The oil fields are defended by 4th Division troops, and a 700-strong militia force run by South Sudan's National Security Service that is recruited from among the Rueng



Dinka youth of Pariang county. The funds for the militia are provided by the Greater Pioneer Operating Company (GPOC), the consortium that runs the oil fields in Pariang and Rubkona, and in which the China National Petroleum Company has the largest stake. The salary that GPOC offers to members of the militia is almost double that of a private in the SPLA.

Further south, SPLA positions around the Unity oil field were reinforced with tanks and heavy weapons in November and December. A number of Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) convoys have also moved south through Pariang in the last few months, towards SPLA positions on the Rubkona county line, and have also been seen as far south as Mayom county. These deployments are controversial, and the SPLA denies that the rebel force, which is a part of the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF), is active in South Sudan. JEM is massively unpopular in much of Unity due to its involvement in SPLA attacks on Leer in February 2014, which involved widespread looting and sexual violence. Many in Unity also feel that JEM has violated a basic rule of hospitality: having housed JEM and given tacit support to its campaign against the Government of Sudan (GoS), people are now angry, and claim that the Sudanese rebels have turned on the very communities that once supported them. SPLA-IO media statements focus on JEM's involvement in the conflict—just as they focus on Ugandan involvement—to try to delegitimize the SPLA by emphasizing the support it receives from external actors, and as a means of deflecting attention from GoS support for the SPLA-IO.

In December 2014, the GoS reiterated its threat that if Sudanese rebel groups became further involved in the South Sudanese conflict, it would be forced to respond. Such statements are designed to put pressure on Kiir's government, and thus try to restrict the movement and supply routes of both JEM and SPLA-N through South Sudanese territory. This raises the spectre of a repetition of the second civil war, when Bashir's government supported rebel groups operating in South Sudan as a means of undermining the SPLA. Today, however, the SPLA can also sponsor rebel groups operating inside Sudan, which means that both countries could fight proxy wars across the border. Despite the GoS threats, however, it seems unlikely that Sudanese support to the SPLA-IO would extend much beyond its current levels; even at the height of the second civil war, when the GoS backed Riek Machar's SPLA-Nasir and Paulino Matiep's South Sudan Defence Forces (SSDF) against the mainstream SPLA, its levels of support were halting and uncertain. Thus, while the SPLA-IO retains important military bases inside Sudan, and has been involved—to a limited extent—in operations against the SPLA-N, and while the SPLA has—again to a limited extent—relied on support from JEM, the conflict dynamics in the two countries, at least for now, remain relatively distinct.

Retaining control of the oil fields is a strategically important goal for the SPLA, even if none of the fields in Unity are currently operational after they were shut down in December 2013 and January 2014, at the beginning of the conflict. While there has been fighting at the fields over the last year, none of the oil production sites had been extensively damaged prior to January 2015, and looting has largely been limited to copper and electrical wiring, all of which is relatively easy to replace. The pipelines were damaged, however, when they were rapidly shut-off at the beginning of the conflict, and the security conditions are still not in place that would allow repairs to

begin. The economic consequences of South Sudan's greatly reduced oil production has been accentuated in recent months, as plummeting global oil prices have plunged the price for South Sudanese oil—currently USD 48.75 per barrel—to almost half its rate in 2013. The price drop is also damaging because the GRSS pays the GoS transit fees—USD 884 million in 2014—that Khartoum is unlikely to want to renegotiate. SPLA forces at the oil fields fulfil a twin function: defensively, they protect the oil production sites; offensively, they threaten the SPLA-IO's most important supply corridor, which runs from its positions around Bentiu north to Hejlij and Kilo 30 inside Sudan. Prior to its April 2014 attack on Bentiu, it was along this route that recruits from Guit and Rubkona counties moved north, through Panakuach. In November and December 2014, the SPLA-IO was recruiting inside the Protection of Civilians (POC) site at the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) base in Bentiu, as well as in Guit and Koich counties, and some of these recruits have moved north into Sudan, where they have received training. The recruitment corridor is under the control of Michael Makal Kuol, the chief of SPLA-IO operations in the state, and the SPLA field commander during the 2012 assault on Hejlij. These recruits are now ready to push south towards Bentiu, and east towards Toma South. However, some SPLA-IO fighters have stated that this will not occur until the rebels have weathered a first SPLA dry season push, as doubts remain as to whether they can hold Bentiu, especially if the Mayom road is passable, and SPLA reinforcements can travel along it from Warrap.

The SPLA also currently control Abiemnom, Unity's other majority Dinka county, in the west of the state. JEM forces and SPLA troops moved east into Abiemnom during the rainy season, in anticipation of a dry season offensive. Simultaneously, 4th Division soldiers that were stationed in Abiemnom during the rainy season have also now moved back into Mayom county as part of a more general shift in the state, as military forces move from rainy season to dry season deployments, and previously impassable roads become strategically important again.

Mayom County, the Bul Nuer, and the SSLA

Since August 2014, Mayom county has been relatively free of clashes, though tensions persist in a community with divided loyalties. Mayom is a strategically crucial area in the west of Unity that provides the SPLA with a vital supply route into Warrap. One of the reasons that dry season fighting has not begun in earnest is that—as of 26 January 2014—the road from Turalei to Bentiu, which runs through Mayom, is only passable with difficulty.

Mayom is also politically central to the struggle for Unity, and is home to both Joseph Nguen Monytuel, the current state governor, and Peter Gadet, until recently the SPLA-IO's military governor of the state. It is principally inhabited by the Bul Nuer. The county is currently contested. The SPLA-IO maintains positions inside Mayom on the Rubkona and Koich county borders, and November 2014 saw fighting between local civilians allied with the GRSS and SPLA-IO forces at Buoth, on the Bahr el Ghazal river. The SPLA controls Mayom town, and the town of Mankien, home to many of the Bul Nuer's spiritual leaders, and Paulino Matiep's headquarters during much of the second civil war.



Given the impassability of the road, information about conditions inside the county is relatively difficult to acquire. Some Bul Nuer traders are moving west to Agok to trade, and to access its livestock market. There is also a working supply route running north into Sudan, through which Mayom town is receiving supplies. Following extensive devastation during fighting in the county from May-August, many of the villages surrounding the main urban settlements are deserted.

The county as a whole largely remains under the control of Matthew Puljang, the head of the South Sudan Liberation Army (SSLA). He has been recruiting inside Mayom over the last six months, and this has led to some tension with the SPLA, the putative cause of which is his recruitment of child soldiers. Part of the problem for the SPLA is that the IGAD-backed Monitoring and Verification Team (MVT), which is mandated to monitor the cessation of hostilities agreement, has repeatedly reported on Puljang's recruitment of child soldiers. It is likely that it is this attention, rather than the recruitment of child soldiers *per se*, that has earned the SPLA's ire—both sides have extensively recruited child soldiers over the last year. In June 2014, Peter Gadet issued a directive to SPLA-IO commanders to recruit youths in all of the rebel-held counties. In the course of 2014, underage soldiers have also been observed in Bentiu as part of the standard SPLA; there are more substantive problems between the SPLA and Matthew Puljang.

The last few months have seen repeated rumours that Puljang will switch sides and join the SPLA-IO. While Puljang currently commands the SSLA, Peter Gadet originally formed the militia in April 2011. It then repeatedly clashed with the SPLA in Mayom and Abiemnom, before agreeing to an amnesty offer in 2013. When the conflict began in South Sudan, in December 2013, Puljang's SSLA forces were awaiting integration. Since the conflict began, some former SSLA commanders, such as Carlos Kuol—as well as Peter Gadet—have joined the SPLA-IO. The majority, however, have sided with the GRSS. The governor of Unity, Joseph Nguen Monytuel, is the brother of Bapiny Monytuel, one of the most important SSLA commanders, and his appointment as governor—following the dismissal of Taban Deng Gai, now the lead SPLA-IO negotiator—was partly a means of ensuring that the SSLA stayed loyal to the government.

All of the SSLA commanders are Bul Nuer from Mayom—one of the communities that has been most affected by the current conflict, with internal rifts emerging as different community leaders align to different factions. The SPLA do not entirely trust Puljang's SSLA, and the Bul Nuer more generally. His troops are paid less than the regular SPLA, and less often. They are also not supplied with heavy weapons due to fears they might desert. Equally, while earlier in the conflict Puljang's troops were central to the defence of Bentiu, and he was—for a while—the acting 4th Division commander, in recent months his forces have been increasingly politically sidelined, and Puljang has withdrawn to Mayom. In December 2014, rumours that Puljang would join the SPLA-IO intensified. However, these rumours appear to have been instigated by Puljang himself, in an effort to ensure that his men would be paid.

It seems unlikely that Puljang will desert. Many members of the SSLA have been well rewarded for their loyalty: in September 2014, Kiir made the SSLA's former spokesman—and a former SSDF commander—Gordon Buay Malek an ambassador.

There is also a great deal of hostility towards Puljang's SSLA, and the Bul Nuer more generally, among the Nuer populations of southern Unity that constitute the bulk of the SPLA-IO in the state, and that means it is unlikely that Puljang will join the rebels. Leik and Jikany Nuer from Rubkona and Guit counties feel a sense of betrayal, as the Bul Nuer sided with the government in a conflict that has involved extensive pillaging and sexual violence against Nuer communities in Unity state. In the UNMISS POC site in Bentiu, the Bul Nuer stay separate from the rest of the Nuer internally displaced people (IDPs), and it is indicative of the tensions between these communities that IDPs from Mayom have moved into the Rueng and Ngok Dinka areas of Abiemnom and Agok rather than into Rubkona and Koich counties. In the POC, Dok Nuer from Leer talk openly about taking revenge against the Bul Nuer when the political conflict has ended, an indication of some of the tensions that—regardless of the outcome of elite negotiations in Ethiopia—will have to be addressed if any future peace agreement is to be sustainable.

The attack on Bentiu and changes in the SPLA-IO leadership

Bentiu saw the only major altercation of the rainy season. From 25 to 28 October, the SPLA-IO moved south from Kilo 30 and Hejljij, inside Sudan, attacking SPLA positions around the Unity oil field and elsewhere in Rubkona county. On 29 October, SPLA-IO forces surrounded Bentiu, moving in from the north, and from bases in Guit county in the south-east, and from Rubkona in the south-west. The SPLA withdrew from the town in the early afternoon. However, later that day, the SPLA re-entered Bentiu, and rather than attempting to hold the city, the SPLA-IO withdrew for unclear reasons. Perhaps Gadet did not think he could hold Bentiu militarily. However, some SPLA-IO personnel have suggested his decision to withdraw reflects ongoing disagreements in the rebel movement about the shape of a SPLA-IO-run Unity state. A number of the SPLA-IO's most important members are from Unity, and the balance of power in the state is contested. These key figures include Riek Machar, a Dok Nuer from Leer, Taban Deng Gai, the former governor of the state and a Jikany Nuer from Guit, and a number of important military commanders from Mayom, including Peter Gadet and Michael Makal Kuol, both from the Kwech section of the Bul Nuer.

The Pagak conference formalized the structure of the SPLM/A-IO, and formally split the military and political wings. It is the second major change in the rebel command structure, after a first shift in April–May 2014, when Gadet, who had been in Jonglei, was appointed the military governor of Unity state, and the state-level leadership of the SPLA-IO more generally shifted so that states and counties were led by members of their respective communities. At the Pagak conference, Peter Gadet became the deputy chief of general staff for military operations, one of a series of deputy chiefs of staff under Simon Gatwech Dual that includes most the SPLA-IO's most important military commanders.

Following the conference, Machar also announced that the SPLA-IO intended to dissolve South Sudan's ten current states and create 21 federal states, based on the districts of the British colonial administration. Unity state, however, would remain unchanged, other than being renamed Lich state. Brigadier General Simon Maguek Gai Majak was appointed commander of the SPLA-IO's 4th Division. Majak was previously appointed by Taban Deng Gai as a speaker in the state assembly. In this position, he was extremely unpopular, and the state parliament accused him of

corruption. His appointment as head of the 4th (Lich) Division, with that of Brigadier General Ruai Kuol Jal as governor of Lich state, seems to suggest a lessening of Peter Gadet's influence, and a strengthening of Taban Deng Gai's position in the state.

How these formal changes may play out on the ground is not clear. Despite Gadet being moved up to deputy chief of staff for military affairs, his forces have control of Koich, much of Rubkona, and the counties of southern Unity, where the civil administration is heavily militarized, despite the formal division between the military and political wings of the SPLM/A-IO at the Pagak conference. Equally, many of the most important SPLA-IO commanders in Unity either used to serve under Gadet (both in the SPLA, and, in the case of Carlos Kuol in Guit, in the SSLA as well), or are part of the same section of the Bul Nuer as him—such as Michael Makal Kuol, who remains the operational commander of the SPLA-IO in Unity state. And while Gadet is feared and admired in much of Unity, Taban Deng Gai is extremely unpopular outside Guit county, and his return to the governorship seems unlikely. It is unclear whether the SPLA-IO can resolve tensions—both personal and political—between Taban Deng Gai and Peter Gadet, and formulate a coherent power structure in Unity; until they do so, the SPLA-IO's political future in the state is difficult to predict.

During the rainy season, the SPLA's leadership in Unity state also changed. Major General Thayiep Gatluak was appointed the commander of the 4th Division. Gatluak had previously served as an aid to Paulino Matiep, the powerful head of the SSDF during the second civil war. In Bentiu and the surrounding areas, there has been a reduction in the presence of 3rd Division forces from Bahr el Ghazal over the last six months, and an attempt to recruit and rebuild the 4th Division, which was a division in name only after the defection of James Koang—then the division commander—in December 2013, when most of the division followed him into the SPLA-IO. Joseph Nguen Monytuel remains the governor of the state. But he is not popular, and has limited influence—he is only rarely in Bentiu itself, spending most of his time in Juba. In January 2015, Monytuel was accused of embezzling state funds, failing to maintain the roads, and appointing close relatives to positions in the government. Whether or not the claims are true, that they are voiced at all is indicative of his unpopularity. It is unlikely, however, that Kiir will replace Monytuel. Appointing Mabek Lang, the deputy governor and a Rueng Dinka, would be extremely poorly received by most people in Unity state, which is majority Nuer, and dismissing Monytuel would alienate Puljang—who is from the same Nyang subsection of the Kwech section of the Bul Nuer as Monytuel—and the SSLA, which militarily, the SPLA can ill afford to do.

Southern unity and humanitarian supplies

The closest front lines between the SPLA and the SPLA-IO are in Guit and Rubkona counties, just south of Bentiu. Both sides have spent the rainy season reinforcing these positions, with the SPLA-IO recruiting in Koich and Guit, and moving forces north. Clashes occurred on 6 January 2015, beginning at 8:00am, when the SPLA began shelling SPLA-IO positions on the Guit and Nhialdiu roads. When considered alongside the clashes at the Unity oil field, these early skirmishes suggest the main axes of the conflict in Unity state. These axes were also those that the SPLA-IO used in its October assault on Bentiu, when they targeted Torabeit, next to the Unity oil field, some 60 km northwest of Bentiu, and moved north from Guit county. Along

with the battle for Mayom junction, on the road that runs east from Warrap into Unity—and also connects to a road that runs north to Sudan—these are likely to be two of the central sites for dry season conflict.

The southern counties of Mayendit, Leer, and Panyijar are firmly under SPLA-IO control. The rebels have formalized the political administration of these areas, though the county commissioners and their staff effectively form a military administration. There has been recruitment in all three counties during the rainy season, and new recruits from Panyijar headed north in December 2014 in preparation for the dry season military campaign. However, following the October assault on Bentiu, many soldiers returned south, amid reports that there is little appetite for further conflict amongst the people of Panyijar and Mayendit.

Panyijar maintained good relations with Lakes state to the south until January 2015, when there were tit-for-tat cattle raids. In mid-January, reports from Panyijar suggested that raiders from Rumbek North county had attacked a cattle camp, injuring 30 and leaving four people killed. In retaliatory raids into Rumbek North on 18 January, between seven and ten people were killed. The SPLA claimed that the SPLA-IO was responsible for the attacks. That seems unlikely—the attacks were consonant with cattle raiding, rather than a military operation. Nevertheless, the clashes are indicative of worsening relations with Lakes state, which bodes ill for Panyijar, which was partially reliant on its southern neighbour for trade.

The southern and central counties of Unity also exemplify an increasingly important part of the conflict: the war for humanitarian supplies. Both the SPLA and the SPLA-IO have attempted to manipulate and divert supplies of humanitarian aid into the state, to their own troops. At the end of 2014, aid groups undertook an assessment in Bentiu town, where the GRSS had been encouraging NGOs to distribute food aid. Bentiu town is now effectively a garrison town, empty of civilians. In many cases, the SPLA told the ‘civilians’—presumably the soldier’s families—what to say in response to the humanitarians’ questions. While, following the assessment, regular food distributions were not implemented in Bentiu town, the incident is indicative of a broader trend. Both sides have long experience in manipulating aid flows, the control of which, during the second civil war, became essential to the SPLA’s economic base. In southern Unity, it is hard for humanitarian actors to work out whether civilian populations have been moved into specific places by the SPLA-IO, something which Riek Machar has a long history of doing during the second civil war. On 4 January 2015, the SPLA-IO announced it would create its own humanitarian wing, in an echo of the SPLA’s humanitarian wing during the second civil war.

In the southern and central counties of Unity, the population is extremely mobile. In Guit and Koich, for instance, the population moves north to collect food aid from the POC site in Bentiu, during the monthly distribution, and south to Leer, to access the hospital. Rather than pastoralist transhumant grazing routes determining peoples’ passage through the state, access to aid now creates a different sort of pastoralism, one that both sides are eager to control. With the SPLA and SPLA-IO set for dry season military operations, and negotiations at an impasse, the population of Unity is likely to endure many more movements in the months to come.

29 January 2015