

Looming Crisis: Open Wounds in Abyei Increase Risk of New War Enough Project 13
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Introduction

In Abyei, a small but strategically important disputed area on the border between Sudan and South Sudan, rising inter-communal tensions have resulted in a marked escalation in conflict in recent weeks. At this extremely sensitive moment in the nomadic Misseriya community's seasonal migration across the Ngok Dinka homeland, these new dynamics could spark another war between Sudan and South Sudan, unless the international community acts immediately to enforce the pledge to demilitarize the area and arrest this trend.

Armed youth and dissatisfied cadres within the South Sudanese army in the area seem to be interested in provoking a confrontation, both with the Misseriya community and the Sudanese government. Unaddressed anger around the South Sudan's lukewarm response to the October 2013 referendum vote and the Ngok Dinka paramount chief's killing has emboldened local armed actors. Armed groups aligned with South Sudan are increasingly moving to the northern parts of the area, actively confronting nomads and challenging the seasonal migration of the Misseriya community. In response to dramatically shifting realities on the ground as a result of South Sudan's internal war, some in Abyei may be interested in instigating violence to attract international attention to the area's unresolved status. For their part, the Misseriya are desperate to move their cattle further south in search of water and grazing pastures. Any threat to these pastoral routes raises the stakes of violence and the likelihood of bloodshed. This game of brinkmanship is putting both local communities and the broader region at great risk of war.

The African Union, United Nations, and broader international community must pressure the governments of Sudan and South Sudan to honor the provisions of the agreements they signed on the Abyei area. Both governments must fulfill their pledges to demilitarize the area by removing their armies and police forces. The United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei, or UNISFA, must carry out its mandate to protect civilians while also supporting disarmament, especially of non-state armed actors. For real reconciliation between the communities to begin, the Commission of Inquiry report into the paramount chief's death must be made public, and restorative justice must be pursued. Traditional communal mechanisms for dispute resolution and communication should be strengthened through interventions by external actors at the grassroots level. However, none of these steps will be sufficient to resolve Abyei's underlying problem: its unresolved final status. Abyei's people have been promised an opportunity to exercise their right to self-determination for decades; it is time to take steps to fulfill those promises.

Defiant Armed Actors Clash in a Demilitarized Zone

Several military confrontations between armed forces have been reported within Abyei in recent weeks, despite the fact that the area is officially a demilitarized zone. In June 2011, Sudan and South Sudan committed to withdrawing their armed forces from Abyei. As a result of escalating violence, hundreds of civilians are evacuating Abyei town and other villages north of the River Kiir to Agok town due to fears of increasing attacks. The Enough Project spoke to displaced persons in Agok, who confirmed that scores of Ngok Dinka were killed in the recent violence.

Sources from the ground in Abyei reported deadly military attacks on March 1 and 3, 2014, in Makir and Dungop. On March 1, Misseriya militias attacked Makir and nearby areas reportedly resulting in at least 50 deaths. Two days later, the Ngok Dinka community in Dungop suffered an attack by Misseriya militias resulting in the death of at least one person. Confirming these reports, the Enough Project spoke to observers who confirmed that fighters used AK-47 rifles, mortars, and rocket-propelled grenades in a recent round of clashes.

The March clashes were perpetrated by armed Misseriya militias. However, elements aligned with the South Sudanese army carried out a series of offensive raids into the northern part of Abyei between December 2013 and February 2014. Specifically, a February 3, 2014, attack by South Sudanese government armed forces and police in the north of Abyei drew harsh criticism from the U.N. Security Council later that month.

When situated in context, the recent clashes stem from the presence of increasingly defiant armed actors within the Abyei area. The UNISFA peacekeeping mission for Abyei has authorized 4,250 military and police personnel to maintain security and protect civilians. The Council has repeatedly called on both sides to withdraw their forces from the region. Still, almost three years after the pledge by Sudan and South Sudan to demilitarize the zone, the area remains awash in weapons, raising the risk of a return to large-scale conflict at any time.

In their recent report, UNISFA noted the presence of around 660 military elements of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and the South Sudan National Police Service, including more than 300 in Maker Abior, 100 in Noong, 75 in Leu, 70 in Dungop, 69 in Marial Achak, and 50 in Tejalei, all of which lie along the Misseriya migration corridor. Because the mission has observed trenches in these areas, analysts suggest that this military presence is organized, rather than spontaneous. The U.N. Secretary General's report on Abyei to the Security Council states that SPLA and South Sudan National Police elements informed UNISFA that they were deployed to the area following the completion of the unilateral referendum. However, Kuol Monyluak, a senior official on the Abyei Joint Oversight Committee (AJOC), denied these reports, stating "we do not have any group in the area. We withdrew our forces in Abyei region in 2011 and never returned."

Despite numerous U.N. Security Council resolutions calling on them to withdraw their forces, the Sudanese government has maintained a military presence of at least 150 oil police in Diffra/Kec in the northern part of the Abyei region. In June 2013, the pipeline near Diffra

suffered an attack by unknown assailants in Ajaj. The damaged pipeline serves as the key link between the Diffra oil field in Abyei and the processing plant in Heglig. Additionally, armed Darfuri rebels aligned with the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and loosely organized South Sudanese militias called “SSUM” also operate within the area. Sudan’s government points to these threats as a justification for the continued presence of its police force in the area.

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