



**GLOBAL EMERGENCY
AND
COUNTERTERRORISM
INSTITUTE**

POLICY BRIEF N°7



SOUTH SUDAN: WHAT HAPPENED?

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November 2018

South Sudan is the world's youngest state which obtained its independence from Sudan in 2011. In 2013 this new nation descended into a bloody civil war with drastic consequences on peace and human security. The worst thing is that despite its ravages, this conflict seems to have been forgotten by regional and global communities. Until recently, the number of casualties in South Sudan conflict was estimated to be 50,000. However, a very recent report revealed that these figures are eight times higher, that is around 400,000 dead. In this policy brief, the Global Emergency and Counterterrorism Institute, reviews the past and current developments in South Sudan in a bid to understand what really happened and explores avenues to address the current situation.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF SOUTH SUDAN HISTORY

In the 1800s, Sudan was under the control of Egypt and later, Britain took over. On 1 January 1956, Britain granted independence to Sudan. However, from 1955 insurgents from the Southern part of the country grew concerned about being dominated. They then set up a movement called Anyanya and expressed their will to secede from the North. The Anyanya movement struggled owing to internal divisions but by 1972, all factions gathered under the Southern Sudan Liberation Movement (SSLM) to negotiate a peace agreement with the Sudanese government. The Addis Ababa Agreement was signed, granting the south considerable autonomy and a share of natural resources. But in 1983 the Sudanese government officially abolished the Addis Ababa Agreement, dissolved the southern regional government and divided the south into three regions.

John Garang and the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA).

In that same year, the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA), led by John Garang came into existence in Ethiopia. A civil war opposing rebels from the SPLA to the regular army soon broke out with villages being burnt, killings and displacements of people across the region. This war was to be intensified under Omar al-Bashir seizing power in 1989 following a coup with the enforcement of Islamic code throughout the entire country, the banning of trade unions, political parties, and other 'non-religious' institutions. The government also deployed army militiamen known as the People's Defense Forces to raid villages in the south. In January 2005, peace was finally brokered between southern rebels and the government of Sudan through the Nairobi Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) granting autonomy to the south for a six-year trial period, after which the south will have the opportunity to vote to secede. After enjoying the status of semi-independent entity, on 9 January 2011 following a referendum, Southern Sudanese overwhelmingly voted (98.83) to separate from Sudan and became a sovereign and independent state following a deadly civil war that lasted more than 25 years. A Six-month period of transition started, and on 9 July 2011, the new republic of South Sudan formally came into being with its capital Juba. Less than a week later on 14 July the new republic joined the United Nations as the 193rd country in the world.

After gaining its independence from Sudan in 2011, South Sudan descended into a deadly civil war in December 2013.

Yet something quickly went wrong as the honeymoon within the new nation was cut short. After less than two years of celebrating its independence, South Sudan descended into a deadly civil war in December 2013. The civil war uprooted millions from their homes with around two million people internally displaced and more than two million having fled to neighbouring countries. Currently, the country has the third largest refugee's crisis in the world after Afghanistan and Syria. The war that broke out in the twilight of 2013 characterised by ethnic cleansings accounts for the deeply-rooted political and ethnic tensions which are yet to be resolved. It is therefore crucial to (re)assess the whole situation in South Sudan including the causes and impacts of the war before exploring some recommendations.

CAUSES OF THE WAR

The hostilities between two leaders from different ethnic groups along with corruption and the curse of black gold are among the major causes of the South Sudan conflict.

Hostilities between two leaders and clashes along ethnic lines

It is still unclear as to understand the entire features that triggered the deadly conflict in South Sudan. What is noticeable is that after the country gained its independence from Sudan, Salva Kiir and Riek Machar became respectively president and vice-president. At the time, not only Machar was the vice-president but also the first deputy chairman of the ruling party, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). But it appears that since 2005, the friendly relationships among the two began to fade out as rivalries and hostilities took over. It is within this context that Kiir repeatedly accused Machar of running a parallel government and sabotage of his

initiatives, accusations denied by the latter. The tension between the two leaders was perceptible and this is exemplified by the fact that their bodyguards come from their respective tribe and are subject to their direct command. In terms of ethnicity, President Kiir is from the Dinka tribe, the largest ethnic group in South Sudan whereas his deputy Machar comes from the Nuer tribe, the second largest ethnic group. Yet despite the fact that each leader was protected by bodyguards from their respective tribe, these bodyguards had to be merged into a single entity namely, the Presidential Guard to protect the whole presidential office.

■ Growing tensions between the president and his deputy and military build-up.

The mistrust between the two leaders kept growing and in July 2013, Kiir fired his entire cabinet, including vice-president Machar accused of plotting a coup. Members of the cabinet who were fired strongly opposed president's Kiir move and organised riots and popular campaign criticizing his incompetence and requesting his removal from the head of party and from office. As the crisis quickly unfolded, Kiir, being aware of the threat from Machar and his loyalists initiated a military build-up. During the night of 15 December 2013, he ordered the disarmament of the Presidential Guards from the Nuer ethnic group on the ground that they were Machar's supporters. These soldiers opposed the order as the situation quickly escalated and triggered the war which following a domino effect, spread to Army General Headquarters. Fighting between the two factions of government forces loyal to each Kiir and Marchar confront one another. It is apparent that soldiers from both factions were also ordered to execute anyone not belonging to one's ethnic group. The clashes along ethnic lines got out of control resulting in thousands of victims. It is

reported that on 16 and 17 December 2013, the number of civilian from the Nuer tribe killed by Kiir's soldiers from the Dinkas reached more than 20.000 dead. The amount of horror that unfolded in less than two days since the conflict erupted was despicable. In his [Analysis of the South Sudanese Conflict](#), Tethloach Ruey who served in the South Sudanese Army, commissioned to the rank of Major and defected to Riek Machar argued as follows:

'The method of killing was horrible. The soldiers made a house-to-house search hunting for the Naath [Nuer]. Children, women, the elderly, patients on hospital beds, were all executed; some were put into houses en masse and burned alive. The killers compelled the victims to eat flesh and drink blood of slain relatives, mothers coerced to cut the throats of their children, and a woman was found dead with a piece of wood inserted into her private parts. Some victims were forced to have sexual intercourse with their mothers at gunpoint.'

Clashes along ethnic lines: the war is 'a war of revenge, hate and anger'.

The tribal character of the war was to quickly emerge when paramilitary groups from the Nuer tribe undertook to retaliate against anyone from the Dinka ethnic group whether connected or being aware of president's Kiir actions or not. The Nuers therefore launched a full-scale counterstrike in Upper Nile, Jonglei and Unity States, targeting the Dinkas and government soldiers. Hundreds of thousands of innocent people including, children, women and the aged from the Dinka tribe were massacred in responses to Kiir's atrocities perpetrated by his soldiers. As time went on, the war that started between the two major ethnic groups in the country (the

Dinka and the Nuer) quickly expanded and spread to other minority tribes which were not involved at the beginning with dire consequences. This means that the war unfolding across the country is peculiar in the sense that it does not follow the rules of war, for civilians, aid workers and humanitarian actors are regularly the main targets. As observed by a member of a local organisation committed to identifying every person killed in the civil war by name, the war is 'a war of revenge, hate and anger'.

Corruption and the curse of black gold

'The civil war in South Sudan, which began as a political conflict between elites, has evolved over the past two years into a tribal war, reigniting historic grievances and encouraging military opportunism and revenge.'

The above quote is from the [Final report](#) of the Panel of Experts on South Sudan established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2206. With an estimated 3.5 billion barrels, South Sudan has the third largest oil reserves in Africa. The country has been producing around 135,000 barrels per day of oil, a production that was set to substantial increase in a near future. Yet like *du déjà vu* on the Africa continent, instead of being used as a tool of development and promotion of social services for its inhabitants, oil revenues in South Sudan play a crucial part not only in corruption but more importantly in fuelling the civil war that broke out five years ago.

Nile Petroleum Corporation, South Sudan's state-owned oil company 'captured by predatory elites' is being used to fuel the civil war in the country.

The Sentry, a U.S. based organisation, following an investigation revealed how more than 80 million US dollars was paid to South Sudanese politicians, military officials, government agencies, and companies owned by politicians and members of their families. It appeared that Nile Petroleum Corporation (NilePet), South Sudan's state-owned oil company is directly according to a report by the organisation Global Witness under the close control of President Salva Kiir and his inner circle. Similar investigations conducted by other organisations reported that Nile Petroleum has been 'captured by predatory elites' and is being used to fuel the civil war in the country. Various investigations also mentioned how Nile Petroleum Corporation provided 'financial authorisation for the purchase and transfer' of small arms and ammunition to the Pandang Dinka, one of the local militias recruited to fight with the government in Upper Nile state in 2015. Following the release of these investigations, officials of the United States coined that:

'Oil profits should be fuelling the development of the country and not be corruptly used to buy arms to further destroy it. South Sudan's resources should be used to benefit the people of South Sudan and leaders have a duty to put the interests of their people above their own.'

IMPACTS OF THE WAR

The death toll in South Sudan since December 2013 and the overall impacts are horrendous.

Death toll in South Sudan since 2013

The war that broke out in December 2013 in the youngest nation on earth resulted in a variety of dire consequences including several thousand of dead, famine,

destruction of livestock, looting, displacement of people and so on. In the first month the conflict uprooted around 413.000 people. Regarding the number of dead, until recently, a common estimate by the media, the UN and various organisations believed that around 50.000 people have fallen victim to the atrocities. But it appeared this figure was inaccurate as evidenced by a recent [report](#).

The civil war in South Sudan has claimed as many as nearly 400.000 lives, eight times higher than the initial estimates.

The new [report](#) entitled 'estimates of crisis attributable mortality in South Sudan, December 2013 April 2018 a statistical analysis' released by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and funded by the U.S. State Department revealed that the civil war has claimed as many as nearly 400.000 lives, that is eight times higher than the initial estimates. The study covered the period from December 2013 to April 2018. The report went on to refer to people who had not died violently, but as direct consequence and impact of war, such as disease and lack of healthcare. It is estimated that out of the 382.900 people who perished since 2013, half of those died as a result of 'violent injuries' as well as from increased risk of disease and reduced access to health care. This report, based on statistical modeling and not peer reviewed, mentioned that the deaths appeared to peak in 2016 and 2017 after a peace deal initially signed in August 2015 collapsed in July 2016. A handful of peace agreements have been signed over the course of the war but they have almost systematically been subject to violations. At the time, fresh fighting broke out in the capital Juba before spreading into the neighbouring regions notably in the south and northeast of the state where numerous adult males perished. The horrifying new estimate comes weeks after the warring sides signed what the government referred

to as the ‘final final’ peace deal which reinstates the now rebel Riek Machar to his previous position of vice president to President Salva Kiir.

Overall impacts

The desolation of war led to an important refugee crisis that has driven millions from their homes, making it the third in the world after Syria and Yemen. Repeated assaults and target of civilian populations, rape, kidnapping and gender based violence along ethnic lines, looting and theft of livestock are rampant in the country. By November 2015 over 300.000 people were driven from their homes, that is almost a third of the state’s population. A UN report in for the same year observed that 6.4 million South Sudanese, that is half of the population were at risk of starvation and therefore 1.81 billion US dollars was necessary to address this chaotic situation.

1.9 million of internally displaced people, 1.3 million of refugees in neighbouring countries, and up to 2.4 million children without receiving any education.

A more recent [document](#) by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) reported that as of December 2016, there is 1.9 million of internally displaced people in South Sudan, 1.3 million of refugees in neighbouring countries, and 261.500 refugees in the country. Other reports mentioned that up to 2.4 million children remain without receiving any education, that is 75% of the children in South Sudan. In 2018, the dire food insecurity has not improved at all. Two out of three pregnant or breastfeeding women remain malnourished. Recently in January 2018, 5.3 million people were at risk of going

hungry, a number that was subject to increase to more than 7 million without proper humanitarian support. The country is experiencing a serious economic crisis. Oil production which has been the main source of revenues of the nation, 98 percent of the state budget has completely collapsed. A few months ago, the country resumed pumping 20.000 barrels a day of crude oil from the Toma South oilfield where production had been suspended since the war started in December 2013. This production is expected to reach 210.000 barrels per day in a near future.

Nonetheless, insecurity has been looming everywhere. Resultantly, all economic activities have been put on hold, basic services have become inexistent and the government struggles to pay civil servants and other workers. As additional impact of the war, it is also reported that South Sudan remains the most unsafe place in the world for humanitarian organisations wishing to provide assistance and support to the victims of the war. Since 2013 when the conflict started, it is estimated that more than 100 aid workers have lost their life. Attacks on aid convoys and looting of supplies are regular. Another UN [document](#) observed that in 2017 over 600 humanitarian workers were forced to relocate for extended periods owing to the conflict situation.

ENDING THE WAR: THE 'FINAL FINAL' DEAL

Since the conflict erupted five years ago, several deals were brokered in an attempt to restore peace and security across South Sudan. But none of these deals lasted owing to systematic violations by the warring factions. In a quest for urgent solutions, in July 2017 the UN went far so as to issue an arms embargo and sanctions on two military officials but to no avail. In August this year, rebel Machar even refused to

sign another deal. Finally, on 12 September 2018 new developments emerged when President Kiir and rebel leader Machar signed yet another peace agreement referred to as the ‘final final’ deal aiming at formally ending the five-year war. The deal mediated by Sudan’s head of state Omar al-Bashir and signed in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia reinstated Machar in his former role as vice president.

Will the new ‘final final’ bring an end to the conflict?

Despite the new ‘final final’ deal, questions still arise as to know whether they will hold this time and bring an end to the conflict. David Shearer, head of the UN mission in South Sudan remains cautious in his appreciation of the deal. He sees the deal not as the final move toward peace but as step toward peace. As he argued:

‘With the signing of this revitalised agreement, we should publicly acknowledge it is but one step on the road to peace, but one which lays the foundation for all that follows.’

This view is shared by countries that monitored the peace efforts including the United States, the United Kingdom and Norway. In a statement they observed as follows:

‘We hope discussions will remain open to those who are not yet convinced of the sustainability of this agreement. We must seize this broader regional momentum to secure peace for the people of South Sudan.’

As this policy brief is being developed, it seems the recent peace agreement has been holding. On Wednesday 31 October 2018 rebel leader Machar who fled the country more than two years ago following the collapse of a 2016 peace deal has

returned to the capital, Juba to take part in a peace ceremony. During this ceremony, he reaffirmed his commitment to implement the new peace agreement:

‘Our message is one: we are for peace [...] This peace is in our hearts and we are going to implement this agreement.’

In the same vein, following Machar’s statement, President Kiir also insisted the new peace deal brought an end to the five-year war:

‘I want to reiterate in front of you that the war in South Sudan has come to an end.’

The recent signing of a peace agreement to end hostilities should indeed be perceived as a mere step toward the full restoration of peace in the country. The above developments provide details information about what happened in South Sudan. From such developments, the next step is obviously to avoid the repeat or the resumption of this conflict. In a report entitled ‘[How the AU can promote transitional justice in South Sudan](#)’ the Institute for Security Studies provides relevant insights about the mandate of the African Union to help South Sudan to ensure accountability for past human rights abuses through the establishment of a hybrid court; mandate derived from the Agreement for the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan, signed in 2015.

RECOMMENDATIONS

One may say it is never late to do the right thing to address a war that split a country along ethnic lines, uprooted millions of people who after all had nothing to do with the hostile political situation that triggered the massacre. It is now crucial to explore additional avenues that may contribute to avoid the repeat or resumption of this war,

for it is obvious that the 'final final' peace deal in itself and the reinstatement of Marchar as Vice president is not enough.

The peculiarity of the South Sudan war remains its ethnic character and this is why a genuine end to this conflict requires means far superior to those generally deployed in case of wars with purely political connotation.

Firstly, there is a need to bring about inclusive and sustainable peace and justice to really end the crisis. It is highly unlikely that five years of bloodshed on a full-time basis will not easily be wiped out by a stroke of a pain. People have suffered physically and emotionally owing to personal abuse, loss of loved ones and or materials belongings. The peculiarity of the South Sudan war remains its ethnic character and this is why a genuine end to this conflict requires means far superior to those generally deployed in case of wars with purely political connotation. The first step in this direction will be to setup national, regional and international bodies to scrutinise and monitor the implementation of the recently signed peace deal, the so called 'final final' deal.

The erection of robust state institutions, complete demilitarisation, support and reparations and power sharing among the different components of the society is a crucial step toward peace.

The second recommendation which is also an urgent one, is the erection of robust state institutions including legal and constitutional reforms, state-building, strict compliance with the rule of law, check and balance, transparency, accountability and good governance. Independent entities need to be setup to oversee the

management of state owned entities like for instance the state's oil company that provides 98 percent of the state budget. The war can be brought to an end only if there is power sharing among the different components of the society including warring factions, political parties, the civil society and other. In terms of human resources, a culture of national interest and patriotism should be initiated. The system needs to be structured in such a way differences and diversity across the country be perceived instead as strengths rather than weaknesses. On this account, the bodyguards of the president and those of his deputy may not exclusively come from their respective tribe as in the past. In so doing, the entire body of security personal needs to be trained and educated about higher values by privileging the interest of the state instead of those of the tribe.

The third recommendation is a complete demilitarisation across the country. Members of the warring factions who were not soldiers should be inserted within the national army. A national commission for truth and reconciliation with focused on victims should be setup. People who suffered during the war need assistance, support and substantial reparations that will allow them to resume their life and activities. In other words, all efforts must be done to restore and improve their socio-economic situation.

Another recommendation is about a system of sanctions to be designed at the international and regional levels to prevent the repeat/resumption of such a conflict. Such sanctions may include among other the freeze and confiscation of assets, the issue regional and international arrest warrants and so on.

About the author:

Gerard Emmanuel Kamdem Kamga has a multidisciplinary background including in law and political science, human rights, critical theory, security and gender analysis. Holding a doctoral degree in laws with focus on emergency regimes from the University of Pretoria, he is the author of several research outputs published in national and international peer reviewed and accredited journals. Gerard is the Executive Director of the Global Emergency and Counterterrorism Institute.