

Civil War Threatens Sudan, Again

Friday, May. 30, 2008 By [DAVID LEWIS/ABYEI](#)



Zambian UN peacekeeping troops monitor clashes sparked by a local dispute between SPLA and SAF troops.

Petterik Wiggers / Panos

Note from Pastor Kevin Lea: The Muslims of North Sudan don't seem to be satisfied with the amount of land they have taken from the Sudanese nor in the amount of their blood they have spilt. Lord Jesus willing, in late September I will be in South Sudan ministering to the Christian Chaplains of the South. Please pray for them as they continue to endure under the oppressiveness of the Muslim government in Khartoum.

It may have lasted 22 years, claimed 2 million lives and displaced 4 million people, but Sudan's north-south civil war that ended in 2005 was scarcely noticed in the West. But as the conflict threatens to resume, it could wreak havoc with U.S. and international efforts to stabilize the region.

To many observers, the city of Abyei, on the fault-line between North and South Sudan, is the key to the country's future. On May 14, it exploded. What appeared to have been a small incident between rival militias on its outskirts quickly escalated into full-scale fighting, and there was little a small band of U.N. peacekeepers could do to contain it.

"We're seeing a full frontal and rear assault," a peacekeeper screamed into his radio as white U.N. helicopters dropped down into their base in the town and whisked civilians and other aid workers out. Mortar, artillery and rocket exchanges flattened much of the market town over the next few days. As 60,000 civilians fled into the bush, others darted into their mud huts to retrieve assault rifles and join the fighting. By its end several days later, much of Abyei was a smoldering ruin. Fighters continued to loot and torch thatched huts in rival areas. The northern army said 21 of its men had been killed. The southerners refused to give a death toll, but the bodies of several of their guerrillas lay in the streets, their boots removed.

The Abyei clash marked the first time that Sudan's northern army and their proxies and the former rebels from the south and their allies — now all part of the same Sudanese government of national unity — had turned their guns on each other since they signed a U.S.-brokered peace deal three years ago. Still, north-south enmity runs deep, and the new fighting has pushed the region back to the edge. "We are on the brink of a new war," was the assessment of Pagan Amum, secretary-general of the southern Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). Tensions have been building for months. In a report on the region in March, the International Crisis Group (ICG) warned the situation "could quickly become national... It is uncertain whether the SPLM-NCP [National Congress Party, which dominates the north] partnership could survive a scenario in which the two parties supported their respective Abyei allies."

The history of animosity between the north and south stretches back centuries. The north — generally Arab nomads descended from kingdoms around the Nile — have repeatedly tried to subjugate the mixed Arab and African cattle herders and pastoralists of the south. In colonial times, the British administered north and south Sudan separately, although they united the two sides just before independence. Southern frustration at the perceived northern domination of the post-colonial government in Khartoum spilled over quickly into the First Sudanese civil war, which lasted from 1955 to 1972. Whereas then the hostility focused on land and water — southern Sudan has more water than the north, on the edges of the Sahara — today that has been reinforced by oil. The ICG says 70% of Sudan's oil reserves also lie in the south. Much of the 500,000 barrels of crude exported every day from Sudan is pumped from Abyei. The south, whose various leaders agitate either for independence or at least meaningful autonomy, complain they see little gain from the wealth under their soil. One Western diplomat estimates oil has earned the south \$3.5 billion since 2005, a sum that could be expected to discourage the north from letting go of the south.

Added to such southern grievances are continuing disputes over the precise demarcation of the internal federal border between north and south under the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). In particular, both sides claim Abyei. The north has also been slow to withdraw troops from the south, and suspicions are that it will drag its feet over a referendum, promised by the CPA and due for 2011, in which the south can vote for secession and independence. Complicating the situation is tribal local rivalry in the area, which both sides try to exploit to their advantage.

Meanwhile, civilian suffering continues, largely unnoticed by the world. Aid workers must contend with a relative lack of interest in south Sudan, which festers in the shadow of Sudan's other ethnic war, Darfur. Asked how bad the situation was in south Sudan, senior U.N. official Simon Strachan replied: "In south Sudan, women are eight times more likely to die in childbirth than they are of finishing primary school."

