

## **INTERVIEW WITH MARTIN KENYI AND GARHOTH GARKUOTH OF THE SOUTH SUDAN DEFENCE FORCE**

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### **Introduction**

*The South Sudan Defence Force (SSDF) is a group of armed forces operating in southern Sudan, aligned with the Government of Sudan (GoS) against the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). The SSDF derives its origins from territorial and tribal based militias (particularly from Equatoria) that resisted SPLM/A incursions during the 1980s, as well as the largely Nuer fighters who remained loyal to Dr. Riek Macher after his failed attempt to overthrow Dr. John Garang, the leader of the SPLM/A.*

*These groups signed the Khartoum Agreement in 1997, which committed the GoS to self-determination for southern Sudan. While the referendum that was promised has never been conducted, and Dr. Riek returned to the SPLM/A in January 2002, most of his forces, together with a group of GoS-allied militias (which joined the SSDF in mid 2001) continue to maintain their commitment to the Khartoum Agreement.*

*Martin Kenyi is the military leader of the Equatorial Defence Force (EDF), one of the components of the SSDF. He is also on the eleven-man Military High Command of the SSDF. During the last round of the IGAD negotiations held in Kenya in May 2003 on the security arrangements, Kenyi was a member of the GoS bargaining team. During the negotiations, Kenyi defended, sometimes in opposition to the positions of his fellow members, the platform of the SSDF. During this interview, Martin Kenyi was assisted by Garhoth Garkuoth, SSDF official spokesperson and deputy to Gordon Kong (himself deputy to SSDF leader, Paulino Matieb). Garkuoth also serves as the GoS Commissioner for Sobat (Eastern Upper Nile).*

**ASAP:** Your critics, including the leadership of the SPLM/A, accuse the SSDF of being a militia and stooge of the GoS. How do you respond?

**Martin Kenyi:** The SSDF is a liberation movement. It was founded with the objective of liberating southern Sudan, and it strives to achieve that objective through political struggle when that is possible and through armed struggle when that option is not possible. It is worth mentioning that the forces of the SSDF today are largely made up of people who broke away from the SPLM/A. If avenues of peaceful interaction to achieve the objectives of the SSDF open up, then the approach will become political, as opposed to the present military approach.

Our relations with the GoS are guided by the Khartoum Peace Agreement and, as a result, we have to cooperate with the government in every way – security, political, etc – to defend the agreement. It is wrong to conclude that this cooperation makes the SSDF into stooges. After all, the SPLA is cooperating with the traditional northern parties of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and no one accuses it of being a stooge.

**ASAP:** What constitutes the leadership of the SSDF?

**Martin Kenyi:** The SSDF is an umbrella movement that comprises many southern armed groups opposed to the SPLM/A. These groups signed an agreement with the GoS in 1997, and that agreement is still valid today. The armed groups that make up the SSDF decided on the organisation's leadership at the Juba Conference of June 2001. Major-General Paulino Matieb was elected as Chief of Staff of the SSDF. The institutions of the SSDF military struggle are based in the three regions: the Upper Nile, Bahr El Ghazel, and Equatoria. Various armed groups in these areas agreed on their respective regional commands.

Below Paulino, there are various deputies for administration and logistics, operations, intelligence, and regional commanders. Above this is the Military High Command, which is made up of eleven people and, again, led by Paulino.

**ASAP:** Where does the SSDF find its logistical support?

**Martin Kenyi:** The SSDF has signed agreements with the GoS – the Khartoum and Fashoda Agreements of 1997. These agreements provide for national self-determination through a referendum that was to have taken place four years ago and was then extended for two

years, and these agreements are still valid. These agreements also have political and security components, under which the forces of the SSDF remain as a separate military entity from the GoS armed forces. The Khartoum Agreement stipulates that there be a joint military command composed of five members from the SSDF and five from the GoS to coordinate their relationship on matters of logistics and training. This committee was never established, but logistical relations continued to work and the agreement has to be defended. The SSDF receives logistics to sustain the struggle when needed.

**ASAP:** What is the extent of the territory controlled by the SSDF?

**Martin Kenyi:** Realistically the strength of our forces (collectively) may be greater than those of the SPLA because the SSDF controls most of Upper Nile, central and eastern Equatoria, western Bahr El Ghazel, and Aweil. Frequently the GoS army does not have access to areas controlled by the SSDF. The administration of these areas is carried out by us and that includes responsibility for the courts and local administrators. Recently the GoS tried to amend the structure of the Southern Coordinating Council and, as a result, some SSDF commanders now hold positions in the national and regional governments. This development is in fact linked to commitments made in the Khartoum Agreement.

**ASAP:** Why did the SSDF participate in the last round of IGAD negotiations on the security arrangements and what did it hope to achieve by this participation?

**Martin Kenyi:** War is not an end in itself. When we took up arms to liberate our people and create an independent southern state we had fundamental political objectives. We took up arms to fight the government when it was not willing to have a dialogue and when other avenues of communication were closed. The 1997 agreement signed with the GoS was a step in ending the war, with the aim of achieving our political objectives through the right of self-determination determined by a referendum. This was one step, although the Khartoum Agreement has failed to gain the support of the SPLA, which has continued to fight the GoS and SSDF. We consider this agreement as one step towards achieving our objectives.

Today the SPLA is negotiating a peace agreement with the GoS. We are not opposed to such a process because after all these years the SPLA has come to follow our example. And this gives us confidence that we are achieving the right thing. Indeed, we want this war to end

so that the suffering of our people ends. We want to end the conflict so that those who are displaced in the northern cities can return to their homes, those languishing in refugee camps can return to the south, and those loitering in Western countries can finally come home.

We want these negotiations to culminate in a signed agreement that serves as the last agreement between the GoS and southern Sudan. We want this agreement to be inclusive and involve civil society, political parties, churches, SSDF, South Sudan Liberation Movement (SSLM), SPLM-United, and the SPLA of John Garang. All groups must be included in this agreement. This way, the agreement will carry weight by bringing all southern Sudanese behind it, that is, both political and military forces. With the involvement of the international community and those who support southern Sudan, we believe that these will serve as a guarantee that this agreement will be realized and inclusive.

We know that the Khartoum and Fashoda Agreements failed because the SPLA persisted in fighting against us and the government, and this made it possible for the GoS to avoid fully implementing the agreement. If the SSDF is excluded from the IGAD negotiations, then we are not parties to the agreement. We will then not be responsible if anything happens in terms of fighting with the GoS or SPLA and the peace process is de-railed.

**ASAP:** Can you explain the main demands by the SSDF with regard to security arrangements?

**Martin Kenyi:** First, we believe in separate armies during the interim period. The GoS, SSDF, and SPLA are three military entities that exist in southern Sudan and they should remain in their respective areas of control with their own commands. We recommend a joint military commission to bring these groups under one umbrella. We accept a certain degree of demobilization to be affected with respect to child soldiers, the wounded, and the sick. In addition, there should be a disengagement of forces and the identification of specific locations for the encampment of forces in the south. There will be an agreement to maintain those forces, and this agreement must ensure equal treatment of all in terms of logistics.

After the results of the referendum on self-determination, then the fate of these three military entities will be determined. If the southern Sudanese vote to uphold the unity of Sudan, then the SPLA and SSDF will be screened and a specific number will be integrated into the

national army. If southerners vote to have a separate country in the referendum, a new army for the new nation of south Sudan will be created. This will comprise the SSDF, SPLA, and southerners in the GoS army.

**ASAP:** Can you explain the views of the SSDF on southern reconciliation?

**Martin Kenyi:** All along we have called for an inclusive peace process or a comprehensive peace agreement. The GoS and the SPLA cannot alone carry the mandate of negotiations for the people of north and south Sudan. We wanted (even before the IGAD negotiations began) to have a national consensus of the south. Unfortunately this did not happen. Because we do not want to wreck the on-going peace process, we are demanding that southerners in general should sit down and resolve their differences and achieve reconciliation among themselves so that they have a unity of purpose in their efforts to obtain their fundamental objectives.

Should a peace agreement be signed without reconciling the SPLA and SSDF, there would be serious doubts as to how it would work. The same problem would apply to southern political forces, churches, and civil society because unless they reconcile, how can we be expected to live together peacefully? Therefore it is imperative for southerners to engage in dialogue if we are to have a genuine and lasting peace for our people.