



Turmoil in South Sudan

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South Sudan conflict

States affected by violence

194,000* Internally Displaced People

*Estimated, total likely to be higher



On 15 December 2013, political tensions within the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) erupted into violence in the capital, Juba, and rapidly spread to other parts of the country.

Five months earlier, in July 2013, President Salva Kiir Mayardit had sacked his Vice-President, Riek Machar and all his ministers. Salva Kiir's actions came in response to Riek Machar's announcement that he would stand against him for the presidency in the next election and growing criticism by both ordinary South Sudanese and donors about spiralling official corruption. Internal divisions within the SPLM deepened in the months that followed and took on an increasingly ethnic character. Salva Kiir is Dinka, the largest ethnic group in the country, while Riek Machar is Nuer. Some of Machar's supporters have alleged that South Sudan is becoming a 'Dinkocracy'. Independent [analysts](#) have also argued that, despite genuine attempts to promote greater harmony between different ethnic groups over recent years, "ethnic fragmentation" has deepened in South Sudan since the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, sometimes inadvertently encouraged by donor policies.

Relations between Salva Kiir and Machar have never been good. Salva Kiir and his backers remember well that Machar broke away from the main SPLM in 1991, during the long struggle for South Sudanese independence, signing a peace deal with Khartoum in 1997 and accepting arms supplies from the North. In the wake of the latest crisis, Salva Kiir has accused Machar of trying to depose him in a coup; the latter denies.

The upsurge in violence has left over 1000 people dead and at least 180,000 people internally displaced, with many taking shelter in UN compounds but others without access to humanitarian support. While the UN Security Council [mandated](#) an increase in the size of the UN peace-keeping mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) to 12,500 personnel on 24 December, this remains a drop in the ocean in such a vast country.

Parts of the national army have defected to the rebel side. In the days following 16 December, the rebels seized parts of Unity, Upper Nile and Jonglei (where there has been a rebellion against the government under way since 2011 led by an ethnic Murle warlord David Yau Yau) States, including the towns of Bor, which is only a 120 miles or so from the capital, Juba, and Bentiu. Fierce fighting continues around Bor. Machar's forces were responsible for the massacre of over 2000 Dinka in Bor in 1991; he later apologised to the Dinka community there for what happened. Another Nuer leader, General Peter Gadet, has joined the rebels. It is unclear how far he and Machar are co-operating. Rebels now control a significant proportion of South Sudan's oilfields.

A political solution is the only way forward but will not be easy to achieve. The first step will be to secure a meaningful ceasefire. The government agreed to a ceasefire on 27 December but this was not reciprocated by the armed groups opposed to it, including those loyal to Riek Machar, who has called for allies detained by the government to be released first. An Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) deadline for a cessation of hostilities by 31 December came and went with the fighting continuing.

Ceasefire talks between the two SPLM factions in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, under the auspices of IGAD, were due to begin on 3 January but were repeatedly delayed due the distance between the opening positions of the main parties. However, they are now under way. Former Ethiopian foreign minister Seyoum Mesfin is playing the role of mediator. The government appears to be under some Western pressure to release allies of Machar from detention so that they can take part in the talks.

In terms of a longer-term political solution, President Salva Kiir has already ruled out a power-sharing deal with Machar. But it is difficult to see how any approach other than some kind of 'inclusive government' can return the country to stability.

The British Government [announced](#) on 31 December that emergency healthcare, shelter and other supplies worth £12.5 million would be provided through organisations operating in the country. Its Rapid Response Facility has been activated to provide "swift additional support through pre-approved organisations." An [additional relief flight](#) landed in Juba on 5 January.

There has been speculation about whether South Sudan's northern neighbour, Sudan, might take advantage of the disarray to strengthen its hand on outstanding disputes between the two countries. However, so far it has resisted this temptation, voicing its support for the IGAD process now under way. Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir is visiting Juba today.

Further reading:

["Minister for Africa welcomes South Sudan peace negotiations"](#), 4 January 2014. For detailed information on DFID's programme in South Sudan, including what the UK spends on development in South Sudan, see the [DFID South Sudan operational plan 2013](#) and its [Development tracker](#).

Previous Library briefings: [Sudan and South Sudan: all-out war?](#), SN06142, May 2012; [Sudan: war or peace, unity or secession?](#) (RP 10/40, June 2010); [Sudan, 2003-09](#) (SN05555, 1 June 2010).